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## **Bracken**

In my grandfather's kitchen is a mannequin he bought and dressed in a second-hand tee. He leaves it on the cabin beds and behind shower curtains to scare the wrinkles from everyone's faces, but when I first saw her, I unclenched my fat little fist and wailed a shapeless greeting to her.

The water is still some days and the sky goes deep down within it. Clouds hunt minnows in the murk. I lay on the furry back of one of them, shirt soaked, and open my mouth for God to feed me little chunks of the sun. My tongue is pink because it is burned, from glistening oil and fish.

I give the mannequin an old dress, sequined and scaled. The new dock leaves splinters in my feet and in my pocketbook, but the latter's already wounded. I give my wife kisses and a wide-brimmed hat. I give my shiny-new sons swimming lessons.

I have been told that I talk very loudly these days, but the lake doesn't mind. My sons are loud too, and the mannequin is not, for obvious, plastic reasons. *Everything* is louder when the mannequin is cleverly vanished, and when she is found everyone barks with laughter like a happy pack of feral animals and, Christ, did you know how deeply in love I am with expanse?

Medical professionals are of the opinion that my hearing is going. One of my boys is quiet these days, save for when he can't help but yell; we are used to it, he is not. His wife vanished last year in a smoke screen of divorce papers which was, really, understandable despite how empty our July dinners feel now. I hurt for her. I hurt for him.

Knowing not how to be a visibly wounded animal, I trap a smaller and more savage creature in my chest to gnaw at my ribcage. My son has the entirety of the local zoo in his own chest.

Things are alright at the cabin. My fingers are starry with hot oil burns and I feed my feral animals with fish once more. Haven't seen the clouds go for a swim in decades, but hey, that's progress for you. That's stern drive engines for you. My wife and my sons play Scrabble with strangers and hand each other bread over the K's and W's. The mannequin's behind my closet door and I wail, happy, but cannot hear any familiar yips and yelps in return.

Dying in one's sleep is surprisingly rare. We as a species have to quit expecting it.

There is something sharp in the eyes of a walking, talking zoo and my wife's body is unconscious on the tile floor beside decades of frying flour worked into the grout. When my son kills me, he does not realize it is me. When my son kills me, he calls 911 himself and tells them not to worry, that the threat has been neutralized, that everything is okay. Medical professionals are of the opinion that if the wounds hadn't gotten me, the adrenaline shock would've.

Two weeks ago I was walking my sickly cat around the ragged outskirts of an overgrown park in my son's old stroller.

The mannequin is dressed in sun-gold sequins, tucked into my dear son's bed. She gives the cops one hell of a surprise when they pointlessly search the house days later, and harass the frightened neighbors, and forcibly capture someone I love