



A Couple's
Hunger

Jeff Hayes

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A Couple's Hunger

Trading on the ignorance
bliss of children



JEFF
HAYES



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Dedicated to Mona
Her attentiveness keeps
this author true to course.

And a special shout-out to CS
for the inspirations.

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A COUPLE'S HUNGER

CHAPTER I

A Couple's Hunger

This is a true story in so far as related to the geographic location. Concerning the events, my memory remains a bit faulty with regard to the peculiar goings on. The accuracy of the telling I leave among yourselves to decide.

Laughter floated in the air. The brilliant sunshine had melted the evening's frost and was well on the way to drying the grass. The waiting energy of pre-Spring was coiled in tension, carrying its subtle smell in the air.

In the middle of an isolated hanging valley, beneath towering peaks, a rustic house was to be found. Built from local materials of wood and stone, its foundation rested upon the most ancient of bedrock.

The surrounding landscape had survived for uncounted millennia of ice glacier grinding to bring into existence the

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lower valley depths, severing the upper valley in twain. The continuity remnant, now a sister valley, was resigned to be forever separated across the gulf, below the distant ridge. Once the massif was a single mountain. In that epoch, the valley pairs were a single grand mass, formed from the silting up of an antediluvian lake, supported upon the bedrock. Now, it was in the gap below that a lake was filled. Its depths had been scored deep, revealed after the glacier's retreat. Each year's melt of winter snow replenished what the prior year had taken.

There was a forest on the shore receding across the moraine. It was a forest as deep, as black and impenetrably foreboding as the waters at its gnarled feet. Sunlight did not illuminate the floor of tangled roots. Mushrooms grew in abundance on the detritus rain from the trees above. This was a realm where fungi thrived.

At the lonely house, on the patio relaxing in the sun gifted warmth, were Jessica and Charles. They were a couple appearing in their middle age. With them, laughing at a joke forgotten before it was told, were two preteen boys, Janz and Pesho. They sat together, as though a family, around a picnic table. There were breakfast remnants on the table: Heal of a loaf of bread. Soft boiled egg shells emptied of their golden contents, each still perched upon their respective throne. Butter that had gone soft in the sun. Small glass bowls emptied of

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jam. Cups for coffee, and cocoa, that had also been emptied; they remained in want of a refilling that had yet to occur.

Janz and Pesho were still smiling as though the echo of that funny joke had yet to pass. The stress to appease had the boys' attention. They were oblivious to the countenance of Jessica and Charles, who looked to each other, exchanging a secret thought. The expression on their face was this: satisfaction borne from a surety of what was to pass.

Jessica and Charles had recently returned home from traveling abroad in the Eastern countries. The goal of the trip, depart home as two, return as four, was the acquisition of feral strays—two only. These trips had occurred numerous times. Before this particular journey, fresh documents had been reacquired; the former had become too dated or otherwise mangled to reasonably suffice any longer. The young boy passports the couple carried were the shopping list to be fulfilled, specifying a match of bone and flesh to ink and paper. From this, candidates were reviewed until the selection was made. The process was not a lengthy one. It never was.

The day arrived when the two empty small suitcases were filled and the return passage was booked. The couple had been excited by the prospects of this excursion's bounty: Janz and Pesho were a match beyond specification, appropriate to complete the series.

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The boys settled into their new habits of luxury. Each with their own room: full of clothes and distractions. The clothes, though not new, were pressed and folded neat. Each dresser was filled. Coats were hung in a shared armoire above a rack of shoes. Game sets were stacked on shelves; the organization was according to some esoteric strategy.

Routines were explained calmly but firmly by the couple. Rules of the house were but few: No entry into the cellar, which remained locked anyway. Not to stray from the house grounds unless Jessica or Charles were with them. In regards to the slope which led to the near cliff, footing was treacherous before the edge. The danger was not apparent and would catch one up if unaware. And it was stressed most seriously, no going outside after sunset.

Charles explained that there were dangers to be found outside the house at night. Such dangers were not present, nor were they obvious during the daylight hours.

There were three large dogs who shared the house. Each had a unique look. The dogs had a strong and somber disposition in common. Pesho recognized their wolf-like temperament from the stories told in his village. He confided his thoughts to Janz, who dismissed the other's worry. Jessica had overheard their whispering, which surprised them as she

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had been reclining in a plush chair far across the grand room. Her face had been hidden behind a newspaper.

Lowering the paper to eye them over the top, she said, “You know, Pesho, every village has such stories. They were invented as amusing sport to scare children and weak minded adults.”

As she spoke, the animals gathered beside her, attracted to the soothing voice. Each animal was stroked in turn before she said, haughtily “These are not wolves, but only lovely dogs, friendly in attendance. They are playful within the house and without. Would Janz and Pesho stray from the grounds however, the dogs would herd them back, with authority. I caution you both to keep that in mind.”

As she had been speaking, the paper was folded into quarters and laid on her lap; entwined fingers rested lightly upon it.

“The rules as Charles explained them are for your protection. We don’t want either of you lost in the wilderness surrounding our meadow. Or hurt by the dangerous wild animals inhabiting the vicinity. That would be troublesome were it to occur. We would be most bothered. For the harmony of the household, I advise you to abide by our rules.”

She smiled a tight, flat smile at them. But as she thought better of it, the lips curled up and her eyes glowed roundly before she bounded to her feet and asked with false merriment, “Lunch, boys?”

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The dogs followed, prancing energetically behind her as she quickly crossed the room towards the kitchen. She and her entourage disappeared through the doorway arch.

That night, as if to validate the concern Charles had imparted and Jessica had reminded them of, dreadful animal noises were heard outside the house, often far away sounding. But sometimes approaching near. Possibly even pawing below their windows. Though in the light of day, they could find no disturbed soil beside the house.

Time passed. Routines were settled into. Charles was cheerful of the boys' diligence to the household. Jessica tried as she could to match him with the same. But the day had to arrive, being the boys that they were: true to their nature, Janz and Pesho would be Janz and Pesho. The restlessness of things forbidden became elevated to the most curiously attractive; they constantly remained in mind, taunting to be explored.

It started as this: Janz tried to get the other to sneak out at night with him. The dreadful animal noises had not been heard for some time. What had replaced them, at least for the last several nights, had been soft, gentle mewing. The sounds seemed to be coming from the grounds just below Pesho's window.

Janz, "It sounded like a lost kitten. The poor defenseless thing. I looked all over today, but couldn't find any sign of it.

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Maybe it sees our light at night and calls that it's afraid. We must rescue the kitten. It's in danger."

Pesho said, protesting, "We aren't allowed." It wasn't just words to him. He really was worried from Charles' warning.

Janz, "You're superstitious just like the old women in my village. They would get scared of invisible things in the dark as well."

"In the dark, with no moon to see by, everything is invisible."

"Exactly. You convince yourself, and therefore it is so."

"I don't have to touch the stove to know it is hot."

"In your reality the stove is always hot. But in mine, I test to see if it is so. Perhaps the stove is only sometimes hot."

Pesho was silent. He had no retort.

Janz, "I give up. I can't convince you. Can you at least do one thing for me? Be my lookout. The light from your window will be my illumination."

Both boys stared at each other until Pesho said, "Of course, I will. But what if I see something?"

"Make the sound like the cuckoo bird. That's what one does when they are the lookout."

"Three times, like the bird in the clock sometimes did, back at my home."

"You had a home? Like, with parents and brothers and sisters?"

"Yes. I did. But no brothers; only sisters."

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“I never did.”

“No home? No mother or father?”

“Not even any sisters. Only the Sisters at the orphanage. But I even lost them when they sold me to the farmer. His cruelty taught me to miss the cold kindness of those gray women. The older boys taught me the bird call. I was a good lookout—”

The sound of soft mewling began again. Drifting in through the open window, it was carried on the night air.

Wanting to convince himself if he said it fast enough he wouldn't lose his nerve, Janz blurted out, “I'm going to climb down the drain pipe to the garden. I'll find the kitten and be right back. You'll see then!”

The mewling grew louder, as if in anticipation.

“Don't go, Janz.” Pesho said, resigned. He grasped weakly at his friend's shirt. However, Janz was determined. He was already out the window.

The garden that he knew very well in the daytime was a spooky mystery at night. None of the bushes and trees seemed to be in the same place, or of the same shape. Janz had followed his intention going out the window and down onto the ground. But after setting foot to soil, the mewling call had ended. Searching back and forth along the wall of the house didn't reveal the source. No kitten.

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Janz was frustrated. Ready to give up, he looked back to the open window of Pesho's room. Just then the sound began again. It was coming from further away in the dark, beyond the light cast from the upstairs window. He followed the call.

Out upon the grass, from the light from the window, the shadow of Pesho was huge and distorted. It was waving anxiously for the other's return. Janz waved back with bravado before sprinting further across the grounds.

Pesho began to cry. Standing alone before the window the memories of his family welled up inside him. His last words with his mother had been in anger. He regretted them deeply, forlorn that there would ever be the opportunity to apologize. She had only asked him to pick berries for the pies they would make.

The season's market fair would be on the weekend. Mother and Father always kept a booth. She sold pies by the slice or whole. Father sold mead. His small meadery was well known locally for the quality of his creations. Seasonal herbs or fruits they harvested were hand-picked to be distilled in the mash. Customers returned in anticipation of the next batch from this well known local family.

The excellence of their booth was both a matter of pride as well as a matter of reputation. Father had spent a great portion

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of the family reserves preparing a batch larger, more varied than ever before. It would be a spectacular exhibit. The whole family had been enlisted in the project. Pesho and his sisters had missed school the last week to assist. Everybody was busy with their tasks.

Word had spread through the village. Father was ecstatic. There were so many pre-orders that he had already started the next mead batch, keen to meet the anticipated demand. The recipes took many months to process and age to his discretion. He wanted to assure the customers continued patronage by having enough stock to maintain their enthusiasm for his wares.

The new mix had commandeered the entire berry supply for Mother's pies. It was decided that Pesho would go to the creek for more. Mother said they would advertise the local freshness of the berries, harvested by the labor of their young son, Pesho. She was proud of her only son.

For his part, Pesho was not enthusiastic about this task at all. He really hated the picking, complaining the thorns always tore at his clothes and left him covered with scratches. The wasps loved the berries as well. Experience had taught, tangled in the vines, he would be momentarily defenseless to their cruel stings. There were hornets as well; however, they were slow and docile. Unlike the wasps, as long as the hornets were left alone, the big nasties would ignore his presence.

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The sisters responded to his sniveling in a huff, pulling back their sleeves to show Pesho scratches on their arms that had yet to heal, and welts from being stung.

Defeated, Pesho stormed out, slamming the door behind. Mother chased after him, bringing the berry pails and a sack with his lunch and drink. In the bottom of the sack there was always some special sweet, for her special boy. She hugged him and asked that he would please return with the pails full. And, don't be late for supper, she reminded cheerfully. He remained purposefully stiff during her embrace, wanting to pull away, but suffered to endure her.

At the creek, he began to dutifully pick the berries. It wasn't long before the scratches began. Several wasps got after him as well. He jerked back to escape them, but got caught up defenseless from his clothes becoming totally entangled. In anger, he pulled back, tearing his shirt and falling backside first into the muddy creek.

"That's just great! I'm a fine sight!" he shouted at the vines, thinking them cruel.

Now wet and cold, he climbed out of the shadows of the creek bank to stand upon it. The grass growing there was nice, inviting him to sit, so he did. He dug inside the bag. Not hungry for lunch, it was the sweet he was after. Tearing open the paper tied gracefully with grass twine in an ornate knot, a flaky baklava was discovered. This was another specialty

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mother was famous for at the market. Pesho wolfed it down greedily, without enjoyment of the delicate layers. He licked at his sticky fingers before searching the bag for more treats. A pouty disappointment became his face when none were discovered, just a sandwich and an apple. The drink was lemonade. He drank that down in one go before pushing the bag away in annoyance.

The warm sunshine had made him sleepy, inviting him to close his eyes. So he did, falling soundly asleep on the grass. The wasps buzzed their music into the stillness. They enjoyed the berries in the pail Pesho had started to fill. The other pails were of no interest; they had remained scrubbed clean empty. The wind blew lightly at his hair. Dreams of pastries flowed in and out of the mists of this young boy's imagination.

His next waking awareness was not so pleasant. His head hurt, throbbing in fact. He was no longer on the grass by the creek. It was dark and there was movement bouncing him around roughly. Confusion. There was the outcry of someone. Screaming, again and again. The intensity hurt his ears. It shocked him to realize it was himself making the shrieking.

Abruptly, the movement stopped. The blackness struck inward at him, painfully repeated until he was quiet. There was a strong smell and he got sleepy again. Forgetting, forgetting.

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When next awake, he was in a bed. Alone. The screaming began afresh. Immediately, storming into the room was a woman. He would later learn her name, Jessica. She was livid. A man, Charles followed her in with a look of concern. He tried to calm her. She pulled away from him to put a cloth over Pesho's face. It scratched. It had a similar smell as before, the smell in the dark.

As he became sleepy she said coarsely, with hot breath burning his ear, "Your fate is resolved. You live here now, such as you will."

The echo of her words rang in Pesho's ears. Tears streamed down his face. He blotted at them hastily, reminding himself where he was. Janz had tasked him as look-out so he must remain alert for his friend.

Janz's first intrepid steps encountered damp grass. The easy going allowed him to swallow back the fear. But then he stopped short. There was a dark shape before him. It moved, or didn't it? Without a thought, he reached out and touched at the shadow. It was a bush.

"Silly to be scared," he said aloud, chiding himself. He fingered the damp leaves, feeling their rough thorny edges.

The insistent mewling calls brought his attention back. He walked further from the house, further away from the light.

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Pesho, desperate, whisper-called for him to come back. But Janz walked on, enticed by his eyes adjusting to the star lit night. Dim gray shapes emerged, shadows against the sky. They were recognized for what they were: more bushes.

With half-steps he approached, but as yet, could not see the caller. His single focus continued on the sound, until suddenly he realized vague shapes had surrounded him. They moved in repeated motion in the periphery. Another step forward, unsure. Nothing happened. And another, hands outstretched into the black. Nothing. Again, another. A twig snapped under foot, stopping the mewing in mid-call. At that moment, two shapes rushed out of the darkness passing on either side of him. Something rough touched at his cheek. There was wetness. It burned. He wiped at it with his pj sleeve. The fleeing shapes receding into the black were dim white, not gray like the bushes. And, they smelled musty, like damp turned earth in an old forest.

Thought and movement were frozen. There was the light from Pesho's window. A beacon in the dark. He willed himself the courage to cross the distance to it. One foot was forced to move and then the other.

Pesho was surprised by the quick movement emerging out of the dim. He was about to form the call of the cuckoo, but sound would not come. How often he had heard it in his home, to be forgotten in the awe of the moment? Before he could

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force the memory, the image of his friend Janz was clear. In his pj's, he was shuffling fast, returning across the lawn. Arriving at the house wall, Janz scampered up the drain pipe in a single movement.

Allowing himself to be helped in, Janz was surprised at the shocked look on the other's face.

"Yes, my feet are wet and a little muddy, but what?"

"Come to the mirror and see."

"What?" he said, crossing to the vanity. He found a wide-eyed boy with crazy hair staring back at him. Himself. There was blood weeping from many little scratches across his cheek.

Pesho was beside him, with eyes red and watery. He turned on the tap, wetting a washcloth, and began blotting at the injury.

"It doesn't hurt," Janz said. His cheek was numb as was his face. Numb but rigid as a mask.

"Were you crying, Pesho? Your eyes are red."

He paused, averting his eyes.

"It's OK, Pesho. I'm OK."

"But what about the kitten? You left it out there?"

"I couldn't find it."

"What happened to your face?"

"I don't know. It was so dark. I guess I stumbled and fell into a bush, or something."

"Jessica and Charles will be angry. They'll see your face and know you were outside."

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“We just have to make a story up, and stick to it.”

“The wall planking is rough next to your bed. You could say you had to get up to go potty in the middle of the night. You were so sleepy disoriented that you got up on the wrong side of the bed and tripped, falling into the wall. That’s how you scratched your face: on the wall.”

“Beside my bed. That’s a great story, Pesho.”

“And your pj bottoms were wet because you peed yourself after you fell.”

Janz looked cross.

Pesho realized the humor didn’t go over—that Janz was sensitive about this. Maybe he had been a bed wetter? “Look, we have to wash the mud out of your pj’s. They are filthy. And, they won’t dry by morning. The mud you tracked across the floor, we have to clean that up too.”

“You think of everything.”

“That’s what brothers do for each other.”

“Yes. Brothers.”

The next morning at breakfast, Jessica and Charles were bright and cheery, as they always seemed to be that time of day. It was in the late afternoon that they became sullen—increasingly dour as the dusk approached. They noticed Janz’s scratches. Exchanging glances, a hint was broadcast that they had noticed, but had chosen not to say anything.

Janz felt guilty about lying and said nothing in response.

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Pesho volunteered the story of the fall against the wall.

Jessica and Charles listened patiently. A new concern grew jointly in their expression. Jessica took Janz by the hand, leading him to the pantry. The injury was cleaned thoroughly, scrubbed with a stiff brush. Sensation had since returned to his cheek. He winced in pain. His discomfort seemed to invite her to rub firmer and deeper. Blood began to ooze out. She stopped.

“That looks good. The blood must flow to facilitate healing. Don’t want to get a nasty infection from these small cuts. Now that would be silly, wouldn’t it? Even sillier than falling out of bed.”

“It was dark.”

She opened a cupboard and brought out a clear glass jar containing a greenish yellow paste. There was a length of twine wrapped several times around the jar; it was bound with an intricate knot. Words on the label had been written in a stiff script in ink, but the greasy contents had stained the letters, blurring them illegible.

She twisted the lid off, “Yes. Dark. That makes all the difference, doesn’t it? And your pj’s? Those weren’t the ones you were wearing last night.”

“You saw?”

“Yes, I did. I see things.”

Janz was desperate. A panic was coming on from her inquiry. He had to distract her, regardless of the consequences,

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before he lost control and blurted out in confession about the entire adventure last night. He could take it, but the worst to him would be exposing his brother to the repercussions of the lie. She would know that and relish the pain it would cause.

The words came to Janz without a thought. “Do you mean you are observant, or that you imagine seeing things that aren’t really there?”

Her eyes flared.

He knew this look well. The farmer had taught him what was to come next. Relax for the blow. Experience had taught it hurt less if he relaxed.

“Flippant little shit!” She hit him with her open hand against the back of his head. Blood oozing from the wound flew against the mirror.

He was dizzy but knew to exaggerate, pretending to stumble.

“Liar! Don’t pretend with me.” She pinched him under both arms until he stood by himself.

Looking at the mirror, the blood ran in streaks before her image. The scowling beautiful face reflected was terrorizing.

She growled, “You are going to clean that up!”

After taking a gasping, wheezing breath, she continued, “I paid that old man good money for you. He had a laugh that you were a good-for-nothing, but he was happy to take my money. I had the last laugh though, telling him that you were

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indeed good for something—something beyond his rustic goings on behind the woodshed.”

Time then seemed to have stopped. Her expression froze. It remained before him, hypnotizing. Without movement, she said more words, and at length. To Janz, the sounds flowed from his ears directly into his subconscious. None remained coherent.

When understanding finally did return, she was before him. They were facing each other. Their heads were close, barely separated. She was still, smiling pleasantly with an open mouth. Her beauty was enchanting. Janz wished he could stay like this, with her, forever. He was sad when she pulled back. It was not to be.

“Here you go. Let’s put some of this on you,” she said, applying salve from the open jar, rubbing it extendedly into his cheek.

She explained, “The motion activates the healing properties.” Some ran down his neck. Her eyes lightened. She slowly licked at the drips with a pointy rough tongue while making a call, distant in her throat. The sound was something like a mewling.

Janz stiffened in acknowledgment of the sound.

Just then, Charles came suddenly in. Observing the situation, he glared at her and spoke softly in a language that

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Janz had never heard. It sounded like the singing of a bird in the pre-morning dawn.

Jessica patted the boy on the shoulder and smiled.

Smiling now as well, Charles said, "Janz, I want you to go to Pesho. Tell him to brush his teeth, and if you are finished with your breakfast, brush yours as well."

"You should have more breakfast. You are still too skinny, little street urchin."

Charles' smile melted into a glare at the woman. She mouthed a single syllable word to him without sound.

"Go on. Exactly like I told you," Charles said.

Janz dodged between the couple, quickly leaving their ominous presence. He found Pesho at the table, who had still been eating. Pulling at his sleeve, Janz said, quietly, "Come."

"But I haven't finished yet!" Pesho protested.

"Shush," Janz said, holding a hand to the other's mouth. Without further protest, Pesho followed his adopted brother. They went upstairs and into the bathroom. Janz shut the door.

"Was Jessica angry?" Pesho asked.

"I had thought so, but she wasn't. She was just concerned. She is so beautiful..."

Pesho looked at his brother with uncertainty. "After you and Jessica left for the pantry, Charles talked with me cheerfully. But he kept nervously glancing away. His attention was distracted by the noises coming from behind the door.

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“Finally, he just stopped talking. That got me nervous, so I chimed in with a story I had just made up on the spot. Told it rather well too, I think. You’d be proud of my creativity. However, in the middle of my story he got up and darted for the door. I was stunned. I didn’t know what to do, so I continued my telling to the audience of three empty chairs.

“Janz, something strange happened. As the words tumbled out, I saw the chairs gain occupants. It happened right before me as though I had conjured them up. There was a boy, and Jessica, and Charles. I thought the boy was you, but as his outline strengthened, he was clearly not you. This boy was another, dressed strangely. The clothes were a style I had seen in books of paintings from long ago. Jessica and Charles, they weren’t right either. They were older. But as their looks gained focus, they became younger, as they look today. Maybe even younger. They were both so beautiful. The other boy looked to them lovingly, as though enraptured.

“Then you came in, Janz. Before I could protest, you sat in the chair the other boy was sitting on. I was amazed: His looks blended with yours. You both were the same height. Both the same shape. I realized I had been mistaken: but for your clothes, you were identical.”

“And the ghost Jessica and Charles? Were they still there after I came to sit?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

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“You imagine things!” Janz said, not sure of his own words. But the experience in the pantry was even more weird: Jessica licking at his neck as though she was tasting him.

Pesho heard him through, without comment. After thinking for a moment, he said, “That is strange. Are you sure that was all of it? You were with her for a while. What about the shouting?”

“What shouting? I told you, she wasn’t angry. And I would never shout at her. Why would I?”

“Well, I know what I heard. Charles did as well. You do remember him coming in, don’t you?”

“Yes. He came in and talked with her in some foreign language. It sounded nice.”

“I didn’t hear a word of it...” His attention wavered. The next words came out dreamy. “Maybe the salve has a nice taste, like honey baklava, and she couldn’t help herself?”

Before Janz could say anything, Pesho wiped some ointment onto his fingers and sucked on them. “Yes. Like a sweetmeat. Rather pleasant.” He took another wipe and sucked at his fingers longer, making a gurgling noise. Then he began to hum tunelessly.

When Pesho tried for a third taste, Janz shouted, “Stop it!”

The shock woke Pesho out of what seemed to be a daze. He stumbled to speak, until he could. “Oh! Sorry... I didn’t realize what I was doing. Might that I have spoiled the properties?—”

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Charles interrupted, calling from downstairs in a syrupy-pleasant voice, “Janz, Pesho. Come join us in the garden when you boys are done with your toilet.”

Janz was silent, studying his brother, who studied him back.

Pesho replied cheerfully, apparently recovered, “OK, Charles. We’ll be down shortly. See you in the garden!”

The boys bounded out the open french doors with pretended laughter, giggling and pushing at each other. They sprinted across the patio and into the garden where Jessica and Charles awaited. Arriving together, they stood stiff in mock attention before the couple, who had been quietly drinking coffee.

Returning the mock play, Charles said, “At ease! You two ragamuffins.”

“Former ragamuffins,” Jessica said, coldly.

“Yes, ma'am,” Janz said, feeling an opening for appeasement. “You and Charles have rescued us to this wonderful life at this wonderful house, with you two generous, wonderful people.”

Jessica glowered at the feigned compliment.

Charles, “Well, I don’t know about that, the wonderful people part—”

“Boys! Charles and I need to go to the city for business. We need one of you to accompany us. But here’s the dilemma:

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which one of you shall it be?” While looking between the boys, she said, “The wonderful city? Or, to stay here, house sit, do chores, till the garden?”

Her blank gaze came to rest on Janz. A smile crept upon her lips, first in one corner, then the other joined it in the tightening upward movement. She said, “Pesho. We leave after lunch. You will clean yourself up to be presentable for the journey.”

Still looking at the boy, she continued, “Janz. Charles will speak to you concerning the chores we expect from you while we are gone.”

After lunch, the three departed. The dogs followed them down the track until the forest start. They sat before the darkness of the forest, assuring themselves of the surety of the parting. Janz had already made the trek from the shed to the garden with the wheelbarrow. He was unloading the tools and bags when the dogs bounded up. They laid on the grass before him, each with a head on paws. Janz came over to the nearest. The head lifted to receive the intended scratch. No change in temperament occurred from the attention given.

The day carried on, elongating in shadow. The dogs had moved out of the sun to escape the heat. Janz continued diligent to work the garden until he got dizzy. He stopped for a water break and sat among the dogs. They moved sleepily from

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his presence. One, the one that had received Janz's attention earlier, laid his heavy head on the boy's leg. His eyes looked up in sympathy, as though sorry for the boy's situation. Janz scratched the animal, misunderstanding the communication. After a while, the dog closed his eyes, indulging the attention.

The sun continued lower, approaching the horizon.

"They haven't returned yet, boy," he said. The dog opened its eyes. "Should I be worried? I am worried."

The dog growled softly. Janz was startled. He moved to stand. The dog reluctantly did as well, moving heavily.

Janz started for the house. Half way there, he thought otherwise. Returning to the garden, he collected the tools and the bags, which were loaded back into the wheelbarrow. Pushing it up to the house was more work than walking it down, though the grade was not great. Passing the tree, the dogs were still gathered there. They were sitting, now alert, paying attention to every movement of the boy.

Janz saw this and was a bit nervous for it. Attempting bravado, he said, "Come on guys. Let's get you fed."

The dogs responded. Two sprinted ahead to the house. The third came to stand beside Janz. He reached to scratch its head, but drew his hand back quickly, as the dog again growled softly at him. Janz bent to his burden, lifting to push the wheelbarrow to the shed. The dog attended his heels with every step.

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The dog feeding chore, Janz was adapt with this one. Charles had shown the boys the routine on their first day at the house. Pesho had never been comfortable with dogs, any dogs. These in particular, he was afraid of. The dogs knew this and enjoyed taunting him. He begged Janz to switch this chore with him whenever it was his turn. Janz was glad to, though he was wary of these animals as well. He was just more careful to hide his feelings. The opportunity to switch was fine, but he made it a two to one deal: Pesho had to do two of Janz's chores to this one. Unloading the wheelbarrow at the shed, Janz looked at the attending dog and was sorry he had taken advantage of Pesho. He hoped his brother was OK down in the city and that he would return soon. He tried to imagine the funny stories Pesho would tell of the trip. His brother could arrange words nice, such that he could see pictures in his head from them. The thoughts didn't get much further before he realized his face was wet with tears. He looked at the dog who stared at him without expression.

Wiping his sleeve across his face, he said, "Come on. Let's see to your chow."

He marched stiffly out of the shed, latched the heavy door closed, and continued along the walk up to the house. Arriving before the pantry door, he went directly inside. The attending dog rushed before him, pushing into the house. Janz stopped, recognizing he had made a mistake in forgetting to bring in the dog bowls. He went back out, closing the door behind him.

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The dog bowls were on the patio by the picnic table from the morning feeding. The attending dog recognized it was closed inside the house. It jumped at the door, banging furiously. The intensity startled Janz. He stumbled backwards, falling upon the ground. The dog's face was visible through the glass upper of the door. Its hot breath steamed the window in pants. The stunned boy and the dog stared at each other before it howled in calling. Without a moment passing, the other two dogs rounded the house, as though they had been waiting there. Each looked at the boy, then to the other behind the window. They jumped up to stand against the door, communicating in dog-speak. Grunts and other utterances were exchanged before attending to the passive boy. One grabbed at his collar, pulling, indicating him to stand. After he did, the same pushed him towards the door. Janz grabbed at the knob nervously, but his arm wouldn't obey to open it. Both dogs growled at him, not softly as the attending dog had done earlier. This was a serious, no nonsense growl. Janz's arm responded reflexively to the dogs' command. The trapped dog came out and sat before him. He licked at Janz's hand, pushing it atop his head. Janz obeyed this dog's command as well, proceeding to scratch at it.

After the dog feeding chore, Janz made a small dinner for himself of sausage and boiled potatoes. All the while during the preparation and the meal he listened and checked repeatedly out the window. The window into the dark of the

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night. He longed to hear sounds interrupting the forest's chatter, but hope was in vain. There was no return.

He had become sleepy. The dogs were let out, as was their desire. He went upstairs. A last look out the open window of his bedroom, straining into the night to detect sign of their return approach. Nothing. Absolute stillness above the background chatter.

Laying in bed with the covers pulled tight, he said, "It's more quiet than usual." These were his last words before sleep overcame him. It was a deep sleep. A sleep of dreamless unconsciousness.

Janz was awakened suddenly. There was movement on the wall. It came in through the window. A flickering light. Grunting sounds were heard, irregularly repeated. A loud crackling and popping was growing in intensity, becoming a roar. He went to the window. There was a bonfire burning on the grounds by the grassy area, away from the house. The fire radiated such a brilliant intensity that he had to shade his eyes until they became accustomed to it. There was more grunting demanding attention. In the light, he saw a person, a black silhouette before the fire. The image was moving around the parameter. It was jerking with twisting movements, leaping and spinning with much energy. The shadow was hugely grotesque across the lawn, even more exaggerated than were its movements, which appeared disconnected—shadow from

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individual. Circling around to the far side of the fire, the light reflected upon them.

“Her hair participates in the dance,” Janz said, entranced by the long wavy hair, swirling, shaking, jerking in response.

“You are a woman, but you are not Jessica. You are younger.” She was nude, but that did not embarrass him. The recognition was instant and without reservation: Her beauty was stunning. He was drawn to her.

The next awareness Janz had after leaving the house and crossing the grass, was of himself approaching the fire. The woman had continued her dance of abandon as if unaware of the boy. He stopped to stand outside the direct fire light, remaining in the shadows. The next revolution of the fire brought change to her dance. Focus was directed into the surrounding dark, in his direction. But as yet, she did not acknowledge him.

After another revolution, she stopped while on the far side of the fire. Her body was illuminated. Attention was fully directed to Janz. Her chest was heaving for breath. Feet were poised, standing defiantly erect, legs apart in balance.

Unsure, he asked, “Are you Jessica’s daughter?”

Before he could reason further, she kicked up her feet and with a single leap disappeared behind the brilliant fire.

Janz was anxious, longing for sight of her form. When she emerged on the other side, he was relieved the vision of her was restored. No longer nude, she wore a robe. She walked

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directly up to him in the shadows, taking his hand. He winced from the contact, which was hot, almost burning. And wet, she was dripping wet.

“Come,” she said.

Janz obeyed automatically. He was relaxed in obedient happiness. To be commanded by her, to be in her presence, to be in her attention. This was ultimate joy.

She led him away from the fire, but not towards the house. The absoluteness of inky blackness was before them, but for the starlight. Her pace was confident, which gave him surety with his blind steps matching her, two to one. Their direction was the edge of the meadow, where the valley’s forest began. He was not permitted to go there without the couple. But he was not afraid to break this rule. The young woman would protect him. Of that, there was no uncertainty, no fear, no doubt.

Not another word had been spoken since the first. Across strides, she would look down at him from time to time. He received the green glow of her eyes; they empowered him. Her hand had remained hot, but he had adjusted to its severity. Drips of liquid would roll from her onto him, wetting their grip before falling to the ground. The dogs had come up and were attending the march. Their eyes glowed too, though theirs were yellow. It wasn’t the starlight that the young woman and the dogs reflected, it was an inner energy. He wondered if his

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eyes glowed too. Holding his free hand up before his face did not show any glow; indeed, the obscuring hand was invisible in the forest dark.

The group continued the trail, walking over a pass, then down, where they followed the long depression slash of a draw. Janz had no comprehension where they were. He had never been so far from the house in any direction since the arrival.

They had stopped. There was a small wall before them. The woman urged Janz forward. She steadied him as he climbed over, following him immediately. The dogs did not cross. Janz felt the firmness underneath, believing they were standing on a rock paved area. The cold light of stars was before them. The distant ridge peaks formed the horizon. The air was still.

Standing behind Janz, she took both of his hands, holding them together as one. She broke the silence to say, "I am Iscah. I lead you to the return of Karl."

At the speaking of the name, a shadow detached itself from the dark to stand before them. Stars were blotted out by the shadow's presence.

Iscah spoke again, "Karl shall return to me." The firmness of her hold of Janz's hands remained unabated. Janz, in turn, had no intention of pulling away from her; indeed, he had worry that she would. He was afraid: To lose contact would lose himself to the night. He would not see Pesho again. Of these fears, he was correct.

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The shadow pushed against Janz, moving to embrace her, causing the boy to step aside to maintain his balance. Janz knew without knowing that the shadow was a man. But, was he the Karl Iscah spoke of?

The man wore a robe of similar material as she. It felt softly delicate, but of a sticky strength, as though it was made of woven spider silk.

Iscah had kept ahold of one hand. Janz offered the other before the man reached for it, knowing contact would be required. Without understanding but for intuition, Janz led them across the glade to a small column. They surrounded it. Iscah and Karl joined hands, completing the circle. She immediately began to utter mumbled words. Janz strained to hear them, to break the sounds into a coherent flow; but the more intensely he tried, the more effective they were at eluding him. The man joined in, reciting words echoing hers. They continued in harmony. As the words droned on, Janz's attention wavered. He had become dizzy, though his legs stoically refused to fail him. The couple's intensity was pushing the night into his being.

The words stopped. A breath was taken and then she began to sing. The words sounded like bird-speak. Janz was pulled back into the moment. He mused playfully that her pitch was higher than possible for a human voice. The focus of his entire being was pulled into the notes. And then suddenly she

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stopped, as though cut off. All was quiet. Even the night chatter in the distance was paused, as if in anticipation.

She and the man shouted a single syllable simultaneously. The sound echoed off the mountain peak behind them. The echo repeated beside them, distant, weaker. Again, even further away, even that much weaker. A final time, barely audible. The couple stood without movement, as though in quiet expectancy.

And then it was fulfilled. Barely audible at first, the echo came back to them, quicker, and with much greater force. Janz cringed. The echo built, approaching peak to peak. From across the gulf, from the sister valley driven twain, the echo was beamed at them, striking the ridge above. The sound was as though a giant crashed its gnarly hands together, clapping directly before the couple and boy. Janz had closed his eyes. He wanted to scream, and would have but for the lack of air in his lungs.

In response to the din, a wispy orange fireball formed above the column, which illuminated it. Janz saw its light through clenched eyelids. He opened them timidly. The scene before him had changed from black to illumination. The column was revealed. Its shape was hewn from rock. Across the glade, it was of the same. A single surface, flat but for the connected pillar thrust before them. All of one rock.

The ball beckoned the return of his attention. Revealing deep texture, like it was formed of glowing yarn, it pulsed,

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moving within itself. Twisting, pulling and pushing. The ball responded to his focus, transitioning from dark orange to yellow. The change within flowed to the surface. The brilliant core remained visible through the outer layers, increasing color frequency and density. Energy expanded outward onto the surface.

The glow illuminated the couple. They were staring at Janz. Their eyes were wide, but dead of expression. The man broke his gaze, looking to the ball, which was now a depthless pure white. It was a single glow of impossibly bright light. Janz should have had to shield his eyes from such blinding intensity, but closing his eyes made no difference. The scene before him remained the same as when they were open. The light required his fascination. No thoughts distracted him.

An itching began in his chest; it was a longing, which became an opening of himself. The longing pulled at the ball. It resisted, vibrating, pushing away from him. The more the ball resisted, the more it was desired. He pleaded, begging completeness. This did not bring appeasement.

Disappointment flooded in at failing Iscah. Janz resigned himself to the fate of abandonment. At once, as though a crossbow bolt had been released, the ball of light entered him, piercing his chest. He received the containment, stumbling backwards. But for the grip Iscah and the man maintained upon him, he would have fallen. His attention was upon that grip. Looking, there were no longer separate hands grasping at each

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other. Their bodies were fused at the wrists, each to the other. Following up his arms, they were draped in the same material as the couple had been. But now, they were nude: young woman and older man.

The ball boiled within him. His chest was on fire from the heat. It was spreading, engulfing his entire torso. The view of the couple was fascinating. It brought him relaxed happiness. Relaxation as the fire grew, continuing into the extremities, entering his arms and legs. It did not traverse into his head. The neck seemed a buffer. This was not the direction it was seeking. The garment began to respond to the heat, melting into his flesh, contracting, squeezing him as though the shape it desired was a tube. The pressure from the heat inside and the garment outside balanced against his boiling tissues.

All this while, there was no fear. Janz was observing dispassionately, as though this phenomenon was happening to some distant person.

The heat pressure raced down his legs, accelerating, drawn to the megalith. At the moment the energy entered rock, all became aglow surrounding them. His attention was consumed by the terrifying beauty of Iscah. By watching this woman, this young Jessica, satisfaction became fulfillment. Her smile radiated with the glow. She personified the completeness he desired. His humble self had brought her joy. He was happy for that.

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Iscah was not aware of Janz's attention. Her entire being was engulfed in studying the man. Her intensity drew Janz to follow. Looking to the man, his features were tightening. Lines on his face flattened, absorbed by strength emerging from within. Janz had an insight; the realization was known as truth: He recognized the man. It was Charles. A much older man who was now becoming Charles again, the man who brought him here to his home, with Jessica. They had rescued him from the street. From a life long beyond the short years he had passed. The actuality flooded into him.

The change continued. Charles' features became younger, and continued younger still, until he was a young man: Karl. Karl, matched to a young woman, Iscah.

They both looked to each other, radiating the intensity of their love bond. Love Janz observed and was never to receive. But, it was his happiness to contribute to. A gladness to relinquish freely any and all of his being.

The couple together looked at Janz, acknowledging him, observing in curiosity. The force opposing the crush of the spider silk garment subsided as the last remaining energy had been pressed out of his being. The garment won, as it always did. The couple released their contact as Janz was crushed down upon himself into a small cocoon. But from this wrap, a butterfly would never emerge. What had been now was gone, gifted onto Karl.

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The glow of the rock floored glade faded to reflection, revealing the man and woman aglow in their glorious nudity. The man picked up the cocoon of Janz. He walked with the woman away from the column. They left wet prints on the stone, each step glimmering briefly. Near the edge of the megalith, another awaited. The woman lifted the cocoon of Pesho above her head, joining the man in form. They together stood at the edge of the earth. Below them, the vertical drop was uninterrupted to the lake surface and its depths below. The remnants were dropped simultaneously. Without ceremony, without a look, without a further thought of the boys, the couple turned. They walked across the square, matching steps, in rhythm with their beauty. Janz would have appreciated the sight, as would Pesho.

Before the couple's glow in the glade high above was obscured by their walk back into the forest, down upon the lake surface, a single splash was formed from two. It was only a small displacement of water, with hardly a wake formed. However, the objects' transformation had yet to come to an end. With a movement barely discernible, the cocoons sank. Through the depths the water mass built above, pushing down with great force upon the settling of two leaves from the forest above. Time passed without heed until the depths had no more to traverse. The brothers settled on the bottom, laying one beside the other.

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Light had not reached into this abyss for millennia. It was a place abandoned, a place without time; however, in the darkness, the boys were not alone. Scattered around and below in layers as though laid down by sedimentation were pairs of cocoons. Movement joined the newcomers. Responding to the offering, they arrived. A group of creatures. Creatures, they would rightly be called that: not descended from fish or amphibian. In fact, their species' incarnation predated such newcomers. In size, they matched a cocoon's length at double, with a width similar as well. They possessed movement and independent intelligent thought. There was purpose in action. Each caused a paste to be secreted, manipulated from the other's form. The paste resembled in color and consistency a certain salve kept in a glass jar wrapped in twine which was bound with an intricate knot. They rubbed it slowly and carefully upon the surface of the two forms. When the covering was complete, they inspected the shapes before laying them accordingly. With these two, a strata layer was completed. They were satisfied in this accomplishment. Before departing, the other nearby forms were reviewed. Pairs of a more recent history were covered in a sparse fur of what some would think mushrooms. But rightly, these organisms are of kingdom fungi, though not of a type in any known taxonomy. If there was illumination at these depths, those mycologists so

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inclined would be fascinated with the color of the fungi, a green so dark as to be mistaken as black.

Before the expiry of Pesho, the night shadowed his tears. Tears, the origin of which were emotions held simultaneously: the loss his new brother, Janz, would suffer from his demise. And, the sorrow for the missed opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the moment they did not share together.

THE END.

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ABOUT JEFF HAYES

Jeff Hayes has been working for many years as a Software Engineering Consultant- not to be confused with his evil-twin, of no relation. Now located in Switzerland as an employee with a financial firm, he has found several hours free in his daily commute. Daydreaming out the carriage window on the green Swiss countryside, the idea came to him to consider the train commute as renting a public space office. Balancing the distraction of the fellow passengers with life within office space cube walls, thus began Jeff's side work realizing his thoughts into words.

Though many pets and a few horses have graced Jeff's life, he presently finds himself pet free, for the short term.

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CONNECT WITH JEFF HAYES

Jeff enjoys talking with his readers for reflections words can bring. Their impressions can be fascinating and unexpected.

He can be reached at his website, depli.com



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Summary

[A Couple's Hunger](#), a short story. Part, the second, in [Rabbitry](#), a pentalogy.

Benevolent benefactors of street urchins can run the gamut of motivations. For some, it is an end in itself. For others, it is the end, beautiful though it may seem.

High mountains keep their stories secret. Those not adept are warned to beware where they tread. From the exploration [A Fine Day](#) introduced, [A Couple's Hunger](#) carries on.