Beast Bouquet

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Ansin's callused hands trembled uncharacteristically, as he stared at the smudge of chocolate that was brushed across his mother's face in the photograph. He looked down at his daughter and her neatly combed hair, chocolate all around her mouth, while she was wiping her hands on her dress, her face empty.

'I... didn't do it, Daddy,' Sydney said.

And just as he thought he might sob, he began to laugh.

Ansin swallowed his tea heartily and sighed until the taste of rose enveloped him in the smell of that little potpourri filled house he grew up in—the house where his mother had painted the living room a flat mauve color.

He was calm now.

His mother never had many photos taken, and his father had cut her face out of the only one with all of them together. Grownups never think about how their actions will cause history to change so severely, how easily they become the ancestors. Now, his mother was only living in beats of memory, and faceless: an unraveled wool sweater he huffed against his face every night, assuming it was hers, until his brother told him it was made in China and not by her motherly love.

He sputtered into his tea. Upon trying to find her face in his memory, he thought of the day his older brother and himself had repainted her pink walls with that fowl mud from the back garden. Ansin wasn't sure which of them had the bright idea, but he remembered the great merriment that was had while the trans-

gression was fulfilled.

As soon as his mother came home, she was struck still, staring at the walls. He remembered when she started sobbing—the way her empty face had twisted. Now his mother's cries sounded like his wife, Jesslyn, swirling her spoon around the rim of her own mug in the room beside him, and he was snapped back into the present.

Jesslyn gazed out the window as she dried her mug with a fresh tea towel, watching the glare in the chimes that rang in the Breeze. There was something so satisfying about a clean towel, though she liked to hold out as long as possible before having to launder them. This particular one was well-worn, but it smelled of detergent and carried no strange orange stains of inappropriate use. It seemed she was always running out of paper roll, though she couldn't fathom what the husband, Ansin, could be using them on, since mysterious spills still lingered on her counters, and all her towels wound up left crumpled up and smelling of old food.

She stopped staring at the chimes when there was a discordance in the melody and let her eyes wander up the frozen hill instead.

'What's that beast out there climbing over the hill?' she muttered, half to herself.

Ansin sighed and put down his pipe. He first looked out at the cattle—Bessie was trying to mount Daisey again—then continued to scan up toward the woods to see a black mass emerging against the white blade of the sun. As the beast came more into view, it was just as bizarre to him—what looked to be Rick's boy, Charlie, with giant antlers.

'It's an angel! An angel!' hollered Sydney, hopping up beside him on the couch and jumping up and down.

Ansin had trouble seeing his wife as a mother, though he supposed she was one. To him, she was only the woman he loved. He wondered how his father must have seen his own mother.

When cleaning out an old cedar trunk in the attic after his father's funeral, he found that photo of his mother as a teenager gently tucked in a handkerchief. She looked like a baby. He recognized the lace as crotched by his grandma's hands, and he recognized the man beside his mother as his maternal grandfather, with his hand posed on her shoulder. He gently touched her face with his middle finger, then traced a line to his grandfather's hand. He recognized those dirty fingernails. Father and daughter were smiling and holding paintbrushes and on the floor was a can of cheap flat pink paint. He never knew those walls were bright pink once.

'Jess! Look, look! Come look at this!' he had called, much younger than he was now.

'What's wrong?' she asked, scurrying to him from the vinyl she was organizing on the other end of the attic. 'What is it? Oh, wow. Is that...?' She took the photo and examined it.

'She would have been pregnant with Ed when this was taken,' he had said.

'I hope ours is a girl,' Jesslyn said, placing the photo back in his hands. 'And I hope she looks like her. God she's beautiful.'

'If you let me stay here a night you can have this buck,' said Charlie, slopping the poor creature on the ground in front of Ansin and holding up his head by the antlers. 'It's a six pointer.'

'Mn,' said Ansin. He didn't care to say now, but the buck wasn't typical: a big prize to some. One of his tines on the right was projecting down, and it wasn't so simple as calling it a six-pointer, but Ansin didn't have a head for that kind of thing. He

just worried if it was a fair hunt as Rick had a little garden where he'd lure them in, and Charlie could've very well shot the creature there.

He could hear his mother's voice ringing in his head: 'Oh, couldn't they've let the poor thing live a season longer—just a season longer. I'd say he was the king a somethin'. Not just some beast for your wall.'

His mother, Mary-Rose (of course), was a fantastic hunter—would sit and wait in a clearing for hours to meet the beast, just to watch him, just to take photos. This 'waste of time' was excruciating to his father. Now, squirrels, according to her, were fair game. She had a knack for bow-hunting, would shoot 'em with a blunt tip right up into the trees. This especially drove his father crazy—the man could barely find a squirrel, let alone stun one.

Sydney slung mud as she, herself, ran outside to join the party, letting the screen-door slam behind her. She felt that the two men should be thrilled at her presence. Her mother, Jesslyn, always called her their little entertainer. 'Woah! That's huge!' she screeched.

Charlie looked her over, from her wiggling bare feet to her neat blonde ponytail. It seemed odd that she had already changed so much to look like a person. Last time he saw her, she was just a sack of flour with legs.

'Back up,' said Ansin, 'you don't need to see this.'

Just then, Sydney was drawn to the blood on Charlie's jacket, then to the buck's bottomless black eyes. She stumbled back slightly. The air smelled of ice, of woodsmoke, of iron.

'Jess!' called Ansin.

'Yehesss?' Jesslyn sang, coming out quickly from the door and looking among them as if she hadn't been watching the whole

endeavor from the window.

'Will you take Rick's boy in and show him where to wash his clothes?'

She smiled from the husband to the boy and then to the deer. She walked up to them and stroked the head of the creature gently. 'I haven't had venison in a while. This is glorious.'

'Glorious,' repeated Sydney with a grin, shrugging off her bit of discomfort.

Sydney stared into the tub full of bloody water holding her towel and rubber duck. The faucet was still dripping, echoing strangely in the small room. Where the water landed created a thinness in the red, like clear milk being poured into coffee, offering some solace that there was nothing slimy hiding on the copper beneath the tub of turbid water. The girl felt unsure, very unsure in the stomach.

'The pipes,' began her mother behind her, "will freeze if we don't keep the water running.'

Jesslyn scooted Sydney over by the shoulders, then leaned over the tub to turn the water from cold to hot, letting the faucet run hard and steamy. Under the stream, she took a bar of Irish Spring and rubbed it between her palms until there was a white film over everything.

'Just wait for the water to turn clear and you should be good,' she said, shaking off her hands. She stopped briefly on the way out to grab Sydney's hand and look at her fingernails which had become little black crescents from playing in the garden. She didn't say anything else though, and left Sydney there with the duck.

Sydney stared at the newly pink water, then at her hand where her mother had touched her. She just stared.

Charlie hung his newly dredged clothes out on the line, wearing Ansin's flannel pajamas. The frost was bound to leave his clothes stiff, but it was better than nothing.

Bessie eyed him curiously before exhaling a deep 'Maauuuhrrr,' which caused him to still.

Charlie was aware all at once of his smallness on the crawling white landscape, about how the world existed where his back was turned, and beneath his feet, and his absolute freedom to move through it. He projected himself across it, retracing his journey from this morning, lugging the buck through a world that barely noticed him outside a few remaining little red birds.

He laughed a bit after a time, as Bessie just watched him.

Making her grocery list, Jesslyn thought back to last spring.

A big fat catfish sloshed out of the bucket, and following it, a string of eggs that had been gutted.

'Dammit. This one was pregnant,' said Jesslyn, turning to Ansin.

'Oh,' said Ansin, pushing the bucket away with his foot. 'Well, I didn't know.'

Sydney gasped.

'It's alright. It's part of life—' began Jesslyn.

'Does that mean there's more meat?' Sydney asked suddenly.

'What?' someone asked.

'No,' someone answered.

Sydney seemed to turn inward for a moment, looking at

her hands. Maybe that's when she started to think of herself as a bit of a monster too. That should be fine.

Before they left the house, Sydney had thrown an orange peel into the woodstove. The fragrance travelled with them down the country road into town, lending them a feeling like playing outside after school.

They drove past a plastic nativity decorating an unsealed wooden shelf stuck in the side of a hill close to Ansin's childhood house. The neighbor's new silo took on the color of the hyacinth sky, and wet hay that fell from someone's trailer slopped on the side of the road, reminding Ansin of the pine-straw bow target that was consumed back into the earth when he was a kid, eventually.

After turning onto the new highway, a tractor drove along the edge, so not to be a burden on the fast to anger drivers. Jesslyn thought of when the world was slow, and that whenever there were cows her mom would stop the truck and say, 'look cows.' Now they were moving so quickly. She remembered the barn in the distance, before it lost its roof, and the field full of wildflowers before hemp was legal again. For a moment she saw herself on the hill, younger—too young—hair twisting into the wind, and Ansin coming up to meet her, holding a little brown rabbit by the ears. 'Nice bouquet,' she thought to say, but they were too young. They hadn't figured out where the edges were yet.

'Why do we keep getting stopped by this same train? I swear it's the same graffiti as last time,' Ansin said.

'Maybe it's a gang. I've heard they do that kind of thing,' said Jesslyn, admittedly pleased to be slowed down.

'A train gang?' Ansin asked, grumbling. He stuck his hand in the bag of tobacco, put a wad on top of his pipe, and quickly

stuffed it with the back of his lighter. He sent the flame crackling down the bowl, inhaling deeply. 'What happened to your dad, kid?' he asked suddenly, exhaling a large mass of smoke.

'What?' asked Charlie with a croak.

Sydney coughed into the bag of onions and potatoes in her lap.

'Will you roll the window down please?' asked Jesslyn, pulling her shirt over her nose.

As Ansin rolled down the window, the bite of the cold swallowed the heaviness of the smoke like a vacuum. It was silent but for the wind for a moment.

'That's...what I thought,' said Ansin.

Sydney didn't know what any of it meant.

And when they made it back home, the clouds looked like tire marks in the snow.

A log fell over in the fire with a pop, at the mercy of Sydney prodding it with a stick.

'Stop that. Playing with fire'll make you pee the bed,' said her mother, rotating a tin-wrapped potato in the coals.

Ansin turned toward his wife slightly. 'I always heard it gives you good dreams, keeps you warm.' He nodded at himself, plucking at his guitar.

'Tends to happen when you pee the bed,' said Jesslyn.

Ansin looking at her, responding by changing the tone of his plucking.

'I know what I'm doing, Momma," said Sydney.

Charlie's hot dog fell into the fire off his stick.

No one made any movements but Sydney, who jumped on his shoulders. 'Piggyback!'

'Get off him,' said Ansin simply.

'No,' said Charlie standing up. 'It's fine. Let's just see if she can hold on.'

He stood up and Sydney wrapped her arms around his neck as he began to spin around, clinging to his hood as her legs flew in circles.

She laughed wildly.

They all laughed. Even the smudge. Even the venison smoking over the fire.