Antiquarium

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After a day of trying to please Hank, Ellie said to hell with what he thinks and dragged him into the used bookstore on the corner. Ellie had never been in there before, a crumbly, two-story building with loose newspapers and trash blown against the dull brick. Weeds creeping up the sides. No one she knew ever went in there because of the rumor. But that was crap, she thought. So what if there were lights on behind the closed curtains upstairs every night.

“You just have no common sense, no fear of anything do you,” Hank said to Ellie as she pulled the handle, opening the paint-chipped door. “You know, sometimes I wonder if you don’t want to be raped.”

The door’s movement stirred a single, dead leaf that twirled up around Ellie’s ankle and spiraled down. She watched it lie back down on the grungy concrete. She didn’t answer.

Ellie turned and went inside, letting the door close behind her and stepping up the stairs leading to the main floor. Hank followed. Ellie realized immediately there was something very queer about this place. The Antiquarium, it was called.

Somewhere, deeper into the maze of bookshelves on the ground level, was music. A piano. Honky-tonk piano music. To her left, a wall of books stretched from the floor to the thirty-foot-high ceiling. An antique fan spun and wobbled above her. A card table stacked with sale-price paperbacks was set up in front of the shelves and Ellie walked over to it. The wood floor creaked each step.

She picked a book with yellowed pages off the card table and
flipped through it. The movement of someone sitting in the corner startled her and she looked over to the display case. In the pocket where the shelves met the storefront sat a white-haired man. A ghastly bearded man wearing a black top hat. He was hidden to passersby by a collection of flyers and posters taped to the window. Only through the cracks between the posters was the street visible, and the man kept shifting, as if trying to look outside through them. On his bony legs was a laptop computer and in his ears, headphones. His pale lips were moving. He spoke aloud either to himself or into the receiver attached to the headphones in his ears.

Ellie glanced at him briefly, then looked away, afraid of making eye contact. He gave her a nauseous feeling, made her heart race. Ellie looked back to Hank, who was standing sideways on the second step like a statue, leaning against the concrete wall with his fists shoved in his pockets, staring straight ahead.


Opposite the man in the window, above the spiral staircase and through the open balcony with a black iron railing, Ellie noticed a few men sitting around a table. Curious, she walked over to the spiral staircase and began to climb. After about fifteen waffle-iron steps, when her eyes were level with the floor, she stopped. The men were sitting around a conference table in brown office chairs dotted with brass studs. They were puffing funnels of smoke, sipping on coffee, maybe brandy. They didn’t look down at Ellie, just kept talking, looking at something — papers or playing cards or pictures. Their smoke was making the upstairs hazy. Or was that smoke? Ellie wondered.

Ellie retreated, slowing backing down the stairs. She continued
looking up. The fan wobbled on the ceiling. She stepped softly, trying to make out the words that kept causing chuckles or the occasional groan from the men upstairs, but the conversation was one continuous hum.
The honky-tonk played in the back of the bookstore, on the ground floor, plucking away Maple Leaf Rag, a song that reminded Ellie of her grandma, Eleanor, who played the organ until she died at ninety. Something was off-kilter, but familiar. *Déjà vu,* Ellie thought as her foot stepped slowly off the last step, onto the wood floor.

At the bottom of the stairs, walking toward her, was the first customer she'd seen. A man walking beside what appeared to be his son, in a motorized cart. The young boy's knees were exposed through his ripped jeans. And when Ellie looked into the boy's eyes, he wasn't there. Or was he? He looked crazy. Absent. Was the son okay? Ellie looked back to the man. His eyes pointed at her. Warning her. Dark eyes that went deeper into the back of his head than any she'd ever seen. She felt exposed. She swallowed hard. As she walked past the motorized cart and the man, an involuntary full-body chill shook Ellie.

Pretending to know what she was doing — trying to avoid the man and the boy — Ellie disappeared into the maze of bookshelves underneath the balcony. The ceiling was tight now. And the bookshelves close. The familiar Joplin tune plucked on and Ellie tried to pick out the title of one book, one color, but it looked like one continuous book.

Dizziness overcame her. Her vision blurred. Suddenly, instead of seeing the whole scene, she began to see things as a warped montage: of the corner where the skeleton man was talking to himself, the glass window covered in papers, sunlight peeking through the cracks, the spiral staircase, the leather chairs, the top hat, the bookshelves, the wobbling fan, the smoke, the iron railing, the smoke, the waffle-iron steps, the books, the
smoke, the glass. Ellie had the impression that the titles of rows, stacks, shelves of books were looking at her. Black and white titles, peering with stenciled eyes, at her . . . Note from The Underground. 1984. Bhagavad-Gita . . . Ellie sensed each dead author was there, circling overhead, sweeping by, brushing her, moving through her, around her, in her.

Suddenly Ellie could think of nothing but the recurring nightmare she had as a child: Trapped. Naked. In a glass box. With men prowling around. Peering in. Sneering, smiling horribly, lusting. Her aquarium dream, she had called it. Why would she dream such a thing at five years of age? Surely she hadn’t seen it on TV in between Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers. Surely she hadn’t witnessed it in real life. But why did she play with her Barbies that way? With Ken fondling Barbie’s stiff, plastic breasts. Her wrists bound with one of Ellie’s hair ribbons. His plastic hands clicking against her plastic groin as Barbie hung from Ellie’s desk drawer knob. It had excited her then. Maybe it was her fault now.

Her grandpa was a gruff guy. A fur trapper. Always had lots of traps lying around. Lots of stuffed animals with teeth on the walls. There was a secret in the family. And it had something to do with him, but that’s all Ellie knew. There were things that happened that her mom would never talk about. Not to anyone. Not ever.

Ellie’s mom had only hit her once. It was the time Ellie playfully hid in the closet and grabbed her mom’s ankles. Her mom had kicked her hand. Hard. Kicked her reflexively. Then apologized profusely and tried to explain that she hated having her ankles grabbed, that’s all.

Before her grandma Eleanor had died, she had grabbed Ellie’s hand in her squishy, liver-spotted one and looked deep into her with her cataract-clouded blue eyes. She asked Ellie if she as planning to marry Hank. Patted her hand knowingly, smiling sadly, and told her that Hank
reminded her of grandpa. “There are better men,” she had said.

Still with trance-like vision, Ellie looked down at her wrists and her eyes fixated on where Hank’s grip from the night before had left hints of blue. And she remembered how she had wondered if his strong hands could actually crush her bones. “Ouch. You’re hurting me. Hank, stop it. Don’t. You’ll break them.” His eyes had held the same glare. Sneer. Lust. As the men in her aquarium dream. As the man with the boy in the motorized cart.

Her trembling shadow reminded Ellie that she was moving here. Now. But her eyes were still out of focus. The words of the men slurred. And her mind pulled her further, into a distant blur, until she realized that somehow the days carried through their pinchers, molding her into her grandma, her mom. Again. Here. Now. She knew what her grandma had been trying to tell her. She knew the secret. And as if the suspension had snapped, Ellie’s mind sucked back into the room. Her eyes re-adjusted. Focused. She heard the honky-tonk piano. The murmurs from the men. She felt the wood against her feet. She felt the air go into her lungs. And Ellie headed for the door.

She strode down aisles of book titles, beneath the men smoking upstairs, past where the skeleton in the top hat sat in the corner and, without saying a word or looking his way, walked down the stairs, past Hank, and stepped outside. She took a deep breath of fresh air. She bent over, picked up the dry leaf and crushed it in her palm. ✤