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## THE BONE SEEKER

MY DAUGHTER DROWNED last summer. But just yesterday I saw her mismatched eyes—one green, one blue—watching me from the smudged window of the number ten bus. A little cloud of steam breathed onto the glass.

On the day Maddie died, we ate toast. We went for a walk along the muddy riverbank with Ramon, my brother's dog, a wild brindle boxer that Maddie adored. The sky was shiny and irresistible, like a bright blue marble, with thin wisps of white clouds swirled through the glass. Maddie lost her first baby tooth that day, the bottom left.

Maddie's great grandmother, Imke Van Dijk, was a painter. I never met her; I knew her through her art, which was abstract and brilliant. I've been told that she didn't believe in God. And that she always wore a dainty ring made with a slender band of tarnished silver and a serrated edge bezel, inlaid with a pearly incisor. It was my father's first baby tooth.

Maddie's tooth and my Oma's ring sit together on the table in front of me. Since Maddie died, the tooth has stayed hidden at the bottom of my jewellery box. The ring lives there too; my mother wanted nothing to do with it after my dad died. But I retrieved them both this morning after waking from a dream, tangled in the sheets, sweaty and disoriented. In the dream Maddie was wearing her armadillo t-shirt and muddy rubber boots. Her tongue was playing with the loose bottom tooth, wiggling it back and forth in her mouth. She was laughing, her mismatched eyes squinting in the sun. When the tooth popped out, her eyebrows flew up, her mouth was a little 'o' of surprise. Then she threw a stick for Ramon, and they both went chasing after it. She was gone and I was left alone, clutching the tooth.

"Sophie! You can't do that with Maddie's tooth! You're not really thinking about it, are you?" my best friend, Kate, asks. She looks like a beaver with her glossy pelt of dark hair, her buck teeth, and her round black eyes, but she behaves more like a wolverine, fierce, even vicious sometimes. Kate

and I work together at The Wolfe Avenue Animal Hospital near Granville Island in Vancouver. I'm a vet, she's a tech. We make a good pair, like Batman and Robin, except wearing scrubs instead of capes, and fighting disease instead of crime. We are sitting together on my back deck, under a blooming magnolia tree, basking in the spring sunshine.

"I need to do something with it."

"But a tooth ring is so morbid."

"Is it?"

"It crosses the line." We both regard the silver ring, glinting in the sun. "It's like what women do with their placentas. I took a pic of Sam's before the nurse whisked it away. Some people refuse to even look at it, some plant it under a tree, and then there are the freaks that take it home and eat it." Kate snorts before taking another swig of beer.

I glance up at the pink petals of the magnolia tree, under which Maddie's placenta is buried.

"Is it morbid because it's a tooth, or because she's dead?"

"Both! It's just—"

"Just what! We both know clients who've taken their dead pets to a taxidermist to have them stuffed. My brother told me about some old rocker who snorted his father's ashes. People do what they need to do. It doesn't have to make sense, or be acceptable! It just has to ... has to—" I fall silent. Kate says nothing. Eventually she leans over and clinks her beer bottle against mine.

After we finish our beer and Kate leaves, I take my wolfhound, Friday, to the off-leash area at Hadden Park. He gallops across the sand, a black pony-dog. There is the smell of rain in the air and the wind has picked up, chasing itself over the ocean like a dog chasing its tail, little gusts that play with the water, tugging at it so that it rises in sharp little waves that slap along the shore. A pixie wind, my dad would have called it. My father was a painter, like my Oma, but also a professor of Old English. He believed in God. And fairies. He and Maddie used to spend long hours together building fairy houses in the backyard with magnolia petals and tiny twigs, stones and pebbles, shells from the beach.

Friday prances at the water's edge, chasing the waves. I glance down, looking for shells; nestled amongst some small grey stones I see a tiny white pebble. A tooth! I kneel to pick it up; Friday comes to investigate, shoves his tufted black muzzle against my hand. I place the pebble on my ring finger,

swivelling my wrist to admire it, before placing it against the middle of my chest, hanging on an imaginary chain, close to my heart. It leaves my hand violently, arching over the water, hesitating at the cusp of its trajectory, considering its choices, before falling and disappearing into the waves.

When I get home I google ‘baby tooth jewellery’ and I find out that my Oma was not alone. Queen Victoria had a gold and green enamel brooch fashioned in the shape of a thistle, with the milk tooth of her eldest daughter, Princess Vicky, forming the blossom. She also wore a necklace made with the teeth from forty-four stags, each tooth engraved with the date the animal was killed by her husband, who would return from the hunt and throw a dead deer at his wife’s feet. ‘All shot by Albert’ was engraved on the clasp.

The next day I finish appointments early and go to Granville Island. I wander along Cartwright Street and then back along Railspur Alley to Old Bridge Street, looking for a funky, not fancy, jewellery shop. Maddie’s tooth is in the front pocket of my jeans. I have been tracing its contours all day, the thin smooth edge of the biting surface and its fragile jagged underside. It has become my worry stone, my wishing stone. I duck into a shop called The Razor’s Edge just as the rain starts up again.

“Cool,” the woman behind the counter says when I ask about having a baby tooth made into jewellery. She tilts her shaved head to one side, like an inquisitive dog. “It’s not for everyone you know. Some people find it very unappealing. It creates an odd aesthetic. But you’re not the first. I’ve had a few hipsters in, asking for the same. Some kind of unique, counter-culture bling.” She admires my Oma’s ring.

“Did you know that Queen Victoria had a brooch made—” I start to say.

“Oh, I know, I know! I went to see the Victoria and Albert Art and Love Exhibition at Buckingham Palace when I was visiting London. She had a bracelet with one tooth from each of her nine children. And the stag necklace!” She smiles sheepishly. “I’m a bit of a history geek.”

I place Maddie’s tooth on the palm of her outstretched hand then close her fingers around it. “I think I’ll go with a necklace.”

She has an Australian shepherd puppy with her at the shop. He spins around her black army boots, worms his way under the counter, and then leaps up on me. I look into a pair of eyes that are a merry-go-round of colour. The left one glitters blue, with a wedge of autumn brown slicing through it; the right one is like honey, smudged with flecks of black.

“His name is Pan,” she says, “as in Pandemonium, not Peter.” His gaze is disconcerting, puts me off balance, like leaning too far forward over the edge of a cliff.

Kate and I are prepping for surgery, an emergency hysterectomy on a Golden Retriever with pyometra, a fancy word derived from Greek that means “pus-womb.” Kate is shaving the dog’s belly, I’m scrubbing my fingernails with chlorhexidine and a nailbrush. Maddie’s tooth is with us, hanging against my breastbone, beneath my undershirt and scrub top. The necklace is beautiful. The cable chain is made with elaborate double links. Four slim leaves of silver clutch the tooth, like sepals holding a white berry. The incisor is pressed against my sternum, tooth to bone. My heart thumps in my chest, singing to it. It bites back, sharp and unexpected.

“It was a mistake,” I say, without any preamble.

Kate stops abruptly, clippers held aloft.

“The tooth. It was a mistake, making it into a necklace.”

“Why?”

“People don’t talk about Maddie very much. Not the clients. Not my friends, especially the ones who have kids her age. Not my brother, not even my mom. It makes them too uncomfortable, so they avoid it. Or maybe they think it will make *me* too uncomfortable, or worse. So they don’t mention her, or say that something reminds them of her, or tell stories about her.”

Kate doesn’t look at me; she has gone back to shaving the dog’s thick golden fur. “I’m not like that.”

“No, you’re about the only one who isn’t.” Kate sometimes reminds me of quirky things that Maddie did: how she used to pocket food away in her mouth like a hamster, the way she liked to dance, spinning in wild circles, her goofy eyebrow gestures. “Here’s the thing I wish people realized though: remembering Maddie and remembering Maddie’s death are two different things. There are years of good memories. And then there’s that day on the riverbank.”

Kate meets my gaze, her black eyes knowing, like a raven. The tooth is making me remember the wrong Maddie.

My last appointment that day is a pre-surgical appointment for a dog neuter. As I finish up, the clients, a young Asian couple, ask a final question. “Can we have them back, please?”

There is a long pause before I clue in. “Do you mean the testicles?” They both nod solemnly. “I can’t see a problem with that. Why would you like them?”

“In our culture, it’s very important to pass to the afterlife whole. We want to make sure that when he dies, he can be buried complete.”

“Oh, of course, then,” I say.

That night Maddie wakes me. No, Maddie’s tooth does, nibbling at my skin, chewing a hole through to my heart. I scramble from my bed, startling Friday, who lifts his head and gives a low throaty growl. The hairs on my arms and the back of my neck are standing up, like a wild bristling cat. I search the darkness for a wraith.

“Maddie?” I whisper into the shadows. There’s no answer. I tug the chain over my head, but it doesn’t fit; with trembling hands I undo the necklace’s clasp and hold the tooth out into the night. “You can have it back,” I say.

In the morning I go to Mountain View Cemetery, where Maddie remains. I have no tools, so I use a stick to pierce through the grass, to dig through soil and rocks and roots. Six feet under, she’s six feet under the ground. A fathom.

My father once told me that the word fathom was from the Old English word *fæðm*, which means arms extended for embracing or protecting. We’d been working on a crossword puzzle together: *six-letter word, last letter ‘m’, make sense of*. I remember the way he stretched his frail arms out wide, the IV line hooked up to his right hand going taut.

“Six feet,” he said, nodding from one hand to the other. “That’s a fathom.”

That’s how far away she is. More digging, using my hands to grasp handfuls of dirt, cold and wet between my fingers. The black earth clings to my hands, roots under my nails, whispers her name to me: *Maddie, Maddie, Maddie*.

The hole remains shallow; the earth is solid and impenetrable, restraining her in its embrace. Sitting back on my haunches I contemplate the silence, the low bank of clouds, the distant mountains. I place the tooth into the hole, let the chain snake its way down on top of it and then slowly, every so slowly, trickle earth upon it until it’s gone.

“There,” I say, patting the ground one last time. “It’s done.”

A woodpecker answers, drumming on the trunk of an oak tree on the nearby ridge, short sharp bursts of hammering, interrupted by silence. I look up towards the sound, imagine Maddie coming over the ridge and tumbling down the green hill through the purple crocuses, arriving at my side with twigs snagged in her braids and grass stains on her overalls, grinning, her eyes shining brightly with leaves and sky, a little gap in her smile. I stand up and back away, my heart thumping wildly.

Moments later I am back, clawing at the earth with my bare hands. “Give me back my tooth! Give it back to me!”

By day the tooth and chain live in my left front pocket. I have taken to running my fingers along the chain, counting the individual links, but avoiding ever reaching the tooth. At night I undress, sit cross-legged on my bed, and place the tooth before me on the jade patch of my quilted bedspread. Friday settles on the bed with me, his long legs dangling off the edge. He yawns widely, punctuating it with a funny sound—*yaaarrh!*—and then flops his head onto my lap.

I avoid the tooth at first, fiddling with Friday’s fur instead, twisting a tuft into a little dreadlock, or tracing a finger around his comma-shaped nostrils. Then I start to watch it, I watch the tooth.

Thoughts tumble from my mind, ricocheting and returning, like stones in the ocean waves. I need to get rid of the tooth. It’s bewitching me. Begone!

I could throw it in the ocean, return it to the elements. But no, I would search for it forever after, thinking it had washed ashore. Every little white pebble on the beach, every little star in the sky.

I could flush it! But that’s so crass, like flushing a dead goldfish.

I wish I could donate it, like bone marrow, like eight inches of hair for a child with cancer, but no one needs a tooth, it’s not like needing a beating heart.

No, I need to destroy it! I can pulverize it with a hammer. My hands clench. But what would I do with the fine white powder? It would be like ashes. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Dust thou art. I could breathe them in, inhale the essence. I suck in a breath, release a whimpering exhale.

Why not burn the tooth? But what if it survived the flame, blackened and charred?

I could pop the tooth in my mouth and swallow it! I open my mouth, place the tooth on my tongue, leaving the chain trickling out between my lips. It tastes metallic, like blood. I tug on the silver, pull it back out.

I could bury it! I see my cupped hands cradling the black earth at the cemetery, dirt embedded beneath my nails.

A strange sound, a sickly warbling, spills from my mouth. My teeth are chattering, and my breath is coming in short quivers. Friday whines, and slinks away. I bite down hard on my bottom lip, hold back the unfathomable anguish that is trying to claw its way out. I undo the clasp, and with shaking hands slide each side of the chain up and around my neck. The catch on the clasp releases and locks me in.

On Monday morning I have an appointment with Lily, a nine-year-old Weimaraner, whom I've been seeing since she was a puppy. She has that ghost-like appearance typical of Weimaraners: luminous blue eyes, muted charcoal-grey fur, as if she's a water-colour painting come to life.

I know her owner, Emilio, well but today it's his wife, Amy who brings the dog in. She has orange hair that cascades down her back, freckles on her cheeks that map out constellations. She carries a baby on her hip, and three more small children trail behind her, quiet and serious looking.

"Hey," she says to me. "Emilio's away," she adds, gesturing at her pack of kids, "so you've got us." They regard me with solemn brown eyes; the baby frowns and pats Amy's breast. "Lily's been acting weird. All slouchy and grumpy. I didn't think much of it, but today she growled at Sinead, which is so not like her." Lily stands, pressed against Amy's thigh, panting.

"It sounded like this," a little voice pipes in: "grrrrrrr-grr-grrrr." This one must be Sinead; she has her mother's orange hair, tied up in braids, like a little Pippi Longstocking.

"Emilio usually looks after the dog things." Amy's brow furrows, a little crease appears between her pale eyebrows. "I wish he was back. He'd know what was wrong."

"How long has she been acting strangely?"

"Two, maybe three days."

"Anything else seem wrong, any vomiting, diarrhea? Is she off her food?"

“No, that’s why I didn’t bring her in sooner. She’s eating like normal, she doesn’t seem sick, she just seems off.” The baby gurgles, and a long strand of drool emerges from her mouth. Amy wipes it away and the baby chortles.

“Ok, well, let’s take a look,” I say, crouching down to begin a physical exam. I like this kind of case, one that requires a bit of investigation. I’m thinking back or neck pain, but there are a lot of possibilities to rule out.

“How is Emilio doing?” I say, lifting Lily’s long ear pinna so I can exam the canal with an otoscope. “Last time he was here, he’d just had that cruciate surgery on his knee.”

“Oh, he’s fine. All back to normal.”

“And how’s his research going?” Emilio has spoken to me before about his work as a scientist, studying radiation and human health.

“That’s why he’s away, actually. He’s at the University of Alaska, spearheading a new project, studying the effects of the Fukushima disaster.” The oldest child, Sinead, tugs at Amy’s sweater and then whispers to her. Amy nods.

“Fukushima is a happy island,” Sinead says. “My dad told me.”

Amy touches her daughter’s head and then tugs gently on one of her braids. “*Blessed island*. That’s what it means in Japanese.” She smiles ruefully. “People seem to have forgotten about the catastrophe already, but the radiation’s arrived now, in the waters along the west coast of Alaska. I’m so worried about how it will affect us here in Vancouver and the government’s doing squat. Emilio says we need more data, current data, but if no one is sampling anything, then we won’t really know what the hell is going on, will we?”

“I’m glad someone’s doing something about it.” I put the otoscope down on the exam table, tug my stethoscope off from around my neck.

“He’s studying radioactive strontium, which is one of the most dangerous components of nuclear fallout. It’s a bone seeker.”

I don’t know what a bone seeker is, but it has a strange ring to it. Something ominous, maybe a character in a post-apocalyptic novel.

“What’s that exactly?” I ask.

“It’s an element that accumulates in the bones and teeth of humans, like calcium does. Emilio is studying baby teeth, checking them for strontium. In the 1980s scientists found a rise in levels in baby teeth, from radiation from Chernobyl. He’s trying to launch a national campaign, checking for



radioactivity in our population, so he needs baby teeth now, to compare with baby teeth in the future.”

The stethoscope clatters against the metallic exam table and falls to the floor with a thud.

I place a hand on the exam table to steady myself, but it's not enough. I lean back against the wall, slide down to the floor. Amy inhales sharply, then opens the exam room door and calls out. Kate is suddenly at my side.

“What's wrong? What's happened?” she asks. I look into Kate's eyes. They are black like Friday's fur, black like the longest night of the year. They have seen my through my darkest times.

“Emilio is a bone seeker,” I mumble. “He's seeking baby teeth. For the future.”

The donation form is straightforward. I wrap Maddie's tooth and chain in blue tissue paper, slide it into the padded envelope, seal it shut without hesitating.

Friday and I walk to the corner together. Waiting for a red light, he sighs and leans heavily against me. I scratch the top of his head, tell him he's a good dog. He looks up at me and his tail swishes back and forth across the sidewalk. We walk together a few more blocks and stop.

I pull open the mailbox and let it go.