

Mostly Dead Things

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Problem solving is hunting.

It is savage pleasure and we are born to it.

—Thomas Harris

Happiness is a large gut pile.

—T-shirt proverb

for michael michael motorcycle

ODOCOILEUS VIRGINIANUS— CUTANEOUS DEER FIBROMA

How we slice the skin:

Carefully, that's a given. Cutting with precision sounds like the same thing, but it's not. Consider the following: you've pared the flesh from a mango for a bowl of fruit salad. Have you done it thoughtfully, preserving the sweet yellow flesh, or have you done it with the clinical detachment of a surgeon?

There's gotta be some tenderness. There's gotta be some love.

Our father said this as he slid his knife into the coat of a white-tailed buck. It was unusual. He never let us close to the table while he worked.

You've gotta want it. He pointed to the throat, tapping lightly with a fingertip. *Start below the cape, here. Like you're unzipping a jacket.*

Milo and I crowded at either side of the metal table as our father gently opened the body, his hands blue-gloved and steady, as if delivering a baby. We were nine and ten and treated the shop with its creatures like our personal toy store. Other kids had stuffed animals; we had preserved skinks and mounted bass and antlers coated with Varathane.

Gimme a little elbow room, guys.

We each stepped back half a foot, then moved in close a few seconds later. The buck was large, but I'd seen bigger. The deer had already been drained of its blood and lay limp, limbs sprawled like a dismantled puppet. It was a nine-pointer and the man who'd brought it to the shop was a regular, someone our father had over for beers in our living room.

Why the whole deer? This wasn't just a mount—the entire animal would be processed: chest, rump, legs. I couldn't imagine why someone would keep the whole thing as a trophy; most hunters left the remains to rot out in the woods after their field prep.

Our father's eyes were bright with excitement. It was a new challenge for him, a way to put creativity into his work. He hummed under his breath. It made me want to sing too.

Inside was cool with the constant hum of central air, but still humid enough to draw sweat over my lip. The sign in front of the shop was just as big and yellow as it had been when our grandfather ran the place: MORTON'S TAXIDERMY (& MORE). The marquee promoted sales, whatever was in excess that week: pig ears, deer antlers, rabbit pelts.

Our father didn't look at us while he spoke, just kept his voice at a low buzz that zinged in my brain. *If it's not done with some kind of feeling, the customers can tell. It won't look real.*

Buckets sat at our feet for any leftover innards the customers hadn't disposed of already, white plastic tubs that had at one point housed pickles soaked in yellow brine. Some entrails we saved, some we didn't, but we always made sure the floor stayed clean. The smell of bleach saturated my cloud of dark hair, even when my mother braided it out of the way.

Milo and I both wore old Publix bag-boy aprons, tied around our necks and backs in looping double knots. Though I was older by a year, Milo stood half a head taller than me—taller than anyone in the fourth grade. We leaned close to our father's elbows, trying to catch the knife's movements, until he cleared his throat and we both moved back again. He wore a black rubber apron that he'd rinse off in the back sink, slicking off the intestinal remnants of our daily autopsies with lemon-scented dish detergent. Our mother would wash ours and hang them in the front closet, next to our muddy sneakers and raincoats and the mothballed sweaters that we wore only once a year.

Jessa-Lynn, hold the neck steady. I moved to the front of the table and dug my hands into the fur until the spine and tendons compressed beneath my fingers. I fought the urge to massage deeper, to let my hands crawl spiderlike up the column and embrace the muzzle.

Now come here, son. It's not gonna bite.

From behind the deer's fuzzy cheek I watched my brother take the knife from my father, a double-sided scalpel. On the table beside it sat the half-moon of the fleshing blade he'd use to strip the wet hunks of flesh from the skin. Its curve caught the light, blinking silver under the fluorescent bulbs that lined the paneled ceiling.

Like this? Milo clutched the knife like he would a sharpened stick, something to gouge and

mutilate. He fidgeted and nearly dropped his grip as he dug down into the deer hide.

Let me show you. Flex your wrist. Press steady, slow. Not too deep.

Prep meant our father would completely skin the buck and assess the skeleton. See where the shot penetrated and reconstruct the animal's body, fortifying it with thick patches of wool and cotton padding and strong wiring to hold the pose. Most shops worked only off prefab mannequins and forms, but my father liked creating his own—even if it meant every piece took two weeks longer than it would at a competitor's shop. Customers looking for specialty work were willing to pay for the extra labor, but most weren't after the art my father wanted to make of their kills. It didn't matter to Dad; he'd put in the time regardless. Even if it meant losing business.

He's got a gristly patch here, push harder.

According to our father, customers wanted something commanding in the animal's pose. Most were hunters, and if they chose to have their kill mounted, they wanted it larger than life, as if the animal might reanimate and attack. They wanted bigger, stronger, more muscled. Our job was to grant that wish, even if the person had shot the animal from behind as it nosed through a garbage can.

Milo sweat through the neck of his shirt. It was cool in the back of our shop, low sixties to keep the inevitable rot at bay, but my brother looked like he'd just run in from the playground. *I'm not sure. Like this?* He pulled up the knife—jagged, moving too quickly. There was a purring tear. *Sorry, sorry!*

Grunting, my father took my brother's hand and guided it back down to the work. *That'll have to be repaired. You'll have to stitch it up after we tan so the lines won't show through crooked.*

Sorries wouldn't fix the coat. There would always be a scar, something out of place to mimic the fat bullet hole behind its tufted ear. Ripped pelts weren't ideal, but there were ways to cover them: mud flecked up on an ankle or the fur combed over in a way that suggested muscle mass beneath the skin. I ran my thumbs down the buck's neck to the softest place at the heart of its throat. Its white hair had grown in a clumped oval, framed by the thicker, slick stuff that coated its back—the dense coat that grew in for winter, even in Florida. Usually my father would brace the deer's antlers in one of the clipped tracks that hung from the ceiling. We'd never been so involved in the process before; certainly never been allowed to use his tools or cut into any of the customers' prized pelts.

There. Push hard, just below the fetlock. You gotta scoop along, like you're pulling open canvas. Let the knife become an extension of your arm.

Our father's cuts were seamless. He'd been doing the work for almost thirty years, alongside his own father, who'd died the year Milo was born. In pictures, our grandfather looked like a harder, grayer version of my father: tattooed and T-shirted and grizzled, the kind of man who smiled only when he needed to stretch his mouth. His picture was still up in the front of the shop, near the register. It sat between the mountain lion he'd shot and stuffed and a BEST OF CENTRAL FLORIDA TAXIDERMY plaque with years pinned underneath it dating back to 1968.

Milo's blade slowed. They'd reached a blockage behind the back right leg. My father took the scalpel from my brother and squatted down to view the situation, lifting the carcass and turning it deftly. One hand pulled the skin taut while the other slid the knife below the lump that protruded from beneath the fur. He quickly sliced the flesh and poked the knife beneath, flicking the tip upward until the mass was exposed.

What is it? Milo's face was ashy gray. His lips, normally petal pink—so pink that boys from school joked that he wore lipstick—had thinned into a pale slit.

Deer tumor. Our father carved out the lump until it began to separate from the fatty flesh and veins that surrounded it. *Pretty good size. Maybe four inches across.* He hefted the mass in his hand, the vibrant blue of his glove clashing with the dark, clotted red of the tumor. He dug into it with the fleshing blade, testing the resistance of the growth. *Hardly ever see any this big. Mostly just warty stuff around the neck. Sometimes the groin.*

Milo covered his mouth with both hands. A deep noise rumbled in his chest, a sound like gears grinding together, and then he turned and puked. We'd had tomato soup and grilled cheese an hour earlier. Most of it went in the big plastic bucket, but some of it splattered onto the concrete floor, with a few bits landing on our father's shoe.

The buck's eyes were open, surfaces glazed and beginning to harden into wrinkles along the corners from where the water had leached. Milo continued to vomit into the bucket as our father stalked from the table. He brought wet rags from the corner sink. He waited until Milo was done, still slumped over on the floor, before thrusting one at him. *Get the mop from your mother out front and clean all this up. Everything.*

The tumor sat on the metal table, my father's knife still stuck in it. He took the blade by the handle and pressed on either side of the mass with his fingers until it pulled free. Wiping it against the other rag, he turned and offered it to me. Overhead, the air-conditioning hummed to life again. The breeze was cool against my neck as I took the knife. It was solid in my palm, the curvature of the handle fitting just inside the crease where my hand closed. He beckoned me around the table and I stood in front of him, contemplating the buck's substantial bulk.

See there? He held my wrist, gently pointing the knife toward the open wound, now taking on oxygen and darkening. *We'll have to work around that. Can you get below the leg and take the seam around the back?*

Being this close, I was enveloped in the odor of his aftershave. It reminded me of Christmas trees: piney and musky, a smell that wouldn't scare off a deer. Behind us, Milo dragged in the yellow mop bucket. Some of the water splashed over the lip and onto the floor as he struggled through the doorway. Our mother called to him from the front of the shop. My father turned away from my brother and leaned down to whisper in my ear.

You're a natural. Just like your dad.

It felt right; it felt like I'd been doing it forever. I could see the exact place I would set the blade and strip the animal, knew how we'd replicate the skeleton with trusses and padding and ruffed forms. I could see where the tanned hide would fit over the preparation: a strong, hardy deer, head uplifted, sniffing the wind. Inserting the tip of the blade into the opening, I pulled forward carefully. I let myself love the buck on the table. I caressed its soft, sweet body.

My father put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed lightly. Leaning forward, I braced my arm against the cool metal of the table and looked into the cavity where the flesh separated from the skin. In the dark heart of its carcass, I saw my future mapped out in gristle.

I was my father's daughter and I loved him fiercely. We had identical hands and neither of us could roll our tongues. Both of us snapped using our ring fingers, which we thought was very funny. There were permanent frown lines etched between our eyes. We liked the crusts off pizza and the tartness of lemons squeezed in water. There was a security in seeing myself mirrored back. Our

shared love of the animals; the way we could be in a room and stay silent, comfortable in our skins as long as we were together. No one knew me like him. No one understood him like his daughter.

Not so different from us, Jessa. He tugged my braid. Just guts and blood.

We were a family of taxidermists.

We were collectors, dismantlers, and artisans. We pieced together life from the remnants of death. Animals that might have weathered into nothing got to live on indefinitely through our care. Our heart was in the curve of a well-rendered lip smoothed over painted teeth. I saw my father's hand in the ears of the rabbit he created for my brother the one that rode on a small doll's bicycle. It was in the glass eyes of an albino ferret whose lids my father sculpted with the utmost tenderness. We created better than anyone because we loved it more, because we knew those animals better than anyone else ever could. It was ours because we fashioned it to be ours. My father molded me to assist him; to be the one who helped shoulder the load. He was the lynchpin that held our family's world together, but I was the one who supported him. I could always bear the burden because he told me I was strong. Because he told me I was the only one who could.

I tried to tell myself this as I stared down at the blood and matter congealed on the concrete floor of our workshop. As I assessed the droplets that dotted the white cinder-block walls in a Rorschach pattern that my eyes identified as a butterfly, as two men shaking hands, as the entrance to a well that opened into something infinite. Let my eyes follow the sight line of the red mess, which had originated from the soft place in my father's skull. Somewhere near the temple, but I couldn't be sure. It was hard to look at for longer than a few seconds. Hard to believe it was real.

Behind me, softly, the radio played Randy Jackson.

He was in his chair, slumped over the metal counter where he'd spent so much of his life. Face down, head turned to the side so that I could make out the bristle of his mustache. The eye I could see was closed. His wire-framed glasses had slipped halfway down his nose the moment he'd fallen, one side bent crookedly behind his ear so his hair fluffed up to a graying point. He wore his apron over the plaid button-down my mother had gotten him for his birthday so many years earlier; the one I said made him look like the Brawny paper towel man. I could almost make myself believe he'd dropped off to sleep midproject, which he sometimes did. Working into the small hours of the morning, painstakingly stitching hide beneath the light of a gooseneck lamp. If he just woke up and groused at me for staring at him. If he smiled at me so I could feel okay. If he were breathing. If there weren't so much blood.

It was the whole animal laid out in front of me again; unnatural and unknown. That was the first collaboration with my father. This would be the last.

It hurt to see him that way, wounded and opened up to the elements. I allowed myself a moment to marvel at his face. It sometimes looked much older than its sixty-six years, but death had made him young again: his cheeks soft and loose, lips tender and partially open. His hands, always in motion, finally still.

Though I knew I shouldn't, I took off his glasses and smoothed down the cowlick in his wiry hair. I moved his hands from the table and set them in his lap, one propped on either thigh, how he always liked to sit at the dinner table while my mother prepped the meal. I unbuckled the watch from his wrist with trembling fingers, the watch that had been my grandfather's before it had

belonged to him. The one I'd coveted because it was my father's favorite and he cherished it. Things that were his that I wanted to be mine. His watch. All the best knives. The shop. His pride.

I picked up the handgun from where it lay on the floor. I set it on the counter next to the letter he'd left with my name spelled out in all capital letters. He'd taught me how to shoot with that gun. Taken me out to the backyard, just the two of us, and helped me pull the trigger. I was scared, but I wanted to look tough, because my father couldn't stomach crybabies. He smiled and told me how impressed he was with my aim and my confidence. Put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed, how he always did when he was proud of me. He was always proudest when I refused to show weakness.

My little miniature, he said. Best sharpshooter in Florida.

Then I went to the back and pulled out the mop bucket and the bleach, staring hard into the water as it churned in the yellow tub. Told myself it was the fumes that teared me up as I dunked the mophead into the liquid, and then began the slow process of cleaning up the mess. I left the letter on the counter until I could get myself under control, wondering if it would say anything to help me understand the animal in front of me.

1

Along with the typical antler sets and knotted pine logs that bracketed our porch, the plate glass window at the front of the shop held a goat, a Florida panther, and a wild boar. The boar and the panther had been around for so long we considered them part of the family. I'd mounted the goat just a few weeks back. It was a black-and-white English Bagot, identified as "vulnerable" on most species survival lists. It had a coat so soft you'd think you were stroking velvet.

But when I came in that morning they weren't in their usual display spots, reenacting a scene from *Wild Kingdom*. Instead, the panther was propped behind the goat, its openmouthed growl suddenly transformed into an expression of uninhibited ecstasy.

"Why?" I turned to my mother, who was wearing her favorite pink floral nightgown with the smocked lace around the throat. She sat sideways on a metal folding chair she'd set in the middle of the sidewalk, holding an empty coffee cup and a cigarette. "Just . . . tell me why."

"It speaks for itself." She took a drag and tapped ash into the mug, which she balanced on her knee.

It was the second time in a month that she'd rendered a sex scene in the front window of our store. While the panther plowed away at the goat, the wild boar leered at the two of them from behind a large plastic ficus I recognized as a decades-long resident of my parents' living room. Even now, in my thirties, I could vividly recall when my parents had brought it home—something green and "living" to chipper up the dull drab of decapitated animal heads that lined the walls behind the couches and my father's recliner.

Binoculars had been propped in the boar's yellowed tusks. There were condoms thrown around, some of which had been opened up, innards dangling from the branches of the potted plants. A second look revealed that the panther's paws were shredded from where the adhesive and pins had originally secured it to an oak branch.

"Take a real good look," I said. "Get it out of your system before I take everything down." My casual morning of stripping skins and sipping black coffee faded into the distance, replaced by the aggravation of refurbishing injured fur and staining new mounts. The panther would likely take

days to fix.

The sun was already burning off the morning humidity and warming the pavement. I'd seen Travis Pritchard's pickup pull into the Dollar General parking lot across the street. This part of town was all older family businesses and single-family homes, dirty, flat places with sprawling yards. Pitted streets intersected at odd angles without the benefit of stop signs, stucco ranches in myriad shades of tan squeezed between a coin laundry, a Goodwill, and a shoe repair shop. A used car lot took up most of the real estate two streets over, near a diner where I ate most of my meals, convenience stores dotting the perimeter. It was Wednesday—BOGO value day for the retirement set from the Towers, a gated community comprised of local grandparents and snowbirds. Soon a crowd would gather to view Libby Morton's latest unholy rendering. The thought of fending off scandalized seventysomethings this early in the morning did bad things to my stomach.

I took the cigarette from her hand and got one good drag off it before stubbing it out under my boot. The goat stood placid, assessing me with its slitted yellow eyes. I turned away so I wouldn't have to see it in its indignity. "Can we go back inside now?"

"I'd prefer to sit here."

"I really wish you wouldn't."

My mother shook her head, free of the waist-length hair she'd had since my brother was born. When questioned about the decision to lop it all off, she mentioned a magazine article she'd read when she took my father to one of his doctor's appointments. Something about hair holding grief: how dead cells left on a living body might make pain last longer. Her shorn head took some getting used to. When the light caught her just right, it was like looking at a miniaturized version of my brother. They both had the same strong jaw and sallow skin, a long, narrow nose framed by deep grooves that almost resembled parentheses. Her remaining hair was still mostly dark, but now there were sprigs of white along with bits of bare scalp that poked through in patches where she'd gotten a little overzealous with the razor.

"Please?" I said, looking at the Dollar General. Travis stuck his head through the front door and waved.

She sighed heavily and propped her chin in her hand. "I'm gonna sit here for a minute. You go on ahead."

A morning jogger in bright purple spandex ran past, moving down onto the street to avoid us on the sidewalk, almost stumbling to a collision as she took in the window display.

"What is *that*?" she asked, mouth dropped so far open I could almost count her molars.

My mother placed one hand over her heart. "It's my work."

"I'm gonna go make some coffee." I scrubbed a hand over my face and wished it were late enough in the day to crack open a beer. At least the place next door was vacant. For a while it'd been barely surviving as a subpar kitschy vintage restaurant, but no one had rented it for the last year and a half. My father always said he'd rather eat something *I* cooked than spend money on a place that couldn't even manage to make a grilled cheese.

"Coffee? Mom?" I repeated.

She nodded and waved me off, pointing out various areas of interest in the display. I heard her

mention something about the panther's naturally high sex drive as the door snicked closed behind me.

"Good fucking grief."

The mess was even worse up close. Bits of fur and leaves littered the floor, as if the animals had taken chunks from each other's hides. There was a big slash by the boar's tail that nearly brought me to tears. I turned away, disgusted with my mother and with myself for not handling things sooner. Imagining what my father would say if he could see the wreck she'd made of his work, I swallowed hard. He'd be so disappointed.

This kind of shit was getting to be a regular occurrence. The original lewd display had been constructed less than a month after we'd buried my father. That morning the shop was pitch-black and I ran directly into the bear—except I didn't know it was a bear; I thought I'd caught an intruder. When he built it, my father had reinforced its broad torso with two-by-fours. The punch I laid on it almost broke my hand.

I'd tried to wrap my mind around the scene as the overhead fluorescents flickered spastically to life. The futon from the spare bedroom wedged next to the glass, covered in my grandmother's linens. A raccoon I'd mounted the week prior gowned in a satin negligee, bridal veil hanging delicately over its face. Its uplifted hand gestured sweetly at the bear, standing beside the bed in a roomy pair of custom boxer shorts made from two pillowcases. I'd immediately recognized the print; they were from Milo's old Spider-Man bedroom set.

There'd been other incidents too: a parade of animals decked out in lingerie and posed in front of boudoir mirrors, alligator skulls with panties stuffed in their open mouths and dangling from their teeth. I knew my father would mind someone dripping lube on his prized mountain lion. He'd definitely mind the ripped fur. But he wasn't there to say anything about it and my mother was my mother. I had only so much control over what she did. I couldn't help but feel I was letting him down, again. His letter, sitting beside my bed, stayed in my head.

I trust you to handle things. I need you to do this now.

"Do better," I muttered, shaking my head. "You gotta do better than this."

Our tiny kitchenette was at the rear of the store, close to the entrance to the workshop, but still in sight line of the register and the assorted candy bars that kids liked to pocket. I searched through the cupboard for coffee filters and found none, remembering too late that we'd been out for a week. I settled on a wadded paper towel.

My mother used to clean the store, but aside from her new window-dressing duties, she'd stopped coming in completely. Dust coated the sale items, coasting along the backs of baby alligators and the lacquered fish until they looked like they'd grown fur. The neon-hued rabbits' feet were grimy, as if the rabbits had run through mud puddles before losing their paws.

Outside, my mother was still yapping about her pornography. Aside from the runner, she'd managed to snag Travis, who stood looking at the scene like a kid in front of a mall Santa Claus. My mother's pink nightgown turned luminous in the sunlight, silhouetting her legs and torso. I wasn't totally sure she was wearing underwear.

I rinsed out a dirty mug and scrubbed the stains with a rag I found next to the sink. Then I poured coffee and took a scalding sip, settling back behind the register. My mother gestured to Travis and to the runner, who'd pulled out a cell phone and was taking pictures.

The beginning of a tension headache boiled behind my forehead.

Travis was still standing outside when my mother came back into the shop. The bell chimed fretfully as she pushed open the door, the metal folding chair jammed under her armpit. She was in the fuzzy slippers my father got her for Christmas a couple of years earlier. Leaves and mud slopped onto the sides and back of the little bunny faces. It had rained the night before, which meant she'd walked over from the house at God only knew what hour of the night.

"Thanks," she said, taking my coffee and handing me the mug full of cigarette ash. She took a sip and grimaced. "That's awful."

"We're out of coffee filters."

"Somebody should buy some more. Tastes like dirt."

"Sorry about that," I replied, deciding not to bring up the fact that she usually bought the coffee, the filters, and the garbage bags. My father would've taped the grocery list to the steering wheel of her car. He would've said her name in that exasperated way that showed he loved her even though she drove him crazy.

"God, I'm tired."

She leaned back against the counter and her ribs moved visibly beneath the ruffled bodice of her nightgown. She was smoking again, which she hadn't done since we were little. The bags under her eyes were deep-set and very dark, like someone had pressed their thumbs into her flesh. I wanted to shake her and ask why she had to make things harder than they already were, why she couldn't just act normal so we could move forward the way Dad would want us to, but instead I went to the back and called my brother.

He picked up on the fourth ring, voice still thick with sleep. I wondered if there was anyone there with him, but my gut told me he was alone. He hadn't seen anyone seriously since Brynn had left him and the kids. Both of us forever in mourning of her, even though she'd been gone for years. Still, it was late. I'd anticipated he'd be at work or at least on the road. Milo, the guy who could never figure out what he wanted to do with his life. He called in sick every other Monday. His daughter was about to go into high school and she was the one who had to do the grocery shopping because he always forgot things like milk and bread. *You have no work ethic*, our father told him once, and Milo smiled as if it were a compliment.

"Come get your mother, she's done it again," I said, watching her in the pale light that filtered through the window. She'd turned to face the scene at the front of the shop, rubbing a dusty pink rabbit's foot between her fingers.

"Christ. Lemme get some pants on."

"Don't worry about it, she's not wearing any."

"I'll be there in ten minutes. Don't let her leave."

I hung up and wondered how I'd get through the rest of the day, much less the rest of the week. Our father had been dead for a year and I was expected to take over everything; manning the store alone, figuring out what to do with my mother's burgeoning creative talents. It was exhausting.

“One thing at a time,” I said, pulling out a pad of old scratch paper. “That’s all there is to it.”

It was easier to work that way: moving forward piecemeal, performing each small task with the entirety of my focus. One done, then another. Letting them all pile up until there was no room to think about anything else.

Bunch of deer mounts. Bud Killson’s bass needed fresh shellac and a couple of new eyes. There was endless fleshing, piles of stuff backed up in the freezer. Pelts to scrape and tan. Flushing out the acid baths and refilling them. Scrubbing down all the countertops in the back, bleaching the floors. There was always something to do.

I’d seen my father work that way all my life. Lists, routines. No time for stress when you’ve got a schedule to keep. Remembering that made my limbs loosen and my jaw unclench.

I could do it. I just needed to be Dad.

“Your brother’s here,” my mother called, setting down her coffee cup. “Maybe he can give me a ride home.”

Milo climbed out of the truck and left the motor running. He looked like he’d slept in his clothes, and he was sporting a couple of days’ worth of patchy beard. Waving off my offer of coffee from the doorway, he took my mother’s arm and put her into the truck. She didn’t argue, just yawned and shuffled her nightgown so it covered her bare legs. They looked too thin; the veins ran blue along her ankles.

“Come for dinner tomorrow,” she said. “I’ll make enough for everyone.”

Dinner at my mother’s meant feeling everything. It wasn’t like the shop, with its tools and disinfectants and work. There was so much of Dad alive in the house: his recliner with the saggy, loose stuffing in the armrests, paperback crime novels parked facedown on the floor, his buttonless shirts piled haphazardly beside my mother’s sewing machine. The green bottle of the aftershave he always wore still sat next to the bathroom sink, its top placed upside down beside the faucet.

“I’ve gotta get stuff done around here,” I said. “Got a customer coming by.”

“I’ll see you at six.”

I didn’t argue, just waved as they pulled out of the lot. When I turned around, Travis Pritchard was standing in front of the window again. He had his cap in one hand and was rubbing the other very gently along his buzzed salt-and-pepper scalp. His shirtsleeves were too short, revealing slips of his skin nearly up to the elbow every time he raised his arm.

“Don’t you need to get back to work?” I hooked my thumbs through my belt loops and yanked up my sagging jeans. Unlike my mother, I’d gained weight in the past year. I drank in excess, sleeping most nights in the shop. My belly sat over my pants and pushed them down my hips. Nothing fit right. Everything I owned felt uncomfortable.

“Marleen’s got the counter.”

Our reflections meshed into the scene in the glass: his weathered skin and dark, sunken eyes, my squat frame in the usual gear—old jeans that needed washing, linted flannel, and a round face so full of freckles that I still got carded at bars. We hovered ghostlike over the animals, more voyeur

than even the wild boar.

Behind us, a bus pulled into the parking lot, transporting a load of retirees. "Looks like the Towers decided to come in a little early today," I said.

Travis grunted and reluctantly turned to stare across the parking lot, where the bus was letting down the first of the elderly wheelchair occupants. "Your mother's got a real talent, you know that?"

That's not the way I would've described taxidermy propped to resemble fucking, but I let him have his say. My mother had always had a penchant for crafting. Domestic arts, my father called them. She embroidered, made her own clothes, threw pottery, scrapbooked. It was flower-arranging shit, the kind of stuff moms did because they needed activities to pass the time. I knew she liked art because my father mentioned something about it once while we were stuffing Canada geese. He mentioned how she'd wanted to sculpt, then shook his head and showed me the best way to place the birds' wings so they didn't look lopsided. It was just stuff she did. Nothing important. Nothing to take away from our time together.

Travis walked back over to the Dollar General and I went inside to assess the damage. The panther was easy to move, but I knew that I'd have to spend a while on its paws. Aside from facial reconstruction, feet were always the hardest to render. It looked as if my mother had actually yanked the cat straight from the branch. Bits of its fur were still adhered to the wood.

The mount was smoothed with a lathe to make a flat surface. When I turned it over, there they were, carved into the bottom: PTM. My finger followed the groove of my father's initials, from the delicate swoop of the *P* to the tight peaks of the *M*. He'd pulled the branch from a larger limb that fell in our backyard after a thunderstorm. My father had an eye for scene and setting. He could make props out of anything: discarded pieces of furniture, wooden pallets, old window frames. He'd looked in that tangle of downed limbs and seen the perfect match, a mount so well suited that it made the cat look ready to pounce onto unsuspecting prey.

I brought him an abandoned sled the week before he died. It was ancient, the crackling red paint sloughing off in hunks, dangling runners spotted with rust. We had ducks in that week. Pristine white mallards with bright orange beaks and feet. I put the sled up on the metal countertop beside their bodies and asked if he thought it was a good match—that out-of-place pairing.

Perfect, he said. Exactly what I would've picked out.

Remembering how he'd left himself laid out on that same counter ruined the memory for me. I threw the branch off into the corner and knocked down a rack of miniature lacquered alligator skulls. They rattled around on the floor, spinning and knocking against each other. A few of them broke, dislodging teeth that scattered across the floor like uncooked rice.

I ignored that mess and focused on carefully removing the condoms from the ficus. My hands were coated in spermicidal lubricant. It took three strong washes to remove the gunk. I was nervous to look at the Bagot's coat, sure my mother hadn't been nearly as cautious. I left it propped in the window. The light threw pastel highlights on the work I'd done to its face and ears, making it look inquisitive and alert. It was the only good feeling I'd had all morning, staring at that goat and knowing that at least I hadn't fucked that up.

In the interest of my back, I left the ficus where it stood. "Come on, buddy." I tugged at the boar's rump until it scraped backward toward me across the linoleum. "Let's take a look at you."

When I removed the binoculars from the boar's tusks, the right end chipped off, sending white dust pillowing onto the floor.

We hadn't had any new business in weeks, aside from assorted small fry and the occasional regular who dropped off a pity kill, but that wouldn't pay the bills. Money problems were another legacy left to me by my father. I'd always thought he was so capable, that he'd handled everything with money to spare for things like groceries and car insurance. What I'd discovered was a black hole of debt. *I'm sorry*, he'd written, his pen digging wounds into the paper. *I'm so sorry*. I looked around at the mess piled up around the shop: the fly-ridden garbage, stacks of bills and trade magazines slipping over the counters and falling to the floor, mingled dust and hair dotting everything.

The bell clanged as the front door opened.

A woman stood in the doorway. Morning sun poured through the gap and shrouded her figure in shadow, but based on the nice clothes and shoes she wore, I didn't think it was anyone I knew.

"What happened to the display?" She pointed at the window. The boar still sat there awkwardly with its broken tusk, like an uncomfortable patient in a dentist's office.

"The what?"

She molded the air with her hands, as if trying to sculpt the image. "You know, the window scene. My friend Denise sent me a picture. She caught it on her jogging route this morning."

"That wasn't supposed to be up."

"Why not?" She stepped precisely around the clutter on the floor. She wore patent leather pumps that made her legs look great and a professional business skirt with a pleat cut in the back. I wiped my hands on my jeans and assessed my work boots, which were stained with an accumulation of varnish and tanning preservatives.

"It was obscene," I said. "My mother's going through a rough time right now."

The woman was a foot taller than me, lean and angular and handsome. She stopped next to the boar and knelt beside it, assessing its face. One long finger probed the broken tusk. "I'm Lucinda Rex," she said, cupping the animal's face. "I run the gallery over on Morse."

"Jessa Morton." I poured myself a cup of the weak coffee that still sat in the bottom of the pot in order to give myself something to do with my hands, which were suddenly sweating.

"It's fascinating stuff." She looked up from where she crouched beside the boar. Her eyes were dark and thickly lashed. "You did these yourself?"

"Most of them. Some my father did."

"They're very lifelike." She unfolded from the floor and continued standing beside the boar. Its broken tusk pressed into the smooth skin of her leg and left behind a pink scratch.

Lucinda was the kind of lady I liked to look at, but generally avoided because they were way too classy for me. My usual type was a messy woman, the kind of person who'd go out with me on a date and inevitably leave the bar with someone else. "Was there something you needed?"

"Yes. How much for this one?"

"How much?" I repeated, watching her pet the boar's head. Her hands were slender and her fingers were very long. I imagined them touching my face, stroking a line across my collarbone. "How much."

"I'll give you three grand for it."

"What?" The most anybody had ever spent in our shop was just over a thousand, and that was on custom work.

Frowning, she brought her purse over to the sales counter. "Is that not enough?"

I shook my head. "It's not right—the tusk is broken, see? I'll have to fix it."

"I can't even tell." She wasn't looking. "I'd love to see what your mother could do with something like this."

She had to be joking. "Yeah, right."

"I think it looks fine."

It obviously did not. "I'd need to fix it up first."

"Of course. But let me go ahead and buy it from you now. I'll just pick it up later." She looked appraisingly at me, lips set in a thin line. "Or do you deliver?"

"Sure, we can do that." We never did that.

"Wonderful." She unearthed a credit card from a giant pile of them, an assortment stacked up like playing cards. "I'll expect you tomorrow afternoon."

I spent the rest of the day sprucing up the boar. Its tusk was shot to hell and the coat was worn down and scaly from sitting in the dust and sun for so many years. Patching the holes was rough work without suitable scraps. It made fixing fuckups a hell of a lot harder, but I wasn't about to sell Lucinda something wrecked. For a solid three grand, the work would have to be pristine.

My father had patented a few of his own tanning recipes, stuff that he'd perfected over the years, tricks he'd learned from his own father. Left to my own devices, I couldn't do half the work he did. I didn't have the connections or the experience. Most of what I created was based on gut feeling, what he called my natural talent. It had served me well in the past, but that was with my father there to pick up the slack. When I asked him to teach me, he always put it off.

It'll be faster if I just do it, he'd said about his special glazing technique for trout. *Takes longer to teach than for me to just get it done.*

I'd had to turn down three different jobs because I didn't know the glaze and he had never thought it was the right time for me to learn. Since his death, I often wondered if he didn't teach me those tricks because he still wished he had the right son to share them with.

It was a pointless concern. All I could do was what I'd been doing: running relentlessly, every day,

until my brain shut down. I worked until my hands slipped and I nicked the pads of my fingers. Gutted fish until my clothes stunk of the lake. Scraped until my muscles screamed. Then I could sleep again and wake the next day, thrust back into my endless cycle of trying, trying, trying. Being what he needed.

Need. It was a word that my father seldom used. I'd heard him say *want*, and *expect*. But there was never anything like *need*, a word that implied helplessness and frailty. A word that made him seem farther from me than ever, drowning, thrashing alone while he waited for someone to save him. For me to save everything. So I worked. It was what my father would have done. *The best way to get through anything at home is just to stay at work*, he'd say, smiling over the top of a mount. We'd laugh about it, him talking about my mother that way. That she would ever be too much for him to go home to. That he would ever need a break from a person who took care of everything for him so he could do the things he loved the most.

"Focus," I said, examining the boar's legs. "Don't fuck this up."

My mother hadn't been too careful posing it, likely because the animal was double her weight. There were long rips along the belly that required re-stitching and one that I needed to resurface completely. I drank unending cans of beer, my mind switching to autopilot, as it always did when I was re-creating. I let my hands do my thinking for me, building something from the tangle of hide and padding and wires. I cleaned the coat. Glossed the hooves. Patched the slippage along the ears. I thought about Lucinda: her long fingers, her long legs. The way her mouth had looked when she half smiled at me in the shop. Wondered if she'd be pleased with the work, then felt aggravated with myself that I wanted to see her again. I generally never wanted to see anyone, and that's how I liked my life: simple, no mess.

Milo stopped by around nine the next morning, carrying a coffee in each hand. I took both from him and sat with my legs splayed out on either side of the table. I smelled sour, my hands stained with dye from where I'd tried to match up scraps on the underside of the animal. It wasn't exact, but I comforted myself with the thought that Lucinda wouldn't know any different.

"Can't believe you're getting rid of him." He petted the boar on its wrinkled snout before inserting two fingers in the nostrils and wriggling them around. "It's like selling a family member."

I slapped his hand away, worried he'd screw up the paint. "The money will help me sleep at night." The first coffee I sipped from was full of cheap, syrupy creamer. I handed it back to Milo, who chugged some before setting it on the metal table next to my tools.

"Don't you feel bad that it was a Prentice Morton original? Not too many of those left."

Sighing, I rolled my shoulders until my spine cracked. "The two of us are the only originals that matter. At least we're getting paid."

He grabbed a chair from the desk and brought it over to the other side of the boar. His face scrunched up as he assessed the side, squinting deep wrinkles beside his eyes. "It looks good, but it'll never be like Dad's. There's something wrong with the coloring, it doesn't match up along the neck."

What the hell did he know about any of it? He'd never had to spend hours in the shop, matching dyes, sweating buckets into the pelt when it didn't want to stretch right. "Fuck you, nothing's like Dad's."

Milo held up his hands. "Just saying you can't do all this yourself."

"Aren't you supposed to be at work?" I asked.

He shrugged and leaned back, drinking more coffee. "Took a sick day."

Since we were kids, my brother was the flexible one, the person who listened and empathized. He'd been home with my mother while my father took me places: out together on early morning fishing and hunting trips, down to the Home Depot to collect gear for a garden-bed project in the backyard. He'd never asked my brother along; he'd considered him whiny and too prone to crying. *Your brother's a little too sensitive about everything*, he told me one day over lunch, digging pickles off his pastrami and passing them to me. *He has too many feelings. I love him. I just don't understand him, that's all.*

"You okay?" Milo asked, leaning closer to me. He'd shaved, finally, and there was dried blood dotting his chin. "You should eat."

"Sorry, I'm just tired." I set down the coffee and stood up. The world blackened to pinpricks for a moment and I waited until the dizziness passed before continuing. "Help me load this fucker in the truck."

We each grabbed an end and maneuvered it through the back of the shop and into the alleyway. Down the street, light gleamed off the lake like a line of silver glitter. It was steamy out and bordering the high eighties. I anticipated that it would soar into the nineties before long, and didn't relish leaving the boar in the back of the bed. The glue and tanners had a tendency to melt in the heat. More than once we'd lost antlers or eyeballs when someone left our work in the car while picking up groceries. Our father always told people to treat taxidermy as they would a live animal: never leave a dog in a locked car; never leave a mounted deer head in the front seat.

I took a blue tarp from the back of the shop and we laid it over the boar, pinning it down with bungees in all four corners. The animal's tusks and back poked up, propping up the middle of the tarp in a bright bulge that made me feel nervous for its safety. We climbed into the truck and Milo pulled down the alley and into the street.

"Let's get something to eat. You can't live off beer."

"I don't think that's a good idea." Our father would never have left a taxidermied animal in the back of a truck, but he also never would have delivered one to anybody. "The boar might get fucked up."

"It's already fucked up, and we need breakfast." Milo rubbed a hand against his concave stomach. He was wearing an old T-shirt from high school, a rose-colored one with a front pocket stretched out from storing chewing tobacco. His coloring was more sallow than usual, a sickly unnatural hue. I hadn't been spending much time with him lately—too busy with work and avoiding the spillover of his feelings—and realized he looked worse than I did. *How is he taking care of his daughter if he looks like this? I wondered. How is Brynn's kid getting fed?*

Even thinking Brynn's name made my brain swim with images of her: crooked teeth and wide red mouth, a girl with so much light in her it almost hurt to look at her face. The one who'd taken up my thoughts since childhood. Memories of Brynn put razor blades in my stomach, never butterflies.

But I forced those images down and focused on food. I could do food. I nodded at Milo and he smiled, turning left, down the street to the diner.

“Maybe it’s time to talk about selling the business.” Milo steered with his left hand, elbow jutting out the window while he punched gears with his right. “The economy’s not great, and there’s no money from life insurance, since . . . you know.”

My brother had never saved a dollar in his life. He looked so smug, talking about something he’d never had to care about. The closest thing he had to a savings account was his daughter’s orange-and-blue UF piggy bank. I wanted to smack him. “What do you know about running a business?”

“You’ll end up losing everything you’ve saved. You need to be realistic.”

I’d already put most of my savings into financing the shop, but I wasn’t about to tell Milo that. Being realistic meant facing our situation head on, and the fact of the matter was that I was the only one taking care of things. There was no one for me to turn to for help. It made me angry, that my brother could drive me to breakfast and tell me what to do when he never had to deal with any of the shit that came with it. He hadn’t found our father, head leaking brain matter onto the metal table where we’d cured our first hide.

“Maybe you could chip in a few bucks,” I said, peeling at the paneling that was beginning to separate from the dash. “It’s your family too.”

Milo’s grip tightened on the steering wheel, and I stared out the window. I knew it wasn’t fair to say something like that. It wasn’t his responsibility to help pay for a shop that our father had never wanted him to help with. I might not have understood our mother, but at least she always showed she cared. My father treated Milo like an inconvenience, an acquaintance he didn’t like all that much, someone taking up space in the house.

“I’m trying to help,” Milo said, tentatively putting his hand on my knee. That kind of touching felt forced, not like anything we’d ever done with each other. He and I were handshake buddies. We slapped each other on the back when we hugged.

“Let’s just drop it,” I said. “I’m too fucking tired.”

The parking lot of Winnie’s was already half-full. I scrubbed at my gluey eyes and blinked to free an eyelash that had lodged itself beneath a lid. The sun beat down on me as I climbed out of the truck, and I spared a glance at the boar, nestled beneath a sea of blue plastic sheeting.

“You good?” Milo scratched at his forehead and squinted at me.

“He’ll be fine. In and out, right?”

The diner smelled like burnt toast and bacon grease. Milo led us to the very back, next to the kitchen. Brynn and I had come to Winnie’s for years, just the two of us, and then we’d brought Milo. Then two again: the two of them without me. Waitresses flew through the swinging doors, indistinguishable from each other aside from their brassy hair colors: coppery penny, corn-silk yellow, the magenta of an especially fiery sunset. One bright head stopped at our table with her notepad already jammed down into her apron. Her hands were birds; one fluttered up into her neckline to fiddle with a button, while the other tugged at an earring.

“You guys want the usual?” she asked, mouth slick and red. Her voice was low and scratchy, like she needed to clear her throat. “Regular? Some coffee?”

A *New York Times* Bestseller

"This book is my song of the summer." — Parul Sehgal, *The New York Times*

A Most Anticipated Book of 2019 at *Esquire*, *The Week*, *BuzzFeed*, *NYLON*, *Bustle*, *HuffPost*, *The Boston Globe*, and more.

One morning, Jessa-Lynn Morton walks into the family taxidermy shop to find that her father has committed suicide, right there on one of the metal tables. Shocked and grieving, Jessa steps up to manage the failing business, while the rest of the Morton family crumbles. Her mother starts sneaking into the shop to make aggressively lewd art with the taxidermied animals. Her brother Milo withdraws, struggling to function. And Brynn, Milo's wife; and the only person Jessa's ever been in love with; walks out without a word. As Jessa seeks out less-than-legal ways of generating income, her mother's art escalates; picture a figure of her dead husband and a stuffed buffalo in an uncomfortably sexual pose; and the Mortons reach a tipping point. For the first time, Jessa has no choice but to learn who these people truly are, and ultimately how she fits alongside them. *À*

Kristen Arnett's debut novel is a darkly funny, heart-wrenching, and eccentric look at loss and love.

Mab Dresden - Penguin Random ** Mostly Dead Things by Kristen Arnett - Mostly Dead Things Mostly Dead Things - Miami Today - In Arnett's dark and original debut, Jessa discovers her father dead of a suicide in the family's Florida taxidermy shop. She also finds a note Mostly Dead Things : Kristen Arnett : 9781947793309 - Book - The Book Stall Loneliness, Resurrection, and Taxidermy: A Conversation with - When i get home ill copy it out for you, as i dont have the book with me atm, but i. fic and characterisation has sometimes been sacrificed to make things work.. Mab, the mother of wicked faeries, has restored the mostly-dead wizard to Can You Finish All of the Best Quotes From "The Princess" - I've spent this year second-guessing myself. Every decision inspired fear. My emotions were out of control. I despised (yet yearned) for change. Homestuck scp - Listen to 67 - MOSTLY DEAD THINGS by Kristen Arnett (Featuring Jessica Hatch) by Drunken Book Review Podcast instantly on your tablet, Mostly Dead Things - In any other climate, it might feel too late in the

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