

A HOUSE DIVIDED

JAMIE CLARKE

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Unlike his best friend Hiram, Ephraim would not touch his daughters. He shifted uneasily in his chair, watching the rain cascade down the window. Through the glass the Utah countryside looked barren, stained, fuzzy. And so it came to pass that the rain did not let up, ten days now and going on forty. Still Ephraim would not touch his daughters. He thought about it, but he was a man of principle.

Late on the eleventh day, sitting in his chair in front of the fireplace, which he had just sealed to keep the rain out, he felt the raging desire building below him. He laid his book across his lap, first length-wise and then on end, the corner digging deeply into him; nothing seemed to stop the panging and throbbing. Martha, the oldest of his three wives and the mother of Celeste, Charity, and Stephen, saw his frustration and asked what the matter was. I'll show you, he said and took her up into the attic where the wooden beams formed the crux of the house. Now it should be understood that Martha, the aging wife of Ephraim and mother of three, was seething with jealousy over her husband's seeming affection for Sylvia, his youngest wife and Alanda who rivaled Martha in age, but was more beautiful. And so in the secret foyer of the attic, Martha disrobed and leaned heavily on the wooden crossings while Ephraim satiated his appetite for lust.

The wet land appeared disjointed and illusionary. The rain beat heavier each day and the family kept their conversations for the precious moments of silence that came between the thunderous pounding. Ephraim paced impatiently and demanded to be let alone in the afternoons. He grew increasingly bored, subject to sudden bouts of depression and bursts of anger.

Sylvia, mother of Gabrielle, Amber, and Heather approached Ephraim one afternoon, interrupting his solitude. He witnessed the terror in her eyes and felt a great need to hold her in anguish, not knowing whether he would beat her severely again as he had in the fall, or accept her kind outreach and take her in his arms. She stared at his feet, a humble servant in his mighty, lusty house, and shook feverishly. Ephraim rose before her and she wilted slightly, bracing for rebuke. He walked stealthily to the door and wedged a chair under the cold, brass knob. Sylvia stood in the gray shadow of the rain-draped sun, her skin aglow, her black, shiny hair falling over her shoulders and swaying gently against her back. She glanced up once and he saw the tears in her eyes. She is most beautiful when she quivers, he thought and steadied her in his arms. She went limp against his body and he pressed their midsections tightly—she suddenly and acutely aware of him. She froze as his breath became a warm, heavy fog in her ears, growing faster and hotter as he held her. His hands caressed her back and came to rest on her buttocks. She buried her face in his coarse beard, hoping she wouldn't have to. She didn't like to, but he told her only she could make him feel loved. So she did as he wished—leaning more on her right knee than her left, which was still bruised from the one time she tried to refuse and was slammed to the hard wooden floor. She winced as his calloused hand grabbed the base of her neck and soon the lace collar of her dress—a nice print she had sewn especially for him—was wet and sticky with perspiration. She endured him and then subjected herself to his cooing and cuddling, his heart trying to beat itself free of his chest.

Ephraim's house was an architectural wonder and he was proud of the design, somewhat boring and plain, but comfortable enough to house his large family. The puddles forming treacherously outside his door came alive with the euphoric dancing of the rain drops and he sat and watched daily, a patron of nature's wondrous amphitheater. For a string of four days he felt neither tense nor morose. He played joyously with his children, entertaining them past their bedtimes, letting the women alone to their chores.

Before long, however, Ephraim again grew restless. He pondered philosophy with a muddled conscience and worked complex mathematical problems to focus his energy and attention, but the overriding power within proved too much. He suffered from frequent fits and his family grew timid and withdrawn. Early one morning he heard the rain and ran the length of his

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Later that evening, while reading in bed and waiting for his wives to finish the evening chores, Alanda crept quietly into the room and sat down beside him. He looked up and smiled at her, cupping her breast with his free hand, holding his book with the other. Alanda gracefully retained her youthful appearance from which she was now forty years past. Her soft green eyes sparkled under her massive dark eyebrows, thick and furry. Her swollen lips were beautiful; her breasts still tight, firm. Alanda knew she was the object of most of Ephraim's desire and carried herself proudly in front of his other wives, driving Martha crazy with envy. She reached up and held his hand which was still grasping her breast. Ephraim let the book fall to the wayside and surged forward to kiss her on the lips. She refused him for the moment and pushed him back down on the bed, licking his face like an overly excited dog, the way he always wanted her to. A few low moans passed between them and soon Alanda crawled on top of him, bobbing ferociously and violently while Martha stood in the hallway, peering silently through the open crack of the door. She watched as Alanda's pasty white breasts hung in the yellow light, bouncing heartily and beaded with sweat. Ephraim held her around the waist, grabbing handfuls of cloth and pulling fiercely. Ephraim's body tensed and he was rigid as stone, paralyzed; Alanda moved up and down ceaselessly, trying to unleash the great natural force within. Ephraim could take no more and tried to throw Alanda aside, as they always had since her miscarriage in early April, but Alanda held steadfast. She gripped the pine bedposts and he saw desperate tears well in her eyes. Soon her cheeks were completely wet, deluged in sorrow and happiness and hope. Ephraim frantically tried to stop her but she was uncontrollable, moved by a will unknown to him. Alanda felt Ephraim inside her and collapsed on his chest. They lay motionless for a moment and Martha eyed Ephraim carefully, waiting for his explosive temper to ignite. But Ephraim could barely gather the strength to lift himself from the bed and when she saw him come for the door, Martha scurried down the stairs and into the kitchen, pretending to mind her chores as Ephraim passed her on his way to the study, where he locked the door and fell asleep watching the rivers run through his property.

Ephraim woke in the morning to a thumping foreign to him. Startled from his chair, he leaned his ear against the wall and listened. Thump. Thump. Swoosh. Thump. The sound traveled the walls of the house and he followed it from room to room. Thump. Thump. He stopped at the window and only then realized that the water had risen overnight to the level of the windowpanes and they started to seep and bulge under the strain. Ephraim began to panic but was distracted again by the maddening thumping. He chased it through the house, coming close only to have it elude him through the wall. Finally an inch of water collected on the floor of his kitchen and after sloshing back and forth, he again turned attention to the waterfalls leaping in from his windows. He called for the children to bring boards and nails and they stood in the corner of the kitchen terrified at the horrible curses they endured while Ephraim vainly tried to stop the flow of water. He ordered Martha and Sylvia, who were trying to mop the floors, out of the kitchen so he could work. But it was too late. The water flowed evenly now and Ephraim stood in the center of the room, filled with fear and despair and waited for the walls to crash around him while his children sobbed quietly in the corner.

But the incessant thumping echoed in his skull and Ephraim ran to the front door and threw it open, letting the rains and rivers rush through the house. The thumping grew louder and louder and Ephraim watched anxiously as it rounded the corner of his house and then looked in horror at Alanda's body as it floated in the front door, buoyed by the water, her hair

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