**[Fowey Festival Adult Short Story Competition, 2018]**

**Don’t Look Now 43**

At first, they were having a baby. Then, quite suddenly, one early morning in January, they were not. She woke in the almost dark and felt low-down pains that could not be dismissed. Shifting onto her side, she stared across the bedroom to where dawn light stirred the surface of the mirror. She could see the outline of their bodies, hers humped and curled like a low hill, his straight and flat. Around her the noises of the flat came and went as ancient pipes creaked to life and the floorboards settled in anticipation of the day to come.

The stillness inside her reflected in the stillness of the mirror until it became stretched, deepening, yawning backwards like a tunnel. At the other end, the glowing circles of her own eyes stared back.

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The mirror came with the flat. Perhaps it was too big to be moved, perhaps its ornate, gilded frame was no longer to the taste of the previous occupants, or their new home too small. Whatever the reason, the outcome was that it stood sentinel, freestanding between wardrobe and window, taking up a sizeable portion of the bedroom floor. She knew he didn’t like it but also that he didn’t care enough to oppose it.

His reasons for disliking it had become the reasons she admired it. She had grown fond of the elaborateness of it. It wasn’t shy and retiring as she was; it stood its ground. By standing in a particular spot, she could see her whole body reflected in the frame, toe to crown, and there was something comforting about it, as if she was held by it, or contained within it.

After the baby had gone, her friends came to help her pack the things into boxes. There wasn’t much. They had bought the essentials, but a prescient superstition had held her back. Just a few simple clothes, some cloth nappies, two soft bath towels and a cot. And a collection of hand-me-down wooden toys. Now all boxed up and stored away until such time as they could be used or she was ready to let them leave the flat.

Once they had left, she stripped down to her underwear and stood in front of the mirror. There was still a slight curve to her belly and she wondered at the cruelty of it, how long it was taking to fade.

Her hand still resting on her skin, sunlight broke from the clouds and flashed from the window to the corner of the mirror. The reflection momentarily dazzled her but not before she saw the skin ripple, like an aftershock.

She gasped and waited, a statue. It didn’t happen again.

It wasn’t until she lay in bed that night that she realised the source of her unease. She had seen the ripple in the glass, but she hadn’t felt it. Neither beneath her hand nor beneath her skin.

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It occurred to her that the mirror had borne witness: to the moment their son was conceived, to the clumsy ritual of her dressing, hesitating over the limited collection of clothes that still fit her body, the ones that didn’t give away too much of her recent past. It had seen her cry in the night, silently, so that he wouldn’t wake and try to comfort her, for fear that his gentle words, his ‘we can try again’ and ‘it won’t always hurt like this’ will somehow erase her tiny boy from ever having been at all. It had seen him pack, with relief, for an extended trip overseas, talking to her reflection as she sat still on the bed to dull the intensity of looking at her face.

These days, she woke before the light. In the still time, she watched the mirror transform from observer to storyteller. They had granted her a leave of absence from work. The lack of responsibility, at a time when she expected to have more than ever before, had left her floating in still waters, holding her breath to stay at the surface. It was easiest to sit on the corner of the bed, her reflection hovering in the glass so that the mirror anchored her while her thoughts drifted.

In this position, the light cast from the windows gave her two shadows.

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As time passed, she found herself watching the mirror each time she came into the room. It had stopped being a tool in which to check her hair or adjust her clothes. Instead, she found herself looking into it as if it were a door into another part of the flat. Her eyes went to the edges as if looking around corners.

She began to learn the ways in which the light moved around the room, the phases of the day and the different shadows they cast: from the dawn shadows, soft like faded memories, to the harsh stripes of late afternoon. There were even shadows cast in darkness as the night coalesced to form dense nocturnal pools.

Which is how she first noticed the extra shadows in the mirror. Sometimes they stretched across the bedroom floor; more often they moved across the reflection of her body as she passed. Unsettling as they were to see, it was somehow worse not to. To just know that they were there.

Now and again, the shadows were the only things that moved. The reflection would shift, pulling the light with it but the movements were unnatural, like a jerk. Abrupt and sudden, like someone falling.

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A knock at the door roused her as she stared into the past. It was the woman recently moved into the flat downstairs, shoulders sagging as if giving in to the insistent bullying of gravity. I’ll not come in, she said. It’s the noise, she said. I wouldn’t usually complain, but it’s just wearing me down. Always worse with wooden floorboards. And so late at night too. You’d think the children would be in bed by then. At least, they would at my place.

An uncomfortable silence before the woman glanced past and into the flat beyond. Into a shrouded space, staring at the absence of the children whose small feet hammered up and down the corridors. Are they away then? she said.

Something like that.

A flicker of concern passed across the woman’s face and she edged away from the door. I don’t mean to complain, she said. It’s just that it’s keeping me awake. You know.

I know.

The door closed and the light shifted and settled.

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Later that night, the surface of the mirror seemed almost to vibrate as if struck. It woke her in the dark and she lay counting the beats between her breath. Eventually, steeling herself, she opened her eyes and saw, outlined in the glass, the reflection of a cot rocking silently by the side of her bed. She turned her head. There, the cot was momentarily visible, a negative image each time she blinked.

Her heart vibrates as if struck.

Reaching out a hand into the emptiness, it is as if she has plunged it into ice water.

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She cannot decide if she is afraid of the mirror. She cannot decide what it is trying to show her.

Sometimes, she knows that she is being watched.

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Sometime around dusk, she moves slowly through the flat. He will be arriving back, late tonight, too late to eat but perhaps not late enough for her to be in bed. She leaves the lights off, merging into the purple shadows as she walks.

‘Ah!’ A sudden pain shoots through the sole of her foot.

Landing heavily on the edge of the bed, she turns her bare foot upwards. Nestled in the crease is a splintered smokestack, snapped from a child’s toy engine. It has broken the skin on the fleshy pad beneath her big toe. A single drop of blood wells from the puncture.

The fading evening light slices through the room and reflects opaquely off the surface of the mirror.

From this angle, the glass is blank. But she knows what she will see if she moves.