

This story is enduring and desperate and cold
Floorboard 8:

George and the Pup *(by Laney Yoo)*

Look up.

(whoosh with travel)

Past the city, beyond the fields, to the edge of the horizon line.

If you squint, you'll see it. A place of magic, of equal parts wonder and peril. The everpresent wood stands dense and alluring, calling for you to come stay.

George was familiar with the wood. From where he and his father lived, in a ranch house just outside the village, he never needed to look far to find it. The dense army of bark and bough lurked right outside the comfort of his bedroom.

Ever since George was a young child, his father would point him toward the window and tell him stories of their woodland neighbors: The faeries, the witches and warlocks, and the shapechangers, who shifted with the seasons, donning fur for the cold winter months, only to shed their tooth and claw for frolicking human feet in the summer days.

And even though George was older now, even as he glimpsed over the edge of adolescence and into adulthood, he still listened to his father's words.

"Be careful," he'd whisper after every tale.

"Be wary, and leave your heart at home when you go. Better to be safe and selfish. Better to feel sorry and stay safe."

In the winter mornings, George ventured into the wood to gather kindling for the fire, and water from the well. One morning, as he pushed through the small gap in the thicket, a voice crept out from deeper within the forest.

"Is someone there?"

George froze and turned towards where the voice had come from. Had he imagined it?

(a small whimper)

"Help me. Please. Please."

No. Someone was crying out from beyond the well. A girl, maybe?

George followed the voice deeper into the brush to its source, where a small wolf pup lay on the forest floor, the metal teeth of one of his father's traps gnawing viciously into one of its hind legs.

The injured animal lifted its head from the snow, its amber eyes downcast from George's own.

"Please, free me, and I'll leave. I just want to go home. It hurts."

George stared warily at the creature, wincing at its whimpers.

But he had left his heart at home, just like his father had warned him to, and turned away to reunite with it.

"Freeing you will only hurt you more, and I have no stomach for pain. Better to leave you as you are. I'm sorry."

And with that, George stumbled back to the house, where the warmth of the fireplace might chase away the image of the shivering wolf.

A few days later, George again found himself in the wood, sent by his father to gather mushrooms for supper. This time, he smelled it first. The sickening sweetness of rotting flesh.

A few steps more, and he beheld the wolf pup, exactly where he had left it.

(soft wolf pup whimpers)

Her leg wept blood and pus. Her fur had grown patchy and bald in spots. Loose skin sagged on her face, no longer fitting her starved frame, and her eyes... The irises seemed to have shrunk, revealing bright white sclera, the same color as the snow.

She lifted her head weakly, and cried, "Please, please, free me. I cannot go on like this!"

George stood frozen, stomach spasming at the sight.

But he had left his heart at home, so averting his eyes and steeling his resolve, he yelled across the clearing to her,

“I cannot help you! I’m no doctor, and have no stomach for blood. Better to leave you as you are. I’m sorry.”

And so, he fled back home, hoping the scent of warm stew might chase away the stink of rotting flesh.

That night, as food sloshed in his stomach and fire warmed his toes, George asked his father about the wolf in the wood.

“Surely, the traps are not meant for pups?”

His father just shook his head.

“The traps are for any creature of the wood that creeps too close to our home. Let that pup be their example. Let the winter do what it will.”

(echoing whimpers)

Night after night, George tossed and turned in his bed, desperate for sleep to steal him away from the keens of the creature he had left to die. But on the fourth night, he realized the dark had gone quiet.

No keens. No screams.

George sprung out of his covers and sprinted into the forest, through the thicket, past the well, to where he had left the wolf.

(echoing heartbeat)

His heart, which he had forgotten to leave at home that night, sank.

Where the metal fangs of the trap had once clutched a whole wolf, there remained a single human foot.

(Growl.)

Barely breathing, George turned his head to face a little girl with familiar amber eyes, a wolf pelt draped over her shoulders. She bore her sharp, bloody teeth at him.

One step back. Two.

The girl matched him, the gnawed-off stump of her leg dragging behind her, painting a crimson line in the snow.

Three steps. Four. Five...

(Schink. A trap closes around George's leg.)

Before George knew it, his back was in the snow, pain erupting through his leg, where one of his father's own traps bit a broken crescent into his calf. He scuttled away as far as the trap would let him, kicking, screaming, desperate to wrench his leg free...

"Please." George begged the girl, "Please. I just want to go home."

The little girl only snarled.

"You may have no stomach for pain, but I have been starving for so long, and now, my hunger is endless."

(limping steps, a snarling bite, then quiet)

Hush.

The wood seems quiet again... but strain your ears one more time.

Can you hear them? The souls left calling in the winter?

Are you truly listening?

Turn your head, cover your ears, go back to sleep.

You leave your heart behind at your own peril... for sorry is not always safe, and safety does not last forever.