

THE ANIMALS



CARY
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Cary Fagan



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*To Frank W. Watt
for his encouragement all those years ago*

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Secrets

Dorn, whose profession was the making of miniature scale models, was not usually embarrassed by his commissions. It might be said that he was locally famous; even if people in the village didn't know his name, they were familiar with his models, which were displayed in the windows of almost every shop, restaurant, and business. There were also half a dozen in the municipal museum, all from businesses that had closed. While Dorn often worried that he would run out of commissions, there seemed to be just enough shop turnover to keep him occupied.

This new project was for yet another new enterprise beside the hardware store. For some reason, nothing seemed to survive in that location for long; Dorn had completed commissions for a wool shop, a vacuum cleaner store, and a

wedding gift emporium, the models all now in the museum. The new one, called the Velvet Touch, was a sex shop. It carried all sorts of creams and sprays, battery-operated devices, visual materials, and manuals, as well as costumes made of spandex and artificial leather and chains. It seemed to Dorn rather doubtful that the Velvet Touch was going to prosper when the other shops hadn't, especially since customers could easily be spied ducking inside from the main street.

Stooped over his bench in the ground-floor workshop at the back of his small house, Dorn worked on the scene. A tiny male figure, his even tinier penis erect, was tied to a bed while a woman in a peek-a-boo bra leaned over him with a whip. To better visualize the scale, one might imagine the whip as being the length of a toothpick. The model was near to being finished; at this moment, Dorn was using his finest brush to add shading to the man's penis and then to the woman's nipples.

Everyone has secrets—countless secrets that are neither important nor particularly interesting. Only a very few have secrets of any consequence, and Dorn was not one of them. These dull truths get added to as one gets older, and a new, ridiculous one for Dorn was that every time he worked on his miniature woman, which could have fit into the palm of a large hand, he felt the stirrings of an erection. Now was no exception. He felt only a mild shame, however; the arousal was understandable given the celibate life he had been leading since his last girlfriend had left three years before. The woman hadn't been from the village but rather the city. Like

so many outsiders, she had come on a holiday, only to “fall in love” with the charms of the place. Dorn had wondered whether she was confusing her infatuation for the village with her feelings for him. But he had put these doubts aside and tried to be happy. Unfortunately, his first thought had been the correct one, and as her enthusiasm for village life withered, so had her affection for Dorn.

Now Dorn straightened up, feeling an ache between his shoulder blades. He was thirty-eight years old and already experiencing some of the pangs of oncoming middle age. He went to the washroom sink and cleaned the brushes and palette, scrubbed his hands, and hung his canvas smock on a hook. From the cupboard behind the small oval mirror, he took two brushes: one for his fair hair, which he kept long enough to fall over his eyes if he didn’t brush it away, and one for the short, reddish beard that adorned his narrow face. He had no illusions about being handsome—his eyes were a little droopy and his nose was crooked—but he liked to appear neat (a habit, no doubt, that came naturally to a maker of miniatures), and after this grooming he took the few steps needed to reach his front hall, put on a cotton jacket, slipped off his work sandals and slipped on his outdoor sandals, picked up his battered paperback copy of *Vordram*, and left the house.

Happy Café

Dorn lived on Linder Row, which ran above and parallel to the main street. He walked down, passing the various restaurants and shops, each with one of his miniature scenes in the window. Preferring not to see his own work, he was careful to keep his gaze turned to the street.

The Happy Café, almost exactly in the centre of the shopping row, was not at all like sophisticated city coffee houses, with their reclaimed wood tables and local art on the walls, or their clean modernist lines. Instead, it had an ornate gable over the door and wood trim inside that made it look like a storybook cottage. The staff wore little suede dresses or shorts with suspenders and pointed hats with elfin ears. It had opened almost twenty years ago, when the village was trying to

reinvent itself as a tourist attraction. The stone quarries to the south had become exhausted not long before, and a scheme to allow a multinational company to harvest the northern forest was halted by a legislative order. What if people, especially families, stayed three or four days, spending their money on restaurants, bed and breakfasts, attractions, souvenirs? The village council received grants to help transform businesses so that they looked like cabins, castles, or any sort of enchanted place, and the founders of the Happy Café took full advantage. So did Dorn's first customers, who wanted adorable window displays that might draw people inside.

The effort succeeded, although the initial surge of interest in earlier years had naturally slowed until now the village catered to a modest trade. There was even a challenger to the Happy Café in the form of a modern coffee chain at the far end of the main street. Dorn, however, remained a loyal customer. The reason was simple: Ravenna.

Ravenna was a loyal customer, too.

He entered the café, pushing through the curtain of beads. It was a little warm and humid, pleasantly womb-like, a place where one might curl up and fall into the deepest sleep. But his senses woke on seeing Ravenna, who had the corner table and sat with a cup and her usual folder of student work, which she seemed to be endlessly marking.

"Hey there, the usual double espresso?" said the elfin server behind the counter.

“Yes, Glin, thanks.”

At the sound of his voice, Ravenna looked up and smiled, pushing away a few strands of hair that had escaped from her ponytail. Once she had been the villagers’ hope for an athlete who could make the country’s Olympics team. The village had belonged to one country and then another, and even a third for a short interval, and perhaps it was this historic identity crisis that made the prospect seem so exciting. Ravenna’s sport had been the javelin throw, in which she had won local, regional, and then national competitions. Four years older than Ravenna, Dorn had seen her throw only once, when he was walking by the school’s athletic field. Tall and willowy and a little awkward, she had reminded him of a giraffe. He had stood watching, entranced by her odd stance, her ungainly run, and then the force with which her slender arm hurled the javelin into the sky.

But Ravenna hadn’t made the Olympics. She had decided not to try out for the national team but instead to immediately enter teachers college. There had even been a front page newspaper editorial begging her to reconsider. But that had been years ago and, so Ravenna claimed, meant nothing to the students in her classes now.

Dorn took his coffee and sat across from her. She made one more pencil mark and looked up at him. “Look at this student’s work,” she said. “It’s a holy mess! How can anyone think clearly who’s scribbling like this? It’s hardly surprising that half the answers are wrong.”