

Community

In my pocket, three beads of ancient, yellowed bone. Warm—they feel alive. A cockleshell, pierced at the tip; my fingers like its ridges. If someone deserves it, I take their things: small, precious, powerful things.

I wonder if Rhys has missed the bone beads.

Melinda swigs her margarita, sloshing onto her divorce papers. We're celebrating her divorce. She doesn't wipe up the mess.

Instead she takes off her hair.

A wig, I see that now.

Her eyes catch mine in the mirror. "Mine fell out."

"Oh." My brain is warm, melting Jell-O, after thirty-four hours of flights and layovers. From the Orkney Islands (our tents at the archeological dig, Rhys' and mine, the makeshift lab from which I stole the bone beads. Could have been yesterday morning, feels like last year) to Jackson, Tennessee, where Melinda just took off her hair.

"Nobody makes it out of chemo with hair."

"Oh. Wow." Swig, swallow. "Why didn't you . . . say something?"

“I’m saying it now. This is also a post-*chemo* party.” She doesn’t look sick-skinny. Just skinny, freckles sprinkling her long legs, another of the many things about Melinda that I admire. My ankles are on the thick side. Not my fault, it’s hereditary.

She settles the wig on a pink plastic head I’d overlooked in my jet-lagged Jell-O fog and begins styling it with a brush.

The wig is a warm brown, washed through with auburn, the same color as Melinda’s real hair last time I saw her, four months ago at our tenth high school reunion. I went in order to wave the fact that I have a life in front of all the assholes from high school. The reunion, in the ballroom of the Holiday Inn on I-45, was where Melinda discovered we’d always been friends, there in the parking lot beside her pristine black Hummer. Who drives a Hummer? She’d “borrowed” it from her husband.

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In high school, Melinda was her own kind of mean girl. Before any friend of hers could have a boyfriend, Melinda had to kiss him first. In front of the friend if possible. The boyfriend would forever after shoot covert looks of longing in Melinda’s direction.

I heard that, didn’t see it. I spent most of my time in the science lab, helping Mr. Newman. He was the one to tell me that my smarts were my ticket out. I wanted to lose my virginity to him, since he’d likely know what he was doing. Better than pizza-faced Andy Riley in the back seat of his car. Which was what really happened.

Mr. Newman wouldn't. So I took one of his silver steer's head cufflinks, which I wear on my wrist on a leather strip.

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At the reunion Melinda was dateless too—Wayne was away on business. He was away a lot. We danced together all night, people looking at me like they weren't quite sure who I was. We faked a French kiss, to the hoots of ex-football players turned sales associates.

Since then we've talked on the phone—a chronicle of her protracted breakup with That-Asshole-Wayne. About how she'll get her life together once he's gone. Open a lingerie boutique, a motorcycle museum, or maybe both, together. She's never worked; Wayne struck it rich with a composter for cow manure—instant fertilizer! Shit selling shit, Melinda likes to say.

Our conversations lasted for hours.

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Hours during which she didn't tell me about her cancer.

The sounds of Labor Day fireworks pop through the unobtrusive air conditioning. “How long before your hair grows back?” Is this an okay thing to ask?

“Who needs it?” She waves an electric razor in the air. “Now my hair looks amazing every day—just put it on!”

Melinda has an amazing head, too. Like a beautiful Cyborg. Absolutely smooth, no weird bumps, a perfect ovoid curving into elegant temples that slope into cheekbones too sculpted to be real. Except they are: genetics can do unbelievable things.

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Four days ago, the entire crew held their breaths while Rhys coaxed a 3,000-year-old skull from a cairn burial. A woman: small and light, no superciliary ridge. Young—the average female lifespan during the Neolithic period was 29.2 years.

The pollen in the surrounding dirt suggested the Neolithic woman had been buried with flowers. A trail of bone beads and perforated shells marked a loose circle at her neck. A prized piece of personal adornment to take with her, wherever the dead went.

“Maybe a gift from her husband,” breathed one of the younger interns, a pretty redhead, still an undergraduate.

Rhys corrected the misplaced romanticism, musing to our Scottish colleagues in his English public-school diction about the communal, often ephemeral nature of early human couple bonds. “Neanderthals were sexual omnivores,” I’d heard him say it a thousand times to lecture halls full of fascinated, or disgusted, or totally psyched, undergraduates. Neanderthals lived in flexible clan-like communities, maintaining the multiple amatory liaisons natural to our human condition. Then we invented agriculture and ruined it all.

Rhys too was omnivorous.

“Lovely cheekbones.” Rhys, cradling the skull in his hand. Prominent cheekbones are owed to nothing more than a particular formation of the zygomatic arch in the faces of primates, but men are suckers for them.

I was furious. Not because of his speculatively flirtatious glances at the redhead (which she returned; now she's in the queue), but because that skull was *mine*.

That night, at the one pub in the tiny town that was ours for six weeks every summer, I drank six beers, three with whiskey chasers. And then I accused him. Loudly.

Of sneaking into the trenches in the dead of night to steal my skull from my quadrant and re-burying it in his, switching it for the fissured-up hot mess that, the day before, had been fucked up by the less-than-professional trowel of his current female tent-mate.

Around whose sylph-like waist his arm remained throughout my entire tirade. He never answered me. Not even when I demanded, ratcheting up the invective and the decibels to what I guess you'd have to call a scream, that he publicly admit to stealing my work.

I could see him trying not to, but he did flinch when I threw my seventh beer into his face. I kept the chaser for myself.

Back at camp, bleary eyed but still furious, I saw Melinda's text—she had a surprise for me. She was paying for my ticket. I was up by dawn, when it was still plenty dark for me to make a silent detour into the lab-tent and pry open the fishing-tackle box where Rhys stores the Really Important Finds. Then I caught the one daily bus heading anywhere near an airport, bones and shells rattling in my pocket.

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Melinda returns the wig to her own head. The Velcro strips at the back make a crunchy sound as she secures them. “This baby'll stick through a hurricane.” Dipping a finger into hair

gel, she pinches the bangs into punky points. “Cost six hundred bucks. Worth every cent. Courtesy of Wayne’s credit card.”

“He hasn’t cut it off?”

“I’d cut his thing off, and he knows it. Got the house too.”

A McMansion, Southern style, in a subdivision carved from a stretch of cottonwoods, abutting the country club. Scarlett O’Hara columns, a swimming pool out back.

Now Wayne is living in another McMansion with someone *nice* named Tammie. When Melinda says it, nice sounds like a bad thing to be.

Maybe it is—nice never got me anywhere.

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Wig in place, we take my rent-a-wreck instead of the Hummer. Melinda fiddles with the radio till she finds Aerosmith. “Girl, we are going to do some *damage* tonight!” She cranks up the volume, then pounces on my arm. We swerve dangerously close to a pick-up. “Tomorrow we’re going to *Mexico!*”

“What?” I’m fighting to keep the wreck on the road.

“*That’s* the surprise!”

“Don’t you have, like, follow-up check-ups or something?”

“I told you, this is a *post-chemo party. A Done. With. Fucking. Chemo. Mother. Fucking. PARTY!*”

“School starts next week.”

“Come on, you can do whatever you want. You’re screwing your *professor!*”

“*Was,*” I correct her. “He’s a dick.”

“Even better! You could out him to the provost. I rented us a condo. Look!”

Melinda flips excitedly through photos on her phone. Sleek high-rise towering over a stretch of white sand; turquoise water ruffled with surf. “We have the penthouse!”

I warm to the idea—selfies against an exotic backdrop of mountains and ocean and palms, or from a multi-tiered pool with floating bar. We’ll order margaritas from cabana boys who we’ll screw and be inseparable from for the week we’re down there and then forget, as they will us. Flexible formation of ephemeral community.

But. “I get *paid* to TA...”

“I have Wayne’s *credit card*, stupid!” She thumps me on the head. There are stolen artifacts in my pocket. Maybe a vacation wouldn’t be a bad idea. “Turn here!”

We jolt onto a gravel road. The car fills with the smells of wet dirt and manure, gasoline cut with the smoky tang of Barbecue. The gravel road dead-ends in an area of flattened grass half filled with pick-up trucks, some with high wheels and silhouettes of naked women on the flaps.

Inside it’s dark. Three past-their-prime truckers hunch around a table in the back. A couple in matching cowboy boots and hats perches at the end of the bar. Melinda is wearing cowboy boots too, with her shorts. Which are very short. The truckers stare like they like what they see but they’re too settled in to do anything about it.

The only damage we'll be doing here is to our livers.

“We need a soundtrack.” Melinda heads in a hyper, skippy dance toward a glowing jukebox. A clatter of change, a sound like an old man's grumpy cough, and the opening chords of “Back in Black” rumble out. According to Melinda, real rock never made it out of the eighties. She scans the list for more titles, shoulders and ass bopping. The truckers are fully focused now.

Then, as if in answer to some cosmic stage call, the door creaks open and in walks a tall, broad-shouldered man. Horse-tail of dark hair, faded jeans, dusty biker boots. Behind him saunters a sidekick, younger, with floppy bangs and a pale, scrubby beard.

Midnight Rider and Blond Boy Wonder order tequila shots and beer chasers and take seats at the bar. As “Back in Black” fades into “Highway to Hell,” Melinda slides back over, making little devil horns with her fingers like an AC/DC groupie. “Y'all been out there raisin' some?”

“All weekend long.” Midnight Rider has a wide, gap-tooth grin. The space between two front teeth is hereditary, product of a misfit between jaw size and teeth. People say it means someone is nice. Which has not been scientifically proven. But when a man looks like that, who cares?

“We got thirsty.” He raises his shot glass and empties it. I watch his throat as he swallows.

And then we're talking to them, or rather, Melinda is talking to Midnight Rider—whose name is Will; I was expecting J.D., or maybe Roy-Dog. I steal a glance at Boy Wonder. Tyler, or maybe Taylor. I can work with that.

Will asks if he wants another round—it's Tyler. Their shots come with a bowl of stale popcorn. Melinda digs her hand in. "Y'all got bikes or just trying to look the part?"

"Got bikes, big ones." A wink.

"Where you headed?" She drags out her vowels, crunching popcorn.

"South by southwest. See some of these great United States."

"Whatcha do for money, rob banks?"

A broad grin. "Construction. Just finished a job in Memphis." Will reaches a big, gorgeous hand into the popcorn bowl. "You ladies live around here?"

"I do. Catherine used to." Melinda tilts her head in my direction. "For now, she's from Philadelphia." She beams at me. "But you're looking at the next director of the Museum of Natural History in *New York City!*"

My most cherished fantasy, I'm pleased she remembers.

"Cool." Will picks up his Corona and melts off his stool. "How 'bout a table?"

Seated next to Tyler, I see the "Don't Tread On Me" tattoo on his forearm—snake coiled around what might be an assault rifle, an American flag whipping in the background. Vintage

2009. The Tea Party seems almost quaint now. The scrabbly beard does its best as camouflage, but Tyler has a weak chin. Fair enough, I have a slight overbite. Genetics can also be a bitch.

Tyler doubts my claim that I've touched 10,000-year-old human bones, because he knows the earth has only been around for 6,000, but I steer us past that squall, telling him there are gun shows in the Orkney Islands, though I'm pretty sure there aren't.

The bartender says there's no more tequila. This close to Mexico, that's just bad planning.

Then we're settling the tab, with Wayne's credit card, and heading back to Melinda's, where there's plenty of tequila.

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In the parking lot, their Harleys wait. "Hot *damn!*" Melinda throws her arms up, fists clenched.

Will's grin flashes white in the humid dark. "Hop on."

I drive with the AC blasting, windows down so I can flirt with Tyler. He zips ahead, gunning the motor, then hangs back till I pass him. I'm contemplating coitus with an ardent defender of the second amendment. Bad-boy rednecks, a vice I allow myself back home.

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When Tyler and I pull into the driveway, Melinda is peeling out of her shorts—the tiniest bikini I've ever seen outside a Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue. "It's hot as Hades out here!"

Will tries not to stare. I saw her after her shower at the Holiday Inn. I don't remember her boobs being that big before.

It is revealed that Will and Tyler are boxer men, and we're in the water. We play chicken. After the second round—Melinda lets me knock her off both times, her bikini top riding up while Tyler ogles—she propels herself out of the water. “Time for a game—Texas salt lick!”

She makes Will lie back on the chaise while she squeezes a wedge of lime, dripping juice from his solar plexus to his navel, sprinkling salt in its wake. Knocking back a shot, she licks up the salt trail with the tip of her tongue. Will's whole body shivers.

Tyler and I never get our turn. Instead, there's an enormous crash, the shrill shatter of breaking glass.

Then Melinda is screaming.

“Oh, my God, I can't feel my *hand!*” The tequila bottle is reduced to shards at her feet. Melinda holds the bad hand close to her chest, protectively, covering it with the good one. Sharp-edged glints on the concrete, limes and salt scattered into the grass. “Not *yet*, goddamn it! “Not fucking *yet!*”

“Careful, you'll cut yourself!” Will reaches out to steady her but she kicks at him.

“Whoa, there!” He jumps back, hands up.

“You're fine now,” I move toward her, in drunken slow-mo. “You said so!” Melinda is Wonder Woman, bad-ass driver of a black Hummer, relentless tormentor of Wayne. Possessor of

the longest legs in the state, a miracle of perfect genetics, evolution's shiniest of shining creations. Melinda can't possibly be sick.

"I *said* I was done with *chemo*." Melinda's voice gets small, but steelier, harder. "The cancer's in my brain. I just had a goddamn seizure."

"Shit, man. That's just wrong." Will starts toward her again, but she jumps away, yanking at her bikini top. It falls.

She thrusts her chest forward. "Like 'em?"

Will's mouth is half open. He nods, once, then stops, like he knows he's given the wrong answer but now he can't take it back.

"These are *fake*. Just sacks of water over big, gnarly scars." A soft tearing sound and the wig is hanging from her hand. "Still want to fuck me?"

Will starts toward her again, tentatively. "I just want to help—"

"You *can't*!" Her anger is sudden, my mind too tequila-numbed to keep up. "I'm fucking terminal! Get it? As in, practically *dead*!" Melinda winds up and slaps his face with the wig, hard, the force snapping his head back. Will brings his hand up, checking his nose for damage.

"Go to hell!" Melinda kicks over the chaise, its clatter reverberating, and stalks across the grass. The door slams behind her.

Tyler looks like he'd rather be anywhere but here. Will starts toward the house, then stops, uncertain, rubbing his nose.

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I find Melinda hunched over the toilet, the amazing wig on the floor beside her. Through her choking heaves, the loud sputter of a Harley.

Melinda's shoulders are beaded with sweat, her skin moist. There is no human more useless than she who plays back-patter to someone else's puking her guts out. The redhead, on the other hand, will make a useful tent mate for Rhys, eventually—he likes useful. Maybe she'll even know how to use a trowel.

Watching Melinda throw up seems like a violation of some deeply intimate privacy, so I stare at a little brass bowl on top of the toilet. It's filled with stones—tourmaline, opalite, lepidolite, malachite. They look like the ones we find on digs sometimes, in burials, or in areas used for cult practices.

The heaves stop. Melinda sits back, wiping her face with the wet cloth I hand her. “We're leaving first thing in the morning,” she croaks. “*Me-ji-co.*”

I don't argue. Instead I fill a glass from the tap. “Here, hydrate.”

Her grip is shaky, but the other hand shoots out and pulls a stone from the bowl—lapis lazuli. She drops it into the glass.

“What are you *doing*? You'll choke!” Or maybe that's what she wants? I'm too drunk for this.

She brushes me off and gulps. “It's a blood purifier. Cleanses your organs and bone marrow. I got them online, from this clinic in Mexico. It's like a spa, only they cure cancer.”

Woman under thirty, metastatic breast cancer, already in her brain, vs. *pretty rocks*. I open my mouth, then shut it. Not the time. Leaning against the expensively tiled wall, Melinda pulls up pictures on her phone.

“It’s right across from our penthouse.”

Shining facilities, all steel and glass and light. Smiling doctors and patients and nurses, strolling beneath Jurassic Park bromeliads taller than their heads. Microwaves to zap cancer cells are touted, nutritional supplements. Ultraviolet blood purification, colonics. A Zoetron machine, whatever that is. A virus that kills cancer cells, miraculously leaving healthy ones untouched. An endless scroll of testimonials—no last names, only initials.

Before I can formulate the *howareyoupayingforthis* question, my just-beginning-to-sober brain supplies the answer. Wayne’s credit card, stupid.

“It’ll be fun, like a vacation—boy-toys galore!” She swats my thigh.

“What?” She looks up, searching my face. “What’s wrong?” I see how pale she is, beneath the tan, the tired circles under her eyes. “I mean, I don’t want you to lose your scholarship or anything...”

I open my mouth to say I don’t know how long I can stay, but then I’m spilling, I’m telling her. Rhys is a fucking sexist asshole who steals my research. He took the most intact, pristine example of a female Neolithic skull probably in the world, which I found, and now he’s going to publish it, with the tent mate. In fact, I dumped him because *of* the tent mate (*id est*, the multiple amatory liaisons). The skull is perfect, I tell Melinda, like hers. And like the tent mate’s

—not much inside, but I have to give her that. I have a pocket full of *literally* priceless stolen artifacts. My career is toast. Forget the Museum of Natural History, I'm going to jail, maybe even in Scotland. Which is a problem, but so much less of a problem than hers.

She sits straight up, eyebrows raised. “That motherfucker *stole* shit from *you*?!”

Her loyal indignation, which she absolutely does not owe me, and definitely not at a moment like right now—she has no obligation to care about any skull other than her own—reverberates off the tiles, the wall, the floor. Through me. Her high-school friends were *lucky* she kissed their boyfriends for them.

I wonder how someone like Melinda came to be so alone in this world that the only option she has for something like this is me. But I'll go. To Mexico or the Antarctic or wherever else she asks me to. For her I'll turn my back on Rhys and his thievery, on museums, even on science. I'll become a magical thinker. I'll believe in stones and spa-clinics and shiny-faced doctors. Magic microwaves, even the Zoetron machine.

I show her the beads, the shell. “Not a problem!” Melinda coughs out a laugh. “Mexico has a crazy black market—they'll buy anything down there.”

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We are awakened, after noon, by smells. Eggs and onions and hash-browns and coffee.

“We must be having the same dream,” Melinda says. “I don't even *have* any coffee.”

We sit up, then stand, and the smells are still there, all around us, making us woozy through our hangovers, and ravenous too. All we ate last night was popcorn, and Melinda threw hers up.

We stumble into the kitchen in tank-tops and underwear, Melinda wigless. Will is at the stove, flipping omelets in two skilletts at once.

“What the *fuck*?...” Melinda’s voice trails off, I can feel her trying to decide if she’s mad or not.

“Slept by the pool—too drunk to drive,” Will turns around to grin, then back to his complicated tasks. “You left the door open.”

I’m weak with hunger. Melinda is already crunching toast. Will brings plates over, three at once stacked up his arm like a seasoned waiter. “So what’s doing for today?”

Melinda looks up at him, calculating. “We’re driving to Mexico. In the Hummer.”

“Drank the county dry and now you’re going to the source?”

I snicker, blowing coffee out my nose. There is something glorious about what we are doing, believing in unbelievable things. Playing hooky from reason, and not just me—the world is bright and in tune with *us*, even the buzzing heat seems to whisper portents of good things. Insane, but true. Magical thinking: anything is possible.

“It’s a clinic,” Melinda scrolls through pictures, the bull cufflink clacking against the table. When I’d tied the talisman around her wrist last night, she breathed, “I’m a Taurus! How

did you *know!*?” An omen. Anything can be, if you think magically. She talks with her mouth full of omelet. “Like a spa, where they cure cancer.”

“*Qué bueno,*” Will says.

Melinda stops chewing and stares at him, brows scrunched.

“I’m from *Glenrio, Tejas.*” He rolls the r like a pro. “Well, also *Nuevo Méjico,* it’s right on the border. Want a translator?”

~

Just like that Will is coming with us. I know he’s a magical thinker too when he tells Melinda no worries about the bike, he’ll pick it up when we come back, once she’s cured.

We drink three pots of Will’s coffee while we plan the trip—twenty-eight hours driving time, all along Route 66. In my coffee-buzzed brain I see endless, hopeful deserts, spread out like blessing hands, the ribbon of road taking us all the way to the furthest corner of the continent and dropping us gently across the border.

Melinda pulls up Google Earth. We follow our virtual route into the Mexican beach town, sleepy without its hordes of spring break-ers, past the liquor store where Wayne’s miraculous credit card will never stop paying, into the gardens of the clinic, where Melinda will go, every morning, her face aglow with hope, for most of the two months that remain in her life.

A huge statue of Jesus on top of a ragged mountain—*Jesús del Sagrado Corazón,* says the caption.

“Sacred heart,” Will translates.

“See?” Melinda whispers. She is talking to herself.

We take a 360-degree tour of the penthouse, Will letting out a low whistle every few clicks. The cursor floats over the enormous king-plus water bed where we’ll all sleep, mounded up like puppies, Will tired from the construction jobs he picks up—he doesn’t think Wayne’s miraculous credit card should be for him.

We gasp at the spacious, state-of-the-art kitchen—every appliance known to mankind, stainless steel pots and pans, skillets of different sizes, all arrayed on racks hanging from the ceiling. Majolica dinner plates and crystal stemware that Melinda will break, dropping them one by one because the Zoetrons aren’t doing their job, though we’ll never say so.

The wrap-around terrace where we’ll sit, drinking tequila and watching stars through a telescope Will has picked up somewhere, until faint tangerine light seeps across the horizon. Melinda won’t go inside alone, even after she starts needing a blanket, then two. We’ll carry her once she’s dropped off, between us at first, later just Will, because she’s become lighter than air.

The terrace is where she’ll die, me holding her and telling her that’s not what’s happening because she doesn’t want it to, while Will is out scoring black-market morphine, which I’ve figured out how to administer on the Internet (“You’re the scientist,” he’ll say, in a respectful tone).

The terrace is also where Melinda will give Will the last deep kiss of her life, kissing him but looking straight into my eyes.

Before hitting the road, the last thing we see on Google Earth is a cemetery, named “*El Porvenir*”—the future, Will says it means. We close the computer because magical thinkers don’t want to look at cemeteries.

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But cemeteries have their purpose, always have. Four thousand years from now, or five, archaeologists will find a female burial. A skull, light as air: its bone structure perfect, its condition pristine. Pollen scattered all around, indicating flowers.

There are grave goods. A mound of stones—tourmaline, opalite, lepidolite, malachite. Lapis lazuli. A statue of the *Virgen de Fátima*, a tiny silver bull. Syncretistic religious practices, a bespectacled someone will murmur. A woman respected, loved by her clan. Given treasures to take with her, wherever the dead go.

A trail of bone beads and perforated shells mark a loose circle at her neck. From an even more ancient civilization, the archaeologists will say, put there by magical thinkers. If we’re still humans five thousand years from now, if we even still speak in words.

Devils Lake, Spring 2017.