

# The Fawn

## by Zoey Slater

On Friday, Lisa shifted in her ergonomic chair and flipped to page forty-four out of sixty-seven in the list of the Smith's Professional Taxidermy office expenses. She entered one after another into the computer database. It was getting to be the time of day when her eyes began to cross from staring at the monitor for too long. She sighed and clicked in the endless numbers: \$67.32 for a lunch meeting in town. \$190.14 for pens with "Hunting? Smith's does the job right!" printed in navy ink against white plastic. \$29.99 for rubberbands. The office was quiet. Everyone left twenty minutes ago to go to happy hour at Otto's. Lisa had stayed behind tonight, telling them she needed to finish entering the office expenses.

Her office assistant desk, tucked between the reception area and the taxidermy studio, was devoid of animals. Instead, this part of the office had rows of gray desks with backboards full of finger paintings and pictures of children that smiled at their parents while they typed. Lisa's desk had two potted plants that wilted against each other. The other office workers considered the lack of animals a break from the constant staring fish, deer, and raccoons that stood watch, their skins in various states of attachment, throughout the rest of the office. But she would have preferred the animals. She didn't mind them as much as the rest of the coworkers did, which, her boss joked, is why she's stuck around for so long. The artists, as they were called, even let Lisa go back into the studios and watch quietly as she gently scraped fat and flesh from the tender skin. The movements were methodical, like watching a sculptor. When she tired of expense reports, Lisa, rarely breathing a word, watched them gently coax the dead back to life.

Working as the office assistant at Smith's was the first job she got when she got to Spoon Lake, and she had been typing steadily behind that desk ever since. Not that she minded. It was quiet, and she liked that these days. The clock read 4:47 PM. She supposed that was close enough to lock up.

Just a little before five, it was already dark in Spoon Lake. Layers of snow folded beneath the wheels as her rusted, white Civic rolled down Spoon Lake's main street on her way home from the office. It was the only street with stoplights in the whole town. Lisa was stopped at one now, and she was flanked on either side by one-story beige paneled office buildings, as she was still in what some people called the "developed" part of Spoon Lake. Otto's stood defiantly beside the plastic panels with its chipped, mildewed stucco. Signs for Miller and Budweiser blinked in the fogged up windows. Inside Lisa could see her coworkers knocking their plastic glasses against the other patrons' in celebration of another week gone by. Hunters in blaze orange hats huddled away from the wide mouthed locals, sipping dark beers from bottles. Lisa used to go to the bar to have her coworkers throw their arms around her shoulders, grinning before grimacing back shots of cheap whiskey. Men with wide shoulders and booming laughs would joke with her all night before leaning in to make suggestions in slurred whispers. Over the years she found it harder to choke back the whiskey.

The rest of Spoon Lake consisted of a crumbling brick-faced downtown filled with shops that changed ownership every few months. A Lutheran church stood at the end of the main street, guarding the expanse of woods that extended beyond the small downtown. Lisa drove past the church and into the arbor tunnel. The road wasn't plowed yet, and her engine strained to push her car through six new inches of snow. Spoon Lake, Wisconsin was home to 2,034 residents, and the number grew to just over 2,200 when families from Minnesota, southern Wisconsin, and sometimes Illinois drove Up North, flocking to the lakeside to take pictures of their children running through sand or spend hours talking, pitching empty beer cans into the black water all night.

The wilderness had brought her to Spoon Lake, but she didn't find it on the cabin-lined beach. To her, wilderness was solitude. So she spent her free time in the woods that stretched behind her house, walking down a path that she had cleared herself with a borrowed chainsaw. She spent all summer hacking down branches and pushing through thorn bushes until she reached a clearing and declared her work done. Now the path's dirt was covered in layers of snow that had almost turned to ice from frequent use. After work, she would pull her car into the driveway and walk out to the clearing. The only noise would be the wind churning dry aspen leaves and her own heavy breathing. The shrubs shrank down, heavy with snow, so she could see farther than in summer and know that, without a doubt, she was alone. Lately she had been spending entire hours out in the clearing just to feel herself standing against the dead woods. She read somewhere once that winter had a way of making people feel more alive. In the cold, she could feel her blood rushing to her fingers and cheeks, and she could see her breath, a sure sign of life hanging in the still air.

She slammed the tiny house's door against the February wind. The walls of the house, which stood at a humble eight-hundred square feet, were covered in smooth wood panels that had at first reminded Lisa of a seedy sports bar or her uncle's basement, but she was used to it now. Besides, she could barely see them. Animals hung suspended from nearly every flat vertical surface, and others lay resting across the floor and on end tables. The years she spent quietly watching the work at the taxidermy studio turned what started as mild, morbid curiosity into a full blown hobby. Sometimes the hunters that over the years became Smith's regulars would give her extra animals or would let her buy the smaller ones. Her first attempts were grotesque, their patchwork skin hanging loose and covered in glue. Now she was proud of her work. Three ducks were stuck with their wings wide above the tv stand while others floated in still plastic water near the kitchen door. A walleye, fins glistening, was trapped in mid-jump above the plaid sofa. Butterflies with pins through their paper wings lay in symmetrical rows in a huge picture frame. She reminded herself to move the butterflies and the ducks over that weekend to make room for the new animals, which presently lay in neat piles (rabbits stacked on top of foxes, six sunnies gently resting against the wood panels) on the carpet.

As she often did when she stepped into the living room, she studied these lives stopped midway through leaps and flights. Their muscles appeared permanently tensed, as if they would spring into life at any moment. Taxidermy felt like a contradiction. Dead animals were made up

to look as lifelike as possible. Just lifelike, enough, she thought sometimes. The house was crowded with them, but she was at peace knowing she was ultimately alone. Others may have seen it as morbid, but she often found dead bodies easier to be around than live ones. These animals seemed to move and breathe, but they never actually threatened to be alive. Around the animals she was never afraid or worried. She never had to wonder what they thought of her, or if she could depend on them. They just were. Lisa stepped over a duck and left the living room, humming quietly.

In the back of the house, through the kitchen, there was a room that Lisa kept locked. Still, despite the closed door, the smell of something like formaldehyde seeped out from under it and spread throughout the house. It being winter, and the windows being closed, the smell was especially strong.

When she entered the room, Lisa locked the door behind her and sat down at the desk. There were no windows, so a single fluorescent light buzzed and broke what would have been silence. The room was small, but there was just enough space for her work, which she spread out across the white, bloodstained desk. Empty ice cream containers filled midway with tanning solution were pushed up against the walls. Gleaming scalpels, Exacto knives, and sharpened spoons stuck out of greasy mason jars, and a large bag of salt had spilled onto the floor in one corner. Two skins newly freed from their flesh hung across the room on a wooden rod. On the desk in front of Lisa lay a fawn. Its skin hung loosely and exposed a bulge of cotton-wrapped wire through its chest. Lisa picked up a needle and pulled the baby deer's skin shut, sliding clear thread through its fur. She was still humming, covering up the drone of the fluorescent light. With the chest pulled into place, the fawn's face aligned properly with the glass eyes that were fixed in clay. She paused, and with her index finger, she stroked its spine, feeling its cold fur prickle. Lisa had never had a fawn before, and this one was perfect, with its feet curled beneath its tiny speckled body. The thought of it resting on the living room carpet made her shiver. The fawn peered back at her with black marble eyes. She reached out her long fingers again, but this time she curled them back, hesitating above its fur. Lisa stared at the fawn, holding her breath, almost waiting for its to start. The phone was on its second ring by the time she heard it.

Lisa practiced saying, "Hello?" to the hanging fish she passed on the way to the phone. Her voice shook, and she tried to remember the last time she received a call at home. "Hello?" She said, this time into the receiver.

The voice at the other end didn't say anything for so long that Lisa almost set the phone back on its hook. Then, "Hi. Um, this is Julie. Your, uh, daughter."

Her mind flew to a dozen places that were far away from her north Wisconsin woods. "My daughter." She couldn't say anything else.

Back then, months before she had stood outside the nursery, craving another chance to hold her daughter, she was young and bubbling with the freedom of being on her own. New to the city, she didn't know many people but managed to never feel entirely alone. The city pulsated like her small hometown never could, and she walked along its streets, feeling it churn.

Even though she lived in the city, she acted more like a tourist than a local, wandering around with creased maps, snapping pictures with disposable Kodaks, and taking in as much as she could. She studied every detail of the city, and she kept a notebook detailing the dramas of people she watched from park benches and coffee shops. An old man drops a newspaper and bends to pick it up. A young couple walks, arms crossed, past her bench. A child stares at her from a stroller. Watching from a distance, Lisa filled her notebooks with glimpses of the city's life.

On a day too hot for early June, she knelt on the ground in a park, getting grass stains on her jeans and digging her fingers into the fur of a German Shepard that stopped for attention, distracted in the middle of returning a rubber ball. She buried her face into the dog's neck, and when she lifted her eyes, she saw a man watching her from across the street. He stood swaggering outside a Vietnamese restaurant, smoking cigarettes with his gaze fixed on her and the dog. Something about the way he smiled, knocking his head back to invite her over to his side of the street, made her trust him. A "sweet-talker" is how she would later describe Jason. Months passed. Looking back, she wondered whether she ever really loved him or was just happy to know someone. But he told her she was beautiful, and her surprised ears got addicted to hearing him say it. He told her they should move in together, that he just got promoted at the restaurant. He told her he loved her. She was struggling to make rent for her apartment, so she told him yes. A few weeks later she told him she was pregnant, and he told her not to worry.

Her daughter's voice faded in and out with trembling adolescent awkwardness. The words had begun to speed up. They crashed into each other. She was telling Lisa that something inside her told her she needed to contact her mother. Lisa stared at the butterflies, with their wings trapped in shining pins. A crinkle on the other line brought her back to reality, and she realized that Julie was reading from something. She had prepared a speech. Its pieces wove together like persuasive essay assignment, with each element intending to remind Lisa that their lives were once connected. Julie explained why she called, that she had always felt something missing from her life. That she wondered where she got her long fingers. Claw-fingers, she added with a laugh. Lisa brought her own gnawed down cuticles to her lips out of habit but stopped when she saw bits of deer fur caught under her fingernails. The paper crinkled again. Julie promised she was happy. Still, she said she couldn't keep the feeling that she was disconnected from something important like ancestry or history from creeping in. Lisa barely said anything. She let her daughter read her speech, and she said nothing. Then, Julie's thesis: "I guess I'm wondering if you want to meet sometime."

On a day in November, a tall man who looked like he was melting was at the door asking for Jason. His sallow skin slid down his face leaving deep canyons beneath his cheek bones and hollows around his eyes. A faded green jacket hung from his frame, its arms extending well below his blue-veined hands. He frowned at Lisa when she told him she didn't know where Jason was. For a moment he was silent. Then his hand flew across the space between them and crashed, knuckles first, into her jaw. The man said steadily, "Tell Vic next time he sends his

bitch to lie for him, I'm going to hit more than her face." His eyes stuck on her bulging stomach before he left as abruptly as he came. Holding her face, she ran to the phone to call the restaurant. The boss answered and told Lisa something that hit harder than the man's punch. Jason quit in August. He hadn't been around the restaurant in months. Lisa sat on the floor of the apartment, dizzy with questions. A bruise began to bloom above her cheekbone. When Jason walked in to find her sitting on the floor with her arms wrapped around her stomach and tears rolling down her face, he gave her answers, but she could only remember pieces. "Honey, honey," he kept saying. His joints popped when he crouched on the floor next to her, "We need the money if we're going to keep that baby." He was talking about selling cocaine like it was noble, and Lisa couldn't listen. She ran out of the apartment and spent the night wide awake, shivering on a park bench near the river.

Lisa choked out, "How did you find me?" All these years, she couldn't bring herself to contact her daughter and remind herself of what she lost. But now, talking to her on a phone call she didn't initiate or really even want, she felt like a coward. She let her daughter explain the reasons why they should meet, pretending she hasn't felt them herself.

"Oh yeah, sorry. Since I know your name, and I know you live in Spoon Lake—my mom told me you lived Up North when I was little too—I just looked your name up in a phone book."

Lisa could hear Julie, her daughter, breathing through her nose on the other line.

"You're eighteen?" She asked, but already knew the answer.

"Yep, about to turn nineteen." Her daughter cleared her throat, redirecting the conversation. "So I was thinking I could just drive to Spoon Lake. I go to school in Duluth, so I'm not too far from Wisconsin anyway. I thought maybe we could meet at the coffee shop downtown." She paused, and when Lisa did not immediately respond, Julie said, "I understand if you don't want to see me. I guess this is probably a shock. But I just had to try to talk to you. I keep thinking I have to know what you're like, and what happened, and why you had to give me up." The last few words sounded like they stumbled out of her mouth.

In February, she lay in a hospital bed surrounded by people she didn't know. Nurses plunged needles into her arms, and doctors with clipboards wove between them. The wife of the couple she had chosen to take Julie stood at her side. Her hair was styled beneath the blue paper hospital cap, and her lipstick was cracked at the edges from smiling too large. Giving birth to the child had happened more quickly than she thought it would. She had expected, even hoped, in a way, for the child to linger inside her, prolonging their time together. The pain burned through her abdomen. But then the doctors were saying they could see the child's head, and soon after that she heard a tiny voice choking and screaming. Tears poured from the woman in the hospital cap, but Lisa looked away from the child, reminding herself, "That baby is not mine. That baby is not mine." She did not hold her. The doctors carried Julie out of the room and her new mother followed, tears still streaming down over her wide smile. The next day, Julie lay sleeping in a nursery down the hall while Lisa signed the forms that terminated her parental rights.

When she was released, Lisa walked by the nursery with averted eyes. She had almost reached the door to the outside when she spun around and ran past the nurses, carts, and wheelchair-ridden patients to see her baby. Julie was asleep, so she didn't see Lisa's breath fog up the glass, or the sweaty palmprints she left there. After a moment, the baby began to stir, and Lisa left the hospital before she woke.

Sweat formed on Lisa's brow, and she was ashamed to find herself thinking of a reason not to go. After eighteen years, today she searched desperately for a way not to see her daughter. The prospect of confronting Julie's expectations of her as a mother, of undoubtedly failing those expectations, paralyzed her. But she knew couldn't tell Julie that she was afraid, so she whispered, "Ok. Sure. But that coffee shop closed last month, and there isn't another one in town." Lisa swallowed hard. "You can just come to my house."

"Are you sure?" She didn't give Lisa time to answer. "I can be there this Sunday. At one?"

"That's fine. See you then. Bye, Julie." Her daughter's name hung in the air long after she ended the phone call.

The animals watched her pace in and out of the living room, and she watched them back uneasily. She walked to kitchen, moving from the window to the refrigerator, to the empty oven, to the sink where she got a glass of water that she mostly spilled down her shirt, then returned to the living room to face the animals. Their black eyes looked at her as she wrung her hands and continued to pace. At eighteen, Julie was looking for her. It was technically an open adoption, but she knew open adoptions were only really open if the mothers don't hide themselves away in the Wisconsin woods. The living room carpet scratched against her bare feet, so she settled on the plaid couch below the walleye with her feet pulled up and her arms around her shaking knees. At first she intended to contact her daughter at some point. But as the years built up, it became harder to think of anything to say.

Lisa sat in the living room, which was empty except for the animals, and watched the snow pile up outside. She remembered the day she realized she couldn't stay in the city anymore. Her phone rang Jason's with unanswered apologies until she couldn't afford the phone bill. The money was running out, but she couldn't go back to Jason's apartment. After weeks of sleeping on couches, she knew she had to leave. It was winter then too. But winter in the city wasn't the same as winter in the woods. It was made of black slush that splattered out of gutters and salt that found its way into shoes and cut deep, stinging between the toes. So she drove north until her gas tank blinked empty, taking the little money she had and finding a landlord who would let her rent the tiny house behind the trees. In the north Wisconsin woods, Lisa buried herself deep in a new type of freedom. She responded to the classified ad looking for an office assistant at Smith's, and convinced them to give her the job. In her tiny house she spent her days in solitude, watching over bodies that were safely only almost animate. Although she grew older in the woods, she was happy, knowing she wouldn't have to worry about trusting anyone this far north.

Years later, she stopped thinking about Jason everyday. She could not stop herself from thinking about Julie. But at eighteen, she wasn't the baby Lisa had seen sleeping in the nursery,

so she could no longer picture her daughter grounded in reality. Without a recent photo to inform her imagination, Lisa pictured a different version of Julie each day. Sometimes she had curled hair, or a broken arm, or acne. Other times she was frozen in the middle of playing the violin, or kicking a soccer ball, or kissing a boy, but she could never be sure. The Julie in her mind did not love or cry or even breathe. In Lisa's mind she was hollowed out, not like a living girl, but like a stuffed version of herself. Thinking about the imaginary versions of Julie hurt less than thinking about the reality of the baby that day she left her.

But hearing Julie's teenage voice brought her daughter into reality with new details. They formed a new version of Julie in her mind, and this time it felt real, like bringing her daughter back to life. The details steadily chipped away at calcified shell Lisa had buried herself in over the years. She goes to college. She was nervous when she spoke on the phone. She has long fingers like mine. She is alive, and she wants to see me. As Lisa sat on the couch, surrounded by dead animals, she felt less alone than she had in years.

On Sunday she tried to go back to work on the deer. When she opened the door, the chemical smell crept into her nostrils and made her eyes water more than usual. The needle shook in her hands and pricked her thumb, prompting a large bead of blood to tumble onto the deer's fur. Lisa set down the needle and tried to work on the eyes. Glossing the eyes was usually her favorite part—it almost gave life to the animal, she thought. Now though, she was distracted, and the liquid gloss rolled down the baby deer's eyes in plastic globs. The eyes themselves were surrounded by loose fur and looked less like glimmering marbles and more like dark pits. Lisa's mouth quivered. Focus, she thought. But she couldn't. Her mind was in a coffee shop in town, staring at her daughter for the first time in eighteen years. She began to wonder what she looked like, what she acted like, what she desired and feared the most. Peering into the deer's eyes, she looked for a semblance of life. But it never came. Its heart had been cut out long ago, and its eyes only shone artificially. In a fluid motion Lisa swept her forearm across the desk and knocked the fawn to the ground. The movement also caught mason jars, which smashed into pieces, its spoons and knives clinking against the ground in a cold symphony. The deer slid across the floor. Its wire frame twisted on impact, and its back bent one side. Cotton spilled from its abdomen. On the floor with its pieces bent and busted open, the deer looked as lifeless as it really was.

It was a little after one, and Lisa stood in the woods, her tears freezing as they rolled down her cheeks. Here she once felt safe in her solitude. Now she felt exposed. Her bare fingers were numb. Through the trees, she heard a car creak into the driveway. Its driver sat with engine running for a moment while Lisa listened from the clearing. Then, the engine went silent. A door slammed. Lisa heard knocking on her front door, but she stood locked in place. It went quiet, and she could feel herself being watched between the trees that were emptied of their protective leaves. Boots crunched down the frozen path. They made halting, uneven steps, fighting against the threat of ice and hidden roots. Still, they were persistent. But Lisa wasn't listening to the boots breaking through snow or sliding against ice. Her ears strained to hear Julie's steady intake of breath as her daughter made her way through the woods to where she stood.