

The Taxidermist

By Heather Nawara

Sam Winters behaved like a spurned lover. The problem? Nobody had rejected him. But Sam felt rejected by Noah Cox, the lead singer and songwriter of the band Radical Rat. Noah was his idol—his god. Sam’s god wasn’t supposed to make mistakes, but he did. He never stopped in Sam’s remote hometown of Dubois, Wyoming, “Where Real Cowboys Work and Play.”

Since Radical Rat was on tour, Sam took it upon himself to make a special trip to Portland, Oregon. The fifteen-hour drive was nothing for a real cowboy like him. It may have been murder on his 1990 Ford pickup truck, but she pulled through. She only needed to stop for gas. Sam never needed to stop. And minimal stops propelled them forward to Noah’s secluded seven-bedroom home, located deep in the woods.

Sam parked right in Noah’s driveway. He felt entitled after being so wronged. He wasn’t scared either. Thanks to the house being so isolated, there weren’t any neighbors that would come poking in. “You did this to yourself,” Sam said to his absent god, his cowboy boots crunching over leaves that had fallen in Noah’s walkway. Grinning wickedly, Sam picked the front door’s lock with nothing but a couple of paperclips. He slipped inside and secured the door again, resting his back against it.

Hazel eyes soaked up sights that no fan had ever been privy to. Those ingrates may have got Noah in the flesh, but Sam got Noah’s home. What could be more intimate than a home? And what a home! Hardwood floors throughout the first level. Walls painted in earthy tones. White curtains, not blinds, ghosted from every window. Where to start? The dining room to the left of him looked inviting enough.

He looked past the table and towards the stone fireplace flanked by two horizontal bookshelves. Atop the bookshelves sat a collection of animals that had expired long ago. Sam approached them. Each one had a golden nameplate. There was Frizzle Fraz the Fox, Percy Pez the Penguin, Barty Banks the Badger, and Sandra Sans the Squirrel. Noah must have looked at these dead animals every day. He collected them. He loved them enough to name them.

“I deserve to be named to you. I deserve to be loved by you,” Sam said, frowning as he thought of every unanswered letter he wrote to Noah. There must have been at least fifty, all sent to some PO box of Noah’s record label. Never to this address. In those letters, he shared his entire being with that golden calf. And did Noah ever bother getting personal with him? No. Therefore, it was time to get personal. It was time to go to Noah’s bedroom.

Sam peeled out of the dining room, taking the stairs two at a time. The home’s large size made him feel like a rat scurrying its way through a maze. He sorted through the rooms friends and band mates must have crashed in, finally stumbling upon a spacious master bedroom painted sky blue. It stood out from the rest of the neutrals walls. Noah’s room.

Sam tore apart the dresser’s drawers. Sure enough, Noah didn’t keep any of his letters here. His god was dead. There was no point in continuing. He wouldn’t go to jail for breaking and entering. Real cowboys were never taken alive. He stepped into the adjoining bathroom, swallowing an entire bottle of sleeping pills from the medicine cabinet. He collapsed onto Noah’s bed. At the very least, he’d be remembered.

Inclement weather resulted in the first tour date’s cancellation. Noah returned home a few hours after Sam’s arrival. He shook his head at the rusty pickup parked in his driveway. It

seemed like he'd have to chase *another* "fan" out with an axe. Great. He pulled his wood-chopping axe out of a stump on his way in.

The house echoed with silence. Upstairs, however, Noah came across a surprise in bed. He smirked at the dead man and knew what had to be done.

"He wasn't killed for me. He's gotta live somewhere. Or not live," Noah told his band mates the next time they visited. In the attic where Radical Rat jammed out, Cowboy Sam stood on display. The band expected as much from Noah. What they didn't expect was for Noah to break from the alliterative names that all the other animals possessed.

"You must really love him," the drummer said.

"Well, how can you not love a real cowboy?"