

Between

Dali had a son – of mixed species, but no hands. This fact changed most of her life, but then again, things had changed for almost everyone after the fast-talking Rhinoceros. She had to stay in the Between for now. Her son was not here, but he could come here – he was allowed to come here – and in one more month, she would see him again. The month felt longer than the year she had already waited. A child is never the same one day to the next. Each night she put him to bed another, older, smarter, more mature child greeted her the next day. Motherhood had been one long series of good-byes to a beloved baby she would never see again. It was bearable if she didn't think about it, and hard labor was the only work that kept her mind too tired to dwell.

The Between was safe, but brutal; the laws weren't written with Humans in mind. And the climate was changing. The storms stopped rolling through. The rain disappeared. The grass turned brown. After a few years, the trees gave up and burst into flames. Water turned troublesome – it flooded the north and abandoned the south. It poured off the land and into the sea before anyone could catch it. And the stuff the Rhino was selling disintegrated to the point that no one could remember what it was anymore. It transported something – the body or the soul – around here or beyond. No matter, he was gone now.

The Centaurs governed the Between, so everyone lived according to Centaur rules, and Centaur rules were generally restrictive in a way that was unpredictable to outsiders. It was your business if you killed someone, but you couldn't gallop in town, leave your back uncovered, or pee on the street. These rules came from the civilization's need to halter and curb a horse. And, of course, no one wanted pee in the street. It would come as little surprise to anyone that most of the Between smelled like new-mown hay

almost by decree. If Humans were smart, everything would have smelled like bread, but Humans weren't smart – not as a group, which is what counts. Ultimately.

She stood in the living room of an abandoned house. There were six more on this street alone. She could make a hundred bucks in each one, but this one had stopped her cold. She held a plastic garbage bag in front of her like a shield over a shag carpet of indeterminate color, not knowing where to start, thinking instead that there was little difference between love and servitude, and that these people had gotten it confused. The hot air was thick and heavy, like a corpse. In some other reality hot air lifted balloons – but not here. Dirt filled the carpet to the tips of its threads, which peeked out like failed plantings, covered in dust. She had sucked in as much fresh air before entering as she could, but now it had run out. She had to exhale and breathe. An odor she couldn't identify – sour, dead-fishy, brackish – filled her mouth and hemorrhaged into her lungs. The grime of the carpet already coated her lower legs, her socks and shoes, just from walking from the front door to the middle of the room. A dim yellow light leaked in from the next room through bent plastic blinds, just enough to light the jagged paths of the giant cockroaches that darted over the walls. A blackened stone fireplace, looking like the ruins from a previous civilization, gaped from the living room wall. Broken bits of irredeemable stuff littered the carpet – the handle of a coffee maker, a barbell, plastic bags with holes, toy race cars, a doll with no arms, a pink and white plastic kitchen, its blue and red pots and pans strewn about the room.

Children had lived here.

Dali stepped gingerly over the debris, the culmination of years, maybe decades of sloth. She thought, looking at it, that most people want to be loved, not do the loving. *Loving* is work. It's cleaning and waiting and hoping and fearing. *Being loved* is like soaking in a warm bath of a favorite beverage while high on opiates, during the first good cool front of October beside a tall garden window, watching the falling leaves never land in the fish pond to obscure the view of the bright orange koi swimming just below the surface of its dark waters. Children were meant to receive it, parents to dole it out. But that had not happened here. This balloon had crashed and burned. And six more like it, on this street alone.

She wiped a mix of tears and sweat from her face. The broken toys on the rug had made her cry, but the heat was so bad, she had barely been aware of it. It was September. In the Between, Septembers were hot and dry; frequently temperatures exceeded 120 degrees as if it were the hottest desert, although the Sahara had gone all the way up to 150. Knowing this took away their rights of complaint. People reminded each other they were lucky to not be over there and end the conversation in a way that made everyone feel unsatisfied, and a little angry.

The product of a Human and a Rhinoceros was a Boar. Her son was a Boar. This was not an insulting thing. The Boars were the most intelligent and hardy of all the creatures. They lived in the North Country with the Dogs and were never seen by anyone, even those who made it their life's work to hunt them. The Boars moved at night, used whatever tools were left unattended, and were wildly inventive in their use of them. They seemed destructive only to others – a Boar was always working, always building, and this often required the destruction of a thing that had come before. They had a reputation for being dirty, because people never saw them, but in fact dressed exceedingly well. This was the secret to their invisibility. No one who actually saw one, would think he had seen one at all.

Not having hands was a tough way to live in the world, so she took extra time to teach her son well. She told him that love was a noun but more importantly a verb, and he should never use the word with a woman unless he was planning on verbing it. If he took her advice, it would save him a lot of heartache. But he wouldn't. Sons of a certain teen age must avoid their mother's advice until they have made enough of their own mistakes to see her as Human and forgive her for falling off the pedestal.

In her case, not knowing where she was in the world, she had misjudged her mate and understood one month too late, in a kind of Kafka-esque awakening, that she was tied to a creature alien from herself, that she was pregnant with his hybrid offspring, and that because she loved him, she couldn't escape the rest of her life. No judgment there. Plenty of people still liked a talking Rhinoceros, whose aphrodisiac prose soothed, long after it was revealed as apocryphal. She herself no longer cared for them; they were creatures who thought more of themselves than was warranted by the world's interest in them.

But her son was a different matter. He seemed to have taken all the good from them and none of the bad. She had worried about him at first. He held back when others fought for their share; he seemed content with remnants. A bully called him a runt, and she had wanted to tear off the punk's arm and beat him with it. But then she learned to see her son differently. He was confident. He didn't have the fear she had of losing. It was a miracle to her that he was like this and it moved her to be a better person. She missed him when they had to be apart, but she knew not to show it. A young person confronts the world alone

The work visa she secured was illegal, purchased through the black market because the official ones were only for the rich – ironically, what need did the rich have for them, she wondered? But she would be done paying for it soon. It had taken everything she had, but the Rhino had gotten it for her for a quarter the official price, because he abhorred restraints of all kinds. People should be free to choose, he said, but of course, she never really had been. He assured her that employers couldn't tell, but if she were ever arrested, the police would know. And even though the Rhino had left them – his freedom had not included her – she felt she owed him. She was grateful to him. She would raise his son honorably and thereby repay him for helping her.

Her legs itched. She reached down to scratch. Sharp needles jabbed at her ankles as if to compel her away from where she stood, as if her frayed nerves couldn't take the dark uncertainty of lifting out the garbage around her and finding what might lie underneath.

Some might think that Pigs had lived in the house. But that wasn't true. Pigs liked to wallow, but they were as clean as a rich woman in a mud bath. Dali wouldn't be with a Pig, but she respected them. No, the house had been occupied by Humans. Poor ones who didn't pay for mud baths in salons out in the hill country. White trash brought down by inherited rage, a skip in the genetic code. The kind that didn't work, didn't pay to have their garbage hauled, and never owned a broom or even knew how to operate one (which hand goes on top, which way to point the bristles -- things a Monkey knows).

The dirt crawled up her legs and bit her. She could see it in the dim light, darting and jumping. Fleas. Hundreds of them. Typhus. Spotted Fever. Plague. She leapt into the air and slapped her legs and stomped her feet to knock them off. The fleas leapt into a frenzy; some jumped off; others jumped on. On her arms, her face, in her ears and nose. She sprang towards the front door and bolted into the bright afternoon light, slapping them away from her body, a clown in a flea circus, the fleas leaping about her like demented parkour bugs. Out on the lawn she ripped off her shoes and socks and beat her shirt with her hands. Then she felt fleas crawling inside her shorts and all decorum left her. The shorts and shirt came off, flung to the far side of the yard. She grabbed a water hose and, hiding behind a bush, hosed herself down with the hot, sulphurous water. This was how she found herself standing outside a stranger's house in the wrong part of the deserted zone in transparent underwear in danger of arrest. They locked people up for indecent exposure. She cursed and waited, peering out through the branches at the pile of clothes, calculating rates of flea diaspora from abandoned clothing.

Dali was now in violation of the law that prescribed a cover for the torso. And if a Centaur came by, it would know she was there. They could sense any anomaly in their landscape by smell or sight or god only knew how. Dali couldn't fathom the vast world that the other animals could sense through smell; it rendered a landscape into four dimensions – they knew what had gone before and saw patterns they could extrapolate into the future. No one cared to reveal these things to Humans. Of all the animals, the Humans were the most suspect and no one talked to them about anything of importance. After the mass revolt that later became known as the Second Cambrian, Humans took a decidedly lower rank in the World Court. Dali wasn't sorry in the least, until maybe right now.

When a passing Centaur happened upon her, she huddled down anyway, hoping the stink of the house would cover her own. He stood on the curb, studying her strewn clothes, staring straight at the bushes where she hid, sniffing the wind. He called out in a low voice. She thought to stay silent, praying to a god whose existence she doubted. But then she second thought. What if he was testing her honesty? She wasn't really out in public – so far she was only guilty of littering, just a fine, not technically an

arrest. He might not check her papers. Why would he? She waved outside the branches, twisting her out-turned palm at the wrist in the manner that Humans had long since learned signaled surrender to more powerful creatures.

"Why are your clothes on the lawn?" the Centaur asked.

"They became infested with fleas in the house," Dali called out.

"You live here?"

"No! I mean, no sir." She could see now he was a cop. "I was cleaning." She nearly swallowed the last because of what many animals thought of cleaning breeds – the lowest of all.

"Come here, cleaner."

Her pride made her say something ill advised. "I'm not really a cleaner – I'm just working to pay off my work visa so that I can travel to the North Country..." Her explanation trailed off, nonsensical in its thrust because she didn't have the courage to say she had sacrificed herself for motherhood. She had made her choice freely; why did she feel foolish?

The Centaur snorted at her story. "You make little sense. Step out."

"I'm not dressed."

"I can see that."

Dali choked back her pride and stepped out of the bushes. This was the life she had chosen. She was here for her son. She had nothing to be ashamed of. She told herself these things but they had no effect. Her shame was palpable. She could not hide. An intense need for comfort welled up in her. She tried not to think – as she stood mostly undressed before this half beast whose dull expression placed him easily several rungs down from her on the intellectual ladder – about having sex with him. The thought would somehow leak out of her and he would see it or smell it, and then all his assumptions about her would be verified. And she hated that, not because his assumptions about her were false, but because to him it was sleazy and immoral, and to her, well, that was at least understandable. And it was probably already too late, the way so many things were for Humans in the Between. By the time she was done

thinking about things, the Centaur had drawn all his conclusions. He didn't need as much brain to see the world. His eyes and ears and nose conveyed information well enough. He didn't have to *guess*.

"Work visas are free – you want to try another story," the Centaur said.

Dali blinked at him. "What?"

"You don't have to PAY for a work visa. Let me see yours."

Dali stepped over to her clothes and threw on her shirt before he could object and dug the paper's clip out of her pants. Her hands shook and rattled the paper as she unfolded it and handed it to him. The word 'free' had shot her body with adrenaline like a poisoned arrow. Shame and anger made her want to cry and scream at the same time. The Centaur barely looked at the paper and started laughing. Son of a bitch, she thought, to laugh at her misery. He handed it back to her. "You paid for nothing."

"Then why don't they tell us, if they're free?" Dali whined at him. Her humiliation was rising up into her face in a hot bubble. The Rhino had lied all along. She had worked for a year to pay him for nothing. She couldn't scream at the Centaur. He'd arrest her and she'd never get out. It had happened to others. She knew this as a certainty and yet she couldn't stop herself. "I've worked for a *year*," she cried at him. " A *year* for this!" She shook the paper in his face.

"Lady," he said, in a warning voice. "You don't want this."

Dali choked back her tears. "I was there, I was *in* the permit office. No one told me they were free."

The Centaur looked down the road and shrugged. "They don't want you here, so why would they?" He didn't say anything else, just stood there, deliberating on something private. She became aware of the smell of sweat on his flank; the smell was earthy and pleasant. The horse in him made him noble to her. She had this thought with disgust, because he was so indifferent to her.

"Can I leave?" Dali asked.

"You're as free as you ever were, I guess," the Centaur said. "Go get a proper visa tomorrow morning." With that he continued on his way. Dali stood planted on the spot where he left her, the unfolded paper limp in her hand. The Rhino was long gone. She could not scream at him or make him

answer to her. There was nothing there but a hole, a nothingness, not even the promise he had made her had any substance to it. Her memories of years of faux history with a liar poured over her like a ticker tape parade. Shredded. Indecipherable. She was free of him, like a boat free of its moorings, as she had always been. Only this time she knew it.