

Labyrinth

by Amanda Leduc

He was born a beast, and remained a beast for the rest of his life. When he was six days old the two red dots that marked his forehead began to grow into horns. The doctors removed them immediately but the horns grew back in the intervening months—wily and curled, a gleaming black that gradually sharpened to white.

The doctors thought initially that warts might be the problem. There had been that case in Indonesia where a man had died with thick growths all over his body—*Treeman syndrome*, it was called. The man was featured on the Discovery Channel and had several operations to remove the warts, but they grew back same as the horns. Eventually the Indonesian man died and became a Wikipedia entry, and the world forgot who he was and who he'd loved. The warts stayed in pictures, like tree roots spreading out from his hands.

Perhaps these were only growths, the doctors reassured his parents. If they were monitored, they could be removed with relatively little trouble. In the meantime, the child could wear hats. People were always giving knitted hats to babies.

The baby's father commissioned a series of knitted blue hats, and soon a small wave of them arrived. The baby wore the smaller ones until the horns began to stretch them, at which point his mother switched to the hats that were larger. The doctors scheduled another surgery.

But as the baby grew his face began to change—to lengthen and shift, to leave its baby softness and human curves behind in favour of something angular, animal, strange. The doctors could do nothing for this. The parents could only watch in horror.

His name was Benjamin, but most of the world had forgotten that by his first birthday. By the time he was a toddler his face had left its humanness behind. He had a calf's head on a boy's soft body. His feet hardened into cloven hooves; his torso and arms stayed the same, his hands too, slender and delicate. The hands, his mother hoped, of a musician, since he most definitely could not be king.

*

His father was King, his mother the Queen. He himself would have been king too, except for this business with the horns, and so soon after his birth his mother found herself pregnant again, another boy, this one born ten months and twenty-three days after the beast had made his own entrance into the world.

Irish twins, the people said. The second son was dark-haired and charming and everything a prince should be. His name was Ryan. The boys shared a room until the second son was three and began to have night terrors. His cries would wake his brother, who would stumble out of bed and go over to help. The second son, wide-eyed and delirious, would scream in horror at the calf that loomed over his bed until their parents came to pull him away.

They decided to move the first son's bedroom downstairs, into the great cavernous basement of the castle. It was not a bad basement—it had been re-done years ago, with hardwood floors and multiple entrances that let in lots of light, and an Olympic-sized indoor swimming pool where his father swam laps every morning. The basement had been profiled on a house-and-home website that had since shuttered. Ben could have the entire basement, the king decreed. He could even have the pool.

And so Benjamin grew up in the basement, with mostly his nanny for company. His mother came down to visit every day. She'd been something of a sportswoman when she'd attended college and on warm sunny days they passed the time outside, in the courtyard, kicking a soccer ball back and forth. His mother had an *educated toe*. He, having hooves, did not, and so he played goalie instead. His nanny, Prim, sat on the sidelines and cheered.

In the wintertime, they played indoors in the great wide expanse of the basement. He was terribly fast and not afraid to leap and catch the ball even if that meant a nose-dive into the hardwood; the first time this happened the pain shocked him into tears, but then he grew to like it—the terror as he lost his balance, the sharp satisfaction of a slap against his face. The fear in his mother's face which quickly softened into pride.

“My strong boy,” she would say, and she would help him up and hold him close, drop a kiss on the rough top of his head. She was careful around the horns and this hurt, because she didn’t need to be. He knew he’d never hurt her.

Over the years his father came down into the basement less and less, and his brother came down once in the beginning and then never again. He was allowed to go outside and traverse the grounds—he was the prince, after all, not a prisoner—but as he grew older he came to dislike the looks that people shot him. The way they would fix their eyes on the ground or on a spot ahead when they passed him in the halls, and then the telltale swoosh of air that meant they were turning around to look back at him as he went. The Queen had decreed that it was rude to stare, but of course nobody listened.

He stopped going upstairs after a while. He liked the basement and the outdoors and the sky; he loved Prim and his mother and the soccer games, the dull hot thud of falling. The King and Queen secured the best tutors in the city for his schooling, from colours and shapes right up to algebra and calculus. He learned to play the cello. He spoke five different languages. His mother came down every weekend to play soccer, except when the family went away. He did not come on family vacations; his brother still had night terrors, and while the people in *their* city kingdom knew of him, there were other cities and other kingdoms in the world that did not. It was safer for him to stay home, the King said. Perhaps in another year, or two. There were those out there in the world who wouldn’t understand what he was—who might hurt him. It was best to stay away.

*

The *Labyrinth*, his father called it. After the old film with David Bowie, because the King had liked dark films in his youth, before he ascended to the throne and had much less time to spend watching movies. They filled in the pool without asking Benjamin and instead installed corridors, long walls of smoky glass and stone that were warm to the touch, almost alive. There were living walls and whole walls made of aquariums and other walls paneled in soft wood felled from the

royal forest; there were walls that sang music when you touched them to urge you forward through the maze.

The King built an addition to the castle, extending the labyrinth out far into the backyard. The addition housed a vast bed and breakfast, where people could pay to sleep in rooms that were built in the midst of the maze and required maps to guide you in and out. One day, after several hours of language lessons and cello, Benjamin returned to the basement to discover that his belongings had been moved to the centre of the bed-and-breakfast complex—a vast, circular apartment with glass walls that looked out into the running dips and halls of the maze. His father, who understood nothing of construction but liked the look of himself in a hard hat, stood in the middle of the apartment and consulted blueprints with the workers, stroking his chin thoughtfully. When he saw Benjamin, he threw out an arm and grinned.

“Isn’t it *wonderful*?” he cried, oblivious to the way the construction workers gawked at his son, the beast. “Like living right inside a tree!”

“I don’t need to live inside a tree,” Benjamin said. “The apartment and the pool were enough.”

“Nonsense,” his father said. “You wanted to go to the university to interact with the world, right? This will bring the world to you.” He spread out his arms and moved around in a circle, very nearly knocking into a worker whose arms were filled with tools and sawdust. “We’ll charge for the bed-and-breakfast and donate the money to the soup kitchens. That was your mother’s idea.”