

Cold Flesh

“Welcome to my workplace,” he said to me.

I had never really had much interest in seeing his workplace, the basement where he occupied all of his time. But he had been so excited to show me, how could I resist? I let him take me beneath the house to his shop. I balanced there on the last step of the stairwell, staring from behind his balding head at all of it. He stood in front of me, his hands propped up on his hips, gleaming with delight at his workplace as if seeing it for the first time. In front of us were the spaces he worked in, the tools he employed, and each of his own creations.

“Of course, you know what I do,” he said. “It’s really not hard work, but it is certainly meticulous.”

I was aware of how meticulous his work is. It begins with a lot of measuring. Every aspect has to be measured; no member can go unappraised. For this purpose, stacks of precision instruments lay around the large circular room: protractors, measuring tapes, rulers, calipers—every kind of caliper, outside and inside calipers, divider and vernier calipers. Every sort of tool is present that can determine a length, but the best of them are the ones that can be precise. It is essential that everything be quantified within a thousandth of an inch.

And it must be recorded. On the far side of the room where he began to lead me, past the leagues of florescent lights, was a desk with a daylight lamp atop it. Under the lamp were stacks of graph paper with numbers and dimensions chronicled in rows down the sheet. None of the handwriting was particularly neat, and it was certainly never uniform. But it was all there, if the reference should ever be needed. The information—the numbers, really—are of infinite importance in the process to come.

“The beginning is really the most important part,” he stated, looking down at his records. “If you screw up the assessment phase of the process then you’ve screwed up the entire thing. People could never understand that—just how important the measurements are.” He picked up a pen and circled some of his measurements to emphasize his point. It was a blue ballpoint pen—a *Bic Cristal*. It was an ordinary pen, no doubt, but I took notice of it; it was the same kind of pen that I always use at home. Perhaps I was too excited to see something so simple, but I smiled. It is a good pen.

“Follow me. I want you to see all of this.” At those words, I finally took notice of the room I was in and recognized how large it was. The beige basement was massive and round, bleached by artificial light deep below ground. Behind me, atop the table with stacks of disheveled graph paper, was a small radio faintly playing “Manic Monday.” On the far side was the door and stairwell where I had come in. But what was interesting was what lined the walls on either side. Around the circular room, each of his works was erected on a small platform. Between them—except where there was one closed door—were his work tables where he did his meticulous measuring among other things. The heart of the room was barren.

He drifted to the nearest exhibition in the room, a small stand with one of his creations on top of it. He was so at home in this room; his steps were smooth as a swan gliding across a pond. A shroud of authority and mystery rippled from him. He looked up at his work, pointing to various parts, and looked back at me. He explained the process of making it and what that specific creation meant to him. They each had their own meaning to the artist. I heard some of what he said.

Each piece was configured in a deliberate manner. Some stood and some reclined. Others deceived the eye as to how rigid they really were; they looked so free moving, so organic. One was reared back, all of its weight shifted to its hind parts as if scared. It was trapped in that perpetual position of fear, never able to flee the invisible doom coming toward it. One crouched on a high platform, its neck low by its knees. One—my favorite—was crawling, its shoulders pushing up on its skin. It was low to the ground as if stalking its prey—almost conveying sensuality. The fur on that one was dark. Others, though, had lighter fur, brown and golden. But the fur on all of the pieces was combed to perfection. In the same meticulous fashion, the claws and teeth for each exhibit were whitened. The bleaching, straightening, and filing process, no doubt, took longer than most of the procedure. The maxillary canines on all of them had been given special attention in the filing process, sharpened to deathly points.

Each of the taxidermy pieces had a deliberate air given to it by its sculptor, as if a whole life history trailed behind each creature and was coming forth in this last pose. It was the eyes. By the eyes each piece conveyed its nature. It was by the eyes you could tell the crawling creature was approaching its prey. The crouching one stayed back from the others, its eyes scanning all of the other stale life, a voyeur in the room. For some, the eyes betrayed a sense of lust. They were seductive in their poses, but never crass. They were all beautiful.

“How do you like them?”

“Magnificent creatures, undoubtedly,” I replied. “You’ve really done some amazing work here. I assume it took you a long time?”

His shoulders rose and a smile stretched across his face, “A long time? In many ways, this is my life’s work. Taxidermy takes months if you want it to be just right.”

“And you want it to be just right?”

“Undoubtedly. This is art. To bring the appearance of life back into these is no easy task. We see the fluidity of life everyday and so there is no deceiving us as to what looks real.” He pushed his wire-framed glasses back up his nose. “There’s no deceiving anyone into what is alive... unless you do it just right.”

“Then what’s the secret?”

The skinning process, some have thought. Most people are tempted to write-off this phase, but that is a mistake. The care given in skinning sets the tone for the entire project. And it is different than the meticulous nature of measuring; the touch of skin sets the processes apart. It is different because your own hands hold the skin down or stretch it taut; there is a connection of intimacy when flesh touches flesh. Still, the secret is not skinning.

Not quite as many tools are needed in this phase. There are the French-cutting nippers, the pelican scissors and snub-nose scissors, the bell-hangers’ pliers, and, of course, skinning knives. The skinning knives are probably the most crucial tools for this phase, and that is why they are constantly kept at peak sharpness. There was an entire desk in the basement dedicated to sharpening tools for the man’s knives.

I looked at them for a long while. Me, an average man of forty years or so, a male of light-brown hair, a common man of loose slacks and shirts tight against his belly—I was more familiar with knives than most men of my sort. So sharp. I stared at the knives; I did not feel at all myself.

“Your question will be answered in time.” He shifted his weight, “But that sort of question is everyone’s problem. They want to get straight to the secret. But by doing that, they

ignore some of the crucial elements of the process. Take for instance, the cleaning phase. The cleaning process will not affect how the end product looks, but too many people let that distract them. Cleaning is no less crucial. You must not forget the cleaning.” He gestured toward the shelves fully stocked with cleaning materials—bleach, Dawn dish soap and Windex, furniture polish, shoe brushes and toothbrushes, q-tips, and insect repellent (you cannot forget the insect repellent). Next to the shelves sat a large aluminum basin for cleaning in. The plastic covering that section of the floor kept the environment sterile.

A sink projected from the wall there, too. There were two knobs to control the faucet: cold water to rinse his hands and splash on his face before he began, hot water to scrub his scarlet stained hands when he had finished. A mirror hung over it.

I looked back at him for direction, for him to say more. He looked at me and began to speak. His lips formed the words, “Look around,” but I heard no words. He began moving again, with that same ghost-like movement. His arms moved in exaggerated mannerisms, continuing his tour of his workshop and exhibition.

I noticed that I was cloaked in darkness. I looked to my right to see what cast the formidable shadow over me.

Beside me was likely the largest creature in the room. The figure stood a towering 6 and half feet, atop its already 18 inch platform. The skin, stretched tight across its imposing physique, had a pinkish hue almost looking warm. But I knew it was only cold flesh. The hair at its peak was backlit, a glowing red. The ten phalanges hanging at its side, from its chiseled and robust arms, had trimmed and polished nails. Its nose came to a sharp point before its face, and

the narrow nostrils looked downward upon me. The eyes that I knew my tour guide spent so much time on also looked down at me. They were the threatening eyes of a veteran predator.

I sped up, following behind the artist. One of the taxidermied pieces reclined in leisure. Its head was rolled back with eyes closed and mouth open as if laughing. The skin over the temples was pulled taut, causing the eyebrows to lift in amusement and the cheeks to have that unmistakable visage of joy. Its abs were clenched tight.

Another piece stood casually, obviously participating in a serious conversation. The bipedal creature primarily put its weight on its left leg so that its right leg was bent. Its left hand was extended with a single finger jutting out, pointing with authority. The muscles in that arm were tense. Its jaw, too, was tense, bearing its teeth. The pearly teeth nearly matched the pale skin of the creature.

And the crouching one. It looked out across the moment of the room, his eyes all too familiar. His authority was unquestionable—he looked over his subjects; he the prince and I his humble knave. His face was handsome and blushing with a warm hue, yet it remained stern. He crouched there on his high pedestal. His genitals were framed by his propped arms and curled legs.

As I continued to gawk at the art all around me, I was unaware that an icy tingle moved its way up from my hips to the base of my neck. I looked around at my fellow members of mankind, among them the innocence of women and children, and the power of men. I looked at the master taxidermist himself; he went on finishing his grand tour of his workshop, showing off his art. Fascinated as I was, I followed him.

“The answer to your question is the *stuffing* process.” His glasses slid down his nose. “Like I told you earlier, arranging the artificial bones, mixing the ballistics gel, and reproducing the measurements I recorded at the beginning of the project can be extremely difficult. But it pays off.” He pushed his glasses back to their groove. “If you do it right, at first glance you might forget they’re not alive. That’s how you know you’ve done it right.” He got excited now, “And don’t begin to think that the bones and muscles are all there is to stuffing. There’s certainly more. And none of it is quite as important as the eyes...”

I knew what he meant. I could feel the stare of the crouching man behind me boring into the back of my skull. He knew where I’d been.

My tour guide grinned and stopped talking, as if he had just won some argument. I could see the pride in his eyes at the high quality of work he did. He really did think that *stuffing* was the most important aspect of what he did. Stuffing, rather than the pre-measurement work.

He walked past me toward the other side of the room and continued talking, “I hope you appreciate the art I make down here in my workshop. It takes a great mind to do it...” He paused. He looked down at one of the smaller tables wedged between two of his exhibits. There was a chessboard there that I hadn’t noticed. A game was in progress. Black had lost a handful of pawns and a knight, but white had no queen or rooks, only one bishop, and a couple pawns left. He took up the black knight and placed it down at F3, forking white’s king and other bishop. “Check.”

Arriving by the closed door, he turned around and looked over the room before saying to me, “What are you doing over there? I want to show you part of the process.” I was frozen, in thought. “What are you doing? C’mon.” He waved me over before opening up the door. The

opened door obscured my view, but I could see a red light coming out of the room. I staggered forward—becoming more curious as to what lay ahead. Before I knew it, I stood at his side. We both went into the room, and he closed the door behind us.

Inside, there was a red bulb emitting a deep aura, like the kind in a darkroom. In the other room, with the exception of the basin for washing and the plastic tarp beneath it, there had been no area large enough to do most of the work required by taxidermists, so I had begun to wonder where he did it. This was my answer. In the small room, a gurney was pushed up against the wall with a stand next to it to place tools on. A tall freezer was in the far corner. On the bed, an elderly man lay—obviously dead. “This is a work in progress.”

I stared. I could not look away. The skin seemed leathery and soft; I wanted to touch it. The creature was rigid with death. There was no hint of life left in its cold bones. It needed something. It needed to be given new shape—more than that, though. It needed life. It needed to be given shape so that it could have new life—a life free of worry and anxiety.

“I just want to show you a small part of the process.” He pointed below the old man’s flabby neck, “Notice the collarbone? The cut needs to be above it.” With his right hand, he took a knife from the stand and with his left he held tight the corpse’s skin. With steady hands, he sliced at the base of the neck. “This is the beginning of what is called a flat incision.” His knife continued to where the clavicles met. Blood began to ooze from the slit and stain his hands. “Does that make sense? I know everything can be very different in practice rather than theory.” He looked to my eyes for confirmation. “Let’s go back.” He again led me back into the large beige room.

When we were back in his exhibition room, he shut the door and asked me, “How do you like it?”

I hesitated, “I—I like it.” He gave me a genuine smile. “Your work is interesting—never dull like a lot of the junk out there. I can tell the time and skill that goes into it. You have an eye for the elegant yet simple.”

“No need to flatter me—”

“No, no, I mean it. I really am impressed.” I pointed at the nearest creature, “You can’t even see the scars or lines where you made your incisions. You’re both a master surgeon and an artist.”

“You’re too kind.” No, I wasn’t. I only spoke the truth. All the phases up to this point—the measuring, the skinning, the cleaning, even the *stuffing* he thought was so important—they are all means to an end. The most important phase of the process is making it into art. He had done it. The greatest art I had ever seen, and it had come from his hands. I loved looking at it; I couldn’t get enough.

Finding just the right pose to convey everything about the animal was only the beginning. Would they smile, would they grimace? Is it possible to convey hatred or love with just the body? Yes, and more.

He had to give it color: make-up and particularly blush, underlying blue and red wire for the veins and arteries. He had to arrange their fur, comb it and clean it. And the eyes—the eyes were everything. On one table in the room, sat rows and rows of glass eyeballs, arranged ever so carefully by shape, size, and color. The eyes and how the lids covered them was the primary way

of relating the life of the creature. Through the eyes, you could look into its soul and know its story.

Each piece in the exhibit was a work of art like nothing ever done before. It would be an understatement to say I was impressed. I longed to know the perfect mind that made it all happen, the intellect of the greatest artist of my time. And only I had been given the privilege to see his work.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’ve just noticed I have blood all over my hands from the little demonstration I gave you earlier. I’ll only be a moment.” He walked away from me to the sink across the room.

He twisted the hot water knob to the left, and a scalding stream sprayed forth from the faucet. A cloud of steam slowly lifted from the sink, as he began scrubbing the scarlet residue from his hands; it chipped off leaving a faint hue. He looked up in the mirror as he continued scrubbing. I looked intently at my face. It looked more familiar. My eyes were dark and deep, and past their unfathomable pit, I could see myself. I washed my hands until all the blood was gone except the stain. Alone in the room, I switched the hot water off and replaced it with cold. It chilled my hands. I finished washing and turned off the faucet.

Notes to help remind you of different arcs and motifs in this story

- N suggests that some have said skinning is the most important, T says its stuffing, but N tells us that making-art is the most important. This is paralleled by N’s growing interest in what he is seeing.
- This focus on the work as art is related to the changing description by N of the taxidermy as “pieces,” then animals, then people, but finally back to animals.

We are given lots of hints that they are the same person: the chess game, the shared knowledge (including familiarity with knives), the pen, etc.

Our knowledge that they are separate entities (in the mind) is reaffirmed by the icy tingle, feeling not at all himself, chess game, and his differing idea as to what the most important phase is at the very end.

We see which personality (T) is dominate by the chess game, the fascination by N, and stating that N *follows* T.