

The Painted Stag

by Shaun Barger

The yellow trolley whisked Jason across the world of grey, and he watched it pass through a thick pane of bubbly glass. The surface was cool against the side of his face, his breath a dewy ghost that grew and shrank at slow, even intervals. Ice frosted the thick dry grass of the marsh in patches that stretched out endlessly in all directions, white blurs like smears of paint across his vision.

“We’re almost there.”

Jason shifted in his seat, turning to face his younger sister who sat across the aisle of the empty train car. She had long, black hair; a long streak of blue hanging across her pale face. She pursed her red-brown lips in what looked to be an attempt at encouragement, but her expression was tinged with sadness.

“Come on,” she said, “Get your bag.”

The trolley rolled to a stop as silently as it had moved, with nothing but a small pull of gravity to let Jason know that they were slowing. He stood, pulling the strap of his worn green duffel bag over his shoulder, and watched the small cement platform approach with a feeling of resignation.

Swoosh. The yellow steel door rolled open, and Jason stepped out onto the wet pavement, crisp, salty air hitting his face. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that his sister stood at the door, but remained in the cabin, her arms folded delicately across her breast.

“Aren’t you coming?” Jason asked, brow furrowing. She shook her head. The door slid closed, and the trolley rolled away, dull yellow steel glinting in the dim light, moving like a sluggish golden serpent through the sea of dead grass. Jason stood there, watching the trolley until it was a dot on the horizon, and turned away.

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There was nothing cohesive about his father’s home. It was comprised of six rooms, all seemingly built at different times. From the outside, it looked as if someone had taken several houses and crushed them together. The paint, although faded, varied from panel to panel, side to side; some blue, some a sad, yellow brown, and still others a pure, unmarked white. The white appeared to be the most recent of the colors. Part of the roof was slate, part tile, and a large portion of it was covered with a wide, black tarp, as if unfinished.

The house was only one story, five halls shaped like the lines of an “8” on a digital clock. There were three bathrooms, and a basement without a stairway that Jason’s father warned him against entering.

Each room was drastically different, his father and step-mother’s painted a cool orange-red, adorned sparsely with nothing but a bed, dresser, and a tall, potted plant that seemed to be faring poorly in the grey light of the marshlands.

“Your step-mother and baby brother are out visiting friends right now,” his father told him, “But they should be back late tonight. Maybe you’ll see them, if you’re still awake.”

It was already late, the dim grey light of the marshland growing dimmer, so Jason’s father brought him to his room. Brown carpeting clung to the hard wooden floor,

and the single window was dressed with rough tweed curtains. The bed smelled faintly of tobacco and squeaked loudly as he collapsed onto it gratefully. His father stepped in, looking tired, and a little worried. Jason sat up, sighing.

“There’s a door next to mine,” Jason said, unlacing his shoes and kicking them off carelessly, “What’s behind it? I tried the handle, and it was locked.”

“I’m going to be working on your baby-brother’s room down the hall,” his father replied, ignoring his question. “Just tell me if it gets too noisy, I’ll probably be working on it late. I hung up a towel in your bathroom. If you need anything, you know where I am.”

He closed the door behind him, leaving Jason alone. Quickly undressing in the darkness, he slipped under the dusty sheets. Sleep claimed him before long, and there were no dreams.

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Jason couldn’t breathe. He sat up, gasping, looking around him. He heard a whisper of suction, a hiss like that of silk being pulled across silk, and the darkness of the room dissolved. Cool moonlight seeped through the thick tweed curtains, bars of white across the floor. His breath rasping in his throat, he quickly pulled on his clothes and stumbled barefoot through the halls.

The grass outside was dry and crunched underneath his toes like straw. He closed the door softly behind him and gulped down the cold autumn air. The moon was full, shining through a big jagged hole in the thick grey clouds, painting the world with silver light. He sat down, feeling lightheaded, and looked up, sensing the eyes of another upon him.

Across from his father's misshapen home stood a house of adobe, a small brown lawn standing between it and the street. A tall stag with immense, intricately twisted antlers and snowy white fur nibbled at the edge of the lawn daintily, slender legs and coal black hooves planted firmly on the asphalt. A surprised smile drifted across Jason's face, and the stag snorted, sensing his presence and looking up at him. Its animal eyes were strikingly blue, flashing brightly at him in the pale light. There was a strange intelligence in them, and Jason found himself overcome with a sensation of calm.

They sat there for a long time before the stag snorted again and went back to eating. Jason stood, stretched, and turned to go back inside. The roar of an engine and the screeching of tires froze him in his tracks.

A light brown station wagon with tinted windows and windshield rumbled like a demon, dull steel fender painted red with the stag's blood. The impact of the collision had thrown it up against the adobe wall, bleeding and broken, dying in silence. Chattering, inhuman laughter issued from the darkness of the vehicle, and with another roar, it sped off.

Jason let out a cry and ran over to the stag, crossing the street and climbing the sloped yard with little thought of what he would do once he reached it. Its antlers had been shattered against the wall, its legs twisted and broken, bruise colored entrails spilling from its torn white belly. The heaving of its chest slowed, and it looked up at Jason with strangely human eyes, flashing blue in the dim silver light.

Jason blinked, and the creature was gone. He rubbed his eyes. The grass was dry and bloodless, and painted on the wall where the animal had been but moments before was a cartoon stag, smiling horribly up at him. Its nose was garish and red, fur dirty white

against the stuccoed adobe. Its eyes were blue. Breathing heavily, Jason stood there for a moment, in shock. With a moan, he fell to his knees and scrabbled at the painting till the tips of his fingers bled, leaving thin red streaks across the wall.

Scrambling backwards, he collapsed upon the grass and looked up at the sky, wondering if he was going insane.

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Don't forget to see the doctor. The note was written on a shred of phonebook paper, a cramped hand in the blank yellow margin, taped against the bathroom mirror with a small piece of tape. Jason shaved in silence, taking the note and crumpling it up, dropping it carelessly in the wastebasket.

The house was quiet and empty, the only noise coming from behind the closed white door of his baby brother's room, where his father was working.

The mall was a short walk from the house, two miles of empty road and silent street fronts. Jason walked with his hands tucked into the pockets of his denim jacket, shoulders hunched up against the cold.

The "mall" wasn't like any mall he had ever known. All the stores were closed, rusted steel gates lining the huge expanse of tile, plastic ferns adorning a waterless, faux marble fountain, a bright red "OUT OF ORDER" sign hung from the neck of a grinning wooden horse for children to ride, a wad of gum sealing the quarter deposit to make it buck back and forth.

There was a McDonald's in the food court, and a coffee shop. Jason wasn't hungry, and the smells of cooking grease mixed with the stink of dust and age didn't do anything to change that. He ordered a coffee, black. The woman he ordered from wore

her hat pulled low over her eyes, *Damien's Bean* emblazoned in red across the cheap black canvas. Her face was haggard, her hair the sickly yellow-white of old bones.

“One-twenty five,” she mumbled, and took his money without further comment, handing him his drink and retreating back to the recesses of the shop.

Jason took a seat at a hard, plastic bench, and sipped his coffee, grimacing. It was burnt, and lukewarm. He hadn't really wanted one anyway, but felt obligated to get *something*, since he had walked all this way.

A janitor shuffled by, pushing an immense pile of dust and debris before him. He had a long black ponytail, and a navy blue jumpsuit.

“Hey there,” Jason said conversationally, “Sure is slow around here, huh?”

The janitor stopped for a moment, and looked up at him with watery eyes. After a moment, he looked back down, and continued pushing his pile along the black and white tiles. Sighing, Jason dropped his coffee in a wastebasket and left.

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The grey light was growing dim when Jason came back home. The clouds were like a smooth surface of bubbling stone, and no moonlight seeped through them this night. He looked at his hands and saw that they were grey as well. Briefly, he wondered if he were actually turning that color, or if it was just a trick of the light.

The house was silent, all but for the baby's room, where his father was working.

“Hey Dad?” Jason whispered, rapping softly on the door and cracking it open.

“I'm busy Jason, what do you want?” his father replied.

Jason opened the door all the way, taking in the room. It was all white, and there was a jumbled pile of dusty wooden furniture in the corner of the room. His father

kneeled on the other side of the room, painstakingly sewing letters into the bottom of the wall with thick black thread. Reading them, Jason saw that they were completely nonsensical. **BEAR HAPPY STARS SUNSHINE CHILDHOOD PLAYING RIVERS MAGIC...**it looked as if his father had just picked out words he thought might befit a nursery at random and jumbled them all together.

He sat up from his work and looked over at Jason, his expression dull, glassy eyes seeming to stare right through him.

“Well, Jason,” he said, “What do you think? Isn’t your brother just going to love it?”

Jason started to tremble despite himself.

“Where are they, dad?”

“Oh, your stepmother’s working late tonight, Jason,” his father said without meeting Jason’s eyes, “She works very hard, you know.”

“But it’s so late,” Jason said carefully, trying to keep his voice steady, “why is she working, and why does she have the baby with her?”

“Jason,” his father said, an expression of concern slipping over his face, “You look very tired. Did you see your doctor today?”

“No Dad, I didn’t,” Jason said. “I went to the mall to see if there were any jobs, and then I went to the train station. I wanted to see if the commute to the city would be expensive, but apparently none of the trains even go to it.”

“Well,” his father said, “I’ve got to do some finishing touches in here, and you’ve got a long day ahead of you tomorrow, so why don’t you go to sleep now, okay?”

“Dad?” Jason said, his voice cracking.

“What?”

“...Never mind.”

Jason turned to leave and let out a shuddering sigh. Going to his room, he stopped in the hall, his gaze slowly drifting over to the locked door. The paint was fresh; a deep, ocean blue that went over the lock, sealing the keyhole. He stood there, entranced, feeling as if it were pulling at him, the blue spreading across his vision, filling the room, the hall, everything -- like a flood. He looked at his hands, and his fingers were blue. He opened his mouth to cry out, and tasted paint, felt the hot oil sliding down his tongue, his throat, choking him.

With a scream Jason fell to the ground, and then sat up, gasping. The hall was dark, once again dim, and grey. Heart pounding, he pulled himself to his feet, and with one final glance at the door, went into his room.

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Jason waited along the freeway for hours the next morning, worn green duffle bag slung over his shoulder, short yellow hair rustling in the cold, salty air. But no one came. Not one single car passed him by, not a bus, nor a truck. Scared and confused, he finally gave up. The walk back home was a long one.

It was colder than usual, and he shivered despite himself, the moist air seeping its invisible fingers through the cloth of his jacket. The clouds seemed to boil up above, the smooth grey surface growing angry and black. The wind picked up from time to time, howling painfully in Jason's ears, and he hugged himself, walking quicker.

A mile or so from home, he realized that he was being followed. Several blocks behind him, moving at a crawl, the light brown station wagon with tinted black windows

moved silently, the only functional vehicle he had seen in this place. He looked back at it, letting his glare linger to make it obvious that he was aware of its presence. It stood there, stopped in its tracks, the engine idling. After a few moments, Jason looked ahead and continued walking. From behind, he could hear the car rumble into motion, drawing nearer once again.

He quickened his pace, occasionally looking back at the car as he made his way. Whenever he did, it would stop, just like before. But the moment he looked ahead and resumed walking, it continued to follow him, growing closer with each minute.

Jason came to an abandoned gas station and turned into it, walking over to the soda machine by a rusted ice cooler. He took his time, slowly pulling a crumpled bill from his pocket and buying a coke. Taking a deep breath, he clenched his fist and turned around. The car was waiting there, rumbling dully, parked before the station.

Fury welled in Jason's chest, choking him, and he dropped the soda and his duffel bag, stalking over to the car.

"What do you want from me?" he demanded, "*Why the hell are you following me?*"

Monstrous, gibbering laughter filled the air, and Jason put his hands over his ears, his face twisting with fear and anger. Grabbing a loose brick from the dirty sidewalk, he walked in front of the car and flung it through the windshield. The glass spider webbed around it, and filthy water sloshed out from the hole, pouring out onto the brown paint in dirty black rivulets. With a screech, the car sped forward, ramming into Jason, who bounced off of the hood of the car and rolled onto the sidewalk, hard.

Howls filled the air, and the car drove off, disappearing into the distance. Above him, the clouds began to churn more violently, the wind rising as if to compete with the howls from the station wagon.

Groaning, Jason pulled himself to his feet. Blood ran down his face, and his ankle had been badly twisted, but he ignored the pain and shambled home. His breathing was ragged and labored. His vision swam, the world of grey turning and twisting before him as he went.

When he came to his house, he stopped, turning to the adobe building across the street from it. The painted stag smiled at him obscenely, and Jason's breath caught in his throat. Forgetting the pain in his twisted leg, he stumbled over to the hot brown grass before the painting and began to tear it up in chunks. The soil beneath was packed and hard, stony and tough, but he dug and he dug, his nails cracking, his fingers tearing and bleeding till the soil was dark with it.

"Jason!" his father called from the doorway of the house, "What are you doing?"

Jason ignored the call, digging faster, the pain in his hands and leg distant and abstract, like that of a stranger's.

"Jason *please!*" his father cried. "You aren't well, we need to get you to your doctor!"

Trembling fingers clutched at a bleached, white surface, and with a grunt of effort, a big, animal skull tore free from the earth. It was a stag's. Delicately, reverently, Jason cradled it close, tears mixing with the dirt on his face, dark, muddy rivulets down his pale cheeks.

“It’s going to be okay now,” he whispered to the skull, holding it tightly, “We’re going to get out of here.”

He stood, and limped down the lawn, across the street, and up to his father.

“Jason,” his father said, watery eyes big and scared, “You’re--”

“There’s nobody here, Dad!” Jason screamed, “Look around you! This is *wrong!*”

“But your step-mother!” his father protested, “Your baby brother!”

“Where are they Dad? *Show me!*”

With a sob, he shoved past his father, into the house. Eyes darting around the darkness of the hall, he burst into a pained run, going over to the locked door.

“Jason!” his father cried, “*No!*”

Gritting his teeth, Jason slammed his shoulder against it. Once, twice, *three times.*

“*Jason!*”

“I’m sorry Dad,” Jason replied. Carefully shifting the stag’s skull in his hands, he slammed against the door one final time. Wood splintering, he fell through the doorway, and was enveloped in the glorious blue. His father’s cries could no longer reach him.