

What Happened, the Winter You Found the Deer

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In the evening, when Sister was tired, she said her prayers and then laid her head on the roe's back and fell sound asleep with it as a pillow. And if Brother had but kept his natural form, really it would have been a most delightful kind of life.

—"Brother and Sister," the Brothers Grimm

The antlers were four-pronged (he had been young). Your

brother held them to his forehead, and your heart turned over, you didn't know why.

"You'll stick like that," you said, and he laughed, swung his head away and up like he was ready to fight.

You wondered what had happened to the deer.

Your brother's eyes were dark, and his hands around the antlers pale as bone.

The house is all wood and white, like winter followed you home, and mostly empty. The only real color is the painting of the girl in yellow and the boy in grey, upstairs, in the room that your parents might have lived in.

(Sometimes you dream your parents were there and left you, sometimes that they've always been gone. Each one is true, while it is, and either way you can't remember their faces.)

Every so often your brother braves the room, but you don't like the painting.

Once you stood in the doorway and called for him, when he'd been missing too long, but there was no answer. When you leaned forward you could just see the edge of a yellow skirt, a pale foot, and you left well enough alone.

He came back anyway, later (a week, or three weeks). He set a crocus on the table beside you, flower and bulb and dirt, said, "Won't you welcome me home?"

He sounded like an old man, and sad about things that hadn't happened yet.

"Oh, did you go somewhere?" you asked, but you looked at him and your face must have ruined it, because he smiled and shed his coat and said, "We should get to work, if we're going to have a garden this year."

You smoothed dirt over the seeds, and never asked where he'd been; it didn't matter, if he was home.

The woods were cold, but the worst of the winter was over, and when the two of you went out you could wear the boots that didn't feel like anvils.

Your strides were the same length. You were efficient hunters (always were; there had never been a time when you couldn't hold a knife and run).

The creek had been swollen high when winter came, but there was still a ribbon of ice clinging to the bank where the current wasn't fast enough to pierce it. Beside it, tiny tracks were black against the frost—small and close, and then the leap.

You grinned at each other, set off.

(You wondered what you looked like, hunting together; you had the family faces, with only the hair to set you apart, and you remember once he touched your head in the cup of his palm and said, "Where did you get this long dark stuff," left his hand a beat too long.)

When you split up, he was the color of winter, like any empty space between the forest trees, if you didn't know how to look for him.

The rabbits saw you; they never saw your brother.

After you had skinned it and were paring the meat, he took off his coat and came closer, stood by the chopping block.

"You'll never be any good like that," he said, like there was anyone else you were ever going to cook for. Something in his voice

was a warning.

You looked up. You said, “Show me.”

(Had he been outside? He couldn't have been, it was snowing outside and nothing had melted in his eyebrows, but he'd hung his coat. Why couldn't you remember?)

He stood beside you, pulled the scarf from around his neck, wrapped it across your eyes.

“Try now.”

The scarf was gold, and warm where it had touched his skin. The hair on your arms stood up—this was a test and he wasn't telling you why—but it didn't matter. In the dark you woke up to the knife in your hand; there was nothing but the scrape of the blade and the thing that you needed, cut apart.

Your vision flooded with light when the scarf dropped into the meat. It was perfectly butchered, like a stranger had done it.

You lifted the scarf on the edge of the knife. When he took it back, his finger bled.

(He doesn't say, You turned the blade to cut me. He saw it; he knows.)

But he'd been drawn and wary before he ever reached out to take it back—as if you'd done better than he'd hoped, as if it was a bad sign.

Before this, you'd thought he kept away sometimes because he liked to be a little cruel.

But his hands had shaken at the nape of your neck all the while he held the scarf against your eyes, as if you were the reason he was keeping away; as if he knew the signs you didn't know. Why were you the collection of his fears?

You weren't used to worrying—what was there to worry about, in a happy home and the woods to hold you?—and lying awake made your hands ache, made you edgy from glimpsing owls and shadows, looking for something out of place that couldn't be.

In the sharp edge of spring, you found the shrews.

He nearly stepped on them, but when you said “Wait,” he froze, foot still in the air, and you were able to urge his leg back with your hands (his knee hot through the fabric), kneel in the dirt, push the leaves aside until the little shrews were uncovered, a nest she had made in a cradle of bones.

“It’s not safe here,” you said. “Why would she leave them?”

“Good thing you saw them,” your brother said, but his voice was flat and strange, and when you looked back at him he’d put his hands in his pockets so no skin showed, and you went cold all over.

You had known they were there even though they were buried, so buried by leaves that you shouldn’t have known.

(When you went hunting, the rabbits caught sight of you but never ran.)

It scraped away at you all that night, as you lay awake in your bed, with the owls casting shadows outside, and listened for his breathing.

You want to think, later, that there was some mark in the dust to which you could return, and scatter teeth, and try again not to wake up to what was happening. But it was always too late. Whatever this is, you were always going to open your eyes.

(Your brother knew it; he pulled his scarf against them, to see if it was true.)

In the painting in the room you don’t go in, you and your brother are in the study, amid the books and the animal heads someone must have put there long before you lived in it. He stands behind your chair in his grey suit with one hand resting on your shoulder. His fingers are barely pressing against your yellow dress, and there are chills up and down your arms, painted in by someone who didn’t see the point of keeping secrets.

If you ever had parents, they hid it here; they covered it up for a long time.

It’s never something you can think about for long.

You went walking, like you could find something you had lost.

Gold crocuses were bunched like soldiers, and the little shrews were nowhere to be seen, and through the frost there were the sharp twin marks that only deer made, and you followed (hunter's habit).

You found him, finally, at the edge of the creek. He was drinking; when you came into sight he was hardly even startled. He looked up for a moment, looked behind him for a way out—just the way of deer—but when you didn't move he took you in for a moment and walked on, like you were any other creature the woods had ever borne.

It was home, and there was no painting here to worry you, and every breath you let out was a cloud in the cold, and the air was warm and damp and nearly spring.

When you came back from the woods, he was drawing.

(Had your father been an artist, if you had a father? Someone had painted the picture upstairs.)

Outside it had barely been chilly. It was too hot now that you were within walls. Your temples itched with blood.

"You'll never be any good like that," you said.

He looked you up and down and smiled, just one half of his mouth curling—pleased but not happy, listening but not yours.

"Show me," he said. But it was a beat too late, and he hadn't moved.

You stood behind him and pulled your gray scarf across his eyes; his hand shook against the paper, a little line of charcoal that skipped and dragged.

He'd been drawing the deer. It wasn't more than a suggestion of the trees yet, a thread of antlers, but you knew.

You knotted it tighter than you meant; you knotted it so tightly you were upstairs before he could pull it free.

When you were very young, you ran into your parents' room

(you must have been looking for them, you must have had parents

once, you wish you could remember if it's true, you don't dare ask him).

The portrait of you and your brother looked down at you solemnly, dressed up in yellow and grey, hair brushed and shining, dark and light.

They were older than you were, by years and years.

It's a room you don't go in any more.

It stormed for three days in spring.

"Are you the cause of all this?" he asked like he was reading a joke off a piece of paper, not quite looking at you. He had just come in; his pale hair clung to his forehead so he looked half-dead.

You almost asked him, What do you mean, but you thought about finding the shrews that were buried, and about going hunting, and you thought about the way he'd looked at you when you told him that if he held the antlers to his head they would stick.

"You're frightened of me."

"No." He slid out of his coat, flexed his hands around it as he hung it up.

(He's done something terrible, you thought, but went no farther. What was there to know after that that you cared to find?)

You said, "Show me."

You held out your hand, beckoned him closer.

He looked back at the door like a deer caught out, looked out the window unblinking, until his hands fell from the coat, fists at his sides. The rain beat down against the windows; it was grey as a dream.

When you lifted your face to him, in the moment before he gave in, he swung his head away and up like he was ready to fight.

"I should never have left us alone," he said.

The words filled his lungs and the dark; they hummed under your hand. The rain shifted like the forest was trying to drown him out.

The paper in his room was a pattern of vines stamped in gold, and peeling at the corners as if it was tired. You thought about parents you couldn't remember, about the breadth of the forest full of buried things that you couldn't have seen, shrews in a nest of bones.

You thought of the room with the portrait, sitting empty, and pressed your forehead into his shoulder like you could drive it out again.

You're younger in the portrait than you are now; you're almost sure.

The morning after the storm, you went looking for the shrews, your heart already in your throat.

They were trapped in an eddy, nest crushed on a rock, long drowned. They were slimy and heavy, a tangle of soggy fur and pink feet melting right through your fingers as you held them.

You set them on the bank, as if anyone was looking for them. Your hands were burning, tight with blood, and your bare feet ached.

You made a straight line home in the frost, the leaves behind you smoking.

Things got quiet after that, and you sat at the piano without playing, listened to the house as he walked back and forth upstairs, as he moved at the edge of your vision in the kitchen or the parlor.

There were things you'd have to say, if you spoke:

"How could you set them in the water to die?"

"It did the opposite of what you hoped. Don't you see what will happen now?"

He kept his hands in his pockets, whenever he was near you. He saw it; he knows.

His room felt like a stranger now, even when he wasn't in it, and you didn't cross the doorway. It didn't matter. It was just another room you kept out of, that was all.

Outside it got warmer every week, and his breathing and your

breathing filled the house to bursting, and out in the forest, green was covering everything living or dead.

“I’m going out,” he said. He slid on a jacket, tied his scarf in a knot.

You paused with the page of your book half-turned. It was the end of summer (his eyes followed your hand whenever you brushed sticky hair off your neck). He’d sweat to death in the coat.

“Give me that,” you said.

After too long, he pulled the scarf from his throat, handed it to you.

It was cold straight through. He was sick, too sick for his body to have any heat to spare. You cupped his neck (he flinched – your touch burned him, by then – but it was good to touch him, and you didn’t let go).

“I won’t live,” he said.

His skin was soft as shrews’ fur.

You said, “Good.”

But he’s your brother, and you watch from the doorway as he curls under blankets that can’t warm him, and you walk past his threshold at midnight to make sure he’s still moving.

The leaves get red, and you go hunting.

You make rabbit stew until he shakes his head, says, “It’s a waste of soup,” tries to smile.

“Don’t be selfish,” you say.

He looks at you for a long time.

“You can let me go,” he says.

You know that. Even in the portrait, even when that brother and sister were older than you, he had the look of a boy about to be eclipsed.

(It’s what you’ve tried not to think of; it’s why you went so long trying not to understand.)

“You’d deserve it, I hate you,” you say, and it’s mostly true

except that your throat is so tight, except that when you look at him you're already thinking about the fragile tracks that the deer made.

His face shifts as he watches you, like he knows, like he's worrying what you'll decide.

It would be so easy to let him die. You could bury his body under the leaves; by spring the shrews would be making nests in his bones.

"I understand," he says, and it's mostly true.

Somewhere else, far away, some other girl might have stood in this doorway and had this choice. Some other girl had a brother she'd already burned to death.

There's no painting any more, in that house. That house is cinders now.

It was winter there, a blanket of white, and that girl was lifting a handful of shrews to a bed of leaves at the base of a tree, where it was warm and covered over; she was sitting awake in her forest home, waiting for their mother to find them.

But you went into the forest.

The deer was too dark for a world this snowed over, it was sable and doomed, and when it looked at you its eyes were two black worlds against the white.

You were ready for a hunt, if it came to that; there had never been a time when you couldn't hold a knife and run.

But it looked at you and never moved. Its antlers were big, and pale as bone. You wrapped one hand around the knife, held out the other; beckoned it closer.

Then it was just the scrape of the blade and the thing that you needed, cut apart.

Your brother opened his eyes as you were wrapping his hands around the antlers. (He was trembling, all over. His eyes were covered with a layer of frost.)

"Do it," you said, moved back.

He had to do it himself. You couldn't help him; that much you were sure of.

He tossed his head, once, like he was preparing for a fight, but by now you knew his breathing.

Your hands were still aching from the knife and smeared with blood from your work. When you'd wrapped your fingers around his hands, you couldn't even tell how cold he was - your skin was so hot, he might have been well again for all you knew. You stood against the wall, pressed your hands to the paper stamped gold with vines.

He watched you the whole time he struggled with the antlers, brought them at last to his temples.

He was so pale; his eyes were black.

You go out walking with your brother.

You wear the gold scarf, but no coat (winter has no hold on you now), and you wear the thin light boots you use for hunting, just in case. You carry a knife.

Your strides are the same length; his feet make twin black marks, in the last of the frost.

