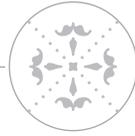


FROM

*Dreadful Young Ladies
and Other Stories*

BY KELLY BARNHILL

From “The Taxidermist’s Other Wife”



1.

Not one of us has ever stepped inside the Taxidermist’s house. We have no need to do so. We already know what we’ll find.

2.

On the center of his desk in the mayoral suite of the town hall (though it is not much of a suite anymore, and not much of a hall; the old town hall burned down years ago, and was replaced by a temporary double-wide) stands a mounted howler monkey, one of the finest specimens from the Taxidermist’s vast collection. Its mouth is open, lips curled outward like the rim of a trumpet. Its head is cocked sweetly to one side, as though reconsidering what it was just about to say. Its knees are bent, toes pigeoned inward in the classical stance, and — though this is a violation of protocol and is generally frowned upon by most who practice the art of taxidermy — its left hand is curled, poised just above the monkey’s bum, as though about to scratch.

Or, perhaps it *does* scratch. Really, who’s to say?

In any case, it is a frivolous gesture, but so furiously ruddy with life (or the side effects of life), that it takes the viewer aback. People have petted the howler monkey. Spoken to it. *Loved* it. They’ve checked its body for nits.

They've unaccountably wanted to scratch their own backsides — and they *have*, when they've thought no one was watching.

The Taxidermist is always watching.

And later, at night, when they've left the office, when they've left the howler behind and returned home, they've tossed and shivered in bed, dreaming of that lonely howl across the empty fields, the yawning trees, and the wide, cold sky. And sometimes, they've howled in return.

The howler makes them forget why they came to the Taxidermist's office in the first place. They wander away, complaints unfiled, petitions undelivered, pieces of mind ungiven.

The Taxidermist loves his howler monkey. His secretary, on the other hand, does not.

"Sir," his secretary says, bringing in a file. "For the meeting." She says the word *meeting* with a certain accusation. She lets the file hover over the desk before fanning her fingers, letting the thing hit the desk with a slap.

"Did you know," the Taxidermist says, "that when Pliny attacked Carthage, he entered the Temple of Astarte and found it filled with no fewer than thirty mountain gorillas? Each one was exquisitely mounted, painstakingly preserved, and, apparently, terrifying. The poor man turned on his heel and ran from the temple, claiming it had been seized by Gorgons."

He sits at his desk, ancient books opened to different pages and stacked for ease of access. The secretary presses her lips into a long, tight line. She is the former librarian of the former library. She disapproves of the wanton opening of books. She shudders at the splay of tight spines, the heedless rustle of unloved pages like the whisper of lifting skirts.

The Taxidermist presses his fingers to his mouth to suppress a burp, though he pretends to clear his throat. He continues. "It is, they believe, the first indication that the art of specimen preservation is not a modern pastime as previously thought. I wonder if the Carthaginian priests thought to re-create the minutiae of the mundane as we do now. I wonder what they thought they were preserving."

The secretary flares her nostrils, forcing her gaze away from her employer. The Taxidermist closed the library. Everyone knows this. Everyone blames him. The secretary answers his phones and files his documents and

maintains his correspondence and organizes his meetings. But she hates the Taxidermist. *Hates* him.

"I'm not certain your research is correct," the secretary says. "But gorillas have nothing to do with your meeting tonight."

"My dear Miss Sorensen," the Taxidermist says, peering into a heavily diagrammed book, its ancient dust rising from its pages like smoke, "it has everything to do with the meeting tonight. You'll see."

3.

The Taxidermist is the mayor, and has been for the last fifteen years. We did not vote for him. We've never met anyone who *has*. And yet he has won, term after term. Always a landslide. We never offer our congratulations, nor do we bring casseroles or homemade bars to his house, nor do we come to his Christmas parties or summer barbeques. (We already know what's in that house. *We know*.)

This, we are sure, hurts the Taxidermist's other wife. What wife wouldn't be wounded by such a snub? She is a sweet, pretty thing. Young. Large eyes. Tight, smooth skin. She grew up four towns over, though no one can say in which one, exactly. Each day she pushes open the large, heavily carved front door of the house and stands on the porch. She brushes a few tendrils of shellacked hair from her face with the backs of her fingers. She adjusts her crisp, white gloves.

She is *perfect*. Her symmetry jostles the eye. Her body moves without hesitancy, without the irregular rhythm of muscle and bone.

Each day she walks from their house at the center of town, past what used to be the butcher shop and what used to be the hardware store and what used to be the Shoe Emporium and what used to be the offices of our former newspaper, until she reaches her husband's office at the Town Hall. She wears high heels that click coldly against the cracked sidewalk. She wears a skirt that skims her young thighs and flares slightly at her bending knees. She used to smile at us when she passed, but she doesn't anymore. We never smiled back. Instead, she keeps her lovely face porcelain-still, her mouth like a rosebud in a bowl of milk. A doll's mouth.

We want to love her. We wish we could love her. But we can't. We remember the Taxidermist's first wife. We remember and remember and remember.

4.

Taxidermy is more than Art. It is more than Love. The Taxidermist has explained this to us, but we have closed our ears. We change the subject. We scan the sky for signs of rain.

Still, words have a way of leaking in.

"If the artisan does not love the expired subject on his table, it is true, the final product will be a cold, dead thing. A monstrosity. A hideous copy of what once was unique and alive and *beautiful*."

We told ourselves we weren't listening. Still, we found ourselves nodding. We found ourselves *agreeing*. It *is* hideous when a thing isn't loved.

"But the love is not enough," the Taxidermist insisted. "*Desire*, friends. *Desire*. When God leaned against the riverbank, when he pressed his fingers into the warm mud and pulled out a man, what was the motivation? *Desire*. God saw mud and made it Man. He *made* Man because he *wanted* Man. We see death and desire life. Love isn't enough. You have to *want* to make it live."

5.

There was no funeral for Margaret, the first wife.

We learned she was dead in the "Fond Memories" section of the newspaper. That was when we had a newspaper. He never mentioned it out loud. He never told anyone. He never even held a funeral. We tried to grieve. We wanted to drape our arms around the Taxidermist, to feel his tears wetting the shoulders of our shirts, to wrap his hand with our hands and squeeze. Then we took frozen hotdish and bar cookies and flowers and sliced ham and left them on the porch when the Taxidermist refused to open the door.

"Here," we shouted. "We've brought food. Wine. Whiskey. We brought our presence and our ears and our love. Let us in and we'll feed you. We'll share a drink and share a song and make you live again. And *she* will live in

the spaces between word and word, between breath and breath, between your tears and our tears. She will *live*.”

But the Taxidermist would not open the door. Each morning, we saw our gifts heaped in the trash bin outside the house. We never mentioned it again.

6.

We listened to the old men in Ole’s Tavern suck down shots and chasers and fuss over the meeting in the school. Or the building that will soon *not* be a school.

“Not much use pretending we’re still a town if the school’s gone.”

“We stopped pretending we were a town after the grain elevator closed.”

“And when the butcher shop shut its doors. Can’t call yourself a town if you can’t get a fresh hock for supper. If you don’t have a locker to put your winter’s buck.”

“Taxidermist’s got a lot of damn gall closing the school mid-year. If he was any sort of a man, he’d set aside his own salary rather than pull the rug out from underneath a bunch of little kids.”

“Not much of a bunch. Just fifty. On a good day. When was the last good day?”

“We stopped pretending we were a town when the hardware store closed. And the seed store. And the gas station. And the green grocer. And the shoe shop. At least we still can pickle ourselves at Ole’s. Soon, he’ll just shove us into a bunch of damn mason jars and line us up on a shelf. He’ll keep us topped up with nice, clear vodka so we can see. Folk’ll come in looking for the town and find it looking right back at ’em, shelves and shelves of blinking eyes.” Arne says this. He’s always been a morbid fellow.

“The Taxidermist’ll like it, though,” Zeke Hanson says. “He’ll like it very much.”

We agree.

7.

Night falls early in November. In those waning moments of light, the sky paints its face like a harlot (overripe rouge, stained lips, unbuttoned taffeta

spreading outward like wings), before opening itself wide to the void of space. Each jagged shard of light in the darkness is a tiny message sent from the recesses of time. “You are alone,” the stars say. “You are alone. You are still alone.”

We pull our coats tightly against the howl of the wind and start our cars.

The school is slightly outside the town, and it sits on a small rectangle cut out of Martin Hovde’s sod farm. The schoolyard is packed earth with a single metal swing set for the children to play on. The yard is dusty from their feet, every speck of green crushed by the insistence of play. Just outside the schoolyard is the endless grass of the Hovde farm. Martin steamrolls it twice a year to keep it as flat as any floor and then he burns it, to give the grass a good, rich start. It is green as snakes, and softer than a lie.

We park our cars next to the school but do not lock them. No one locks their doors. This is a small town. A good town. Or it was, anyway. We hold our coats closed tightly at our throats and bend our backs against the wind. The stars are cold and sharp above our heads and the wind howls across the wide, empty fields.

8.

Taxidermy must embrace imperfection. It is a weak practitioner who feels the need to extend the leg of a lamed cougar cub or repair the jagged scar above the eye of an ancient wolf. Taxidermy, in its soul, is the celebration of life, the re-creation of a single moment in a sea of moments. The taxidermist must build motivation, history, consequence, action, reaction into one, perfect gesture.

The taxidermist’s diorama is a poem.

A song.

A short story.

“We are all just a collection of faults,” the Taxidermist told us once. “A myriad of imperfections through which shines divine Perfection. You see? It is our flaws that make us beloved by heaven. It is our scars and handicaps and *lack* of symmetry that prove that we are — or once were — alive. The more we attempt to force our corrupted idea of the Perfect and the Good

upon what is *actually* and *deeply* perfect and good, the farther we are from the divine. Reveal the subject as the subject *was*, and you reveal the fingerprints of God.”

We have shut our ears to the Taxidermist. We have stopped listening to his hypocrisy. We know what he has done. We have *seen* it.

This is the very reason why we can never love his other wife.

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