

Fed To Red Birds

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Að ganga með bók í maganum.
Everyone walks around with a book in their belly.

Chapter One

I hadn't killed it; I want to make that clear. All the tutorials I'd seen had been performed on roadkill, but there wasn't much of that on the ice-slicked streets outside my door.

There were cats, though: tough little critters who loped through the snow and sank fangs into necks even more frail than their own. I'd put the word out to the neighbours, and that landed me a Tupperware container that did not contain leftovers.

'Thanks for this, little one.' It seemed the right thing to say. Then I slid the scalpel along the bird's stomach.

It's not for everyone, but I find taxidermy beautiful. The creatures we have in the shop are extraordinary; even after nine months of working there, their little faces still take my breath away, alert and alive. When I reach into a packing crate and my fingertips meet bubble wrap, my heart beats faster imagining what's about to be revealed – pointed ears, a russet spine, a lavish tail. Each one is a work of art. 'Beautiful' might be a strange description to some, but to me it fits.

I spent the entire morning on the bird, longer than the tutorial suggested. It was my first proper attempt, so I took my time. When it was scraped clean of flesh, I popped the skin in a jar of methylated spirits, the cape of sodden feathers still attached to the skull. I picked up the jar with both hands and slowly tilted it. The feathers moved through the fluid in a gentle dance. I set the jar back down, sensitive of its vulnerability. Stripped of its former self – its tiny frame of bones and flesh – it didn't even look like a bird anymore. This was the stage I was most entranced by, full of potential and promise.

I hoped I was ready.

When I'd carefully gone over the instructions for the next steps, I cleaned my tools and laid them out next to my notebook: needle-nose pliers, tweezers, fine-gauge wire, cotton and thread, cornmeal paste, glass eyes. Round two.

The lid of the jar came off with a single turn. With the tweezers I lifted the creature out of its bath and shook it gently, then laid the skin and skull on a wad of absorbent towel. For a moment I stood silently, gazing at the way the beak refined to a translucent point, and the ancient, still curve of the eye socket. When this stage was complete the creature would be more than restored. If I worked carefully, if my movements were focused and fluid, then this little life would be . . . honoured.

Folding over a square of paper towel, I began to dry the fragile skin.

Making the stuffing was the easy – even meditative – part, separating and then rolling the wood wool into shape. Some taxidermists preferred to use the fibre from coconut husks, but Reykjavik's hardly tropical. The tutorials called the stuffing the 'voodoo doll'.

I wiped the scalpel clean and peered back down at the table.

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On the verge of starting the resurrection, I realised I hadn't thought about posing; would the final specimen be standing, or legs bent in flight? With wire, surely I could adjust them afterwards? One more question to add to the list in my notebook.

Once I had the voodoo doll in the skin, I knew I was almost there. A few tugs to make the edges meet, some careful stitching, and then a flourish as I cut the thread with small scissors.

My breath escaped in one long sigh – how long had I been holding it? – and gazed at my bird.

He looked terrible.

Damn. The placement of the eyes was completely wrong. He was lumpy as well, less like one of god's creatures and more a dented and demented children's toy. His legs stuck out straight, his wings were wonky and could it be that he had a smile on his face, mocking me?

Groaning, I pulled my glasses off and let them clatter onto the table. Grace was going to *love* this.

Grace! Fumbling to remove my rubber gloves, I reached for my phone and winced: there was no way I'd make it across Reykjavik in time for my shift, not on foot. I'd have to take a cab.

'Heimilisfangið?'

I gave my address, one of the first phrases I'd learnt in Icelandic.

'Tíu mínútur,' the voice barked. Ten minutes. Barely enough time.

I placed the poor bird carefully in the shoebox I'd brought home from work, then scooped up the tools and gave them a burst of hot water in the kitchen sink. One of the advantages of living alone – I let them fall next to the whiskey glass and pizza plate. They could be sterilised later. My winter coat and boots were on with four minutes to spare.

By the front door, I went through the list as I looked around my apartment. Kettle off, one. Skylights shut, two. My sentinels all safe and accounted for: three, four, five. These were the rungs that led me from the sanctuary of my apartment back down into the world. When the count was complete I felt a rush of warmth, laced with gratitude.

I loved my home. I'd loved it the minute the landlady had swept open the door. Apart from a small bathroom off to the side, it was one long studio tucked away in the attic. The roof sloped far enough above my head that I didn't have to duck, though the only windows were skylights. The bathroom door didn't shut, but I didn't need it to. There was only me.

I hadn't brought much with me, just one fat suitcase spilling out my Australian version of winter clothes, so feeble against the cold that Grace had laughed out loud. I'd bought a few things in Iceland: a clothes rack from the gargantuan flea market at *Kolaportið*, a bedside table with rickety legs. And my three creatures, which I'd come across on scouting expeditions for the shop: hare on my mantelpiece, bat hanging from a cornice, snake curled up on a lamp base.

That left only one more thing to check.

There wasn't time, the cab was almost here, and there was no need, but I was crawling anyway, under the kitchen table to the small rectangular door set into the wall. I knew the texture of the paint so well I could find the knob with my eyes closed. The thought of what was inside made my ribcage fill until I held my breath, lips pressed together. I reached out.

A horn blasted. I snatched my hand back. Cheeks flushed, I backed out from under the table, shoved the box under one arm and hurried downstairs to the cab.

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We sailed up Sæbraut to avoid traffic, the bird safe in her tissue-nest encased on my lap. The cost of the cab ride would be worth it – our route would pass the Sun Voyager sculpture at the water's edge, my favourite place in Reykjavik.

This part of town was where my exploration of the town had started. The sculpture was an ode to the sun, its skeletal arms stretched out towards the water. I'd watched the sun rise there my first full day in Iceland nine months ago, snow dusted on the steel as the whole harbour beckoned a rosy glow. Mind you, the sun rose at ten o'clock in February and my cheeks had ached from the cold, my nose numb. I'd sat there, serene and solitary, until the whole city lit up. Now, the afternoon light was dancing on the steel, so glorious a sight I raised the box a little, to share the view.

The driver let me out on the north-eastern edge of Tjörnin Lake. Plump little geese snapped at my heels as I strode towards the shop. Slightly out of breath, I shouldered open the door.

Grace looked up. She had a handful of snake skins and was lifting them into a cut glass canister on the counter one by one, so they didn't tangle and tear. She smiled a welcome, then noticed the box I was holding in front of me like the pagan offering it probably was. Immediately she froze, smile now a grin, eyes wide with expectation. Silently, I walked toward the counter and Grace leaned forward, one of her thick grey plaits snagging a snake skin, doubling its length.

'You did it?' Her voice lifted incredulously. 'You really did it?'

I laughed and put the box on the counter.

'Let me see, let me see!'

Gently removing the lid and some topmost tissues, Grace reached into the box and reverently lifted out the feathery little body, spending a moment gently turning it around.

‘Honey,’ she said, after a moment, ‘he’s really something.’

I nodded cautiously and looked up, to find Grace with her hand on her chest, shaking in silent laughter.

‘Grace! It’s my first go!’

‘Of course, Elva, of course. And a very good first attempt it is too. I just don’t think he’s quite ready to join the others on the shelf.’ She pushed away from the counter and walked into the kitchen with her coffee cup, still chuckling. “‘I just want to honour the animal’,” she mimicked as she rummaged around, and I have to say, she wasn’t half bad at it. When I’m serious and focused, Grace says my mother’s Icelandic tones come through, though I don’t hear them myself.

‘Still, I think I’ll keep it,’ I called after her. ‘Once I’m good at this, it’ll remind me how far I’ve come.’ Maybe he’d be a fourth sentinel.

Grace re-emerged with her coat draped around her shoulders, plaits tucked into the collar. She stopped in front of the bird, nodding solemnly.

‘Yes honey, good idea. Perhaps in the meantime, we *can* show it in the shop, after all.’

I looked up, startled.

‘Really?’

Grace nodded, but I could see the laughter tugging at the lines around her mouth.

‘Sure, Elva. I think he could be right at home among the *Wulpertingers*.’ She cackled.

I should have known. A *Wulpertinger* is a mythical hybrid animal, part of Bavarian folklore, which hucksters sometimes brought into being by sewing parts of different creatures together: wings on a rabbit, fangs on a squirrel. We usually had one or two specimens in the Cabinet, but it’s also our code word for any object that, shall we say, is a little unfortunate. On our scouting

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trips round the local flea markets, junk shops and estate sales, we've seen creatures that would make a real taxidermist weep. Once I wanted to buy a wolf whose mouth was so badly done he looked a little like he was doing an Elvis impersonation, lip curled back over pointy teeth, but the set of Grace's own mouth was enough to end that idea.

She's pretty strict about what comes into the shop, but that's fair enough – the Cabinet of Curiosities is her baby. When people ask what the name means, I'm always tempted to say, 'We sell weird shit.' And we do. Bat skeletons and vintage surgical instruments, chiaroscuro woodcuts and boxes of wisdom teeth, taxidermy fish and yellowed postcards of Edwardian porn. But if you can move past 'weird', you'd find what Grace and I both see: the beauty and wonder in the unconventional things that humans hold on to, and hold close.

Grace squeezed my shoulder as she moved past the counter. I noticed her reach her other hand out, a quick movement to balance herself.

'Are you OK if I leave you for an hour, Elva? I'm off to meet a buyer. Should be back before four.'

I wondered how long the bird would take to stiffen, and whether it was strong enough to be displayed in my apartment or need to be tucked away, watched over in a secret place.

'No problem. Tolti said he might pop by with a coffee soon anyway.'

Grace stopped by the door and flicked her finger across the rim of the case mounted on the wall. Inside was a 1920s compact in the shape of a pistol, with circles of rouge and powder hidden in the handle. Ruby red lipstick emerged from the muzzle, a small and deadly bullet.

'Could you put the duster round, honey? And give that cowboy a hug for me.'

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She was out the door before I could answer. I looked down at the little critter in his box, tiny feet curled under. I touched it tenderly on the feathers of its breast. My fingers stayed there, as though waiting for a heartbeat.