

JASON'S BONES

It was early fall when Marley received the letter telling her that her father had died. The document had arrived registered mail; a law firm's letterhead scrolled at the top of the page. In a brief but clear proclamation, it stated that she had inherited the total sum of her father's estate: an '87 yellow Ford pickup, three hundred and twelve dollars in a checking account, seventeen thousand in a savings and a small, secluded one-bedroom house on two acres of land on the southern Oregon coast. She read the papers twice, allowing the turbulence of her battling emotions to settle. She hadn't seen her father in almost five years; the last time, just after she'd moved to San Francisco, taking a job in a printing shop and then with her first vacation driving the seven hours up to the Oregon coast. The trip had been dubious from the beginning and the brief visit with her father proved both tiring and troubling, and on the long trip back, she couldn't help but agonize over the fact of a genetic association with the insensitive, odd man she had just left.

Now, staring through the icy black glass of her window at the trembling lights of Coit tower and the thick fog rolling in from the Avenues, she realized once again, her father had unknowingly changed her life.

The trust was settled in mid-summer and by September Marley had moved into the house and begun making it her own. She donated her father's clothing and other items to the missions and churches and what she couldn't give away she burned. While going through her father's foot locker, she found a puzzling collection of watches and jewelry that she just discounted as one of his odd fetishes, leaving them where they lay, under his old military uniform.

She turned the garage into a studio, where she made pottery and jewelry. She wrote poetry and planted a garden of vegetables, kale and salad greens. She even, to no success, joined an on-line dating site that did little except to fuel her frustrations and disappointment. Time passed, and by the following year, surprisingly and almost effortlessly, she had assimilated herself into the odd, eclectic culture of the small, coastal community.

If there was one drawback to her undemanding lifestyle, it was loneliness, the lingering absence of another soul, another presence, to embrace and explore the simple mysteries and daily adventures of a normal and nourished life. Financially, at least for the time being, she was comfortable. Her spring and summer days filled with projects and chores that kept her prudently distracted from any analytical discussion with herself of finding a companion. The nights however

were yielding and lonely, the small enamoring cottage surrendering its quaintness for the cold, locking, emptiness of a stone castle. And in the winter the solitude became even more daunting, slipping into a world of colorless ambiguity and a hopelessness that at times, seemed to suggest no end.

With her garden and flower beds grey and flat against the earth, like the stenciled sketches of coiling ash, Marley filled her fall days and early evenings hunting mushrooms. She talked to people at the farmers' market, read mycology books from the library, and scanned the internet. The Pacific Northwest was generously abundant in its array and variety and she was surprised to learn that all but a few of the local mushrooms were edible. She found exploring the murky redwood grottos both calming and challenging, the cascading reefs of tumbling ferns, the twisting garlands of unraveling vines, all sparkling and spinning with an ethereal light that seemed to bounce off her very soul.

She learned to identify the mushrooms; learned their names and where to pick certain varieties that flourished and pushed up through the damp mulch after a subsequent climate change. Marley hadn't smoked pot since high school but a woman at the market, who she only knew as Angela, had given her a small

canister, and she found that a few hits from the pipe before a hike made the adventure pleasantly colorful and mysteriously enjoyable.

It was her second year of coastal living and her second year of picking 'unicellular microorganisms,' a term that made her chuckle when she said it or pictured the words in her head. It had been a wet fall, the skies for the most part sunless and swollen with rain and now in November, with the ground sodden and warming with mulch, Marley found the shingled colonies and buttons sprouting everywhere.

That morning when she woke, her bedroom window filled with sunlight, a strip of blue sky riding the top of the sash, she knew it would be a perfect day for picking. She dressed, made a breakfast of oatmeal and berries and a strong cup of tea, constantly checking the windows as if to reaffirm that her unexpected gift hadn't mockingly been snatched away. Finished, she put the plates and cup in the sink, then after pulling on her rubber boots, gathered her wicker basket, a jacket and the short crescent shaped knife with a wood handle that she used for cutting the stems.

One of Marley's favorite hikes was a narrow trail that wound down through deep cuts of hemlock and spruce and plagues of lightless deadfalls before

flattening out across a chiseled rim high above the redundancy of a swelling ocean. Half way down the path she found a cluster of Hedgehogs, taking three of the biggest and firmest and then further a scattering of Sweet tooth and some black oysters. Her basket not half full, she stepped off the trail, wandering down through boughs of ferns and downed trees caped with mantles of moss and all around the damp smells of mulch and rotting vegetation swarmed up from the primordial darkness of a world lost to any association with sunlight or time. Crab-stepping further, into a hollow of dogwood and spruce, Marley was about to put the blade of her knife to a leaning mushroom when she suddenly stopped.

She had seen something out of the corner of her eye. It wasn't bright or obvious, and was settled ambiguously in concert with everything else around it, but somehow it was a presence and something was wrong, wrong in a way that sent a brief chill shooting through her body. Straightening, she let the knife drop into the basket then stepping forward, cautiously looked over a brown tangling of dried honeysuckle and dead ferns.

She'd seen skeletons and bones before in the forest, but for some strange inherent reason she knew these were not the remains of an animal. And as she walked closer and saw the decaying fabric of a tennis shoe and the partially

buried and twisted seam of stiff denim, she knew that the bones were not those of any animal but those of a human.

Catching the breath that had suddenly left her, she stepped back and looked at the scattered remains. The bones were weathered, some smooth and polished like tarnished ivory, others bronzed like dirty copper. What was left of the clothing was little more than a pool of rotting material and from that fetid cloth, the rack of a ribcage, twisted and snaked with vines, sat cocked, with its grinning apertures like some grisly centerpiece. On one foot was a tennis shoe and partial sock, the other foot, was disturbingly missing. Taking a stick, Marley pushed back a canopy of leaves and branches. When she saw the skull and its hollow, frozen expression staring back at her; she quickly dropped the stick and turned away.

It was hard to explain, the rush of emotions and feelings that had reached out and seized her. This had been a person; a soul, born and thrust into the world with an anticipation of joy and blessings or possibly a poignant lament of bitter regret but a person just the same, and now for all his significance, good or bad, in the coldness of it all, this was his final destination.

Suddenly aware of where she was Marley turned, half expecting to see the dark form of a faceless murderer, but there was only the solitude of the empty

forest and the hydraulic ticking of her blood. Again she nervously looked around and then up at the towering redwoods stoically pushing up through the layers of shadows, their conifer tips burning with sunlight like the glowing wicks of giant candles. She didn't even know if this person had been murdered, she thought. She'd heard the stories, about drug dealers, body dumping and executions, and the fact that several years ago at least a dozen people went missing and were never found. But it just as easily could have been a hiker or drifter or even a mushroom picker, their chest suddenly ripped with a paralyzing explosion of rupturing arteries and aortas. She looked for something identifying, a ring, watch, chain or cell phone, but there was only the decaying clothing and a splaying cavity of bones.

Her eyes fixed on the remains, Marley backed up till she could no longer see them, but she knew they were there and where they were and that was just as chilling. She'd tell the authorities, she knew she had to, so she mentally marked the area by a dead tree. Then with a strange feeling following her like a cold shadow, she climbed back to the trail and up to her car.

Sitting in the Outback, her hands resting on the steering-wheel, she leaned back, letting the startling events of the day settle. From where she parked she

could see the freeway and she sat numbly, almost soporifically, watching the cars pass, wondering if any of those passing might have known the man down in the ferns or maybe, had even been his executioner.

He was a man, she was almost certain, because of the size of the skull and the shoe, but how old was he? What was his name? Where did he come from? Shaking off the thoughts, she took her cell phone and powered up the screen. When she looked down to see the 'No Service' message at the top of the menu, she wasn't surprised.

Back at her house, sitting at the kitchen table, the basket of mushrooms and cell phone in front of her, Marley found herself struggling with the constantly shifting interpretation of her changing emotions. She couldn't help but feel that in some odd way; her life had been expanded, even enhanced. She had seen a side of death, a side that was profoundly secretive and alluding, transcending the constraints of normal social understanding and sentiment. She didn't pick up her cell phone that night and she didn't call 911. The next morning, she found herself putting on her rubber boots, getting into her car and driving back to the deep turnout where she had parked the day before.

For a long time she just sat in her car, watching the trees fill with wind, listening to the distant traffic and the drumming of her heart. It was cooler than the day before and windier, and eventually, after letting out a long held breath, Marley got out of her Subaru and walked to the head of the trail. There she was met by a strident wind, sharp as a viper's hiss, and she could smell and taste the ocean and she stepped down into the deep shadows of the trees, questioning not only her motives but if she would even go through with this irrationally, bizarre exercise.

She could turn back, any time. She was aware of this and almost did, but it was as if she were directed by the compulsion of some powerful energy, one that blocked out all outside logic or reasoning, leaving her helpless to its demands. With every step, her adrenaline tightened and even though it was cool she sweated; when she got to the place where she left the trail the day before she paused. Below she could see the familiar banks of ferns, racks of deadfalls and evergreens, all tumbling down into a carved geometry of sharpened shadows and slicing light. Her heart racing, she stepped off the path and everywhere she looked she imagined the hollow expression of grinning teeth, the gothic chain of a spine, the ebony arch of moss blown ribs. Even when she closed her eyes the images refused to leave and with the taste of anticipation drying bitterly in her

mouth, she wondered if the bones had ever really been there at all. And if so would they still be there now?

She saw the dead and weathered tree she had used to mark the location and ten minutes later was knelt on one knee staring at the raw remains, just as she had left them the day before.

Yes, it was definitely a man, she decided, ignoring the ghoulishness of it all. She looked at the high cheek bones, the soiled but almost perfect teeth, the stringy lock of hair spraying from a dried scab of flesh. Like studying the concept of an abstracted painting, Marley stared at the boney carcass, trying to imagine what it had looked like in life. "You need a name," she whispered, matter-of-factly, cocking her head and looking at the skull. "What should I call you?"

She rose to her feet and with hands on hips, inspected the skeleton from its grinning skull to the missing foot. "Jason," she finally said, snapping a nod in agreement. "Yes, you look like a Jason and I think I'll call you that."

She left at dusk, as a crimson sky raked the western horizon and to the east the first ignition of stars struggled anemically against a pervading rack of assassinating clouds.

At home she made tea, lit candles and sat at the kitchen table thinking about the day and what she had done. Was it wrong, she thought, to leave him there? Was it immoral not to tell the authorities? Was it depraved to actually give him a name? When she said it out loud, "Jason," she was surprised it didn't sound abrasive or weird, so she said it again and then again in a righteous attempt at forming an adherent immunity should it ever sound foolish or morbid. And it didn't. If anything, it made her feel privileged, special.

She slept more soundly than she had since she was a child. In her dreams she saw her father, the overbearing shadow of an entity as uninteresting in death as he was in life. He was telling her through the telepathy of dreams, that she was useless and that he should charge her for breathing and being alive. And when she asked him how much she would pay, he answered by saying the whole price, because otherwise there was a dark and lonely place for useless people like her. In her dream she felt shamed, unable to answer and within the shell of a porous mist she saw the lonely image of another entity, pale and vague and holding out his palm in a consoling, understanding manner. She said his name, and in the dream he answered, and was about to reveal more when the menacing presence her father came between them canceling out any endeavor. "He's gone isn't he?"

she asked, the light now suddenly as cold as a midnight star. “Yes,” her father answered. “Yes, he is gone.”

She woke in the early morning, as a false light brushed the top of the sash and a temporal wind scraped and rattled the trees. She made tea and oatmeal then sat at the wood table behind the steaming cutlery, letting the haunting whispers of the night’s dreams echo and resound as if searching a consoling perch in the solace of her soul.

Finished with breakfast, Marley put on her boots then walked to the closet at the end of the hall. Parting the hanging clothes, she reached into the back moving boxes and bags and more boxes, until she found what she wanted. Then, with the back pack slung over her arm, went to the kitchen. She took two forty- gallon can liners from under the sink and folded them into the pack. From the entranceway, she gathered a garden trowel and blanket and shoved those in with the trash liners. It had started to storm and for a long time, she stood inside the entrance, staring at the door and listening to the tapestry of rain and slapping wind. It had all seemed so abstract, she thought, so disjointed from the logical laws of society and the inherent foundation of a fundamental existence. The element of guilt was there, along with the inviolable aftertaste of a fallible perversion, but the

doctrinal awkwardness, as conflicting as it seemed, dissipated in the fact of a liberating presence. For the first time in her life, Marley felt the ability of being whole and relevant and in possession of an emotional value designed uniquely to serve her being.

She had reached for the door latch once and then again, each time pulling back before finally abandoning all thought and logic, and just pushing the door open to the world that waited.

What was she doing? She thought. At times it was so precisely clear, and then in a turning second it was suddenly as uncertain as the rolling darkness choking the sky. Juggling these questions, she ran to the car, the rain ticking the nylon pack, the wind snapping her hair, a veil of sluicing water as she opened the Outback's door. Awkwardly she fell into the front seat; the pack tossed with a thump to the floor.

She drove down the wet road and onto the highway. The darkened shoreline passed, the weather lifted - a pewter strip of flat water stretching like a band to the west. She pulled over and parked in the familiar turnout then killed the motor and stared at the wall of evergreens and the pale water that slipped from their weighted branches. She said his name, immediately wishing she hadn't then

mechanically reached for the pack hearing the echo of her voice, or was it only a passing car planing over the wet tarmac?

“I wish you’d have left the remains where you found them,” said the deputy.

“I didn’t want him to be alone anymore,” answered Marley.

“Did you know this person?” asked the deputy.

“No.”

“Then why did you say *him*, Ms Jordan?”

Marley had not lifted her eyes from the untouched coffee; she now looked up at the deputy’s round, clean shaven face. “I just figured he was a man from the size of his shoes and head.”

The deputy nodded, displaying a courteous smile. He’d been jotting down random notes in a yellow pad, underlying some comments, circling others, the clicker of his pen pressed at the corner of his mouth when he wasn’t writing. “You understand we don’t know how this person died, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“If there was a crime involved here, more than likely some of the evidence has been compromised and some data lost. You do understand that too, right?”

“Yes, all I took were his bones.”

“Nothing else, you’re sure?”

“No, nothing else.”

The deputy, whose name tag read Wagner, thoughtfully rested his chin on his cupped fist. He tapped the notepad with his pen then let out a long breath. “In the morning you’ll need to take a detective by the name of Torino to the exact place where you found the remains,” he said. “You’ll need to reconstruct where everything was, distance, space, all the physical aspects as best you can. Are you up for that?”

Marley nodded, she had folded her hands across the metal table and was staring numbly at the crude scribbles of initials and graffiti. “When will you know how he died?” she asked, looking up.

“We may never know,” the deputy shrugged. “There’s not much there for the coroner to work with, but sometimes we get lucky.”

Marley swept back the hair, tucking it behind her ear. She looked at Wagner who was carefully watching her like a man analyzing a puzzle possibly missing pieces. "Will you let me know?" she asked.

"I guess I can do that," Wagner said evenly. He leaned forward sliding a card he'd taken from his shirt pocket across the table, placing it next to the Styrofoam cup of coffee. "Here's my card. Anything you might remember or... anything else you want to talk about, give me a call."

Marley picked up the card without looking at it, pushed it into her pants pocket and stood. "Is that it?"

"Unless you have something else to say, that's it."

"I do have one last question."

"Yes?"

"If no one claims the body, what will happen to it?"

Wagner cocked his brow, his face struggling with more than just the answer to her question. "It's not exactly a body any more, but the county will handle whatever needs to be done, why?"

Marley rested her hand on the door latch, looked down at the carpeted floor then up at Wagner. "Because I'll claim him," she said. "I have an acre of land, quiet, with trees where Jason can rest in peace and not be alone - never alone again."

Wagner watched her walk away, the door slowly closing behind her. For a long moment he sat, rapping the metal table with the tip of his pen then turning the page on the legal pad, he leaned forward; hand pressed to his forehead, and began writing fast and feverishly.

Because of Marley's odd behavior and the alarms that went off in his head, Deputy Wagner went to his supervisor expressing his concerns. What bothered him the most was the fact that she referred to the victim by his name 'Jason,' and that she wanted to bury the remains where *'they wouldn't be alone.'*

Patiently, the sheriff listened, agreeing to look into a search warrant. When the autopsy report came back determining the cause of death as a single, small-caliber gunshot wound just above the first cervical vertebrae, the sheriff pressed harder for the warrant and got it.

On a Wednesday morning, sunless and cold and nine days before Christmas, eight deputies and a backhoe drove out from the mist and into Marley's front yard. They presented her with the warrant and she took it with trembling hands, hands that felt unusually stiff and cold and read it as the eight men, their faces slack and pale in the dull light, watched her. Finished, she walked to a small bench, slick and beaded with water and sat.

Her eyes were closed when the backhoe coughed to life, the ground trembled, and a painful meshing of gears raked the tight silence. She could hear the men talking, men dressed in kakis and slicks and carrying shovels and the wave of diesel and cigarette smoke that floated over her making her breath sting and her stomach tighten.

She couldn't understand why these men were here. What they were doing? Was it all because she disrupted a crime scene, tampered with evidence? Somehow, she didn't think so. She opened her eyes to the random scraping of shovels, the lurching form of an iron beast; ghostly figures all lost in the gloom and the disjointed contrivance of another reality, another world.

An hour later, still sitting on the bench, chilled and locked in a melancholy numbness, Marley heard the excited shout of one of the deputies.

The first grave was discovered just before nine; by dusk they had added seven more. In his calculation of a morbid inventory, the coroner evaluated the remains as four mature males, three females and the small bones of one child. In his estimation, the bodies had been collecting in their graves for over a period of at least ten years, maybe longer.

“I didn’t do it, it was my father’s house,” Marley said to the detective who had left the circle of men and was now standing in front of her looking grim and unsettled. “I had no idea... I’ve only been here two years, and I had no idea.”

The detective nodded, handing her a blanket that she wrapped around her shoulders and held like a child clutching a favorite toy. “We know you weren’t involved in any of this, Marley,” he told her. “But we have some questions to ask you about your father and this property. Billy’s going to take you to the station; we’ll get you some hot food and something hot to drink. If you think you need a doctor we can have one brought in. Do you understand everything I just told you?”

Marley nodded numbly, her mouth and throat so tight and dry she wasn’t sure she could talk, but she did. “Yes, I understand,” she managed. “I understand, but can I ask you a question?”

“Yes,” the detective answered softly, “what would you like to ask me?”

“Jason, the man I found mushroom hunting, do you think my father murdered him, too?”

The detective’s expression narrowed, his eyes drifted to the ground then back to Marley’s. “It’s possible, but hard to say. Several of the skulls showed small caliber bullet wounds. The person you brought in had a wound at the base of the neck. It probably wasn’t immediately fatal and he might have gotten away long enough not to have been found but only to die later in the forest. Honestly it’s hard to say.”

Marley let out a long breath then smiling inwardly looked up at the detective. “It’s not hard for me to say,” she said softly. “I knew he was trying to tell me something, yes, I felt it and knew it; I just didn’t know this was what it was, or how it would all end.”

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