

Animal Bones

Word Count: 2,445

Only the pale moon and crepuscular street lamps illuminated the inner city. She awoke in the alley with the pangs of hunger and stalked out to search for breakfast. Across the main street was a park where she was likely to find food. She arrived at the sidewalk furious to see a series of passing cars. Merely two vehicles had gone by when her patience finally left her. She ran. She wouldn't catch any prey that morning, only a glimpse of fate a second before the mortal impact. In the moment before she was dragged under the vehicle, she thought to pull her body out of the way. Thought without ability, however, is powerless. She felt the immense weight of the automobile descend upon her gaunt form. She screamed knowing that she would never use those legs again. The car went as fast as it had come, leaving her alone with only her cries for company. Each second dissipated into agonizing shards. Verily life ends for us all, but the worst fate now would be for it to continue on. Suddenly a blinding light appeared and a warm embrace was felt. Momma? Cold slid into her chest and spread, extinguishing the heat of pain and ending her life.

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Aureate candle light and steam surround the small slipper bathtub. The warm water inside is displaced by a weight of a hundred pounds. Poking through the aqueous surface are ten toes with the

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left hallux rhythmically tapping the tub. Above the water vapor, delicate hands hold a book with *All Men Are Mortal* impressed down the spine. It contains lines of prose being read by large eyes whose contours are accented by a tight line of dark magenta. The eyes express sublimity - the joy of being alone. Outlining this face is a shingle-bob of black hair that curves along blushed cheeks and hovers above elegant shoulders. Annabell turns a page and lifts the lit kretek from the ash tray, placing it between her red lips. Her inhalation causes the quiet crackle of burning cloves. She tastes cumin and feels the smoke warm her throat. A line of text penetrates, forcing her to close the book and contemplate its meaning.

To live forever, how miserable that must be. She slips the book under the tub, sets her cigarette back and bends forward to grab the luffa from the metal bathdish. She turns the red handle of the decorative faucet and holds the sponge under the falling water. The source of life's beauty is mortality. To live... we must die ...and so life makes tragic heroes of us all, and yet we are completely ambivalent to the fate of our heroes. Overcome and triumph or falter and fail, it makes not the slightest difference to their beauty. She leans back and lifts each leg exclusively, propping the foot on the rim. She gently slides the fibrous fruit down each leg, admiring the long white atrophic scars that adorn them. Vulnerability is beauty. Her slender legs rest in warm water again, and before her mind's eye she sees the image of a carmine plumeria that persists alone in a bed of snow.

Does beauty have a different form for man as it does for woman? She rubs the luffa along her chest and down her flat belly. Perhaps I'm passé. She lets the sponge float between her legs. I think

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there's a difference between masculine and feminine strength. Her right hand starts to pursue the drifting sponge but stops at the incline of her mons veneris, the concave of her palm resting upon it. Her left hand slowly slides up the curve of her waist, along the round of her chest and finally closes at her throat. The man should take possession of me. Both hands start to exert pressure. I'd give myself over to him. A steadily maturing passion commences. She bends her knees slightly and slides further into the warm water. Pressing her feet against the curvature of the tub, she holds herself in place against the porcelain. Still hold something for myself though. Her heart rate increases, circulating more blood through her perspiring body. Something he will never grasp, despite his seeking. She gradually draws in and expels more oxygen. Deep tones reverberate the surface of the water. Her tempo increases. She opens her mouth wide and her toes slightly curl. In those moments when he's lost, I'll choose to find him. Her grip becomes tighter. She closes her eyes and they begin to flutter. Colorful heat. A wave of thunder. Just one more second.

Then an incoming call interrupts her rapture. Full of indignation, she quickly sits up to read the display and shouts upon discovery that the caller is her mother. Frustrated and abashed, she throws the phone vehemently against the wall.

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She paces around her small apartment reading through a mental list, checking each item thrice.

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Need to make sure everything is shut off. Feed the cat. Take my meds. Mustn't forget the keys. Can't believe I broke my phone. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, she smooths down her short, tight, black, strapless débutante dress and opens the cabinet to take her prescription antidepressants. She swallows them hard and chases with a glass of water from the tap. She leans forward to check her makeup, giving particular care to her lipstick. A small white cat with large eyes rivaling Annabell's saunters into the room, letting out a long meow. 'Okay Clementine.' She looks down at the cat as it walks between her legs. I'm so sorry dear. So sorry. 'I'll prepare your dinner.' She walks into the kitchen, peels back a can of cat food from the counter and, kneeling down, spoons its moist contents into the metal bowl on the floor. To Clementine feasting upon her meal, she says, 'I'll be back later tonight.' Her broken phone and keys are in her purse along with all the other essentials. She opens the front door and steps into the hall. She locks up, checks the knob thrice and walks out into the mild climate of the summer night.

The streets are littered with people. Car after car drives by in front of her. She would have called, but now she has to hail a taxicab. Standing on the street corner, her small frame extends a hand into the air, waving its slender digits in the night sky. Her signaling is successful and a black sedan pulls to the curb, shutting off the light on the roof. She opens the back door, climbs inside and, feeling the crisp breeze of freon, says, 'The Black Cat. West Side.' She secures the handle and the driver glides the automobile back into traffic. Settled on the leather of the seat, she slides the belt across her chest and looks up to notice a pair of benevolent eyes reflecting back at her from the rear-view mirror.

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- You should keep your eyes on the road, mister.
- Pardon me. I just can't help to wonder at how upset you look.
- My night hasn't had a good start.
- Why's that?
- It's just been frustrating.
- Frustration?
- Yep. (Sighs)
- I've always found the feeling of frustration to be similar to that of guilt, you know?
- Guilt? No, I don't see the connection. (Looks out the window at the passersby. Sighs)
- Well, guilt and frustration are both caused by... well, an inconsistency between reality and fantasy. The person we really are and the person we hold ourselves to be don't seem to match up. You see what I mean?
- Yeah, and?
- Think about the traditional cure for guilt. It's an equilibrium brought on by either punishment or through the confession booth. But what is confession really? It's nothing more than expression... and the cure for frustration is likewise expression.
- Yeah... Say? Where you going with this?
- I just don't like seeing someone in pain. That's all.

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- Who said I needed your help? Who are you anyway? Couldn't find a better job with that philosophy degree?
- Perhaps so... Look, I wouldn't presume to think that I could help you, but answer this for me. Do you play an instrument, sing or paint? Artistic expression? Anything like that?
- I have my art form. I build sculptures from lost and forgotten things. (Smiles at the eyes in the mirror)
My favorite material has always been animal bones.
- Animal bones?

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Having been captivated by her reading, Annabell arrives at The Black Cat later than usual. She sits at the bar, greets its tender and orders a beer. She asks, 'Joey? Has Frank arrived?' 'Sure has Bell. He's upstairs waiting.' She grabs her drink, steps onto the floor and gracefully walks her stiletto heels across the relatively full venue. Surrounded by friends around a billiard table is her boyfriend Frank. Seeing her ascending the steps, he walks toward her and grunts, 'Finally.' His build is large, his gait aggressive. Upon noticing his mood, any strength in her weeps through her pores and leaves her body in a cold layer of sweat. A dark longing arises within her, filling her void of strength. Cast by the garish lighting overhead, his shadow confronts her at head of the stairs, engulfing her small form. She languishes after quieting the animosity that now breeds inside of him and thinks she might find solace

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if only she could bring him to overcome his anger and lovingly embrace her. If only he could forgive her.

- I called and texted. Why didn't you answer?
- Calm down okay. Have a look at my phone.
- Why'd you break it, huh? You were pissed at me, weren't you?
- No, no. I just dropped the damn thing.
- Bullshit. Look at it. Why are you lying?
- I'm not lying. Relax. Are you high?
- What's it to you?
- You said you'd quit.
- That's right. Try to turn this around. Tell me what really happened to your phone.
- I've already told you. I dropped it.
- You're lying straight to my face, Bell. Get the hell out of my sight.
- Frank. Don't be like this. I would never lie to you.
- Don't touch me, Bell. Get off me!

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- What exactly did you see?

- I saw Frank and Bell arguing, then I saw her fall down the stairs.

- You didn't see how she fell?

- No. I was busying playing pool and talking to the others. I mind my own business whenever Bell and Frank get into it.

- You've seen them argue before then?

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- You are aware that this is a serious charge?

- Yes, officer.

- Tell me once again what happened.

- Bell and I were arguing and she started pushing me. I told her to stop and tried to get her off me.

That's when she fell down the stairs.

- How'd she fall?

- I dunno... Bell gets hysterical sometimes.

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- You talk to the girl?

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- Yup.
- And?
- No idea... what do you make of it?
- I think we ought to let the judge decide.

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- Ms. Woods?
- Yes?
- Both you and your boyfriend are under arrest.
- Wait! Me? For what? What did I do?
- You are being charged with assault and battery.
- This is ridiculous! I'm innocent. He pushed me down the stairs. I sure as hell didn't push myself down.
- The judge will decide that. Stand up, turn around and put your arms behind your back.

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While Annabell is being driven to the police station, she thinks solely of how she could remedy

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the situation. She could talk to her boyfriend and convince him to trust her, reveal the upsetting truth about what actually happened to her phone. Suddenly the car hits something in the road. First a bump is felt, followed by the piercing shriek of a death rattle. Annabell shouts, 'That was a cat!'

- Quiet down back there!
- You have to go back. See if it's still alive!
- I said shut up!
- Maybe we can save it!
- Either you shut up or I'll make you wish you did.
- Fuck you. Turn this car around now!
- Sit the fuck back!

The police officer in the passenger seat quickly withdraws a canister of pepper spray and partially empties its contents into Annabell's direction. With the onset of pain, she falls back to the seat and wails from the chemical compound burning her eyes. The only sense that isn't disrupted now is auditory, but all she can hear is the animal's agony coupled with her own sobbing. With the persistent echo of the cat's last intimation, it dawns on her that this is actually the second time she has heard such a terrible sound. The first time though, she made the driver halt and inspect.

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Annabell's mother raised her alone and had to work two jobs to make ends meet. This required that she drive Annabell to school before dawn. Often they rode in silence, but on one particular morning the peace was interrupted by a morbid squall. Annabell urged her mother to stop the vehicle. She was hesitant at first but did finally park the car and switch on the fog lights. They both exited. Upon seeing the slaughtered corpus of the surviving cat, the mother gasped and covered her face. Her teenage daughter was not dismayed, however, and continued to approach the animal. From her thigh-high boots, she withdrew a stiletto switchblade. She heard her mother shout, 'Where did you get that?' Ignoring the question, she placed her left hand on the cat's chest to find its pounding heart. Annabell carefully thrust the steel inside, gracefully putting an end to the cat's misery. She stood up and turned to look at her mother's facial expression of disbelief. Annabell closed the blade, walked back to the car and opened the passenger door. Her mother, though, was paralyzed by incredulity. Annabell called out, 'Mother. Don't just stand there. Let's go.'

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Through a thin veil of tears, Annabell begins to recover her vision. Her actual self resonates with the

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grace of her childhood memory, uniting some lost and forgotten part of her. She looks upon her arrested state, feels suddenly resolved and privately confesses, 'I'm not guilty. I deserve better than this, and no one is going to give it to me. I'll just have to do it all by

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