

THE TAXIDERMIST'S WIFE

The Museum of Taxidermy was nothing like the natural history section of the State Museum. The bear at the MOT had a shiny coat and its glass eyes looked like real bear eyes. The fur was not coming off the viscacha in tufts, all the zebra's stripes matched up, and you couldn't see the lions' seams. None of the animals were in glass cabinets; none of them had hundred-year-old paper tags with serial numbers and Latin names in spidery handwriting.

The MOT had been built as a theater in the twenties. The stage was still there, with its red velvet curtains pulled aside. Some of the animals stood on the stage awkwardly, as if in the middle of a dress rehearsal where everyone had forgotten their lines. The animals who were not on the stage—the audience animals—were waiting patiently for the actor animals to remember.

The taxidermist lived with his wife in a small house behind the theater-museum. They'd set up a lounge room in what had once been a dressing room. The wife was in there most days, sitting on the worn-out leather couch and watching daytime television or reading southern gothic novels, while the taxidermist took care of the business and made sure that visitors paid the two-dollar entry.

It was the taxidermist's wife who fascinated us more than anything, more than the stiff animals or the display of taxidermy tools that looked like instruments of meticulous torture. The taxidermist's wife, who was in love with a man devoted to preserving the dead. For a time we liked to speculate about who her former lovers might be—the Latin professor, the obituarist, the forensics photographer. But the taxidermist's wife walked right through the walls of the ideas we had for her, back to the faded couch and Carson McCullers.

She knew almost nothing about the taxidermy process and could not answer any of our questions, redirecting us to her husband when we asked about ear pliers or polyurethane forms.

But she understood the gentleness of such work. She knew a thing or two about responsibility. If we came in early on a Thursday, we'd find her kneeling in front of the pet cabinet with a small white box open on her lap. The pet cabinet was a cupboard stacked with dozens of small white boxes, and in

each was the preserved skin of a cat or a small dog, or, in one case, a large coffee-colored rabbit.

Nobody was coming back for any of them. Loving owners had grieved for them years ago when they died of old age or snail pellets or traffic, and they were brought to the taxidermist wrapped in towels or soft cloth. But these animals were to remain eyeless, jawless, shapeless, marking the point where that grief was no longer a thousand-dollar grief or a twelve-hundred-and-fifty-dollar grief.

Once a week, the taxidermist's wife would take each skin and rearrange it in its box so that it wouldn't develop unnatural creases. There was a reverence to it, the way she tucked their tails and paws in. Sometimes we'd hear her speaking softly to the skins: You were so beautiful. Who'd ever wanna get over you, hey? Who'd ever wanna leave you behind?