

The Mausoleum

In winter, I moved indoors, made coffee in the morning, and washed my cup out in the sink as I looked out the kitchen window at the rusted fields. The old house at the end of the two-mile dirt road smelled of mold and decay. No one had bothered to clean up or lock up after my grandfather died. So I trespassed beneath the doorbell where he had engraved his name and with the wood he had chopped, I built a fire. At night, close to the flames, I tamed myself. The maples in the yard crimsoned. I played Beethoven records on the turntable, pressed my ear to the speaker, and listened a thousandth time for the beginning of his deafness.

A squirrel came down the chimney one morning before the frost had melted off the windows and we stood watching each other for a long time. I could see the dark of his eyes, the pulse of his chest.

“Hey, Charlie. Hey, Charlie. Don’t be afraid,” I said. It was the name my grandfather had given all squirrels. “Hey, Charlie.”

He was my first visitor. I played Billy Holiday for him. For the rest of the day, he stayed in the living room and I stayed in the kitchen.

I cornered him again around sundown, and shot him.

Once, my father gave my brother and me a chicken's wishbone. He took it down from the shelf where he dried things we'd gathered from the shore.

"Hold the ends," he told us. "Don't pull 'til I say pull. Whoever breaks the biggest piece gets their wish. And what can't you do?"

"You can't say it aloud," I finished.

"It," my brother said, smirking. "It."

Under the table, our father clicked his belt buckle while we stared at the bone greedily, our desire sealed by marrow. We imagined the bone was our father's. We imagined the game was ours. We imagined the sound he would make as it snapped.

There were other skeletons on the shelf: clam shells and sea urchins, the dried carcass of a starfish, periwinkles, a giant lobster claw; a mouse's foot, the skull of a baby raccoon, a shard of deer antler; a shark's tooth and a flawless mackerel spine. My mother had brought feathers and blue, speckled eggshells from the wilderness outside and placed them around the bones.

My father appeared at my grandfather's doorstep to get the old hacksaw from the garage. I greeted him at the door with the gun and blood-stained towel.

"Squirrel?"

I nodded.

"You get it?"

"Yes."

He made to enter the house, and I shifted the gun, my body, the blood across the door.

"I took care of it. Don't be bothered to come in."

He didn't have to push past me. He stepped over the threshold, scuffing his boots. I gave way just before his clothing touched mine. As if the sinews of my body were connected to his structure, his muscles.

Alone again, in the house made silent by his absence, I stood at the kitchen window and cried. Terrified suddenly of the empty, soundless rooms. I listened for the

sound of his truck coming back up the drive. Then I climbed the roof, put wire mesh over the chimney and took it off, and put on tighter, sealing myself in.

Later that night, I found a set of skeletons in the ash bin next to the fireplace. A pair of squirrels, their rib cages entangled, so that at first they appeared to be one animal with two heads and two tails and one cavity for the heart. I pulled one from the other, snapping their bones like twigs.

It.

It. It. It. It. It. It. It.

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