

The Deer in the Lake

He drifted until he didn't, his side ebbing against a half-sunken log like the long breaths of sleep. He had the body of a man, mostly. That was how he was referred to in the panicked phone call to the dispatcher, and then to the emergency responders, and then in the coroner's reports, and so from then on that was how he was. His jaw, though, stretched out in a long basilica of flat teeth and from the top of his head protruded branches of bone. He had the form of a deer; not the animal itself but the shape of one, as though a human body had been bent and rearranged into the silhouette of a stag that now lay, drowned, in the lake.

The arms of the deer in the lake were long and slender and lay limp at his sides, and his skin, which now took on a watery gray discoloration, seemed to dissolve into the murk. Floating there, bloated chest raised as if in rapture, he had about him the manner of a dead bird: crooked and helpless, beyond helping. Still, there was a grace to him. A notion danced around his body that if he were still animated, he should be standing in a field, feet planted among tallgrass and thistle with his body held low. Like he should be bent at the waist, frozen mid dance with arms raised: all poised and delicate and waiting. Not bloating and sad and drifting with the hum of the lake, antlers raking against the peeled bark of a fallen tree.

On the small gray beach beside him stood a young red-headed boy, his bare feet digging white-knuckled into the sand, staring into sunken eye sockets and hearing only his own rushed breathing.

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The call was answered by a dispatcher sitting at a desk with her hair pinned back under a small, wired Plantronics headset, as she scratched through her uniform at a patch on her shoulder. When she first opened her mouth, her voice spilled out along the path of a script.

“New York 911.”

“Yes what is your location?”

“Do they appear to be breathing?”

“I’m sorry is there or is there not a body?”

“Um yes okay.”

“No yes I am hearing you.”

“Yes someone will be with you soon.”

“No I’m sorry please repeat the location.”

“Okay off Cedar yes.”

“Someone will be with you soon yes.”

When she checked out of work at 11:00 PM, the night air was heavy and stung her throat. The world had moved slightly.

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The inside of the Stewart’s was cooler than the outside, which always brought images to the cashier’s mind of being marched into a meat locker whenever she started her shift. Once

behind the counter, the roles would reverse: every ring of the bell at the top of the door was another pig carried in by its hind legs, and every click of the cash register tray sliding shut was the fall of her cleaver. This rhythm would go on for hours alongside the chatter with her coworkers and friendly customer exchanges. The two worlds did not conflict or interact, they simply laid alongside one another. In her words she was a cashier, in her hands she was a butcher, and in her mind she was both.

She spoke to an older man in a US Navy cap ordering a black coffee, egg sandwich, and cheese Danish who asked about her children, and all the while she slid cuts of meat down the counter and chopped away. Yes, he just got engaged, yeah, it's amazing; she is doing well, she's down at the Regal now; no, seventh grade now, we're looking into a behavioral specialist, yeah, he's got plenty of friends sure, yes, he's a very good kid I know, a sweetheart – oh, I'm sorry I really have to take this. The butcher's reality collapsed as soon as she picked up the phone.

There were police cars in her driveway when she pulled off the road, and four fawns at the tree line took off bounding as she stepped out onto the grass. She walked through the door into her house and found her youngest son on the couch surrounded by three officers. He was picking at the fabric of the futon and shaking like a dog that had been left out in the rain. She got down on her knees and held him as close as she could, and she did not let go until his father arrived an hour later. Not as he sobbed through her shirt, nor as the police asked her questions, nor as the sun began to set over the lake down the street.

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Laid down on a slab, the body took on a funerary appearance. The white glare of the overhead light dressed him in burial linen, and the shadows in his deeply recessed eyes were the

space between stars. Scalpels were brought out, and bloodless incisions were made along the base of his antlers and across his shoulders down to his sides. The work was careful and hesitant, as though the coroners were afraid to wake him. Organs would need to be weighed and identified; fluids tested. They would find little. In the other room, it was being decided whether he should be shipped off elsewhere or put into a box and burned. No one seemed to have any right answers.

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The early afternoon sun cascaded between the trees, and the woods were pleasantly warm. On one side of the dirt trail walked the boy, his cheeks and nose spattered with freckles and dirt, and his clothes smelling like sweat. Walking parallel to him on the other side was another boy whose long black hair and thick-rimmed glasses framed a round face. They swatted at gnats that buzzed in their ears, and above them the trees breathed in the summer breeze. The black-haired boy was talking about a monochrome movie full of long silences and frightening gore, while the red-headed one nodded along. His parents had never shown him this one. The black-haired boy had been born whole from the ground, he knew, and had no parents to stop him from watching movies. For a few seconds, the red-headed boy wished that he too had no parents, before a wave of guilt washed the thought away.

As the conversation reached a lull, they came to a boulder set into the dirt hill at the side of the trail. It appeared to the red-headed boy as the top of a buried giant's skull. He summited the colossus and stretched his arms out in the sun, catching the smell of sweetly decaying manure on the wind. Something else too, but he couldn't quite place it.

Just off the trail ahead, the trees parted and gave way to rolling brown fields that stretched out along gentle hills where a collapsed barn sat. Before it was a dead tree rising out of the tufted hedges of yellow grass, its splintered hide bleached from sun. From its furthest branch hung a tractor tire. Along the edge of the field was a long row of wooden posts strung together with lines of rusted barbed wire which the boys found too low to crawl under, and so they stood there and stared at the tree a hundred yards away. The tire swayed in the breeze, and the red-headed boy wanted to reach out and grab hold of it. The two continued down the path but found no way around the fence.

Further along, the fields gave way to swamp, and the air grew warm and heavy. The trunk of a red maple had fallen across the trail, and someone had come along and cut two feet out of the middle of it. They sat on the bisected log in silence and swayed slightly in the breeze. A sour smell came to the red-headed boy now like bad meat. He laid his head on the other's shoulder.

“I might quit soccer.”

“You don't like it?”

“I don't know.”

For a moment, the red-headed boy wished he could stay there on the log forever. A few minutes passed, and the smell grew stronger. He thought to point it out, when he felt a stabbing pain at the back of his neck. The two got up and ran back down the path, swatting away black flies. They parted ways once they returned to the road at the end of the trail, and the red-headed boy

walked back toward his house, wiping blood from the welts on his neck and feeling as though some nameless transgression had occurred.

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The dispatcher emerged from her car with two plastic bags under her arms and trudged through the driveway and up the stoop into her house. Inside, her fiancé stood at the kitchen sink with his back to her, drying plates idly, but he turned around when she placed the bags on the counter. Two yellow smiley faces looked back at her from the sides of the bags, distorted from the residual tension on their plastic skin. They still smiled at her when she pulled the cartons of lo mein and rice from their bodies and placed them onto the counter, and even still when she shoved them down into the garbage can and closed the lid.

She and her fiancé sat at the table and ate, him asking her about her day and her about his. Their conversation soon ran its course, and he looked down at his phone while scraping his fork through the last of the noodles. She said she had almost hit a deer off Lucas on the way back from the Chinese place. He looked back up at her with his mouth full and a vague concern lighting his eyes. It had just been sitting there on the pavement, not moving until she leaned into the horn. Even then, it had just looked up at her for a few moments before it finally limped off into the woods. They finished their food in silence, the air heavy with all she left unsaid. It had been like this for a few days now.

He volunteered to clean up afterward, and she laid back on the couch in the living room. The gray stipple ceiling stared back at her, small patterns shifting in its cracked landscape.

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The antlers were sawn down to nubs so that they could fit into the casket alongside the body. It was a long, simple plywood box that slid into a steel machine fixed into the wall of the morgue. There were twelve of these machines on both sides of the room, all inert. One hand pushed the box in as another pulled the metal trap closed, before a separate one entirely pressed the ignition. Inside the machine, quick flames climbed the sides of the box and crawled along the arms of the figure inside.

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The boy had taken a back road to avoid passing by the lake, and now it was almost dark. The sun had already disappeared behind the trees, and the last streaks of orange fire hung low in the sky. The woods' edge at either side of him stood dark and imposing: an unending palisade through which vertical eyes of shadow stared down at him. It made him suddenly aware of how far the woods stretched out all around him, and he wanted to be home. He avoided looking into it. The sky lost its golden flares and flattened into dark blues and grays, and the world around him was dimmed behind the dull cataracts of dusk.

A sound cut through the periphery, and the boy slowed his walking. Not quite a rustling or any discernible noise but a short absence of ordinary sound; the crawling notion that something off the road was moving. The air grew sour again, and a familiar dread began to creep in: the sense that all the quiet woods, sprawling out endlessly around him, had taken sudden notice. Seeing nothing, he started ahead faster this time.

He rounded a bend and felt his muscles tighten like rope. On the side lay a fawn in the ditch, face down with its hind legs limp on the asphalt, and standing in the middle of the road ahead of him was a young buck. Its head was bowed over the fawn in the ditch as if in prayer. Its

skin clung taut to its ribs, where its uneven fur sprouted in matted tufts, and thin red ropes of shedding velvet hung from its pink antlers. It craned its neck slightly and tilted its head at an awkward angle, so that the animal's eyes were level with his. They stood in unbroken stillness for seconds that dragged on like minutes. The deer raised its head and began to walk toward him with a limp, its back left leg dragging weakly behind the rest, and the boy found himself rooted in place. He yelled for it to stop, to go away, but it continued to haul its narrow body toward him. Its long face came close to his, and the boy could hear its animal breath shudder with every step it took. Saliva fell from swollen black lips onto the road, and it stared down at him with eyes of dark glass. The deer limped past him and continued down the street.

Air finally returned to the boy's lungs, and by the time he turned around it had already disappeared into the woods. He walked down the road toward his house, trying not to look at the fawn on the side of the road where the flies had already established a colony.

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A black van turned off the road onto the mud by the shore of the lake. Two state workers in navy blue jackets exited, one carrying a cylindrical metal container. She walked to the water's edge where the foremost trees leaned over a dirt slope to see their reflections in the lake, as her partner stood in the gray sand with his hands in his pockets. Twisting the lid off, she leaned with one shoulder into a tree and thrust the container forward. Ashes flew from its mouth and played like a swarm of white flies on the wind. She watched them for a moment, swirling, until they settled along the water's surface and disappeared into the deep murk of the lake. She placed the cylinder back in the trunk of the van and wiped her hands as though of invisible stains.

They stopped for gas at the Stewart's once they were back in town. It was dark when she stepped out onto the pavement, and the electric light that spilled from the windows of the gas station was as pale as the moon. She walked to the door as her partner fiddled with the gas pump, and a small bell rang above her head as she stepped in. The woman at the counter had deep bags under her eyes. She maintained the same cadence as usual during work, but she glanced nervously at her phone as they talked.

“Just a small coffee please iced.”

“Comin up. Long night?”

“Just wrapping up hopefully. You too?”

“Almost there.”

The state worker took her drink to a booth on the far side of the room and scratched at a dried stain on the table with her fingernail. The other soon entered and ordered a cup of vanilla ice cream and a newspaper for himself before sitting down across from her. He set the paper on the table and scanned the front page.

“Deer disease going around. Around the water. Calling it an epidemic.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah right there in the headline. The um H is for hemorrhagic.”

They talked about it no further. The article warned of excesses of diseased deer wandering onto property and into public space; of dehydration leading them to water where they drink and die; of the stink of dead flesh that poured over creeks and blanketed lakes like a thick fog. Outside the

window, car lights passed like the upper decks of ships. The man scraped the bottom crevices of the cup with his spoon, as the two worked through sparse conversation. They tried to think of anything other than bodies or lakes, but in both of their minds loomed the same stretched visage. After a few minutes, the woman behind the counter pulled a jacket over her maroon uniform and rushed out of the building with a phone to her ear.

On the way back to the station, the state workers put on the radio and sang along to the chorus of a country-pop ballad. By the time each drifted to sleep in their own beds, safe in their homes, the visage was all but gone from memory.

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The house stood two stories tall but did not take up much space. The gray paint had begun to wear off its old siding, and the shingles on its steep roof could have been redone a decade ago. Only one downstairs window was illuminated through the dark. A driveway led out from the road to the side of the house where it was flanked by a cluttered shed, and the boy dragged his feet in the gravel as he walked up toward the narrow front porch.

The flimsy white door screeched open, and the boy stepped onto a doormat in the small foyer, as his mother set down a plate loudly in the kitchen ahead of him. She came down the hallway and hugged him close and shouted at him, and then she shook his small upper arms in her hands and shouted again. She dragged him into the other room where his father glared from the dinner table.

“Your sister ate already. We called everyone looking for you.”

The boy sat down and ate in silence, as his mother portioned potato salad onto his plate and his father watched him with a patience that could have been comforting under different circumstances.

“No more going out in the woods anymore. If you’re at a friend's house you stay there until one of us picks you up.”

His mother told him that she didn’t know how he kept getting into trouble; how her other children hadn’t needed precautions like these, and how she didn’t know what was going on, but nothing seemed safe anymore. He wanted to tell them about the black-haired boy from outside and how he needed to see him, about the strange light that seemed to cover everything these days, and about the deer that had come along and made the world wrong, but no words appeared to him. Eventually the conversation moved on, and the boy excused himself to his room, tears cutting through the afternoon grime on his face.

He lay curled on his bed with the warm glow of the lamp on his back. He had clenched the sheets between his teeth, dug his fingers into the mattress, and whined from the bottom of his throat, but now he had succumbed to a wave of melancholic fatigue, and so he just stared at the white plaster of his bedroom wall. The room seemed to tighten around him, and he clutched his head in his hands. His father knocked on the door, and when the boy didn’t answer he opened it slowly. The boy still did not turn, and so his father knelt by the side of the bed and rested one heavy hand gently on his shoulder. He said that it would be okay, and that he knew it hurt but that it was just not safe otherwise. The boy still faced away from him, his red hair golden in the lamplight. His father stayed there a moment and took a breath, before getting up and closing the door behind himself.

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The dispatcher lay on her back in bed and found her mind too full to sleep. The patterns in the stipple ceiling appeared far more menacing now, swirling across the dark room as dreamlike serpents. Her fiancé scrolled on his phone beside her, its cold glow illuminating the underside of his face so that he looked like a campfire storyteller.

“I think I want to quit my job.”

He looked over at her and put down his phone. Both were obscured in the dark now, the only light being the dim gleam of the streetlight peering through the window shades. He asked her if something had happened, but she shook her head and put her face in her hands. She said that things just didn't make sense anymore; that everything was just wrong now; that something had changed but she didn't know what. He didn't know quite what to say, so he pulled her closer and told her it would be okay. She spoke through her fingers and said that she thought things would get easier as she grew up, but they just never did. That still, just as when she was a child, she didn't know just what made the world so frightening to her.

She excused herself and rolled out of bed, and then she pulled on her pajamas and left the room. Outside, she sat on the cement stoop and breathed in the sharp night air. The bright light fixed above the door gazed over her head like a sentry, casting its stark white glare across the driveway. Beyond the pool of light stretched the woods, a black silhouette of pines from behind which she could see pinprick stars glittering on the midnight blue sky. Her breath faltered. There before the façade of the trees, just visible, was a figure wavering on the edge of the light: a human shape flickering into perception as though composed from the night before her eyes, and atop its head were antlers. It stood there just long enough for her to recognize what she saw as

reality, and then it receded into the dark. Eyes fixed upon the space where the figure had been, she rose from the stoop and followed it.

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An hour passed, and the overbearing walls of the room did not release their grip on the boy. He sat up, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and went to the door. Opening it slowly but not so slowly that the hinges whined, he stepped out into the hallway and descended the stairs. The house was asleep now, and the only sound was the shifting of the floorboards beneath his feet. He retrieved a headlamp from the closet, and then he left. When he stepped out onto the porch, the summer air was cool against his face. Only once he had reached the road did the dark close in on him, and the constricting of the night around his small person propelled him down the road. Soon, he passed the last of the houses on his street, and the only light sat in circular pockets beneath the lampposts. On either side of the road stood a darkness as impenetrable as the bottom of the ocean. The awful feeling of the open woods crept down his spine again, and the boy realized now how utterly alone he was.

The trees all around him were changed in the dark, and he could not tell exactly where he was on this long stretch of road. He walked uncertainly through the foreign night until the sour smell returned to him stronger than ever, and there before him was the dead fawn. It still lay in the same spot on the side road. The animal's fur was almost white under the glare of the headlamp, though he could see growing patches of black discoloration that spread along its stomach and rear and enveloped its face. It looked strangely peaceful, unbothered by the legions of flies that blanketed its underside. The boy grabbed hold of the fawn's legs just above the hooves and pulled, as a cloud of flies nearly blotted out his headlamp before dispersing into the

night. It weighed surprisingly little, even for him, and with some effort he managed to drag it from the road into the woods. Hauling it through the trees, he came to a spot a dozen yards away where he felt he could let the thing rest.

The boy sat on his knees beside the fawn and worked delicately, covering it with leaves and moss and fistfuls of dirt, until it lay beneath a burial mound. Satisfied, he stood from his little barrow and sat for a moment on a log nearby. The land thrummed with the low orchestra of crickets and bullfrogs and the swaying of the trees. He turned off his headlamp, and the settling darkness revealed thousands upon thousands of fireflies. The boy peered into the woods ahead as his eyes adjusted to the dark and became suddenly aware of something watching him; standing atop a dirt slope a dozen yards away, barely illuminated in the dull green light of the fireflies, was a deer.

It stooped low to the ground, shifting strangely from side to side in the gloom so that he strained to follow its movements. The deer descended the hill and crept toward him until the boy realized that it wasn't a deer at all. Crawling on arched arms and legs was a human form contorted into the silhouette of a stag; its hands sprawled out in the dirt like spiders, and from its head stemmed crooked branches. It looked at first identical to the deer in the lake, but this one seemed stitched together from ashen bone and clay, its face a vacant dome, and it moved with none of the wild grace that the boy had imagined. He fell backwards and caught the ground hard between his shoulders, and the graceless proxy disappeared behind the log. The boy had started to move again when the faceless, antlered head rose back into view, shining under the pale circle of the moon. The thing hung there for a moment, suspended in some thought unknown to the boy, and then it dug its long fingers into the clay of its face and hollowed out two little eyes. The boy felt as though the creature was peering out at him through the holes, and it held out its hands

as if offering unseen alms. He reached out hesitantly, and it took his hands in its cold palms, and then the sides of his small face, and before the boy could move it pressed its eyes into his. He felt as though the two were tumbling at once forward and backward and into one another, as he fell through the expanding oubliettes of its sockets and into darkness.

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And then he was in a field. It stretched out around him under a mottled pink sky as though magma was burning through the firmament, and all around the edges of the clearing were hundreds of dead deer. They sat in placid silence, bowed down to the earth on bent knees as if waiting for some prophesied arrival. He watched as, slowly, others crawled up through the tallgrass and thistle, dragging themselves out from the ground by their hooves as though being born from the world in front of him. Each wore the same marks of decay along their swollen faces and taut bodies, and one at a time they found their places in the field and knelt.

When the boy turned back from watching the deer, he found that he was no longer alone. The deer in the lake crouched before him, watching through the grass. The twilight had painted his gray skin purple, and he seemed to always move even when he was still; every motion of his willowy body was its own dance. You're not where you should be, the body danced. The boy stared back at him.

“But you took me here.”

A breeze kicked up as the deer in the lake moved. Not me. They're out there when I'm down here.

“What are you? Tell me what you are.”

There was a moment of stillness between them, as the grass whipping in the wind formed the only sound. I'm a shepherd. Now you tell me what you are, the body danced.

“But I don't know what I am yet.”

The gust built to a howl and then a roar, scattering grass and flowers through the air. I'll tell you what I am, the body danced. I'm nothing. I'm just the wind. The boy stood silently for another moment.

“What am I?”

The wind screamed too loud for him to bear, as the deer in the lake rose from the grass and twirled through the field toward him. You can be nothing too. When the slender arms reached out and touched him, the boy felt the ground fall from underneath him as he was swallowed into the warm earth.

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The icy air burned his lungs as the boy was pulled from the water. The dispatcher hoisted him up into her arms and waded back onto the shore of the lake, where she knelt with him in the gray sand. When she was sure that he was breathing, she held him close and kissed the top of his head as he cried.

“It's okay. You're okay. I'll take you home.”

She looked around the beach for the shape that had led her there, but whatever it was had disappeared into the night.

The boy sat wrapped in a towel in the passenger seat, as she drove through the dark toward his house. He stared at a flashing blue light on the dashboard and smelled takeout and cigarettes and the sharp pine air that poured through the crack in the window. They sat in silence, but it was a good silence. He let it wash over him, and at last he drifted off to sleep.