

***Jade Green: A Ghost Story by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, pp. 7-17***

THE DRIVER HESITATED when we got to the front steps, setting my trunk down as though he would go no farther. As soon as I put one foot on the porch, however, the heavy oak door swung open, and I was immediately enveloped in the two round arms of Emma Hastings, the cook.

“Judith Sparrow, you are welcome here indeed!” she cried.

I would have replied in kind, but my head was pressed against her large bosom, crimping the rim of my bonnet. As soon as I righted myself, she led me into the hall, and the driver brought my bags and boxes.

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At Mrs. Hasting’s instructions, he heaved and jockeyed my trunk up the stairs while I took off my bonnet and rearranged my dress. He seemed eager to leave, though, and as soon as he came down again and had been properly paid, I thanked him for his company and he went on his way.

Turning my attention to the interior of the house, I observed the high ceilings and the long flight of stairs leading to the floor above. The wainscoting and walls were of a deep brown, and the heavy velvet drapes at the windows a pale rose. On either side of the great hall were paintings of the Sparrow family, my uncle’s side. Uncle Geoffrey and his deceased wife, both dressed in gray, were to the right, and my cousin Charles, their only son, on the left, in brown.

At that very moment there were footsteps on the stairs, and I looked up to see a man of sixty years coming down to meet me.

“She’s here!” cried Mrs. Hastings. “And what she has brought, sir, would hardly fill a closet. She’ll be no trouble at all.”

Uncle Geoffrey gave only the faintest smile. If I had not been watching his mouth so closely, I might not even have recognized it as such, except that it so much resembled my late father’s.

“And how was the journey?” he asked, shaking my hand, but with no great enthusiasm, I noticed.

“I survived it well, but am very glad to be here, and thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking me in,” I told him. “I intend to earn my keep, Uncle, and will do all I can to help Mrs. Hastings.”

“I know she will,” said the cook, squeezing my arm. While my uncle had thinning white hair and a pale complexion, Mrs. Hastings was pink-cheeked, her head topped with a mop of gray curls, putting my own long, straight hair to shame.

“We’ll have dinner in an hour or so,” she told me, picking up my small valise. “Let me show you to your room and then we’ll see you at table.”

I picked up another travel bag, and Uncle Geoffrey followed with the rest.

What a welcome surprise that I should be given a bedroom on the second floor with the others. I had thought I might be lucky to have a room in the attic, but I was taken to a corner bedroom, with a four-poster bed and a chest of drawers, as well as writing desk and chair.

Mrs. Hastings showed me the closet where I should store my trunk, and pointed out the windows overlooking the garden below. There was a yellow quilt on my bed, a blue cushion on my chair, and I was most pleased with what I found.

When they left me to unpack my things, I wondered, with each dress I hung in my closet, how long that dress would hang there, and whether or not this was to be my final destination, the only house to call home. Better than many girls had, to be sure.

Carefully I opened all the drawers in my dresser and gently placed inside them my linens and stockings and gloves. It was when I reached the bottom of my trunk that I saw my mother's picture in its green silk frame, and remembered once again how I had disobeyed the conditions for my coming. I knew only that the color green upset Uncle Geoffrey for some reason, and vowed therefore that he should never see it. What remained unseen could upset no one, I told myself. And so I kept it where it was, at the bottom of my trunk, and shoved the trunk far back in the closet.

"Well, Miss Sparrow," I said, looking at myself in the mirror—at my long brown hair and gray eyes, and a mouth a little too large for my face. "It seems you have a family now. And here is your room, all done up in yellow."

As I said the words, I let my eyes roam about the walls and floor and, turning, I saw that there was truly nothing green in sight. I went to the doorway and looked out into the hall, then over the banister to the floor below. All was brown and rose, gray and black.

No matter, I thought. Every family is odd in some way, and this shall be our peculiarity.

After I had changed my dress so as to be more presentable at dinner, I went downstairs and into the dining room where Uncle Geoffrey sat at the head of the table, waiting.

"I hope I'm not late," I said, "I was just admiring my room, Uncle."

"I trust you found it to your liking," he told me. And then, motioning to a chair to his left, he said, "You may sit there, Judith. Mrs. Hastings will sit across from you, and when Charles comes, he will sit at the other end. We will not wait for Charles, Emma."

"Very good, sir," she said from the doorway of the kitchen, and at once began ladling up the soup.

"I will see my cousin, then?" I asked pleasantly.

"He takes dinner with us most nights," my uncle replied.

I was pleased to know that he was coming, and that the cook was allowed to eat with us, for I would have found it awkward to converse with Uncle Geoffrey alone.

"How long have you lived here?" I asked Mrs. Hastings, wondering myself about the "Mrs." part.

"Since my Henry died some seventeen years ago," she said. "I was here when you visited as a wee babe, but of course you've no memory of that."

"She knows this house as well as I do. *Better* than I do, in fact," said my uncle.

We finished our soup and then the fish that Mrs. Hastings had poached. I was wondering that my cousin had not yet made his appearance when I heard the front door open, then close, and a somewhat portly man of forty years, a younger version of his father, came into the room with no apology for his tardiness and took his place at the table. Mrs. Hastings immediately rose to bring him both soup and fish.

As he tucked his napkin under his chin, Cousin Charles looked at me and said, “Well, I see our orphan girl has arrived, and I daresay she has chosen the best room for herself and eaten most of the fish.”

My face grew warm, and I opened my mouth to protest, when Charles broke into laughter and said, “Only a joke, Judith. I hope you find your new home satisfactory.”

“Yes, it’s lovely,” I said. “My room looks out on the garden, and I fancy I can see the sea beyond.”

“Not quite,” said Charles, spooning his soup into his mouth, “but it’s only a short ride from here to the ocean, and when the windows are open in summer, you can sometimes hear the waves crashing against the shore.”

“Oh, I will love living here, I know!” I said, delighted that I should make friends with the ocean with so little effort on my part.

Uncle Geoffrey said, “You were detained, Charles, I presume?”

“Yes, I was speaking to a man at the club who might have a position open as bookkeeper in his firm,” Charles replied.

“That would seem a fitting job for you,” said his father.

“Fitting, perhaps, but boring. Nonetheless, I’ll think about it,” Charles answered.

“A bird in hand...,” offered Mrs. Hastings.

“Oh, Emma, you would delight in seeing me take any job at all, just so I would not stop by here so often,” Charles said amiably.

“It’s only that I think you should find your current unemployment even more boring, sir,” she said. And then, reflecting perhaps that she had said enough, she got up to serve the veal, and I found myself seated between father and son, knowing that neither of them had especially wanted me.

“If you will instruct me, Uncle, as to my duties here, I would like to begin as soon as possible,” I said, looking directly at Uncle Geoffrey. His skin hung loosely about the jaw and chin, whereas Charles had several chins, and a light red beard growing in a fringe around the edge of his face.

“I’ll leave that to Mrs. Hastings,” Uncle Geoffrey said. “She will find plenty for you to do, and what you do in your spare time is your business. I have my duties, Charles has his, so please do not expect us to entertain you. We have no desire to turn you into a servant, however, and you may come and go as you please, as long as Mrs. Hastings is satisfied.”

I could not believe I should be treated so well, and thanked him not once, but several times over.

After the veal there was cheese and wine, and I thought the dinner was far better than any I had eaten before, something seemed to be missing. I could not decide what it was. Then, as the pecan tarts were served, half drowned in whipped cream, I realized that there was nothing green on the table: no beans or peas or spinach. Even in winter, my mother had managed to serve green beans that she had put up in the summer. Well, I decided, the residents here look healthy enough, and I vowed I would not worry about it further.

I stayed in the kitchen late with Mrs. Hastings until every fork and plate had been washed and put away. Then, long since exhausted, I bid her good night, went upstairs to my room, and sat myself down, relieved to be alone. I had scarcely the energy to take off my dress and petticoats. Finally, drawing my gown over my head, I slipped off my stockings, blew out the candle, and settled down beneath the covers.