

The Trophy

Bill and Edie hung the antlers in the hall beside the kitchen door.

The head gave their house a Highland feel – a sense of wildness and adventure – which was just what it had lacked. The current fixtures on the wall – Edie’s plates and Bill’s old maps – felt dry, suburban, ordinary; so out of place in Sutherland where they had come to make their home. The antlers would astonish friends who came to visit from the South, and maybe – Edie felt – stoke envy. Bill meantime thought fit to hang his flat cap from the lowest point; he told his wife they should rename their home, and have it called ‘the lodge’.

Not that either liked to hunt. They were not even keen on sport. Besides infrequent games of tennis when they were young and newly-wed, their sole pursuit was rambling. Walking they loved with unvoiced passion. Being within, and at one with nature. Feeling its power, its majesty, laid out in proud magnificence before their willing eyes. And they its vassals, bent in homage, basking in its glorious rays. Even as they watched. That was why, on Bill’s retirement, they had left the South and moved – to somewhere wild and far removed, where nothing would intrude on them but the sun and the wind and the rain. They came in search of that, not

sport. Bill had never fired a gun – not even in his army years – at any living thing.

And antlers weren't a living thing. They may have been so once. Now, though, they had been transformed, transmuted to a sterile state of after-life. Not unlike a bandaged corpse, a dried wild flower, they took a new identity – they were not part of what they were – an object that had once had breath. Bill felt his argument was sound. He would not shoot a deer himself; he would not buy a set of antlers if he saw them in a shop. But, if someone offered them to him, if they were being thrown away, then well, why not, thought Bill.

He and Edie had climbed the hill which sloped up high behind their house, up through the tree-line and beyond. They had scarcely been in Scotland a month, and were still exploring the paths and trails which cut through the bracken and startled the gorse. There, on the border of the estate, they had seen a building standing alone which they mistook for a crofter's hut. A man was sitting by the door, fastidiously sharpening his knife. When they waved to him he beckoned them over, and before too long they were deep in talk – in the history and the mystery of the moor.

The man gave his name as Thom – employed to stalk and mind the deer by those who owned the estate. He had followed his father and uncle before him in tracking deer on this land. Thom knew the

hill as if by feel. He could trace on his palm every undulation of every valley which stretched from his bothy, here near the coast, to ten miles west. He knew each tree and burn and rock that lay concealed beneath the tread. He knew each bog, each eagle's nest. He knew each print pressed in the peat; which plants grew where and when they flowered; the name of every fern.

And he knew deer. He knew them well. He knew them individually. He watched them cross the boundary which lay invisibly between the bordering estate and his. He watched them roam across the years; he knew their habits and their age. Unseen, he saw the males mature from bold young stags in bachelor groups to imperial beasts which lorded over a whole harem of hind.

And he shot them. Culled them, was the term he used, as if to smooth the deed. He weeded out the weak and injured; the old, and those long past their prime. Most of the time he was merely a guide, escorting rich patrons up the hill to do the culling on his behalf. They paid him several hundred pounds for the kick of firing a gun. They came from the South, they came from abroad, fired by the thrill of the kill. Whenever Thom steered them towards a deer, whenever they pulled the trigger for him, a bounty was pinned to their bill. Then the corpse was dragged down the hill, and the meat sold off to enrich the fare of fancy restaurants and smart hotels.

That was the irony of the stalk: the person who stalked got nothing at all. Just swollen ankles and a cartridge shell. They even had to pay ten quid if they wanted to keep the head.

Ten quid!

There, leaning up against the wall, Thom pointed out a pair. Ten quid someone paid him to chisel those off. And the bastard hadn't even come to claim them. Too stinking rich to care. The shame was that they were very fine antlers. They had twelve points, well-proportioned and clean, from a beast which weighed over fifteen stone. Thom remembered it well.

Bill and Edie were invited to look. The antlers had been removed from the head, and were joined by no more than a piece of skull. A bone that was white and polished, like stone. Neatly extracted and clinically clean. So far removed from the living thing that it didn't seem to be wrong.

So what was Thom to do with them? Thom grunted his dismay. He supposed they would stay there and rot down to nothing. Unless they fancied the antlers themselves? Would Bill and Edie like them?

A short while later the couple departed, clutching their unexpected prize.

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Two natural holes were sunk in the bone. All it took was a couple of nails, and there was their trophy, standing proud, firmly fixed to the wall. Bill and Edie were both quite pleased. Both were secretly overjoyed, though they couldn't articulate why.

That night, after Edie retired to bed, Bill stood in the hall and pondered over what he should put on the points. He had hung his flat cap and a long woollen scarf. But perhaps he should drape his coat. Or maybe just leave the antlers bare. Giddy with new-found interest, Bill's mind raced with idle fancy. His breathing slight, his heart rate fast – the blood pulsed through his arteries. He checked his feelings purposely; he forced his eyes and his thoughts away. Tomorrow he would experiment. He would tease this pleasure out.

Turning off the lights downstairs, Bill glanced back at the patchy darkness, seeing the sharp, misshapen object growing at angles out of the wall – awkward and skeletal – caught in the wash of a spectral moon.

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Shortly before the creep of dawn, Edie and Bill were stirred awake by a curious low, round, hollow moan. More melancholy than Highland cattle. A sound that was rich and bass and dense. Piercing the walls of their sleeping fortress, vibrating around their barren room.

Again, and yet again. The sound.

Protected by the grey of night from the fear of each other's uncertainty, they lay in bed and did not move. They did not think to speak. They lay in the dark, with their blind backs facing into the other, as if desiring to seem asleep.

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The next day they spent alone, hugging their silence like secrets, close. By nightfall their solitude stood in between them – it had grown to a cold and piercing pain which sliced straight through their fragile bodies, stripping raw the skin. In an effort to heal the unmentionable wound, they decided to treat themselves to a meal. They drove into town, parked their car in the street, and were crossing the road towards a restaurant when the stalker spotted the pair.

Thom, fired by several drams of Scotch, intercepted them before they could retreat. He snatched at their arms and pulled them towards him, as if keeping his confidence close. Had they heard it last night, that solitary beast, wandering down through the trees? What a fuss it was making – coming so low to bellow despair, depriving the village of sleep. Thom laughed. He thought it might have been their own stag, that had found a way to escape; that had found the means to unhinge itself from their wall and bolt away in the night – wandering wild on the bleak hillside in the early hours before dawn.

As swiftly as they deemed polite, Bill and Edie bade farewell on the pretext of needing to eat. The night reared up before them, hard and black. The sky hung close – timeless and endless – sucking life from the lights of the town, splaying webbed fingers over Thom’s moor with the certainty of a shroud. The moon and a few transparent stars stood frosted in the void.

Through the doors of the restaurant a welcome stream of heat and light bade them enter. The two sat in silence; they were happy to cradle their loneliness in the easy banter of the busy tables bustling with noise to their sides. Neither Bill nor Edie were superstitious, yet both were caught by a curious thought – a thought which rose from the pits of their stomachs, coaxed by the chatter and the warmth and the light, till the thinking of it became a reprieve – an admission that both felt thankful to make. The stark and distressing revelation that the wretched stag had come down from the hill in search of the antlers torn from its skull.

Neither husband nor wife shared this vivid image, nor mentioned it to themselves. They persuaded each other in their own minds that the beast which once had possessed the antlers was being served as a stranger’s meal. No, their logic was more remote; it was still more dispersed from their guilt. The antlers were detached from the beast; they were wholly removed from the stag. The antlers were no more

than a symbol; a remembrance of stag, a tribute to deer. They weren't a part of life or death; they weren't a part of deer at all. In the close confines of the peopled restaurant, surrounded by a confusion of voices, a distortion of truth interwoven with lies, Bill and Edie suppressed the whisper that fingered into their souls.

By the end of the meal their bellies were full; their conversation revived. Thom was forgotten, as was the sound that was spread with the dawn, that punctured their home and carved into their brains as they slept. And the antlers, too, were a part of that dream.

Flushed and glowing with warmth and wine, Bill and Edie fell back on the night, threading their way through the pools of light which spun from the windows of shops nearby. The street was home to familiar objects: post boxes, litterbins, street lamps. For the first time since they had moved to Scotland these mundane idols of their past were a comfort to shield themselves from the night.

Bill started the car. He drove down the silent road till they slipped into the sheath of murmuring blackness, and began to weave a path through the trees. The beam of their lights threw up before them the regular pattern of urgent white lines, marked down the spine of the road. To their sides, in the sudden fringe of that light, the giddy spectre of endless trees dashed back into eternal shade. The

night, impenetrable and immense, leant its weight against the skin of their shallow, half-lit world. Closer, yet closer, the dark bore upon them, stealing around the sides of their car, stifling the stale air within.

Bill hit the brakes suddenly, violently, pulling the car to a halt.

Thirty feet in front of them, facing them and blocking their way, stood a stag. Caught in the curtain of piercing headlight, its body shone an amber-red, and deep, blood-red were its eyes. It stood quite motionless, staring towards them. Not transfixed like a terrified hare, but pensive, unperturbed, and proud. It raised its head an infinite fraction, as if it was wondering where they had come from, and what such bringers of light might be. Then, with deliberate, delicate steps it walked into the invisible trees, and was consumed by the night.

In its place, the empty road, washed by the artificial light, seemed drained and bereft of life. Devoid of any purpose. The engine had stalled. Only the tick of the dashboard clock broke the silence that filled the car, and split the stagnation beyond.

The night as if holding its breath.

Eddie and Bill got out of the car. They stood in the space where the deer had been. They squinted in the glare of the beam. Stunned by the brightness they peered up the road. Had it really been a deer they

had seen? Was that the creature they saw? Why was it standing in the road, and why did the beast not move? Separately, both were stirred by a similar thought – laden with cautious exultation, with the fierce desire for exoneration. The beast they had seen had antlers.

As their eyes grew accustomed to the pitch, they scoured the trees, expectant, eager. Fearful of catching sight of the stag, there in the deadlight, watching them. Their ears were keen to the depth of silence, wanting and anxious to hear a moan come barking up through the woods.

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But they did not hear the stag again. Not then, nor in the days that followed. As if stung by a swelling sense of guilt, Bill and Edie found themselves pursuing their walks with greater haste; staying out longer, traveling further; watching, listening, intent. If they were in search of some sign of the stag then they were thwarted in that quest. The moors opened up a treasure of colour which bled with unimaginable beauty for the city-folk who had never seen, nor thought they would see, such gems. Yet deer were not a part of that wealth. Even Thom the stalker was hidden. Had they transgressed some natural code, some law, some elemental custom, they could not have been punished more. All trace of the beast had gone. All save the antlers screwed

to their wall, perpetually fixed in their minds. Endearing, but also appalling.

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Summer had come, and with it the hunting season commenced. Bill and Edie were forced to restrict the scope of their walks now the stalkers were up on the hill. To substitute for the lack of stag, Bill turned to the antlers instead. A fascination was fired within him, like one who arrives at an accident, who is intrigued by another's pain. Now he researched the fate of the stag; he traced the antlers' final journey – sawn and boiled and scraped and plucked from the skull of a living thing. The more Bill learnt, the more he hid his new-found learning from his wife. Edie, he felt, would not want the antlers if she knew what they really were.

But then, he wondered, why did he keep them? What sort of trophy were they?

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Some while after, wrapped in their wool and waterproofs, prepared to depart on their daily walk, Edie spotted a fleck of fluff caught on the crown of Bill's cap. She stood on the lowest step of the stairs to pluck the speckle away. Closer her fingers came to his cap; closer her eyes to his head.

Then she screamed.

Impulsively, she tore off his cap and scrabbled around in his hair. Bill twisted away, angry, confused. He stooped to retrieve his cap. Then he, too, saw it. There, on the fringe, was a black-eyed maggot, arching its white and puffy body as it wallowed luxuriously in the tweed.

Bill went to the bathroom and washed his hair. He scrubbed his face repeatedly, like a man possessed, unheeding of pain. He felt sick, physically sick in his stomach. He wanted to break from this rancid skin, from this corrupt and decaying corporeal frame. He felt his flesh like a slab of meat stood in the sun to putrefy. He shuddered to think this body was his.

When he came downstairs, Edie was hunched in herself on the step, her figure wrapped closed in a misshapen ball, unwilling, unable to move. Averting her eyes, she pointed towards the antlers fixed on the wall.

Bill followed her hand to inspect the head. The fine twelve points were like delicate fingers, curled to the ceiling, scratching the sky, sprung from the base of the neat white skull. All clinically clean and polished like stone. All, except for the joint on the left, where the antler's root emerged from the bone. There, where the hide must once have been, Bill could discern a clutch of hair. A minuscule, fractional clasp of skin. And clung to the decomposing clod was a moving sea of ecstatic white: a fierce writhing clump of maggots.

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The strangest thing of all for Bill – after the shock and the nausea, after disgust and the shame – was to realise how alive the antlers must once have been. Of how alive they still were. There was no disguising where they had come from; there was no concealing what had been done. Edie and Bill had nailed to their wall a part of a carcass, a cadaver which was mutilated and maimed.

Swathed in plastic and rubber gloves, Bill took the once-live prize from the wall and threw it into a bag. The antlers – the same which they had embraced in their arms, which had hung with such pride in the heart of their house, which Edie had polished with such tender care – were cast away in a tip. One of Edie's plates was placed in their stead; whilst Bill learned to hang his cap and his scarf on a peg on the back of the washroom door.

That was where it ended for them – this brush with the natural world. It was done.

Though it wasn't the antlers that were diseased, Bill reflected after a while. It was the way in which they hadn't been cleaned, and the maggots which feasted on their decay. If there hadn't been any bloated white bodies, the antlers would still be in his house, taking pride of place. And however shaken he was by the thought of that seething mass, that massive shame, Bill couldn't help but own his regret, to

concede how much he missed the head. It had been such a feature; it had given such pleasure. It seemed such a waste that it lay in a tip. Now their home was no more than an ordinary house, devoid of the one thing that made it special. It was dry and dull like that house in the suburbs from which they had dreamt of finding escape.

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Autumn arrived. The shooting season was growing long. Edie and Bill had seen the fishermen casting their flies on the peat-black waters; they had seen the stalkers climbing the hill; they had heard the haphazard barrage of shotguns discharged from around the loch at dusk. The hill was alive with the bringers of death, with the sounds of death, with the smell. It rolled down the valley and into their home, infecting them both with its stain. Yet they knew this death brought life to the village; it was death that sustained the estate. It brought money, brought work, and brought food. It brought as much as it took away. Life and death. Death and life. And that frightening moment of realisation – that curious state where life meets death – where each stares into the other’s eyes.

Bill was out on his own on the hill. He was near the fringe of the rigid tree-line, on the lower slopes where they first met Thom. He had come to escape from his sterile home; from its emptiness, its soullessness. In truth, he was missing the head. If he

could secure a clean pair of antlers he was confident he could coax his wife to put it back on the wall. Thom was certain to have another. Thom would have boiled it and scraped it clean. Bill would check to make sure.

There was no one at the whitewashed hut. The door was locked, and the shutters closed. Two pairs of antlers stood by the wall; the smell of blood crept from under the door. Bill walked round the sides of the hut; he screwed up his eyes and scoured the hill. Then he turned his steps towards home.

Two hundred yards down the slide of the slope he came across Thom and a guest. They stood in the heart of a shallow burn, their bent backs facing away. With them, there was a stag. Thom was grappling with its antlers, forcing the corpse across the stream. Its stomach had been sliced open and emptied, its intestines ripped from their still-warm cage and discarded on the wiry heather for foragers to feed. Thom was sliding the awkward body across the uneven face of the moor, leaving a trail of blood in its wake, like a grotesque, lopsided snail.

Bill did not want to look at the deer, but he hadn't the strength to avert his gaze. Its eyes were dead, their fire was gone. Its large pink tongue hung stupidly in the half-open hollow of its mouth. Thom was bringing it back to the hut, back to his abattoir. He was wrestling the body across the moor, while the paying guest looked on.

Thom turned round and saw Bill. He dropped the antlers with a curse, stood straight, and smiled at his friend. Then he raised his hand towards his head, rubbing the blood across his face as he wiped the sweat away.

Bill stared at them, embarrassed, ashamed.

He could have gone to view the beast. He could have helped them cross the burn. He could, if Thom was so inclined, have gone back to the hut with them. He could have watched Thom as he worked – sawing the antlers from the skull, cutting the tendons from the legs, hanging the corpse to let it bleed. He could have shared a dram with them. He could have heard the shooter’s tale. He could have grasped the shooter’s hand, and shaken it to share his praise.

He could have done. But he could not.

Bill waved; he forced a smile at Thom. He tipped his cap. Then he set off, fast, down the hill.

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Though Bill said nothing to Edie that day, she noticed a difference, a change in him. The daily walks which led their routine, drew closer and closer about their home. They tightened like a noose. Bill found an excuse why they couldn’t go far, they couldn’t climb up beyond the trees, they couldn’t traverse the estate. Instead, they stayed down low.

He steered their walks along the coast, close to the village or through the fields, as if they were held on a leash. She didn't ask him why this was; she feared to ask, to know the truth. She gave him space and time to think. She waited, and she watched.

Then, one day, when crossing a field which led into town – on the flat, in the open, in the height of the sun – they chanced upon a stag. It was standing so still they did not see it till less than a hundred yards away. And now they were standing facing it, caught in the lines of the furrowed land where they thought no deer would come.

Bill and Edie stood their ground. Foolish though they felt themselves, they were afraid to scare the stag by any further move. They knew it would have seen them come; they knew it would have smelt them come. It had the time to run away. And yet it chose to stay. Here, far from the moor, in these tame surrounds. As if resigned to stay where it stood, regardless of how close they came.

It was a well-proportioned beast, with a coat the colour of fading embers. Yet it held its muscular head to one side, rocking it to and fro. It seemed to have shed the wildness within it. There was no depth in its eyes, no spring in its limbs. Though, in its poise, its rigid frame, there was dignity, and grace.

Bill took a step towards the stag. He moved instinctively. He didn't want the beast to start, yet he

was sure it wouldn't run. Their eyes had met, and still they met. There was recognition in both.

He came to within sixty yards of the stag.

Then fifty. Thirty.

The creature followed Bill with its eyes, unmoving save for the roll of its head, which it rocked from side to side. There was wisdom in those eyes. There was life, and death, and both were blending, coming together as one.

This was no wild beast. Or, if wild it was, then Bill felt the urge to feel as the stag. To know what it was to be wild, to be free. To share in its agony, and its bliss. To share in its life; to share in its death. To share in its being. To know.

Bill had come to within twenty yards. Now it was only ten.

Then Bill caught sight of the hole in its side, a few inches behind its front leg.

The stag had been shot – it was shot in the stomach – and now it was bleeding to death. It had traveled far; it had come all the way from the moor through the trees, until it was here, in this field. Dying and running, it had covered much ground, eluding the final shot that would kill it, though caught in the motions of death. Death crawled over its faultless body. It shuddered its death, it nodded its death. Death sat proud in its dying eyes. It knew it could

run no more. It could not move. Its legs were locked like those of a child that knows without knowing how it knows that even the smallest, the most gradual of movements, is likely to make it fall.

Bill was so near he could feel its warmth. He felt that if he could just reach out – if he could make contact with his hand – his being might be transferred to this beast, to this living carcass before him. He felt that in that moment of touch, the clutter around him would fall away – the façade, the intellect, the self – and instead the creature within would arise: noble and rude, untamed and free, born of both life and death.

There were distant shouts from somewhere behind him. The stalkers had closed on their prey.

Bill turned and saw the blur of two men emerging from a blind thicket of trees. Thom was waving his hands in warning, the other was pointing a gun. Now Edie was also waving at him – Edie who stood in a different realm, detached by a lifetime from him.

Bill looked back towards the beast. It was only him – him and this regal creature before him – populating his world. They stood close together watching the hunters; watching this farce borne out before them. So trivial to those who shared in a secret, to those so at peace with themselves. Those who were breathing both life and death. Life and death. Death and life. And now this subliminal state

they had entered, where both were fused as a single being, where each stared into the other's eyes.

Then, as the lesser world coughed and was extinguished, Bill bent forward and touched the stag.

Laggan