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The Dream of the Bull // Lucy Graham

As I headed home my contentment began to fade into something else. By the time I arrived back in the flat, I found myself hoping to God that Uncle James was asleep.

But no, he sat perfectly still in the living room chair. He reminded me of a praying mantis: long arms folded, hands clutching his book, and glasses opaque, reflecting the lamplight. I tried to drift through the room smoothly and silently, like a flower moving with a stream.

As I was passing his armchair, there came a "Hello, dear." It could have come from anywhere; his body didn't appear to move at all, not even in the mouth or throat.

"How is Aileen doing?"

That's what I'd told him, that I'd been at Aileen's flat. I wasn't going to tell him about Ted.

His eyes were on me. They were hidden, but I just knew. And my clothes—there must have been some rumple that hadn't been there before. It was on my body like a bug crawling, in no place in particular. It was in my hair, my skin, my smell, everything suspended in the dimness, for him to examine and dissect.

"She's good."

"Good. That's good."

And he returned to his book.

Ivan the bull was in my room. Not in my dreams, where I'd always seen him: in the cities, or the jungles, or the brown mountains. No, he was here in my room, sitting off to the side like a dog sits: backside on the floor, torso upright and supported by his forelegs.

I wasn't as surprised as I should have been.

"What are you doing here?"

"I know what you did."

"Of course you do."

He flicked his tail.

I sat on my bed. "Tell me why you're here."

"I told you I'd always know where to find you."

"Yes. But that doesn't mean you have to follow me there." I removed one of my shoes and dumped a pebble out. I wondered: if I reached out to touch him, what would I feel? Anything?

I let my hair down and shook it around a little. It was still wet from the rain, from my sweat and Ted's sweat.

He only stared at me.

"Look. I'm going to shower now. *Don't* come in."

But he appeared before me as I was bathing. Only the front half of his body fit in the shower; the rear half was outside, beyond the curtain.

"Am I supposed to feel guilty or something?"

"Do you feel guilty?"

"No, I feel like I want you to leave me alone. I know you're a bull, but you have to understand that humans are very particular about who sees them naked."

"Clearly." He paused. Then, "I told you not to stray from my path, Hazel."

"You weren't even here when I strayed, to show me what that path was. Besides, you never said your rules applied in my waking life." It was easy for me to argue with him here, on my own territory. There was no getting lost or eaten alive.

He sniffed and said, "How are you so sure I wasn't here?"

"Well you certainly weren't watching me bathe."

Ivan stayed there, watching, for the rest of my shower. I continued only because I knew there was nothing else to do.

Later, as I curled up in bed and turned off the light, he stood in the corner. I doubted he intended to sleep. Maybe he wanted to make a point, or maybe he wanted to act as a guardian against something. I had no idea what that something might be.

But in the morning he was gone.

I saw Ted again the following week. From the moment he opened the door I was entranced by all the normal things that entice the eyes—the way his clothes clung to him in places and sagged in others, the loose knot of his tie, the dull glint in his belt buckle: he was dressed to be undressed. Probably not his intention, but he struck me that way all the same.

We talked first. Ted liked to share things, and I liked to listen. He spoke like a story teller. He loved incongruities, unexpected stupidity, and non-sequiturs. One story he told was about a

doctor's appointment he'd had as a teenager:

"The doctor looked at the wart on my finger for a long time. I think he was in awe. And then he said, 'I don't think that's a wart. Warts aren't usually this . . . domed, and smooth, and perfect.' He looked at me, and then back at the wart, and then back at me. Eventually he said, 'I'm going to . . . I'm going to recommend a dermatologist. I have no idea what that is.' It seemed like he'd fallen in love."

"Was it a wart?" I asked.

"No, it was an abscess. I asked him, 'what do you think it might be?' He only said 'I have no idea' again, just staring relentlessly. And he told me it wasn't cancer. I got it removed no problem."

And in the hospital where Ted worked there was one doctor who blinked excessively, and another who always focused on the same eye when she spoke to you, never switching between them, never looking at anything else.

We went to bed in his purple blankets. Like the last time, he looked surprised as if it were all new to him. He was both ecstatic and unassuming.

There was no difference between getting to know him and revealing things about myself, because the two amounted to the same thing: with each of his heavy breaths, I saw a little more of myself stepping out of the shadows. This aspect of me had emerged before, of course—when I was alone in the dark, or in public, where someone had unwittingly set me off; or in cozy spaces just like this one, but with different company. Nobody wanted to believe it was there, and no one wanted me to believe it, either. It was gross, strange, unfeminine—not the way things really were. Nobody said it like that, of course. Nobody said anything at all.

And yet here I was, face to face with it: hot and unruly, a pale reflection of myself that bloomed out of the dark like a moonflower. I hid it away every time, a secret kept from myself. But whenever it came out I knew it was familiar, more familiar than I wanted to think.

When I walked in I found James' eyes blinking at me, small and heavy like stones, from behind his lenses. He was standing in the sitting room, putting a book away.

"How was your night?" His voice was smooth. It hit me like a raindrop, and goose bumps rippled over the surface of my skin.

"It was fine," I said. He took an enormous stride toward the kitchen. I felt the cold sweat coming as his face moved into the yellow light, and those arrogant angles defined themselves, even glowed. His lenses were glaring again, too, like goggles.

"What did you and Aileen do? Anything interesting?" I wondered whether his eyes were focused on me. I couldn't see them.

"We just hung out."

As his long fingers cracked open a can of pineapple juice, I imagined them creeping and crawling all over other bodies, my body, it didn't really matter. They moved into weird places, knowing what should never be known, things that should only know themselves. I asked myself how he was configuring his reality behind those lenses, with knowledge like that. I shivered just imagining it: that strangers could enter his world and welcome his touch, asking for it, even paying for it.

While he gulped, his Adam's apple bobbed over his long throat. I wondered if he even had appetites, if he'd experienced sexual intimacy at all. Anything like what I had left over—the sticky remnants of sweat and saliva on my neck, the moisture hidden in my clothes, the cramp in the arch of my left foot—was impossible for him: it had to be, almost by definition. I thought, too: what would his child have been like, if he'd had one? Long-necked like him, but too stiff to be graceful or swanlike in any way. The child would be white, like milk or paper—quiet skin, silent voice, gray eyes cast down on a picture book, and later, a heavy text.

James finished gulping his juice. He moved his face a little, and his glasses became clear again.

He looked me over: my little body—compact, curved, muscular—my ragged hair and stale clothes, Ted all over my stale clothes.

"Glad you enjoyed yourself," he said, brow bent.

I had to leave. He was crawling through me, and I felt infected.

“Yes, I did.” Enjoy was the wrong word.

“You know what”—I tried to sound casual, even spontaneous—“

I think I’ll go for a walk.”

He only sipped his juice in response, until I was halfway out the door. I heard his voice then, but the shapes of his words were obscured by the walls and furniture.

This was another wet evening, misty and purple. I walked fast because I knew Ivan was out here somewhere, keeping step. He was always about to appear out of the fog, just around the next corner—dark and shapeless, faster than I could even imagine. I found the cathedral in the center of town. I wasn’t a Christian, but I didn’t know where else to go for darkness, silence, and aloneness. Through the giant doors and down the aisle, I found only a few people kneeling, hands clasped in prayer.

At the altar I knelt and bowed my head, arms tired and sagging. I intended to whisper a prayer, at first—just to soothe myself, purr myself into a little meditative bliss. But all I could do was breathe, hard. I didn’t know God at all. I had no understanding of what God meant, what the whole idea even attempted to mean. It was someone else’s truth.

There was the dark green velvet and the incense, all still and silent in the dark. Every little noise—a footstep, a whisper, a breath—swelled to a mighty echo that drifted into the faraway loft of the ceiling.

James didn’t know what I’d been up to. Or maybe he did. There was no way to be sure. And yet here I was, trembling—chased across town by a phantom. Ivan was still striding through the rain, not yet swallowed up by reality. His hoofs continued *clocking* against the cobblestones, hard and fierce. I could hear and feel them in my own heartbeat.

I rested there awhile, slumping in a pew near the altar. The moment I stepped outside the cathedral I would find him there, waiting to trot along with me, to blend in with the rain and say what we both knew. I could tell him he wasn’t real, but it wouldn’t matter

right away.

When I was ready—body solid, breath relatively settled—I stood up, found my balance, and sent my own footsteps bouncing up the walls.

There was only one safe place now, and that was Aileen's flat.

Several minutes later, and several blocks away, I arrived at the door to her building, sheltering myself against the rain that had begun while I was in the cathedral.

And she appeared at the door, dark and warm and untouched by the rain.

In her apartment I told her what had happened.

"You? Sexual guilt? *Why?*" She was messing around her bedroom while I sat on her bed with a small shot of liquor. Natalia, her young Weimaraner, was weaving hurriedly through the room. Her ears were pricked, nose wiggling and eyes wide open. Her sharp alertness reminded me of a pot of water about to boil over.

"Not in the usual sense. I just feel . . . I can't escape James and all the weirdness he makes me feel. But at the same time I know it's not true—not inevitable, at least—that he knows."

She looked at me. "Do you think any of this is real, or is your mind toying with you?" Aileen's eyes were coffee colored—not as saturated as Ted's but rounder, like pennies or buttons. Her skin was dark, too, browned and freckled by the sun.

"I can't tell. Could even be both." My thoughts were still racing but my heartbeat had slowed. Aileen's sheets were soft and cool, and her green blanket was heavy, some kind of velvet. I felt my weight dissolving into it, sick of my own mind, sick of the beast who still pranced around the damp and the dark outside, like a monster sinking back into the sea: unknown and unmanifest, but alive.

He wouldn't come in here.