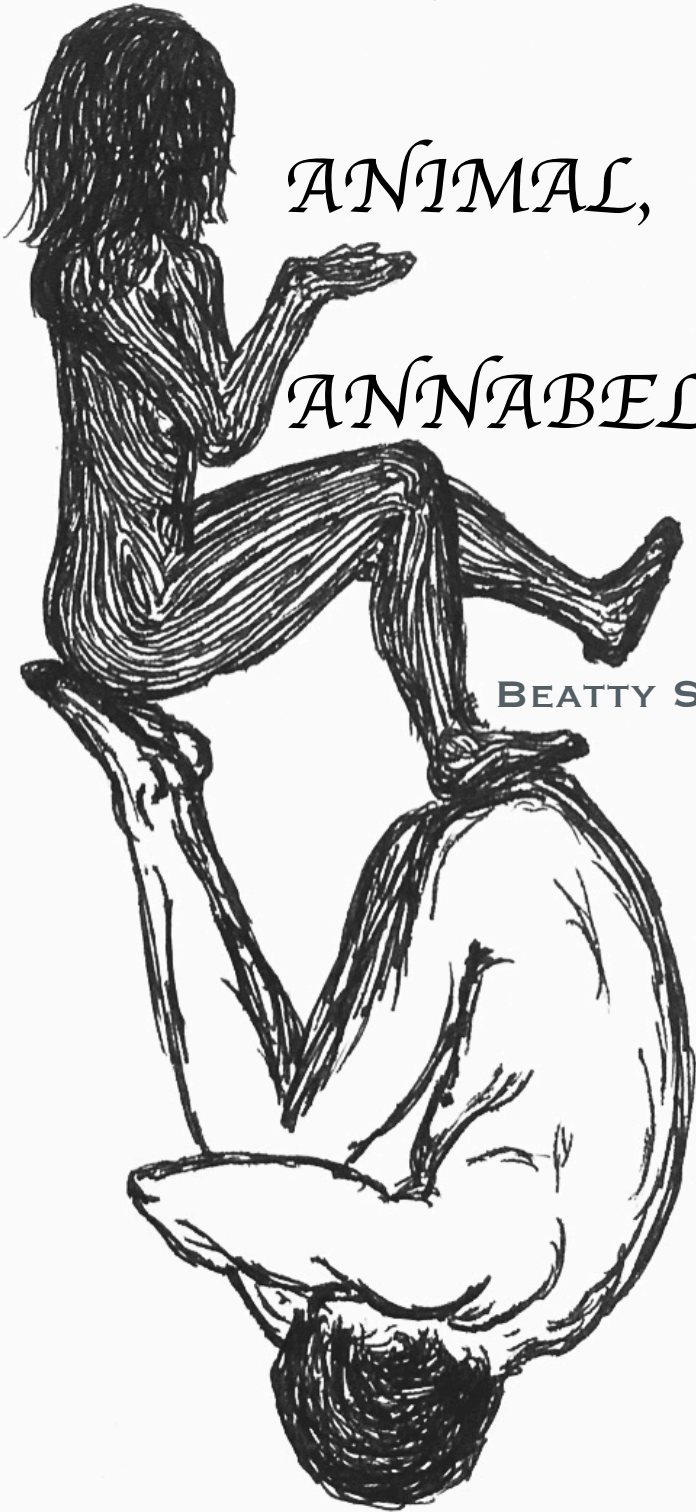


A Short Story

ANIMAL,
ANNABELLE

BEATTY SMITH



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TINY WINDOWS

Cover: “Balance,” an original illustration from this story’s author Beatty Smith.

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The creature existed, unless she was losing her mind. She had not dismissed this entirely but put it aside to deal with later, ruling that the best way forward was to assume sanity and continue her investigation of the facts. If she was insane, then the facts should lead her to that conclusion anyway. If she was sane, then she would surely find an explanation for the creature, even though she had never seen or read about such an animal before.

Annabelle had stumbled upon a monster, but she didn't run or scream. She lacked the survival instincts that came naturally to others. Instead, she approached the unknown organism in order to gather more information.

He — for the creature was decidedly male — was not human, though there were common features, such as the eyes and curve of the nose. He also mimicked some human behaviour. Perhaps it was an adaptation developed over thousands of years of natural selection; at some point in history humans might have poached this species, killing all of their kind except for those with the genetic mutation that produced similar characteristics to their own. It would be harder to kill an animal that looked like you.

Every time the moon peeked between clouds, the creature's fur shimmered in the darkness. She surmised that the natural oils in his coat produced such an effect, and that when wet, the water droplets should roll off his body. He lolloped around on all fours for the most part, but occasionally he hoisted his upper body up to balance on his hind-legs. He could walk this way with such disciplined posture that even Auntie Clare would approve of him if Annabelle brought him round for tea. Clare's vision had deteriorated with age so she wouldn't notice his teeth until they were chomping on her own flesh. He could only walk like this for a few steps, however, before releasing a huff of relief as he returned to his natural quadrupedal existence.

His tongue was barely fenced in by his teeth. Sometimes the red tissue constricted and moved as if it were an independent creature tethered to the base of his mouth. Annabelle wanted to get a

closer look, but in a haze of her own curiosity, her foot caught on an unearthed root and she stumbled forward.

The creature's ears perked and head snapped to look at her. He had not realised her presence in the forest before due to her own natural oddities which had made her invisible to him up until this moment. Now, his eyes were locked on her. She wondered if he was examining her in the same way she had been him. Then he moved towards her.

She had underestimated how large he was. His limbs and extremities throbbed with sinews and blood, as if his skin might be too thin to contain all of him. He did not take his gaze off of her as he approached, and she noted how distinctly human his eyes were. His pupils were on the smaller side which would usually indicate that he was not nocturnal, though it was nighttime now and he seemed alert. She looked into those eyes as he hoisted onto his hind-legs to tower over her. With every breath she smelled notes of garlic and pine, and it was heavy in her nose like breathing in smoke. She still didn't move as his lips pulled back over his teeth, his tongue constricted, and a low, guttural sound escaped his mouth.

It may have seemed as though Annabelle was being brave, but she wasn't. When the creature first approached her she felt such mortal fear that her body had shut down to protect her mind.

She could not have moved an inch or muttered a sound, even if she had wanted to. Then her subconscious had smothered her fear, along with every other emotion, in order to maintain clarity of thought — this was the only survival instinct Annabelle had at her disposal. She did not feel the natural urges of fight or flight. Instead of running or screaming, she had handed herself over to her always honest friends, logic and analysis.

These friends could not protect Annabelle's body in the same way they protected her mind. The creature's teeth ripped into her flesh like a knife cutting butter. She wanted to scream, but the creature flung her onto the ground, winding her before her lungs could catch up with her ambition. She was swaddled by adrenaline for a few luxurious seconds, but then the agony settled in. She panted

and yelped, then extended her arm in a vain attempt to grab his head and pull his jaw from her body. The creature just shifted the aim of his teeth, and her arm was ripped from her shoulder socket as swiftly as Aunty Clare tore weeds from their cobbled drive.

The first thought that entered her mind as her blood splashed on the ground, besides the pain, was that it didn't seem like her blood at all. She had always assumed that if the various contents of her body were ever separated, that they would still belong to her. They ought to maintain a connection to her, if only in some distant, metaphysical way. Other than the knowledge that the cells must contain her DNA, there was nothing familiar about her dissociated arm. She considered that she must not be a whole. What she understood as "Annabelle" was not any one finite thing, or anything in particular at all.

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Roger hadn't been living there at the time of the attack, but after he arrived, he never asked Annabelle what had happened to her. Perhaps he didn't care, or more likely, he didn't need to ask because he thought he already knew. Aunty Clare had probably informed him that a bear had escaped from the local zoo – though there were no zoos located nearby, and even the zoos further away had not reported an animal escape. There were no wild animals in the Dales known to attack humans in such a manner, which led some newspapers to speculate that a human being had done this to Annabelle and tried to make it look like an animal attack. After waking from her surgeries, Annabelle hadn't explained what she had seen, instead claiming to have forgotten the incident entirely. She felt it was important to keep the creature's existence a secret, though she wasn't sure why.

Annabelle knew everything about Roger before he arrived, as she had asked her Aunty an exhaustive list of questions. She had learned that Roger's father had remained in the army after the war and was currently assigned to a regiment in Gibraltar. Roger's mother had declared that she would not be parted from her

husband ever again. As such, they had elected to send Roger to a boarding school so that he could enjoy some consistency in his education, rather than dragging him from base to base, uprooting him from one country to land in another, as the army often required them to do. Roger was clever and popular amongst his peers, but his rebellious spirit soon led to his expulsion from the school – he had given another boy a nosebleed, for a reason he had deemed just but never shared with anyone, not even Annabelle. His parents weren't sure what to do with him, until Aunty Clare had offered to house and homeschool Roger alongside Annabelle as a favour to Roger's mother, one of her oldest friends.

Annabelle didn't like the idea of a strange boy entering their consistent world, but she soon discovered he had an active, formidable mind. He filled her days with adventure, games, drollery, and intellectual combats – activities she didn't realise she had been craving until Roger had offered them. They became inseparable, even sneaking into each other's rooms at night to finish their conversations from the day. Annabelle was fascinated by the parts of Roger she couldn't predict or understand, and she also admitted to herself that she enjoyed the persistent attention he gave her.

A long time passed before she confessed the truth of the attack to Roger. He believed her without asking too many questions, which she appreciated. He was just as fascinated by her description of the creature as she had been observing him at the time. He insisted on completing some sketches of him based on the details she could remember. She had little interest in art, but occasionally Roger's work moved her, which then frustrated her, as she struggled to understand why she should be affected at all.

His first rendition of the creature was a failure – an impressionist doodle that looked like it belonged in a fairytale, not in her objective reality. Roger took her criticism well and, after a few more attempts, he soon achieved a biologically sound diagram that Annabelle was satisfied with, though there were elements that he was unable to capture. Roger felt he would never be able to capture what she described in its entirety without seeing it in the flesh; one must examine an animal in motion to truly understand its

physicality and presence. For Roger to fathom him, he would have to observe the agility of his tongue, the oil in his hair reflecting the light as he moved, and his translucent skin struggling to contain his muscles as they rolled and contracted with each step.

“I’d like to see it for myself, if there was a way to find it again.”

She didn’t tell Roger how every night she lay awake hoping the creature would find her. She would stare at the crack in her doorway, the shadow against the window, the crumbling corner of the skirting, wondering when he would claw his way inside to finish her off. It wasn’t that she had taken pleasure in the pain or harboured a secret death wish, but that the incident had been festering in her mind like a tumour on her thoughts since it happened. She would not be rid of it until she saw the creature again, she was sure of it.

She knew she could find him if she wanted to. At the time of the attack, the creature had taken a piece of her and made it a part of himself. He had ingested her blood and skin and flesh, then broken down those cells into their most basic elements to be redistributed as fuel or regenerated into new cells in parts of his own body. An ordinary girl would not be able to feel this after the fact, and would forget the former pieces of herself in the same way one forgets other bodily eliminations. For Annabelle, this transferral of herself to the creature had created a bridge between them. Every now and then, she could feel what he was touching on her fingertips, taste what he was tasting on her tongue, and sense when he was somewhere nearby. She wondered if he could sense her too.

From this newfound, obscure connection, she would find him. She had not dared to attempt it before, assuring herself it would be foolish to seek out the beast that had maimed her. Now, Roger’s inclination towards adventure had reignited her own natural curiosity. For better or worse, his desire had given life to her own.

They were to treat it as a scientific and artistic expedition, with a level of risk involved that they were both comfortable with, and safety precautions in place to avoid the worst. Most significantly, Roger proposed they protect themselves by carrying weapons. He revealed to Annabelle that each time his parents had moved bases

over the years, his father would misplace certain items in the chaos of the transition, and those items would often end up in his son's custody without his knowledge. Roger had acquired quite the armoury as a result. Annabelle couldn't imagine a world in which she would intentionally harm the creature, but she also realised that to face him again without some form of a defense would be irrational. She was not irrational, nor suicidal, so she should seek to protect her body and her life more than anything else, she reminded herself.

On the night they had selected, Annabelle waited until Aunty Clare had completed her nightly prayers before she quietly climbed out of bed. Roger was already waiting for her when she arrived at the spot they had agreed on, and they both looked giddy with excitement. Annabelle was happy not to be doing this alone, and to be sharing it with someone like Roger, whom she knew she could trust.

Annabelle used her senses to track the creature through the depths of the forest. Along the way, Roger planted weapons under fallen branches and between rocks so that they could reach them if the need came, but Annabelle wasn't paying attention to him. She was focused on the feeling of the animal's warm blood pumping in his limbs as he skulked between the trees. Her connection to the creature didn't make it feel as if she was moving, but it felt as if there were insects crawling under her skin, creating phantom itches of motion over her stagnant muscles.

Then, emerging from the darkness, he appeared.

She must have looked quite different to him now; the result of time passing, as well as his own assault on her body. He looked almost the same as she remembered, except for a new quality in his eyes and countenance – something that made him even more human. He was still a beast to be sure, but he was less wild looking, and seemed more confused by the sight of her than he had been the first time. Before, he had looked at her with the focus and instincts of a predator. Now, he looked as though he might open his mouth to introduce himself, but was struggling to find the right words.

Upon seeing his claws, Annabelle instinctively raised her hand to touch one of the scars that ran from her brow to her chin, as if remembering. The creature watched her run her finger down the thick white line of keloided skin, as if he was remembering too.

Roger stepped forward from the shadows, bewildered by the sight of the monster before him. It was funny to see Roger unsure of himself for once, and a tender relief washed over her as she realized she was not alone in this anymore.

Hearing him approach, the creature's head snapped towards Roger. Annabelle could sense that Roger's gaze was an invasion. Roger's body was an imposter. Roger's scent was alien. She tried to draw his attention back to her, but it was no use; the animal's ears perked, tongue constricted, teeth bared, and a low growl rolled out from the back of his throat.

"Step behind me, Annabelle," said Roger.

She thought his request was odd considering it was Roger who had upset the creature in the first place, and it was he who was in immediate danger. It should be him to step behind her, she thought to herself.

The creature kept moving towards Roger. Starting to panic, Annabelle inched forward and reached out her arm – her only arm – to draw him back to her through some unspoken summons. She wasn't sure what to do other than try to regain the connection she'd felt between them moments ago.

She was successful, as the closer she became, the less he focused on Roger. The creature hoisted himself onto his hind-legs to tower over her as he had done the last time. The smell of him was so familiar, though she'd only breathed him in once before. He stared down at her and held out his hand, or paw, while she reached upwards, so his claw could graze the palm of her hand.

She was anxious still, but not afraid. When he touched her, but did not harm her, she jolted back into her body like waking from a nightmare. She found that the immediate threat to her life was gone, but the swellings of dread remained heavy on her chest. A tight knot of memories tumbled through her mind, too difficult to

untangle in her current state, but they weighed on her. Had the creature felt this too, upon seeing her, smelling her, touching her...?

The creature had changed; not only physically, but also something in the way he looked at her now told her that he understood things in a more reasonable manner. He was just as untrammelled by convention as he had been before, still an untamed animal with teeth and claws that could deconstruct her if they wished to, but now he was expressing himself to her in new ways, without words. She wondered if this was a natural development, a self-willed change, or something he had learnt from somewhere. Perhaps he hadn't changed at all, and it was the changes in herself that allowed her to recognize other qualities in him.

The blast of a gunshot startled them out of their trance. A bullet ripped through the thin skin of his upper arm, tearing into the flesh and out of the other side in an instant. The creature was still towering over her so his blood spilled down onto Annabelle like a warm fresh spring. Some fell in her mouth but she didn't spit it out, as she was in shock, and curious about the sweet taste of it. She even lifted her fingers to her mouth to taste it again. He then pulled away from her and furred into his natural posture, keeping his weight on his uninjured front leg and both back legs, as he licked his lacerated arm and wailed like a newborn.

As the shock wore off, tears tumbled from Annabelle's eyes. She broke down into the sort of hysterics she had not performed since she was a child. She could feel the creature's pain, not as fully as he experienced it, but tormented flutterings within her like pin pricks on her nerves. She fell to the floor and clutched herself, watching the creature as he lolloped back and forth in a frenzied agony.

Roger tucked his weapon away, took hold of Annabelle, and dragged her to her feet. She thrashed against his grip in the throes of rage and torture, but eventually he managed to pull her away from the beast. The creature fled into the shadows without looking at her again. She kept fighting Roger, thumping his chest until she exhausted herself and crumpled into his arms, sobbing into his

shoulder. He held her like that for some time before leading her back to the house.

Once inside, Annabelle regained her senses. “Enough, enough,” she said, pulling her body away from his to stand on her own. She sorted through her chaotic thoughts and chose the one that she knew would do the most damage to him: “I’m ashamed of you, Roger.”

Her words had the desired effect, as Roger’s expression hardened. She watched as he turned to rise up the winding staircase without a word, but he stopped when they heard someone coming down the stairs. It was Clare, who had been woken by the sound of the gunshot outside and then had discovered that neither of them were in their beds. Now she was rushing downstairs and calling out to them both in a panic. In a few moments, Clare would surely turn the corner of the staircase and see Roger holding a gun and Annabelle covered in blood.

“Roger! What the devil are you doing with that?!”

It took Annabelle a few seconds to realize that Clare and Roger could no longer perceive her standing before them. Roger had glanced back, expecting to see her, but his face fell into

confusion; to him it was as if Annabelle had vanished into thin air, though she hadn’t moved an inch from where she had been standing. Clare couldn’t see her either; she only saw Roger and the gun, so he was forced to defend himself without Annabelle’s assistance. Annabelle watched as he scrambled for an excuse – he claimed he had taken one of his father’s guns in an effort to impress him with his shooting skills on his next visit, but he had fired it by accident in the woods while practicing handling it, with no damage done beyond a dismembered branch.

Annabelle, still not perceivable to them, carefully stepped around Clare as she scolded him. She ascended the staircase, one delicate step at a time. Once out of their line of sight, she bolted to her bedroom and climbed under her covers, turning her face away from the doorway to avoid any chance of an examination of her bloody face. By the time her Aunty Clare had made it back up the stairs, she was exhausted, as she wasn’t in the best of health. She

ascertained that both of her wards had safely returned to their rooms and went to bed without pressing the matter further.

Roger crawled out of his bed for a second time that night, sneaking into Annabelle's bedroom to ask how she could have been there one moment, and gone the next. She drowsily sat up in bed, her face still speckled with dried blood, and told him the simple truth; the optical systems of humans do not always perceive reality in absolute terms.

"I can't tell if you're being patronizing or facetious," he said, so she adjusted her explanation.

She told him how, ever since she was a young child, her body had been able to disguise itself into its surroundings to avoid being perceived. She couldn't control this ability; it would happen instinctually when the situation warranted it. It was how she had approached the creature without him seeing her upon their first meeting, until she had tripped and snapped out of her camouflaged state. As such, Annabelle had been standing in front of Roger and Clare at the bottom of the stairs, but they could not perceive her. She theorized that she had instinctively manipulated how the light interacted with her body, and as a result, the receptors in their eyes must not have received the photonic information required to process her image in their minds. The effect should have looked like a blurry dark splotch where Annabelle had been standing, but their brains had unconsciously filled in the absence of information with what should be there based on the context of the environment, operating similarly to an optical illusion.

"You must be magic, or supernatural?"

"That would depend on your definition of the words."

She assured Roger that she was human – every medical test had confirmed it. Her mother had been born with the same abilities, so she hypothesized that she had inherited the traits from a line of humanity that had developed these natural defenses over thousands of years of genetic mutations. Annabelle would acknowledge one day, but did not consider at the time of this conversation with Roger, that people like her had likely been the foundation of some centuries-old folktales and legends; fairies disguising themselves

in plain sight, elves wreaking havoc but only when no one was looking, and witches casting glamour spells to conceal the truth.

The only absolute facts that Annabelle would discern over her lifetime were these: Annabelle was born in a human body, but with nerves and senses that were more sensitive than most people, and with unusual photoreceptor proteins in her cells that responded to the light environment in such a way that it rendered her anti-reflective. This, at least in part, was what had given her the ability to camouflage herself when confronted with a predator, as well as to prey on unsuspecting others, as the case may be. There were other factors, such as the fact that no one could hear her either, that she would never be able to explain.

She finished her report and Roger remained silent. She felt a similar sensation as to when she had shared her knowledge of the creature; a flurry of nerves, relief, and joy at the prospect of being even closer to each other now, with one less secret between them. The thought left her mind as quickly as it appeared, as she could still taste the creature's blood on her tongue and remembered what Roger had done just a few hours earlier. Again, rage and betrayal bubbled across Annabelle's face. She commanded him to leave her room at once, and warned that he wouldn't be allowed back in the future.

Roger was taken off guard as they'd been having a pleasant – albeit peculiar – conversation until now. “Surely you're not still angry about that animal?”

“I've barely had time to be angry with you at all!” “How long do you think you'll be angry, then?”

“Likely forever.”

“Not forever, Annabelle. Some time, but not forever, lest I have Clare as my only companion.”

Annabelle's lips begged to curve into a smile, but she forced herself to remain solemn. She reiterated that he should not attempt to talk to her the next day, or for the remainder of the week, and likely for even longer than that.

She tried to get back to sleep after he left, but her upper arm began to ache. She assumed she must have been sleeping on it at an uncomfortable angle. Then a dreadful thought slithered into her mind: she must be feeling a pale reflection of the creature's wound. The events in the forest had tightened the binding of their two bodies. It had taken until now for her to digest the parts of him she had swallowed, and they were still in the process of forming new parts of herself.

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Annabelle could remember her mother very well, but her father very little, as he had died suddenly of an undiagnosed brain tumour when Annabelle was an infant. Her mother had the same unusual genetic traits as Annabelle, and it was she who had explained what was happening to her body when it first began. As time went on, her mother became less able to control her tendency to hide herself in public, so she remained at home for the most part to avoid any prying eyes. Annabelle would happily walk herself to and from her primary school without an escort, but one day she came home to discover her mother wasn't there. She assumed it was a temporary disguise and waited for her to reappear. The next day she made herself breakfast and went to school as usual, but her mother still wasn't there upon her return.

Several weeks passed before anyone realised that she had been living there alone. Aunt Clare, her father's sister, was quick to offer up a room in her North Yorkshire residence to the unfortunate child whose father had died and mother had abandoned her. Many applauded her charitable nature, but in truth, Clare had never started a family of her own, despite wanting one, and fate seemed to be in her favour.

Aunt Clare would often tell Annabelle she loved her, usually in a ritualistic manner as she was saying good night, but Annabelle had only truly felt it from her a handful of times. She hadn't attempted to define the feeling with much depth, as it had seemed less important than her other studies, but she understood love to be a

feeling of safety and the absence of shame. Roger forced her to reevaluate this thesis. She often felt safe and without shame when she was with him, yet she couldn't love him, and couldn't believe that he loved her.

Their digression into this topic came soon after their encounter with the creature. Annabelle had attempted to avoid Roger in the days following, but he did everything he could to appease her. When apologies and flattery failed, he sought to provoke her anger enough to force her into an argument. He was successful, as she soon began rebuking him for his barbaric intervention that night. Roger insisted that he had done what was necessary to keep her safe. He had been overwhelmed by the need to remove her from its reach. He didn't want that animal to hurt her again. When she refused to accept this reasoning, Roger went on to admit that his hasty actions had been the result of his love for her, which he thought she must have already been aware of. Annabelle just scoffed.

“Look at it any which way, Annabelle, and you'll find it is a fact,” he said.

“Then you're a fool because you're convinced of a fact that you couldn't know.”

She insisted that he had not known her long enough, and the parts he knew were curated elements of “Annabelle” she had elected to share with him. He must have been confusing things in his mind, as Roger was prone to do. In Annabelle's mind, his desire to not see her ripped apart was nothing to do with love, but simply a human instinct to protect the members of one's community. Perhaps he was experiencing the natural pangs of his adolescence and applying them to the nearest human form, accidentally combining the contentment he felt in her company with his animalistic instincts — an easy mistake to make, she assured him, but it was not love.

He chuckled sadly, somehow expressing both understanding and disagreement at the same time. “It is your own feelings you should dissect, not mine.” He didn't fidget as he usually would. He looked at her, confidently.

The way he stared at her reminded her of the creature. The difference now being that Annabelle knew everything about Roger, so there was little to document other than her own discomfort. She did not enjoy being observed. She did not want to be the subject of someone else's experiment. It made her feel sick. It was as if Annabelle could feel the image of herself being taken in by his eyes, and pieces of herself were dissolving away in the process. She wanted to use her natural talents to hide herself from him, but it had never worked as conveniently as that. She couldn't make herself disappear no matter how hard she tried.

He must have misinterpreted her flushed cheeks, because Roger stepped closer to her.

Annabelle's initial instinct was to jolt away from him, but much like her first encounter with the creature, her body failed her and her emotions were smothered. Her focused analysis of the events kept her mind steadily ticking along as he moved his body towards hers, with his eyes still taking whatever they wanted of her.

Annabelle was often dismissed or talked over by most people, and it had never bothered her as she knew she could be an exhausting character. Now, Roger looked at her as if she was one of his artworks, an object worthy of study, displayed especially for his appraisal. She resented him for making her feel like this. She felt he was taking something from her against her will. He was ruining the only true friendship she had ever known out of a meaningless desire for sexual gratification. Every time they had been together, had he been thinking about her body, her lips, her chest, her arm, her legs, her hair, her skin...? Though she knew desire was a natural human emotion, Annabelle wasn't comfortable being desired. She felt less human than she'd ever felt before — a collection of parts to be sought, examined, and acquired.

Roger, who must have been reassured by the fact that she was still standing there, raised his hand to graze her cheek. The instant she felt him on her hot skin, her mind's cage of analysis began to melt, and one emotion was allowed to bubble up to the surface: anger.

"You've invented this in me," she hissed.

Roger removed his hand from her cheek. Again he expressed contradicting emotions, looking both amused and hurt by her words. “You’re frustrated by what you don’t understand, but this doesn’t need to be understood to be true.”

“You’ll talk in circles until you reach your preferred conclusion. That’s a fool’s logic.”

“And you’ll talk in proofs until you forget why you began talking at all – the reasoning of a madman. You’re like your Auntie Clare searching for her glasses when they’re on her head! Or a missionary with no faith, just yelling nonsense at strangers... Or— Or a tasteless roast dinner that took hours to prepare! What’s the point of it, Annabelle?”

Annabelle searched her mind for a clever retort, but found none. She broke into a smile. “I’m like a tasteless roast dinner?”

Roger smiled too; he liked that he had been able to soften her. Roger’s victory in an argument had always been something Annabelle could concede happily, as he often leveled her with his wit and good humour. They looked at each other like that for a moment too long, before a new, wordless, tension took hold of them. Annabelle knew then that Roger’s revelation had infected the simplest of moments between them – a smile between friends had morphed into something alien. From now on, every interaction would be tainted, every word would own a hidden meaning, and every touch would be laced with an unsatiated hunger for more.

“Roger.” It sounded like a rejection.

Hearing it, Roger dropped his gaze, then turned away from her and towards the door. His abrupt departure felt as if he had shoved her away.

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After Auntie Clare reported the incident with the gun, Roger’s parents elected to take him to live with them after all. Roger explained to Annabelle that it was in his father’s character to

assign him a righteous consequence; if Roger was so inclined to practise his shooting somewhere as peaceful as the Dales, he may as well receive proper military training alongside the British Forces in Gibraltar. His mother assured him that he was old enough now that he wouldn't be in his father's way, which didn't provide the comfort to Roger that she had intended. He tried to argue with them, but they reminded him that this was not the first incident that had concerned them.

The weeks before his mother came to collect him had been strained and strange for Annabelle. She could still feel the creature within her, and at the same time, feel parts of herself somewhere very far away. She presumed that he had fled Yorkshire after Roger's attack and doubted she would ever see the creature again. She didn't mention this to Roger, as she knew it would please him to know that his crime had achieved the desired result.

They never spoke of Roger's feelings; Annabelle tried to bring it up once, but he had cut their conversation short by pretending he had something important to do for her Auntie Clare. The rest of the time he tended to avoid her, keeping himself busy with his drawings, reading books he'd shown no interest in before, and socializing with a group of friends he had acquired from the area.

One night, she was woken by the sound of the east gate creaking open outside. Her bedroom was on the edge of the building, so at one side she could see the cobbled drive and the ponds, and on the other side, she had a view of the rusted gate that opened onto a path into the forest. She watched Roger depart from the gate and disappear into the darkness like an apparition. Terrified that he might be attempting to seek out the creature, she hurried to pull on her coat and boots to follow him.

Instead, she discovered him sitting around a disorderly bonfire with his group of friends, all drinking themselves into a playful daze. She watched from behind a tree as he and the pretty girl, Lucile, pulled each other away into the shadows. The others whistled and cheered them on, as if it were a game they were all participating in, though the rules had not been spoken aloud in the time Annabelle had been watching. It was surprising to see Lucile amongst this

group and acting this way, as she was the precious daughter of a Lord and member of Parliament who lived across the moorland in the neighboring estate. Lucile had been raised with less freedom and firmer expectations than Annabelle, yet here she was.

Even if they had been looking, they wouldn't have been able to see Annabelle moving through the trees to follow them, just as the creature had not seen her approach in their first encounter. Annabelle could not observe them well in the darkness, but she could hear them whispering, kissing, undressing, and laughing. With each second they sounded less like themselves.

As her eyes adjusted to the dark – or perhaps the clouds had shifted and the moon was allowed to breathe for a moment – Annabelle began to see bits and pieces of them. She saw a limb swipe across the ground, fingers digging into the dirt, a flicker of Lucile's hair as she moved it out of their way, and the glimmer of Roger's wristwatch as he moved his hand to touch her cheek.

Seeing him touch Lucile in the same way he had touched her caused Annabelle to inexplicably step forward. She was flooded with emotions, some harder to decipher than others, but one general feeling stood out: she wanted to get a grip on Lucile's lovely hair and drag her away from him. She wasn't a violent person by nature so the strong urge to hurt Lucile was unsettling. It angered Annabelle to see her fawning over Roger, with her hands all over him, making him laugh, and whispering secrets in his ears. It felt like Lucile was trying to take something that wasn't hers – not that Annabelle thought she owned Roger, but that the internal tethering between them was so distinct and tightly bound, that no one could replace it. Jealousy and betrayal swarmed inside her throat and threatened to purge themselves onto the forest floor with her stomach contents.

She had shifted around the tree so she could see them both much better now. They were wrapped around each other, disheveled, half clothed, rolling their bodies against the ground without a thought to how dirty their skin and clothes were becoming. It appeared messy and awkward, but they were both smiling and making

sounds of pleasure, so Annabelle assumed they must not have been aware of how it looked.

She wanted Roger to turn and look at her. She willed him to see her standing there, watching them. It would be humiliating, but she didn't care. She was internally begging him to glance up, to release his grip on Lucile, and... and what? Did she want Roger to grip her instead?

She realized now that she was being ridiculous. She should not be upset. Witnessing this was a satisfying conclusion to her own hypothesis. Roger was achieving the sexual gratification she had prescribed to him as remedy for his feelings towards her. She should not be angry at him for pursuing someone else, when she had rejected him. She should not be jealous that Lucile was able to have all of Roger, when Annabelle only knew how to have parts of him.

A moment ago she had wanted to be spotted, and now she wanted to disappear. She turned to leave, but as she did, she suddenly felt an itching in her calf muscles – they quivered as though she had just finished a sprint. This was already curious, but the true horror came when she tasted the blood. It wasn't sweet in the way the creature's blood had been; this was salty and metallic in flavour – human. She could sense that the creature was far away, somewhere colder, and he was eating someone, a woman, who was terrified. There was nothing in her mouth, but Annabelle could feel human flesh on her tongue and warm liquid running down her throat. She started gagging and stumbled forward.

Hearing her, Roger and Lucile stopped making their sounds and scanned the forest for the source of the disruption. Annabelle froze in place, hoping the darkness would swallow her up.

They soon began whispering again, and Annabelle was sure she hadn't been discovered. She slowly backed away, then turned and ran all the way home without pausing for breath. The taste in her mouth had faded, but she spat out saliva as she ran as the memory of it kept returning. She could feel the creature running too. She could feel that he was full, energized, and satisfied, and Annabelle was ashamed to feel the same way.

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Annabelle never made the trip to Gibraltar to visit Roger after he left, and he never returned to Yorkshire to see her either. She tried to write him a letter once, but stopped halfway through as no words seemed correct or worth expressing. The loss of his companionship did not affect her immediately, but developed slowly like an internal disease gnawing at her insides. It was a disease she could live with, however, as she was a resilient character, and her favourite activities were better served alone.

As soon as she reached the appropriate age, Annabelle left Aunt Clare to pursue her studies at the University of Brighton in the bustling seaside town that was a world away from everything she had known before. There was a part of her that had been desperate to escape all along, and another part that had feared leaving would be like dying; who would she be if she was not here?

She was surprised to find that she thrived in her new life and preferred the version of herself she was becoming to the person she had been. She missed exploring the moors and forests of the Dales, but Brighton was spilling with humanity, a more complex study. Aunt Clare would visit her from time to time, hoping the sea air might improve her health, but Annabelle wouldn't visit her in return. She would even make excuses as to why they should spend their holidays outside of Yorkshire, as she worried that returning would unravel the work she had done to establish her adult self. Of course, her real fear was getting closer to the creature and experiencing him hurting people too regularly for comfort. Their connection had weakened the moment she had travelled south, which told her that the creature likely resided further north, in Scotland perhaps. She would still feel the odd fluttering or phantom spasm, but it was manageable as long as she kept her distance.

Alongside her regimented studies, Annabelle made it her mission to uncover the origins of her abilities. It was her research that led her to Étienne, a retired jockey and current horse trainer, who

expressed the same strange genetic traits as she did. She tracked him down from a newspaper article published before the war that had reported a miraculous sighting: a jockey seemed to have abandoned his horse at the last turn of the track, only to be comfortably seated in his saddle a moment later to win the race. When she first showed up on Étienne's doorstep, he dismissed her as a lunatic and denied it entirely, but as soon as she revealed that she shared the ability, his demeanour blossomed.

“How wonderful! Come, come inside,” he beamed, opening his door for her.

He spent hours answering her questions over a bottle of fine red wine. He had far more information than she did, as he was raised in a large family that had carried the trait for generations. Even the locals of the French village where he grew up were aware of his family's “quirks,” as he called them. He explained their genetics in as much detail as an ex-jockey could – poorly, but with feeling. His father was a self-taught geneticist, however, who had dedicated his life to the analysis of their DNA in the hope of developing some kind of preventative medicine, to no avail. They had determined that peppermint tea seemed to dampen the ability temporarily, but it wasn't a dependable treatment, he warned her. They also knew that their abilities intensified with age, but they had yet to understand why.

Étienne became a great mentor to Annabelle beyond his knowledge of their heritage. He was twelve years her senior and had experienced a great deal more of life; he'd fought in the war, been married and divorced, and travelled to eighteen countries. His natural charisma made him the centre of any conversation, which Annabelle came to admire in him as she had been raised to never draw attention to herself. He also tended to talk in meandering but entertaining speeches – he was storytelling, rather than merely transferring information like most people. She could engage with him on any topic that came to mind and he'd have something interesting to say, even if he wasn't able to provide the most accurate or valid conclusion to whatever she had hypothesized. They would propose questions and share ideas without a clear victor at the end of the conversation. She found herself spending

more and more time with him, until she ventured into a brand new area of research.

“I’d like to kiss you, and eventually try sex as well,” she said over lunch one day, making him choke on his battered haddock.

“What brought this on all of a sudden?”

“I’ve always been curious, but now I feel I’m ready to experience it for myself. And I find you attractive, naturally.”

He chuckled, but he looked concerned. “I’m quite a bit older than you, you know.”

“Not significantly, and I’d prefer it this way anyway. I must be able to ask questions throughout, without fear of embarrassment. I know that I would be comfortable with you, and I also trust that if I asked you to stop that you would do so without argument.”

“Of course I would,” he said immediately, as if it was ridiculous to suggest otherwise. He took a moment to think. “If we’re to even consider this, I must know that you understand... This isn’t a project, but a significant and vulnerable human experience. An experience that cannot be undone, and may affect you more than you’re aware of at present.”

Annabelle assured him that she understood, but resented the implication that she was too naive to know what she wanted. She was an adult woman with urges and desires like anyone else, not a delicate flower for him to stomp on. She knew that it would be a physically and emotionally demanding endeavour, but that didn’t scare her. It scared her more to see Étienne look at her differently as soon as the subject had been introduced.

She didn’t feel strongly about him, nor him about her, but they were entirely comfortable with each other as she had predicted. They began with a kiss and Annabelle was surprised by how much she enjoyed it. Soon she found herself craving it even when he wasn’t in her company. Her fear and uncertainty increased as their activities escalated, but she ventured on. Annabelle knew very little about physical intimacy, while Étienne seemed to be an expert. He understood that she needed time to learn her body in the way he had already learnt his own. They stopped as soon as she requested

it, and resumed whenever her curiosity and desire returned to her. She came to understand that her sexuality had its own way of thinking, outside of her own acute consciousness, and she had to listen to it and respond to it as best she could with the tools she had developed. It was through this process that Annabelle mended her relationship with her body, after feeling separate from it for most of her life thus far.

The most puzzling and helpful discovery was that she could find great pleasure in physical intimacy, but only when in complete darkness, or if her partner had their eyes closed. She could keep her eyes open, but if she saw their eyes observing her in return, the veil of intimacy between them shattered and she would, unfairly to them, feel degraded and disconnected. It took her a long time to realise the shame she felt was her own invention, and not something they were doing to her. It was an unfortunate mindset born of her childhood; a weed planted long ago that was difficult to rid herself of now.

Their arrangement had been working well for them both, until the night that Annabelle tasted blood. At first she thought she must have bitten Étienne's lip, or he hers, but then she felt the hunger and the instinctual fury that came with the taste of flesh, and she knew it was the creature. It wasn't as strong as it had been in the past, but it was enough for her to disengage from Étienne and frantically move to the bathroom to brush her teeth a second time.

When he asked what had happened, she first dismissed it as tiredness. He didn't question her, but later that night she was kept awake by another thought: what if her genetics were somehow related to her connection to the creature? What if Étienne knew more about the origins of the creature, or had a secret creature of his own? Intrigued at the prospect, she woke him and demanded an oath of secrecy, which he gave. She then told the story of the strange animal of her childhood and her internal tethering to him. Instead of the relief she had felt with Roger, she soon regretted mentioning it at all.

“Is it not your duty to track it down?” “To what end?”

“To kill it, of course.” Annabelle recoiled, so he continued. “You say you have already sensed it hurting people – killing people, even. You can’t allow that to continue. We shall gather a trusted group, well-equipped, and use your instinctual navigation to locate it, capture it, and then—”

“It isn’t my duty to save anyone in particular.”

“But we’re each born with an innate duty to each other...” Étienne kept speaking, but Annabelle stopped listening. She usually appreciated his passion, but in this case she didn’t care to indulge him.

Her relationship with Étienne came to a natural end soon after that, as he became obsessed with the idea of the creature. He would find ways to bring it up in every conversation. He could not get past what he perceived as her lack of empathy, and she grew to despise his stubbornness and moral superiority on the matter.

She didn’t miss him much after he was gone, as they had never been strongly attached. They had been intellectual companions with sex as a pleasurable hobby they shared together. They would write to each other at first, but over time the letters became less frequent, and then the day came when Étienne only existed in her past.

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Years passed before Annabelle returned to Yorkshire to organize Clare’s funeral proceedings. She had included Roger on the list of invitees, as Clare had only made a few significant acquaintances over her lifetime. Annabelle was her closest living relative, though there was no grand inheritance. Clare had little to her name and had spent a significant chunk of it on Annabelle’s upbringing, medical expenses, and university education. Even Clare’s home did not belong to her, but to a wealthy distant relation from America who had allowed Clare to live out her life there. The American had offered the same to Annabelle too, if she desired it, despite never meeting her in the flesh. Annabelle would also receive all of

Clare's earthly belongings, to keep, sell, or dispose of as she wished. This proved to be more challenging than she had initially thought – the items were useless, yet they were the only proof that Clare had lived at all.

She was both comforted and unsettled by the sight of the house again. Exploring the rooms she had once been so familiar with, now felt like strolling through a museum; everything had its place on display, and Annabelle was no longer a part of the collection, but a visitor. The passage of time had dampened her memories and distorted her perception of things. Objects she had once considered ordinary now seemed odd. It was fortunate her fiancé hadn't accompanied her here, she thought to herself, as she would have felt obligated to narrate her tour of the place and tell him childhood stories littered with half-truths.

She had met her fiancé a year prior, one rainy day in Brighton. She had been rushing across the street, sopping wet, and running late to a concert at the Royal Pavilion. A kind man had offered to share his umbrella and said it was a wonderful coincidence that he was late to the same concert so he could escort her all the way to the entrance. It was only when they arrived that she discovered he did not have a ticket to the event, nor did he have any intention of buying one. He introduced himself as Cornelius and asked if he could escort her somewhere else in the near future, to which she agreed.

Her relationship with Cornelius came naturally, without trials or anxiety, and they were engaged within a few months of meeting. He had asked, and Annabelle couldn't think of a reason why she shouldn't marry him. He was an objectively good man who loved Annabelle in a graceful, unaggressive way, without selfishness. She had never felt more secure than when she entered a room on his arm. He came from a family of milliners, designing fabulous hats for fashion houses across Europe. From the moment of their engagement, she would rarely be seen hatless and always wore the most current styles, courtesy of her fiancé. It wasn't just out of duty, however; she found it comforting to have a covering for her head and the ability to shield her face from others with a slight tilt of her neck.

Cornelius didn't accompany her to Clare's funeral as he was in Milan with his brother, handling a business matter; Annabelle didn't know the details of the endeavour beyond that it was timely and hat-related. He had offered to return home to be with her, but she insisted that he stay where he was. She admitted she would prefer to be alone when grieving anyway, and Cornelius knew her well enough to know that was true. He promised to bring her back a new hat on his return.

Roger was barely recognizable when she saw him again. He entered the Church, accompanied by his mother, wife and children, and scanned the room, searching for something. His eyes found her across the pews and settled there. She was drinking a cup of peppermint tea, which must have looked odd in a Church, but Annabelle didn't mind looking odd if it meant the tea would calm her nerves and prevent her from disappearing in the middle of the service. He nodded a respectful greeting without words, which she returned. He looked harder than she had known him, with thicker eyebrows, darker eyes, and a firmer mouth.

The funeral was underwhelming. She had hoped it would feel final – that she would be given clarity on or a resolution to her grief – but the Priest's words sounded like any Sunday Mass.

Losing Clare hadn't been a shock as she had been unwell for so many years, but waves of sadness would still overwhelm Annabelle unexpectedly. It was difficult to comprehend that she would never speak with her again or hear her say her prayers from the other room. Of course, Annabelle had a practical, biological understanding of death that made her grief more manageable. It was all part of a necessary complex system, and the pain she felt was merely proof that she had loved her Auntie Clare very much.

It was when the congregation reached the last hymn of the service that she felt him again. For many years he had merely been a weak taste in her mouth, a dull aching in the back of her head, or a twitch in her muscles. Annabelle had learnt how to live with these uncomfortable sensations in the same way she had adjusted to abdominal pains over her monthly cycle as an adolescent.

Now, his sudden return to Yorkshire assaulted her body like an allergic reaction – her legs throbbed as if they'd been sprinting for miles, her skin itched with the dirt and pollen that must be caught in his fur, and her nostrils were filled with the grass, dung, and wild garlic of the moors.

He must have sensed her arrival in Yorkshire and her internal wounds at Clare's loss, and felt the need to be by her side. She was strangely grateful that he had. She was excited even, and it was then that she realized she must have summoned him herself. It hadn't been a conscious choice, as there was no logical reason for it, but the moment she had returned she had longed to see the creature again. He had heard her silent cry from many miles away and had come back to her at once – as a loyal friend or biological servant.

The wake was held at Clare's house, which meant Annabelle had to continue to play the host before she could disappear into the forest to finally see him again. She forced herself to be present, diverting her attention from feeling the creature outside to caring for her guests inside. Roger reintroduced her to his mother and to Lucile, now his wife, who was as pretty as ever.

Roger's mother was all emotion, blubbering at the loss of her dearest friend. Such expressive grief seemed odd to Annabelle at first, seeing as she hadn't seen Clare in years. Then Annabelle thought of the strength of her feelings for Roger now, despite the time gone, and she understood.

Annabelle had heard of his marriage to Lucile and had sent formal congratulations in the form of a floral arrangement, but that was the extent of their contact until the day of the funeral. She hadn't heard about his father's death until the period when sending condolences would have been reasonable had long passed. She had also, albeit unintentionally, been informed of his artistic success. One day she had stumbled upon an article in the Arts & Culture section of *The Times* that had focused on one of Roger's exhibitions, titled "Animal." The exhibit featured several renditions of her creature, in various forms and materials. At first she had felt violated and furious at this betrayal, but then she

reminded herself of how Roger operated; his art was a compulsion born of curiosity, not a weapon he was wielding. She could not condemn him for that.

Lucile was pleasant towards Annabelle, except in the middle of conversation her eyes would often shift to glance at Annabelle's scars and prosthetic arm, as if they made her nervous.

Annabelle tried to be understanding, reminding herself it was probably out of an instinctual empathy; when Lucile looked at Annabelle's body, she was imagining what it would feel like for her to be in the same pain that Annabelle had been in when it had happened. Even so, it made Annabelle uncomfortable, and if Lucile hadn't been Roger's wife she would have corrected her.

She was sure that Roger had noticed Lucile's behaviour as well, as he quickly handed her a glass of wine and encouraged her to tell an irrelevant story about their journey here, like a parent trying to distract their child. Annabelle smiled to herself as she watched them interact with each other, so tame and controlled. The last time she had observed them together they had been rolling around on the dirt ground, clawing at each other like wild animals.

Annabelle drifted around the room to engage with Clare's other friends and accept their condolences, but she found herself regularly returning to Roger and his family, as if they were her anchor in the room. They had been staying at Lucile's family estate during the visit to Yorkshire and would be returning to London the following day, so Annabelle knew that her chance to talk to Roger was slipping away with every second that passed. They discussed all the ordinary things, such as Roger's art and their family life in the city. They didn't discuss his past exhibition of her creature, or anything else of real significance, instead keeping the conversation light and courteous. Nonetheless, Roger held her rapt attention throughout; it was strange how much she felt with so little said. She had been starved of his company for so long that each word now felt like an embrace, even with Lucile there as witness.

It was towards their third glass of wine that Roger and Annabelle finally found themselves alone, when Lucile had stepped away to take the children to the bathroom. It was as if someone had lifted

the starting gate, but their horses were stalling. Annabelle did not want to exchange purposeless pleasantries with Roger. They stood in silence for a minute or so before Roger's expression changed. Annabelle waited for him to reveal whatever was on his mind. "I saw you that night. In the forest."

"Which night?"

Roger didn't answer her, because they both knew which night he was referencing.

"I saw you, just for a moment, and then you were gone. I told Lucile it was just an owl."

She blushed and looked down. If she had known he'd seen her back then, she would have been humiliated beyond repair. Now she just felt dull shades of embarrassment. "I followed you because I thought you were going after the creature. I was worried."

"Worried about me or about it? "Both of you."

Roger asked if she had ever sought out the creature again, and she said she hadn't seen it since, which he thought was odd. "Perhaps I killed it with that bullet."

She could tell Roger was trying to agitate her for some reason, so she did her best to appear at ease. "Perhaps you did," she nodded, though she knew that wasn't true. She allowed her thoughts to take her somewhere else, then gathered the courage to speak them aloud. "I don't regret following you. Seeing you with Lucile was helpful."

This made him laugh, and she saw a glimmer of the Roger she had known break through his hardened features. "Helpful? In what respect?"

"It confirmed all that I had said to you, not long before, about the truth of your feelings."

Roger laughed again, but his harshness had returned. "Yes, you were an expert on the truth of my feelings."

"It was proof enough. You had found what you had been seeking in me, in Lucile." "Do you mean sex?"

“I think that was heavily on your mind at the time, yes.”

Roger nodded and looked away with a short exhale of breath. Annabelle wasn't sure whether that was an acknowledgement or a dismissal.

“But not just that,” she continued. “You were so present and joyful together. It was clear to me then that she could be fully with you, in every way, without fear. I couldn't have done the same at the time.”

Roger was still looking away. Then he said, “And now? With this hat-man, I mean; do you feel you can be with him fully?”

“I suppose I know myself better now, so I'm less afraid.”

“I'm glad. It seems the more I get to know myself, the more afraid I am.”

“Rubbish. You've always been annoyingly sure of yourself – even time couldn't have dampened such reckless self-confidence.”

“I see time hasn't dampened your delightful ferocity either,” he chuckled.

The worst happened when Roger's hand grazed hers as she handed him her empty glass to refill with wine. His touch, combined with the fact that it had been several hours since her last peppermint tea, triggered her body to do the one thing she had feared all day. She drew her hand back from his and he glanced up to look at her, but she was already gone.

Mercifully, they had been sequestered in the kitchen at the time of the event and no one else had been witness to her vanishing act. Annabelle watched as Roger registered her disappearance, gathered himself, and then rejoined the main room. Lucile returned from the bathroom and Roger gathered his son and daughter up in his arms as if they were weightless. They giggled as he squeezed them, spun them round, and then plonked them back down. Before seeing it for herself, Annabelle never could have imagined fatherhood suiting him so well. She didn't want children of her own, which Cornelius was aware of and content with, but she did

enjoy hearing the children's laughter on a day that had been generally sad.

Annabelle was far more comfortable at the wake now that no one could see her. She listened in on many inane conversations and some kind stories about Clare, without feeling the need to perform or respond. She then saw Roger move to the centre of the room and clear his throat, drawing everyone's attention.

"Annabelle's gone to bed, exhausted from the day, as you can imagine. I believe it is time we leave and allow her to rest."

Everyone nodded and mumbled agreements. Annabelle smiled, grateful. She watched as Roger then shifted into the corner and began whispering with Lucile. She couldn't help but skulk over to them to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"It's that instantaneous? She is here one moment, and then gone the next?" "Miraculous, isn't it? I told you," Roger said.

"She ought to be studied in a lab."

Annabelle stared at Roger but he couldn't see her there. She felt the food and wine in her stomach rise up her gullet. It took everything in her to shift out of the room, unnoticed, and crawl into the bathroom to throw up in the toilet. She wondered if the creature could feel her acid in the back of his throat. She pulled herself to her feet, then took her time fixing her hair, washing her face, and brushing her teeth. She hoped that by the time she was done, everyone would be gone and she would be alone again.

When she returned to the living room, she found only Roger and Lucile remained, but Roger's mother and children weren't with them. Annabelle was visible now, as they both turned to look at her with the same surprised expression.

Lucile spoke first, "Everyone has gone home."

"Not everyone," Annabelle corrected her. She looked at Roger, and he stared back. She knew Roger would be able to see the anger under her mask of politeness.

Lucile accepted the mask. "We're leaving now. We just wanted to make sure you were alright."

“I’m fine, thank you, Lucile,” she said. “But you mustn’t leave yet. Not until I have heard about Roger’s exhibition.”

“Which exhibition?”

“It was a couple of years ago. Animal. I assume Roger told you of its real inspiration?”

Lucile didn’t know how to respond, so she turned to Roger for assistance. Roger only looked at Annabelle, like a deer examining the trees to determine whether it is being hunted.

Their silence confirmed her assumption. “So Cornelius was right,” Annabelle smiled, but she was devastated. “Marriage means sharing everything.”

Lucile looked between Roger and Annabelle, as they only looked at each other. Still unsure, she muttered, “He only told me about it because I wouldn’t stop asking about the—”

“You should collect mother and the children from the library, and then take them home,” Roger said to Lucile. “I’ll stay and help Annabelle clean up the house.”

“How will you get home? It will be too dark to walk alone on the moor paths—” “I know the route by heart. I’ll be careful.”

She looked annoyed. “Alright then.”

Annabelle spoke as Lucile turned for the door. “Wouldn’t you like to see him before you go?” “See who?”

“The animal. He’s outside, in the forest, at this very moment.”

Lucile’s face contorted, horrified, and again turned to Roger as if he would confirm that Annabelle was joking.

He just stared at Annabelle, bristling with fresh anger. “You said you hadn’t seen it since.” “I’ll take you now,” Annabelle ignored him and focused on Lucile. “You must be curious.” “I am not curious in the least. Roger, perhaps you should return with us.”

“It will only take a moment, and then it will be an experience we’ve all shared together.” “No, thank you. It’s the children’s bedtime.”

“Come. He’s a sight to behold, and I’ll make sure he doesn’t–”

“Annabelle,” Roger’s commanding of her name made her stop and look at him.

The silence was rigid. Finally, Roger took Lucile’s hand in his and said, “Collect the children, my dear. I’ll come home with you, but I must speak to Annabelle alone for a moment.”

Lucile squeezed his hand, then glanced back at Annabelle, unnerved. “Good night, Annabelle.”

“Lovely to see you again, Lucile,” Annabelle smiled.

As soon as the door closed behind Lucile, Roger turned to the window, though he couldn’t have seen anything beyond the drive. Annabelle was just about to end the silence herself when he finally spoke again. “I understand you’re upset that I shared our secrets.”

“My secrets. I shared my secrets with you. That does not make them yours.”

“You’re right, and I am sorry,” he turned to her. “But Lucile is my wife, and it was only because I trusted her so fully, that I felt I could–”

“I don’t believe in your trust with Lucile,” Annabelle scoffed, pouring herself another glass of wine. “You both perform a lovely dance for each other and everyone else. Memorizing the steps and counting in your heads to keep in time. I’m sure it’s comforting, and even fun at times, but at the end of the day you must know it’s just a dance.”

“Perhaps you’re not the authority you think you are.” “I’m only stating what I’ve seen between you.”

“You don’t have to see anything at all. I love Lucile. She’s my wife. The mother of my children. My partner through life. These are facts that do not need to be observed by you to be true.”

“Well said,” she conceded, pushing back a smile, though it felt like coils had tightened around her lungs.

Roger smiled slightly too, but it didn’t last, as something else was weighing on him.

“Is the creature truly in the forest?” Annabelle considered lying, then nodded and watched his anger return. “And you would’ve had it attack Lucile out of your own spite and jealousy?”

“You’ve conveniently traded your betrayal of my trust with my supposed jealousy!”

“And you’ve conveniently avoided my question. Would you have taken Lucile to the creature in the hope that it would hurt, or even kill her?”

“I’m not sure. Probably.”

Roger stared at her for a moment. Then he moved towards the door and closer to her. “I had thought of you often over the years – more than you thought of me, I think. But now I regret coming back here, and seeing you again. I don’t like the arrogant and vicious person you have clearly become.”

His words hurt, as intended. “You don’t have to like it,” Annabelle lifted her head to hiss the words into his face. “But whatever version of myself you see here is how I’ve always been. Either you were blind to it then or you’re forgetting it now.”

They said nothing else but stared at each other in silence. Roger was the first to look away, but as he reached for the door they both heard Lucile scream his name from somewhere else in the house.

They hurried through to the foyer just as Roger’s mother and Lucile rushed down the stairs. Lucile spoke in panicked spurts of information. “Your mother fell asleep, and now we can’t find the children. They had mentioned earlier, when we first arrived, that they wanted to play in the forest, but I wouldn’t let them, and now I think they may have—” the words caught in her throat.

Roger looked at Annabelle and she saw a type of fear in his eyes she had never seen before. She assured them they would be fine, but in truth she wasn’t sure; she had felt the creature’s hunger all evening. He told his mother and Lucile to stay in the house in case the children came back there, but Lucile insisted on coming with them to search the forest. “They’re my children,” was all she said, but it was enough.

They left in such a hurry that by the time Roger remembered he was unarmed, they had already entered the forest and Lucile refused to turn back. Roger led the way with one of Clare's old lanterns outstretched before him, glancing back for Annabelle's navigation as she pointed ahead. She could feel they were getting closer to the creature as his body began to pulse through hers. Then they heard their son scream.

They found the boy on the ground with a cut knee, having tripped. His sister was standing over him but looking in the other direction as if she could see something out of their line of sight.

Roger and Lucile ran to embrace their children and began reprimanding them for leaving the house. Annabelle kept her eyes on the dark spot between the trees where their daughter was still looking.

Their son sobbed as he got to his feet. "We saw something, an animal, and started running, but couldn't find our way back—"

The sound of a low growl silenced them all in an instant.

The creature crawled out of the shadows and into their view. He looked older and weaker, with his thin skin revealing almost colourless flesh beneath it. The whites of his eyes had become yellowish. He still seemed like the creature, but was more closely human than ever. He had lost his thick odour and the agility of his tongue. His gaze drifted over each of them with sentient attention, and he made little huffs of sound that could pass for communication, though none of it was intelligible. The bullet wound in his arm was now a scar, but his weight still leaned to one side – the injury must not have healed correctly.

In the next moment, Roger lept towards the base of a nearby tree and dragged his hands through the dirt and leaves on the ground, searching for something. She then remembered Roger stashing various weapons across the forest all that time ago, and wanted to scold him now; it was in character for him to recklessly abandon them here for anyone to stumble upon over the years. Perhaps this was why teenage Roger had so confidently entered the forest and frolicked with Lucile without a care for their safety; if the creature had come, he would have had his armoury at the ready.

While Roger searched for his weapon, the creature skulked towards his family. Lucile stepped forward to put herself between him and her children. “Go to aunty Annabelle. I’ll be fine.” But the children didn’t move, terrified by the beast of their nightmares now before them.

Annabelle had been watching this take place with detachment, as if she were at the theatre and it was not her place to actively participate in the events. By the time she registered her present reality, the creature was already towering over Lucile and sniffing her head, with his long tongue tumbling out of his mouth.

Annabelle rushed forward and commanded: “Enough!”

The creature looked at Annabelle with something more than recognition. He shifted his body and lumbered towards her; he couldn't move as fluidly as he used to, as his bones now ached with age and exhaustion. In her peripheral vision, Annabelle saw Roger had finally retrieved a revolver from his hiding place and now held it up to point at the creature’s back. He pulled the trigger but nothing happened. He frantically tried again as the creature reached Annabelle but no bullets escaped from the barrel. It must have been jammed with dirt and rust from years in the forest.

The creature didn’t touch her, but moved his head to her level so they could stare into each other. He breathed onto her face and she breathed him in. Annabelle’s nerves were blistering with all kinds of sensations but she forced herself to stay focused. She knew that she only needed to hold his attention for a few minutes, to keep him in sync with herself as only she knew how, and then maybe she would give Roger’s family enough time to reach the house.

Her gaze faltered briefly – she couldn’t help glancing to the right to confirm Lucile had taken the children away – but Annabelle’s flickering eyes made the creature look too. Seeing Roger flailing with the gun and backing away like prey triggered new rage in the creature. He shifted away from her and towards Roger instead. She called out to him again but he didn’t hear her this time.

Annabelle looked around for a way she could stop him. She grabbed a fallen branch with a sharply splintered end and dragged it across the soft spot of skin above her collar bone, yelling out,

“Come! Come to me!” Small beads of blood trickled down her neck and onto her coat. She waited for the creature to smell it and stop his pursuit of Roger. She willed him to obey with all of her being, but for some reason, it wasn’t working.

“Annabelle do something! Annabelle?”

It was then that Annabelle realized she was no longer visible or audible to anyone, even the creature. Roger desperately scanned the forest but could not find her there. The creature lifted his upper body to stand on his hind legs. The movement appeared strained, but the result was just as terrifying as it had always been: he loomed over Roger like a schoolmaster to a little boy.

“Stop! Stop now!” She rushed forward and tried to grab the creature, but she couldn’t get a grip on his thinning fur.

Roger swiped the useless gun as his last defense, but his effort only made the creature swing his arm forward to knock the gun out of his hand in return. In the same movement, his claws slashed across Roger’s face and blood spilled instantly. Annabelle screamed. Her tears flowed without needing time to gather in her lids. Roger brought his hands to his eyes that had taken the worst of the blow. He blindly stumbled backwards and fell to the ground, groaning in untempered agony.

“Roger...?” She said his name as a plea, but it was no use; he could not see or hear her, and even if he could, he soon fell unconscious. The creature just licked the blood from his claws and then shifted towards his limp body once more.

Annabelle lowered her eyes from Roger’s butchered face and spotted the gun by her feet. She leant down to pick it up. It was smaller than the gun Roger had used on the creature when they were young, or maybe it had just seemed larger at the time. She wiped it clean on her coat and then opened the chamber to blow out any dirt that may have been clogging the internal mechanics.

She had been so focused on the gun that she hadn’t noticed the creature turning his head from Roger to look at her instead. Her calm resoluteness had made her visible to him again. She had known what she must do as soon as she had seen the revolver, and

that purpose had settled her nerves. In turn, her reappearance had halted the creature's attack on Roger. Now he was only focused on her but he didn't move, as if he was waiting for her to finish what she was doing.

She raised the gun between his eyes and he still didn't move. She pushed her finger into the underslung trigger unit. As if sensing her hesitation, the creature released a hoarse exhale of breath, startling Annabelle. The sound was cut off by the bellow of the gunshot.

Blood and some pieces of his head splattered onto the trunk of the tree behind him, and then his body fell limp like a puppet with his strings cut. Her own body slumped onto the ground in unison with him, as if her strings had been cut too. She hit the ground and felt her nerves settle and muscles relax. His lungs were no longer straining for breath, and she experienced the same relief within herself. It was as if there had been ropes tied around her limbs for so long that she'd learned to live with them, but now the ropes had been sliced and she had to relearn how to operate without them.

She remained like that until she heard Roger cough and shift his legs in the dirt as he regained consciousness. She dragged herself to his side to examine his injuries. His face had been badly lacerated but the bleeding had stopped for the most part. "I can't see," he said.

"There's blood in your eyes, that's all," she lied. "Don't touch your face; we'll clean it at the house."

She helped him to his feet. He winced and groaned with every movement, then leant on Annabelle's shoulder as she slowly led him back the way they had come. She glanced back once to confirm the creature's body was where she had left it, as if she expected him to have come back to life and be following behind them. From this distance, the creature looked like a tired old man, asleep on the forest floor.

She told Cornelius she wanted to spend the remainder of her time in the Yorkshire Dales, living in her childhood home, alone. This was what was best for them both, she explained, as he wanted a partner through life while she could do without one. She suspected that he had been pretending that he would be content without children, believing that she might change her mind one day.

She assured him she would not. Her reluctance to reproduce was not the main reason she had ended things between them, but she knew it was the reason he would most understand.

Cornelius wafted from being angry, to confused, to panicked, and finally landed in the same place she was, which was a sad acceptance of the facts. Even though he knew she had only spoken in truths, he had planned his future with her as the foundation, and now she had deconstructed it all in an instant. She told him she loved him, and found she was not lying. She loved him in the old way she had always known; she felt safe and without shame, cared about his happiness, and would truly miss him if he were no longer in her life. Once the raw emotions had settled, Cornelius asked if he could still visit her from time to time in the future, and she readily agreed. He promised to bring her a new hat with each visit.

Roger also visited her once or twice a year, alone except for the driver dropping him off and picking him up as he was no longer able to drive himself. They often argued about the events of the day of Clare's funeral, accusing and apologizing to each other in an exhausting loop which they eventually found humour in.

To be visited by both men, without purpose or expectations on either side, and only for a day or two at most, brought Annabelle great contentment. It didn't last, however, as it was during Roger's seventh visit that Annabelle decided she wanted to kiss him. She expected him to push her away, but he seemed just as relieved as she was. He said her name as he kissed her, quietly at first, and then louder, as if he was calling for her from across the room when she was already in his arms. Then he clutched her body against his a little too forcefully and Annabelle winced.

"Roger, I'm here," she reminded him, and he loosened his grip.

The following day, Roger prepared to leave for London and didn't say a word to Annabelle. She sensed he was weighed down by his guilt over what had passed between them, and she resisted the urge to scold him for the convenient timing of his conscience. Annabelle didn't feel guilty, or if she did, she didn't pay significant attention to it. She refused to be ashamed of how she felt about him or deny what had come naturally. She wanted to say this aloud to Roger, but elected to stay silent; the events of the night before had concluded a long held debate in her mind, and she didn't want to initiate a fresh debate with him now. He said goodbye, took his cane, and walked across the cobbles to the car that was waiting for him. She watched him leave and knew that it would be a long time before he visited her again.

Years later, on one of his scheduled trips, Cornelius arrived to find the house was vacant. He waited for Annabelle to appear, but she never did, so he left her new hat on the rack with the others.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Growing up in Lancashire in the north of England, Beatty was raised with centuries-old folktales of fairies and boggarts who would wreak havoc if you took a simple misstep on a cobbled lane. Every patch of land had a ghost story or mysterious legend to go with it, which is what first sparked her interest in the horror, supernatural, and fantasy genres. After moving to the US, she wrote and directed several short films, including the tense drama film NIGHT SNIFFERS, the cabin-in-the-woods thriller SNARE, and the strange supernatural thriller DRIFT. She also produced the short comedy thriller ! and the short animated drama LUNCHBOX. She has written several pilot scripts and short stories, often grounded in periods of history, regional folktales, or obscure legends. Beatty has a BA degree from University of Notre Dame and an MFA from the Peter Stark Producing Program at USC.



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