

From The Taxidermist's Lover

Last January

‘**Y**ou need to specialise,’ I said, ‘find a niche – I hear cased mammals are making a comeback. Or how about mystical menageries?’

You looked at me, your moustache twitching slightly with amusement.

‘A crabbit or a stox?’ I offered.

‘What?’ you laughed.

‘A crabbit is a crow crossed with a rabbit.’

I could see you mulling over the combinations in your head, picturing the sleek iridescence of the crow’s breast feathers set against the smooth down of an American Albino rabbit.

‘And a stox,’ you guessed, ‘is a stoat crossed with a fox?’

‘No. A stork actually.’ I imagined the body of a red fox, its flame-orange fur contrasted with the angelic white of a stork’s wingspan; a flying, majestic vixen.

‘A stork – yes a stork!’ The cogs were set in motion. That was when I knew you would not return to the pampered pooches cradling their favourite toy on their favourite cushion, their cute little necks twisted in a final gesture of compliance. Or the coarse hair of a stag, tongue lolling in shock from the gunshot that sent it on its final rut to the afterlife.

There was a woman who came to you once with a bald Pomeranian. It had been petted so much after its initial taxidermy that the fur on its head had worn thin. It looked like a tonsured monk from the Middle Ages. You said you were in tune with the ancient Egyptians; mummifica-

tion was an art, yet your art was more precise as the creature was exposed to air when you'd finished it, sometimes handled.

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I had not always been interested in dead things. But they seemed to be interested in me, even from an early age. Growing up among the wetlands of Somerset there were plenty of opportunities to mix with the wildlife, dead or alive. They became a part of my life, a part of me. The ground was black and wet; it smelt of woeful solitude. As a child I'd collect the bones of animals I found in woodland and line them up on my bedroom windowsill. I poked carcasses with a stick to check if life could be reanimated by my interference.

When we were nine, my twin, Rhett, found a bloated badger puffed up like a balloon in the field at the back of our parents' house, so using a kitchen knife I set about dissecting it. I wanted to know how it worked. Imagine me slicing its belly (a movement I'd witnessed on a TV crime drama). I pierced the viscera and the putrid gases puffed out. A river of maggots escaped from the grey snake of its intestines onto the grass. Rhett was all for leaving it to rot but, undeterred, I thought if I could flay enough of it successfully I would be able to stuff it, and the badger would live on instead of decaying by the ditch.

I had not even learned to spell the word taxidermy then. Of course I had seen stuffed animals at the museum, or peering out from the walls of old stately homes we visited in the school holidays. But the act of preserving was not one I had been taught at such a tender age. So I made it up, much to my mother's disgust, and a few days later the rotting flesh from the inside of the badger's skin putrefied, and infused the house with sweet decay.

I'll never forget her face as she looked at the jagged pelt, rough edged, where my knife had cut it so carelessly. It was as if her face swam out of focus. Her little girl did not play with dollies like normal little girls. Her little girl cut up dead animals and displayed them as ornaments. Even though all remains were removed from the house, I still felt the badger near me. He lumbered towards me as I slept, then nosed about my room in the dark. Boar, sow and cub of *Meles meles* – the European badger – would tramp

through my head, uprooting my thoughts with their powerful heads and stocky bodies. I found out that these nocturnal earth-dwellers and underground burrowers were peaceful, unless provoked.

My mother's disapproval did not put me off interfering with nature though. Even in my dreams I'd steal the wings from birds and try to fly, or grow the lithe legs of a hare so I could race across a moonlit field. Mostly my dreams consisted of me sinking into the wet black below my feet, right up to my neck, and I'd wake just before my head was covered in darkness.

But always, day or night, I'd hear them, those creatures that had starved or frozen to death or been poisoned by pesticides or just died of natural causes. I heard them like a sort of electrical static that got louder, especially if the hunt was galloping across the fields or if the pheasants were flushed up to the sky in a bountiful bouquet. Each creature had its own unique signature; they all seemed to know their place in the scheme of things. That was how I became sure that dead did not always mean dead.

So it was little wonder I was drawn to you – transformer of dead things, creator of curiosities – my beautiful, big-boned taxidermist extraordinaire. It did not matter that you were much older than I. We seemed to fit together so well.

Do you remember January as I do? I see it as the death of one of many beginnings, or could it have been the beginning of the end? Depends how you look at it. I know that things were never quite the same after you started mixing up the species. January was the time you religiously took to your workshop, almost every day, with a renewed purpose, to create something so unusual it would be talked about in circles way past your final breath.

It was your devotion to the work that drew me closer to you, the preparation spelled out with lines of jars and tools; it was scientific, medical, and precise, not like my childhood efforts of wild abandon with blunt cutlery. Each of the stages you went through would lead to a final perfect representation of what once lived. I admired you as I would admire any artist, although your medium was grotesque. It stank. You messed with nature.

I think that's what got to us in the end. You were dealing with life, not death. Each specimen had to be renewed, like Jesus moulding new life into Lazarus; you used your hands to replicate the living. Everlasting life. But I witnessed the madness creep up on us and slip under our skin.

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January was a long month. Somerset was groaning and moaning under the heavy weight of an oppressive grey sky and long, dark nights. After the Christmas lights had been packed away, the decorations stowed in the loft for another year among the spiders and dust, we got back into the daily pattern of our lives. It dragged on and depressed most people. For us it was a great month for resolution with all those dark hours, thinking about what to do when the sun finally reappeared to warm our skin. We were thinking about our future – planning, dreaming.

‘I’m tired of stags,’ you said, as we ate venison for the fourth night that week. It was the week after New Year. We stayed at home for that too, munching our way through pretzels and marzipan-laced stollen and a freezer full of meat. My stomach felt heavy from all the rich food I’d consumed. It was just as well I had the sort of metabolism where I never seemed to put on weight no matter how much I ate. Annoyed the hell out of you. Chunky Pepper was your nickname at school. But I always thought we were a perfect match – you with your steady hands, me with the flighty grace of a starling. You knew exactly where to touch me; your fingers palpated my skin and smoothed back the faint lines and dimples with a pressure you had mastered through your work.

You had already begun to diversify into more non-domestic animals: chinchillas; iguanas; a snow leopard that had been kept by an eccentric octogenarian; even a celebrated mirror carp that had allegedly lived for over thirty years in a local fishing lake. The fishermen had affectionately named it ‘Wonky Fin’. It took pride of place in their clubhouse, gazing dry-eyed from a glass cabinet at the lake where it had once swum. I had watched you preserve it and paint the varnish on the scales to make it appear water-bound once more. But it cried. I never told you that. That cold fish cried at the injustice of being born again into a dry body, instead of swimming away to the great lakes in the sky.

‘The eyes,’ you said, ‘they never quite show what was once inside.’ You would place the polished nuggets of glass onto the mount last of all, preferring the naked frame blind until you had finished sculpting and stitching

the skin over layers of structure, blow-drying the fur, or primping the feathers, sometimes fixing with hair lacquer. ‘Welcome to my boudoir!’ I could hear your throaty chuckle echo around the workshop when I delivered snacks and drinks or just needed to be close to you.

I loved your darkness. The way you clipped and snipped, slicing the fascia and sinews, while the dogs sometimes looked on with an expression of awe and fear. It smelt like the depths of a cave in your workshop, and the dense metallic odour of organic matter would infuse your clothes and hair.

When we made love I’d somehow taste the essence of the creatures you’d been handling – the quick, acrid bite of a fox, the feathery scratch of an owl, the smooth perfume of someone’s beloved pet cat. At mealtimes I watched you dissect the meal on your plate, as if delaying the sensation of taste. You’d carefully chew in silence, mulling over the constituent parts, preferring your meat without seasoning, plain and rare. ‘I like my meat to taste of meat,’ you told me.

To the south of our house, your workshop nestled at the bottom of the garden; the soft glow of an electric bulb denoted your presence, a beacon, but also a ‘no entry’ sign for any unwelcome interference. Your light said to me, ‘I’m working in *my* world among *my* things – give me space.’ I understood your need for solitude in your cave-like retreat, a place away from our shared home; it was yours alone. Not ours. What I’m trying to say is: I know how you worked.

We were in the middle of the hinterland, the Somerset Levels, the Moor, Land of Apples, Land of the Dead. The marshes reclaimed from the sea still haunted the place with watery whispers from withy beds, and mist rising up from the rhynes like smoke from a sailor’s pipe. Here we chose to live among the vernacular of widgeon and teal; the loose earth low and slaked with moisture. We lived on borrowed ground, peat shifting beneath us, as if the bodies of buried beasts wanted to reform their ancient bones from the earth itself and resurface to taste the air with moistened tongues.

Even in the cold density of January we sensed the shift of seasons. The flight of lapwing and starling reminded us of impermanence. Their wings were flashes of light in the grey mornings as they rose like an idea suddenly surfacing.

So January became not so much of a drag, as an exploration along an

unmapped road. And where you went I would naturally follow, an enraptured devotee of your world; a world of grisly body parts: heads, legs, claws, beaks, feathers, scales, all catalogued and preserved, then reinvested into new imagined creatures.