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# Buffalosburgh

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## Buffaloburgh

Zack Reno doesn't know that he's dug up human bones. Even if he knew, it wouldn't have excited him; he needs a payoff. He's thirteen, a self-proclaimed gold prospector, and right now, human bones wouldn't pay the bills. Mom keeps saying they'll be living in the street if they don't make rent. Says when that day comes, Zack and his kid sisters will be taken by the state. *You want taken?* she says. *Wanna get snatched up out of the house?* So for two months now, since he saw *Appalachian Gold Rush* on Discovery, where a man and his wife dug century-old early-American coins from the ground just walking their ugly-ass dog down a trail, Zack's been prospecting the East Emporium woods, ranging that midsummer Appalachian hillside looking for a payday: one shimmering, blinking pan of gold. Then he can march into the woods with an army—his entire seventh-grade class. They can suck every speck of color from the ground, filling their pockets so rich even Mom couldn't spend it all. And they'll say: *Zack Reno! Gold Slinger. Zack Reno! Goldboy.*

But: no. Zack finds bones.

He thinks they might be deer bones—that someone must've taken a bad shot at the thing during archery, lost track of it, and let the fucker bleed. *Wasted meat.* That's what Mom's friend Switch is always saying: *Poachers shoot 'em and let them bleed—a waste of goddamn meat.* Switch says maggots get the choicest cuts. He says there's no creature as grimy or as ugly as a maggot, because they're thieves—living on people's shit. Switch hates people living on people's shit.

Zack uncovers the bones with his prospect tool (Mom's garden shovel) and cleans them with his archeologist brush (a cut-off kitchen broom). He brushes dust from bone, running the word *maggot* over his tongue, enjoying the way it feels, *mag* and *got* hung up behind his teeth. Something in the way the *g* sticks in his mouth like Skittle throat or spitting black after drinking Coke or Pepsi. Switch hits that *g* hard when he tells a story—pauses on it so long it sounds like an engine rattling into second gear. Zack imagines telling his own story: that there's larger bones, maybe, beneath these surface ones, these tiny, smooth-faced newer ones. He imagines dinosaur bones: raptor, rex. He can see himself dragging the long, jagged spine of a brontosaurus home on his shoulder, slumping it in the front yard like, *Yeah, that's dinosaur back.*

He'd set up a booth: 5 *BUX TO TOUCH*. Neighborhood kids spilling into the streets on bikes and skateboards and rollerblades just to cop a feel, just to slide their fingertips along that gray, haunted string of bones, and to meet Zack, asking how he found it, and could he take them there, could he please, please take them?

"We'll see," Zack would promise. "Don't wanna spook the vibe." Which is what Switch is always telling Mom when she begs him to call his friend Your Guy some nights, nearly crying, and he's all: *Chill, sugar-ass. Can't spook the vibe.*

But when Zack tears bone from ground, there's only some mud-smudged rag and a pocket of dirt that expels a puff of ancient air like bad breath, which frightens him, so he stuffs the bone back inside the hole, sneaking a few small pieces he thinks are spine bones, identical and serrated with a hole in the center, into his pocket and leaves. It's not the last he'll see of the place. In the prospecting world, it's what they call a honey hole. Zack likes that: *honey* and *hole*. He can't dig it alone. He'll need the boogers (his nickname for his buddies Jerry and Rod). Then all three of them can peel up the bones and dig their fingers into virgin dirt, where the honey is, and if they're lucky, even more: a tyrannosaurus tooth, or the ancient body of some woolly mammoth curled up and dead, or, like the couple on *Appalachian Gold Rush*, a half-broke box of quarter-eagle coins worth over two million dollars.

But here's the truth: Zack has a secret. It's no particular secret—like Jerry's fear of daddy longleggers or Rod's claustrophobia—but a tendency, instead, to be easily ashamed.

In grade school, some guys called him *wolf-shit*. He liked, at least, the sound of the first half—*wolf*—despite the second half's having to do with the time Henry Feldman jumped out from behind a trash can and Zack lunged backward and howled and everyone laughed, *That boy shit his pants*—which, for the record, he hadn't. But he turned red and took off running, because shame, for Zack, was a heightened reflex; he couldn't help it; he could only hide it. Like last summer, at the East-Side public pool, when some Cameron kid did a textbook gainer off the diving board, and half the pool (including the boogers) waited for Zack—who'd been doing cannonballs—to follow him up, and Zack was too afraid to jump. He pretended to slip, took the smack on the ass, and tumbled in laughing, because shame triggered another reflex: making shit up. He shouted loud enough for the eighth-grade girls tanning newly swelled chests and thinning stomachs to hear that he was retiring from the board, that he'd blown his back, and yes, he'd be fine, but diving for the

day was out of the question. Everyone accepted. Wasn't so much a lie as a way of saving himself; the stories seemed to roll right out.

And with middle school came the opportunity for a new look: a six-inch Mohawk, red-and-blue-colored hair painted fresh with store-bought Halloween spray, and—always—his cut-sleeve shirts, jean shorts, and chain hanging from the belt loop—the way Switch wears his. Zack just needs a ring. Switch's ring is silver, has a red stone. On one side, *CLASS OF '81*, and on the other, an engraving of a wrestler. He holds it up always, making a fist: *had to be superman for this ring*. Knocks his knuckles together. *People respect that*. Zack wants respect more than anything. When he hits pay dirt, his ring will be made of gold. It'll say *ZACK*. He won't have to feel ashamed anymore. No hose showers behind the house because the tub quit working, no gathering around the stove mid-winter with his sisters, no using log-tarp to seal the kitchen where the roof collapsed, so that raccoons and possums can't raid the cabinets again. There will only be the score, the money, a gold ring with his name on it. People will respect that.

The night he finds the bones, Zack comes home as streetlights blink on up Carmella Avenue. Some nights, when he cuts it close, he'll run straight toward the house as the lights flicker to life, burning like orange, angry eyes. But this night is hardly melting into dusk, hardly pink and yellow over the Cameron hills, and he's got a surprise for his sisters: spine bone. Got his shoelace threaded through so it can be worn like a necklace.

Inside, Switch is sitting at the kitchen table. Mom is behind him, rubbing his naked back. They're dragging on cigarettes, smoke swirling over stacks of unopened mail and dirty plates on the table.

"Freak Zone!" Switch yells, smiling tightly from the side of his mouth where the teeth still remain, brown, silver-crowned, but intact. "What's happening, my dude?"

"Another day, another dime," Zack says, knowing it will make Switch laugh, and Mom, too. Switch raises his hand and Zack high-fives it. A sting follows, because Switch is hard. All of him, in fact, is hard: his shoulder bones jutting out, his ribs visible and pulsing, his bruised arms rail-thin but deadly like clubs. There's something about him that is frightening and magnetic all at once, and Zack wishes one day to be just like that—to sit around all shirtless and smoking and laughing this wicked laugh, and when people bug him, he'll say, *Listen sugar-ass, you're really chewin' my nerves*. Though Zack hates when Mom's chewing Switch's nerves, hates when she's shaking that bony shoulder, whisper-

ing into that high-school wrestler's ear that she's sick again, because Switch can be real mean sometimes, and he'll beat her down in the dining room, a fist to the belly or a smack across the face, and on those nights, Zack hates Switch.

"Shoes off," Mom says to Zack, pointing her cigarette toward the door. Then, to no one in particular, "I'm not in the damn mood to clean these kids' mud another night"—though the floor is sticky and black with mud and boot-prints, and there's dust blowing in through an open hole in the plaster by the stove, and it's been a month since anyone replaced the garbage bag in the trash that's overflowing with empty cans of diced tomatoes, ravioli, and soup.

Zack peels his muddy shoes off by the door, and the smell of dirty, sweaty socks knocks into his face. He can tell Mom's in a funk. That's what she calls it: *a real nasty funk*. Mostly, he can tell by the look of her, like when she's happy, she's heavier and smiling—though Switch says she's getting fat and they fight—but when she's in a funk, she's sick-looking and angry, shouting for Switch to call Your Guy. And you can't sneak anything past her. No lying about eating all the sugar, drinking the last glass of milk, or leaving skid-stained underwear crumpled on the bathroom floor, because she punishes with the two-faced spoon—one side a smiley (three spanks) and the other a frown (a full minute's worth of spanks). But mostly, it's the smell Zack recognizes—like rotted blood—before even seeing her. It's like she doesn't brush her teeth, or like she's burning her hand again cooking hot-dogs-on-a-fork.

Zack's kid sisters Molly (who's seven) and Deana (who's four) come dumping into the kitchen now, Deana crying that Molly stole her Tasmanian Devil Bear, and though Molly swears she didn't, Switch grabs her up under the arm. "You fucking steal it, kid?"

"No, I swear!"

"Let her go," Mom says.

"Nothing worse than a little fucking sneak."

Zack doesn't like him yanking Molly's arm. Molly tries to unclasp his fingers, but Switch squeezes harder. Zack thinks of tackling him, but doesn't. He's seen Switch throw a punch before, the saw-toothed cut his ring leaves, and the thought of being on the receiving end of that makes him shiver.

"Yes you did!" Deana shouts.

"Shut up," Mom says, her face looking dark and tired. "Don't be a tattletale."

Switch lets go of Molly and both the girls are quiet, but it's too late. Mom's already pissed and she's in a funk and she's starting again about

the mud. “Look at you,” she says to Deana. “Look at all of you. Filthy fucking pigs, I swear to God.”

“Just chill,” Switch says, and when he stands, the smell of him, like hamburger and three-day armpit, wafts from beneath his sweaty tank top. “You’re chewin’ my nerves.” Then he and Mom start shouting and Zack pulls the girls out of the room.

“I have a surprise,” he says.

He ushers them into the bathroom, their tiny eyes exploding into instant firecrackers, pleading that he tell them: *Please. Please!* Making sure the girls are bathed is one of Zack’s chores, so he decides to do it now. While they watch, Zack crawls out the bathroom window and into the yard. It’s been a month since the city shut the water off, but Zack cranks the neighbors’ water on, kinks their hose, and climbs back inside the bathroom with it, letting the cool water pour into the tub. “Lookin’ like you went swimming in the mud,” he says, flicking water at the girls, who cringe and screech and snatch for water to flick back.

“Show us the surprise,” Molly demands, her brown hair knotted on her head. Deana is standing behind her with her hand on her hip, as if to back her up.

Zack pulls his empty hand from his pocket. “I brought you a hand!”

“Quit it. I’m telling!” Deana shouts. Zack can hear Mom and Switch’s voices hammering the walls—*Fucking cunt*, and *My damn house*, then something breaking—a plate or a glass.

“Bath time first,” Zack says, words rattling from somewhere inside him, *cunt* a word that cuts and melts like butter on the back of his tongue.

The girls climb into the tub, complaining that the water’s cold, and Zack says it’s no different than swimming in the creek. Behind them, the sink is broken, the porcelain a sharp, jagged edge, and there’s toothpaste, soap scum, and mold clotted in the drain with hair and dirt. Zack pulls the spine-bone necklace from his pocket, swinging it back and forth in front of the girls.

“That thing?” Molly says. “Looks like a chicken bone.”

“You look like a chicken,” Zack says. “Chicken-bone neck. Chicken-bone face. Chicken-bone...” He pushes his finger into her collar, which tickles her, and she tilts her head into her shoulder, laughing. “Don’t you know what this is?” he says. “Don’t you know where I got it?”

Molly stares blankly. Deana knocks water from her ear. Then, as if some look on Zack’s face has suddenly convinced them, they’re excited. Deana says, “No way!” and splashes water. “Buffalosburgh?”

“Bingo,” Zack says, draping the necklace over Molly’s head. “A necklace like this, they might even let you in the city,” meaning, of course, that with the necklace, the girls might be transported somehow to Buffalosburgh—the magic city.

It started as a joke, a way to prank the girls, to jag their stupid, little-kid questions: *Where’d you get the ice cream? What’s that cut on your arm? Why you home after streetlights?* And he’d tell them, always, that he was in Buffalosburgh—a place that wasn’t on the map, that only he and the boogers were allowed to visit because they knew the secret to get there—and he’d say they gave free ice cream to kids, or that he’d gotten scuffed in an alligator-wrestling tournament, or that he had talked to the mayor about lending him some blue-jay wings so he could quit riding his bike and fly instead.

“I wanna go, too,” Deana says. “Let me wear it!”

“No way,” Zack says. “Your ears are dirty.” He cups water and pours it over her head. Mom and Switch stop yelling, but a quiet follows, the same quiet as when they go into the bedroom and lock the doors and sleep, and even when you’re knocking for them to wake up they won’t. “And you stink like turds. They don’t let little turds into Buffalosburgh.”

“I’m not a turd!” Deana says.

“Oh no,” Zack says, scrubbing dirt from her ears, “you just swim with them,” referring to the time he was bathing the girls and promised they could go to Buffalosburgh if they dunked their heads under the water and held their breath. Then, while they were under, he sprinkled tiny, ripped-up pieces of cardboard into the bath, and when they emerged, he said he’d taken a big shit in the water. To them, the bloated, floating cardboard trimmings suddenly looked exactly like turds, and they exploded from the bath, crying that he’d pooped in the tub, and Mom came in and dragged him across the hardwood floor, beating and smacking him harder the more he laughed.

Now Molly is slipping off the necklace and swinging it like a pendulum the way Zack had done, asking why nothing’s happening, a tiny grin bending into her cheek that says she’s old enough to know he’s making it up, but young enough, maybe, to be convinced.

“That’s just the start,” Zack says. “It’s not cheap. You pay in gold, too—at the gate.” And he wishes he’d described the gate better—*great* gate, *glowing* gate. “No cash in Buffalosburgh, only gold dust.” Or *golden* dust, *magical*. The girls love when things are magical. “You wear the necklace, pay with gold, and...” He has no idea what else, but he’ll have it figured out by the next time they ask—so for mystery, because who

doesn't love a little mystery, he says, "Of course, there's one more thing you need to know before they let you in."

It's noon the next day, the sun mid-July hot and cooking the streets, when Zack heads out to meet the boogers, Jerry and Rod.

The three of them have been friends since grade school, when by default (as kids who walked to school, played kickball with duct-taped shoes, and stuffed extra chicken nuggets into their pockets) they formed their trio, walking home together or sharing paper routes or venturing into the Emporium woods to swing from vines and climb trees. And though there's no power-holder of the pack, Zack has always had a knack for tricking Jerry and Rod into doing things he wants.

He walks Haymaker Road to the old Cooper's Garage, abandoned now. Cutting through saves him twenty minutes to Rod's, where the boogers meet in the summer because there's a couch on the back porch and Rod's parents are never home.

Behind Cooper's, there's a graveyard of vehicles: half-salvaged vans and trucks, spare frames and engines heaped in piles. Zack runs straight through, imagining a junkyard dog is chasing him, until he reaches Sal's meat market on Gerber Street, the sweet smell of cilantro pork tenderloin and roasted lamb and bacon steaming from that air-conditionless storefront. Zack has his cut-sleeve tied around his head, and when he peeks in the store to get a better sniff, the fat guy with gray hair and a sweaty chin swats an apron, telling him to get out, go on, before he calls the cops.

At Rod's, the boogers look ridiculous eating chips on the porch. Jerry's chubby with these huge hands and no chin, and Rod is rickety as hell, like a loose-ass bicycle chain. "Lookin' like a meatball and a razorblade," Zack says, laughing. "Hook me up with some of those." He sits on the table and reaches into the bag.

"Man, wipe your sweaty hands," Rod says.

Zack wipes his hands under his knees. Then, snatching a mouthful of chips, he starts campaigning to get the boys in the woods. It's difficult, because he'd used his "gold" card already. The summer before, Zack saw a guy on TV dig dirt from sidewalk joints, saying if you panned it, you'd find half an ounce of gold in a day. So, with little convincing, Zack and the boogers had crouched in front of the school, digging sidewalk cracks, pouring sporkfuls of dirt into Mom's old, empty, bed-side pill bottles, so that Zack could go home that night and sift it for gold. Other kids laughed, kicked them in their backs to knock them over, but Zack smiled, thinking, *Stupid fools; they'll see*. Then, that night, when he'd sift-

ed all the dirt in the sink and found nothing, he felt so ashamed in the bathroom that he sat on the side of the tub for an hour, refusing to come out, even when Molly banged on the door crying that she had to pee.

So now, Zack assures the boogers. "This is different," he says. "I've found something else." He remembers the bones, the possibility of selling them. He tells them he found fossils, but Jerry and Rod need more. "And I already made a hundred bucks," Zack says, proud of that, though he hasn't sold any bones or made any money. "Took my score to the pawn shop on Vermont Street and dude gave me a hundred cash. Said if there's more, he'll pay more. Said I can get rich if I want. And trust me, there's more."

"Show us then," Rod says.

"Show you what?"

"Show us the money."

Zack slaps the table. He almost keeps it going, almost says he already pitched in on the rent, but he's frustrated suddenly, and impatient. "You two are chewin' my nerves," he says. "Too busy French-kissing on that grimy-ass couch like a bunch of fucking cunts." Jerry and Rod move away from each other.

"Chill, man," Jerry says. "We're playing." And Zack is surprised how easily he's swayed them. "We'll take the pit bikes," Rod says.

The three of them dash into the woods on Rod's Uncle Henry's 50ccs: two Z-Hondas and a '73 MR. None of them are brave enough to ride fast, but they rev those engines into a second-gear, two-stroke scream to pretend they are. When they reach the spot at the bottom of a hill, they lean the bikes on trees. Zack's shovel still sticks up from the ground. He takes the shovel and starts digging.

At first, the boogers only watch.

Zack doesn't have to dig long before the familiar feel of bone and cloth scuffs the tip of the spade. He smiles, drops to his knees, and reaches into the hole, the same smell he'd smelled that first day rising up with a stinking puff. He reaches deeper this time, feeling courageous with the boys behind him. He grabs a bone, smooth and cool to the touch. When he pulls it out, he raises it into the air, laughing, and Jerry and Rod jump back, laughing, too. It's the coolest discovery of their lives. Cooler than the half-deflated beer-ball kegs, or the '60s milk jars, or even that pair of panties Jerry found one summer down by the creek. It's almost mystical—as if they're uncovering the ancient spirit of some long-dead giant, a ground bear or an ox.

The boogers pounce on the hole, greedy now for their own finds. Zack is excited as they extract more bones, and soon a beige pile grows before them. Then Jerry pulls a broken piece of jawbone from the dirt, and Zack wishes suddenly that he'd never brought the boogers. They're calling it an elk's mouth, but Zack sees something else in that smooth, curved shard of what can't be but looks like a cheekbone; he can almost see a human face. He's terrified—by the boogers' excitement, their laughter, what they're holding: this half-jaw, half-skull. He wishes he hadn't told them they could sell it. He tries changing his story, tries convincing them to take the bone down to the deep side of the creek and chuck it into the water, but it's too late. They're stuck on elk-mouth. They're stuck on selling. They mount the jaw on a stick and dance away from the honey hole, hoisting the bone like a torch as sunlight flickers awfully off its sharp, broken edges.

After the boys uncover the jaw, they argue out on Gabriel Street over who will get to keep it, settling—finally—on Rod when it starts to rain.

It pours for two full days.

Zack's mother's been sick since it started. She hung sheets over the windows to block out the light and told Zack and the girls to keep their loud mouths shut while she rested.

Since it's raining, it's humid. They're walking around in underwear, crowding the box fan in the living room. Every smell clings in the darkness: Mom's in-a-funk breath, Switch's armpits and cigarettes, the stink of the girls' dirty hair. Mom keeps saying she's going to call Freddy. Zack doesn't know Freddy. He only knows the mention of his name makes Switch eager to leave, which is unlike Switch, who likes to chill on the couch all day. But no one is as eager to leave as Zack. There's spaghetti piled in the trash, half-opened bottles of cherry pop on the counter—rotted, smelling like honey hole—and he swears if he breathes another breath of the place he'll drop dead. So when Switch moves to leave, Zack shoves his shoes on.

"The hell you going, Freak?"

"With you," Zack says. "I can't be here. I swear to God I'll die. In history, they said a kid stayed in his house all summer once and dropped dead. He had a heart attack. And my chest hurts, man. My elbows. They say that's the first symptoms."

Switch is too hurried to resist, too busy staring toward the front door to register the story, so without any more conversation, they head into the rain, running across the front yard and climbing into Switch's '92 Lincoln Continental. Switch reaches through the rolled-down window

to open his door. “Fucking seat is drenched,” he says, sitting. “Be driving around with a wet ass.” He makes Zack hold his cigarette while he peels his rain-soaked shirt off.

They drive to the other side of Emporium, across Main Street and into the Lower East Side, where the old turntable from the railroad is crumbled and abandoned. “Have to see my dude real quick,” Switch says, wrist-driving as his cigarette smoke curls into his naked chest. His jaw keeps pulsing, throbbing like he’s chewing on a mouthful of jerky.

“Your Guy?”

Switch looks at Zack, seriously, and then laughs. Zack likes Switch’s laugh—like a can knocking around inside a barrel. It’s part of his draw, what makes him magnetic. Zack has a sudden urge to call him Dad, though he knows better. Last time, they were painting the gutter when Zack asked why they called him Switch, adding, “C’mon, Dad. Just tell me!” and Switch, losing balance on the ladder, dropped his paint can to the ground, where thick, pale-gray paint oozed onto the grass. He spit his cigarette out and said, “I’m not your fucking dad.”

Zack’s dad is dead—that’s what Mom said. Zack didn’t know him. He knows Deana’s dad, and Molly’s, too, but of all Mom’s friends, Switch has hung around the longest. In the yard that day, he must’ve felt bad, because he nudged Zack playfully: “They used to call me Eight Ball,” he said. “But I’m about navigation. I move, and I move fast.” He jerked like he was preparing to run, smiling. “The way I operate, I switch up my location. Too many dudes I fuck with stay in one place too long. Ask anyone in Cameron. One move and I’m a ghost—poof.” He flicked his fingers at the air, and that had frightened Zack—not so much the ghost as Switch leaving.

Now, they pull in front of an orange-brick apartment. Switch tells Zack to lock the doors and don’t let nobody fuck with him. Then he’s gone for a long time.

People come in and out of the door Switch entered, walking slowly away, even as the rain grows heavier. The sound of it pattering the roof is a peaceful, humming sound, and Zack dozes off. When he wakes, it’s dusk and the rain has stopped and Switch is clacking on the window with his ring, shouting, “Open the fucking door, man!” He climbs inside, his back arched forward and stiff, and all the way home he drives with his ass lifted off the seat.

When they pull onto their street, two police cars are parked in front of the house. “Sit back,” Switch says, leaning heavily into his seat as he

and Zack pass the house. “They think they’re smarter than me,” Switch says. “Well, shit.” His hands are shaking on the steering wheel.

They park a few houses down and walk up the sidewalk. Switch limps in front of Zack, his hand holding his stomach as if he might throw up, and as they pass under streetlights, blinking in and out of the orange glow, Zack can see a dark stain on the back of Switch’s jean shorts—appearing and reappearing in the streetlamp light.

Switch climbs behind some bushes. “Go check it out,” he says, his voice crackling and hoarse. “And be cool, man. Don’t be fucking sayin’ I’m out here.”

Zack feels stranded suddenly.

He can see light shining through the kitchen-window sheets and he’s afraid. His stomach twitches and he feels like crying, but he wants to be cool for Switch. “I’m cool,” he says—though crossing the street, his hands shake, too, and he wonders if someone complained again about Mom screaming, or about the girls crying or running naked in the front yard under the hose.

When he reaches the door, he hears Mom’s voice. It’s muffled, but it sounds like her grocery-store voice, the same one she uses with Zack’s teachers and at the social security office where she cashes her checks.

When Zack opens the door, Mom stands to hug him. “There he is,” she says. “Always home by streetlights.”

The three officers are rigid-looking. One, a broad-shouldered woman with tiny glasses, leans toward him. “Nice to meet you, Zack. I’m Officer Brenda.” The collar of her navy uniform cuts into the skin of her neck, making her head look separate from her body.

“Sup,” Zack says, trying to stay cool. It’s quiet in the house, and the kitchen is clean, and there’s a smell like Scrubbing Bubbles and diaper. For some reason, Zack feels so embarrassed that his cheeks heat up. From the hallway, Molly is half-hidden behind a wall, flipping him the finger. It’s so uncomfortable with everyone staring and his cheeks turning red that he can’t help laughing, which changes the looks on the officers’ faces.

Mom smiles tighter.

“We need you to take us to where you took Rod Hughes and Jerry Carr on Tuesday afternoon,” Officer Brenda says. “We need you to take us to where you found the bones.”

Leave it to Rod. He took the jaw home and mounted it above his bed. His mom freaked when she saw it. Said she swore to God the thing had

human teeth. When Rod told her Zack had dug it up, she called the police.

Now leaving with the officers, Zack looks for Switch, any glimmer of his eyes in the bushes, but there's only the street, only Switch's car a few houses down, empty.

It's dark in the woods, the warm, rain-fogged night blocking out the moon. The ground is muddy and wet. Officer Brenda and the others guide by flashlight, occasionally clicking away the static voice of some dispatch officer calling on their walkie-talkies.

Zack's never been this deep in the woods after dark, but as a prospector, he's studied the hills; he recognizes where the shelf rock fades and where the clay begins and what trees are the trees that lead toward the creek. Feeling brave with the officers beside him, their guns lifting in their holsters as they walk, he moves ahead, spitting, *This way* and *Deeper down* and *Gotta move faster*, as if he were their commander and they were his soldiers. He feels powerful and cool, the toughest thirteen-year-old in Cameron, leading cops into the stormy woods. He imagines telling his sisters about it. He'd say, specifically, *soldiered*, as in, *We soldiered through the night*—the way he'd heard the wars described in history class—so that Molly and Deana could draw a picture in their minds of Zack as hero: him strong, him brave. Though the thought of bones with teeth still twists his stomach.

When they reach the honey hole, Zack runs to the spot. He's the one who found it. He dug it. He can show them, this army of his—they'll make good diggers. But they're too fast. One holds Zack's arm, asking him to stand off near the water, which he does, huffing loudly so they know he's disappointed.

Officer Brenda keeps turning away and speaking into her walkie-talkie. For a while, there's the constant sound of shovel hitting dirt, tossing dirt. There's the ancient, rotted smell of the hole spilling through the sticky night. Then there's quiet, the only sound the creek water, until one of the men finally stands from the hole, breathless.

"Well, I'll be damned," he says. "The woman was right. It's human."

When Officer Brenda pulls Zack aside and asks why he didn't come to the police, he tells her he doesn't know. Behind her, the others stare, shaking their heads as if he's an idiot, which embarrasses him, so he says that he'd supposed the bones belonged to long-dead Iroquois Indians. In social studies, when Zack's teacher told the Iroquois legend of Pleiades—those Iroquois children who turned into stars—Zack had remembered every word, fascinated by the idea of becoming a star. He tells Officer Brenda he'd thought it was an Iroquois grave, a child's

grave. Even tries out the word: a *human* grave. That's all he intends to say, but she's kneeling now; she's listening. So he dumps on even more, saying that he'd thought, too, if he disturbed it, the spirit of those kids would haunt him.

Officer Brenda stands. "You're not in trouble," she says. But something in her voice, and how she's biting her lip, makes him feel like someone is. So on the drive back, when she asks about his sisters and where they sleep, if he likes his mother's boyfriend or feels safe at home, Zack knows enough not to say anything else. Officer Brenda tells him she'll have more questions for him—about the woods, the hole he dug up—and for his mother, too. She tells him she'll be seeing him soon, then she drives slowly down the street, idling for a long time at the stop sign on the corner.

The next day, Zack is stuck entertaining the girls while Mom and Switch smoke and sleep in the bedroom with the lights out, their smell leaking beneath the door and into the hallway. It's as if they've forgotten the bones and Officer Brenda, though Zack cannot. The word *human* is stuck in his mouth, and though he tries to stop it, he finds himself saying it over and over: *Human. Human.* The feel of the *H* is so subtle, so fragile, that it frustrates him. He keeps licking his front teeth, as if to cleanse them of the letter.

Then whatever medicine Switch had gotten from his dude is gone and Mom is sick and Switch is sick, too. They're all sitting in the living room watching TV, flipping from the Cartoon Network for Deana to MTV for Switch when they see Officer Brenda on the six o'clock news. She looks larger on the television and meaner than she'd really been in person. She's in the woods, down the creek from the honey hole. Emporium police are scattered in the background. People are digging while two Bobcat excavators bite into dirt and dump buckets into growing piles. Rolling across the bottom of the screen, it says in all caps, *TWENTY BODIES EXHUMED FROM THE EAST EMPORIUM WOODS.*

When the screen changes, there's Rod right on the TV. His mom and dad stand behind him with their hands on his skinny shoulders, and Rod has this look on his crooked face, the same look he gets when he wins *Crash Bandicoot* or *Tony Hawk*. It's a smirk, though to anyone but Zack, it'd look like fear. When he speaks, his jagged, yellow teeth poke from his mouth and his voice is staticky through the speakers. "At first," Rod says, "I thought it was a fox when I found it. Then the first thing I thought was to do the right thing. So I went home and called the police." The reporter praises him for *doing the right thing*, and anger

cracks across Zack's chest. How could Rod soak up the cred when Zack was the one who'd marched through the woods the night before and showed them the spot? Zack wants Officer Brenda to walk over and tell the reporter, to say Zack Reno made the find. He's the prospector, the hero. But she doesn't, and frustration burns his throat.

Mom snaps the television off.

"I'm watching!" Zack yells, but Mom tells him to shut up, which angers him more, so he stands puffing his chest to show her he's no punk, that he won't shut up, that he deserves to be respected, and he snaps, "I said I'm fucking watching that," which stuns everyone, especially Mom. Zack feels a brief success. He moves to turn the TV back on. But Switch, who's leaning on a chair by the wall, darts across the room and pulls Zack to the floor.

"Cocky little fuck," he says, looming. His eyes are sunken and dark and there's sweat on his forehead and around his lips, sliding down his naked chest in beads. "Who you think you're talking to?"

"Stop it," Mom says.

"I'll knock sense in the freak," Switch says. Spit jumps from his mouth and Zack flinches from the cool, weightless feel of it. Mom reaches between them, yelling for Switch to quit, to let go of Zack, smacking them, until Switch releases Zack and cracks her across the face. Zack is so angry he almost takes the candy jar from the table and smashes Switch's head in, but he crab-crawls away, feeling like a coward as he recedes down the hall with his sisters.

From the bedroom, he can hear the fighting. Switch is shouting, *You know what I've given!* The girls are side by side on the bed. Zack is by the door. Things smash in the living room. Mom screams for Switch to stop, to get away. The girls are asking Zack to tell them the secret, the thing they need to know to get to Buffalosburgh; they want to go now. But Zack is angry, too rattled by the sound of Mom running from Switch, who growls *Mmm* before every hit—*Mmm, mmm*—as if biting his bottom lip with each blow, savoring it.

"Please?" Deana asks, and Molly looks at Zack as if she believes in his city like she believes in prayer, and muffled through the walls is Switch: *We'll see how you like getting fucked in the ass for dope.*

But what Zack wants is to hurt the girls. He wants to shove them off the bed and call them freaks because they are the weakest, most delicate things in his life, weaker, even, than he is, and because he cannot protect them, and because even a coward wishes to be powerful, so he says, "Buffalosburgh isn't real, you stupid cunts," and though the hurt and betrayal on their faces is painful to watch, it only proves how fragile

they are. “None of it is real,” he says. “I made it up. There’s no secret and no city and no fucking gold in this stupid, dead fucking world.” And when they crawl, crying, to the side of the bed, he drops by the door, steaming.

Eventually, when the girls fall asleep and Deana is snoring lightly in the dark, Zack’s anger slips away and is replaced by a terrible, biting regret. He wishes he could wake them and tell them a story—a better one. He hates that something that never mattered feels suddenly so important. At some point, Mom and Switch finished fighting, only this time, before the long, stinking quiet of the bedroom, there is the sound of them having sex right in the living room, the sound of some object—a table, a lamp, a picture frame—knocking relentlessly against the wall.

In the middle of the night, it’s dark. Zack walks to the kitchen for a drink, not expecting to find Mom and Switch on the couch. The room smells like peroxide, eraser dust, and burnt vinegar. There are empty baggies on the table and syringes, too. Zack almost gags.

Mom’s face is half in darkness, half dimly glowing in the kitchen-lamp light. Her eyes are swollen and bruised, and she’s snoring. Zack moves toward her. She is strange-looking from the marks, shrunken and fragile, and he feels his chest fill with love for her that rushes in like a breath. He wants to reach out and touch her face, but doesn’t. She is so thin he wonders how she was ever the mother from his memories: knees knocking on the city bus; a strong, veiny hand gripping groceries near her feet; neck muscles flexing while she smoked by the kitchen window or broke chicken nuggets into pieces on the table. Now, she’s only wasted.

Switch’s hand jumps and so does Zack. It opens and closes as if reaching for something. Kitchen light catches the edges of Switch’s class ring, blinking like a beacon in the dark. Zack wants to steal its power, so that even if Switch threw his nastiest punch, it would only feel like the wind. So Zack holds his breath and pulls on the ring, the bristly texture of the engraved wrestler brushing his thumb. It’s stuck at first to Switch’s cut-up finger, but Zack screws the thing off. Then, standing with the ring in his fist, he feels some crackle of guts, some blood hammering through him like he could lift the world. “You’re not my dad,” he whispers, leaning closer. “You’re just a punk-ass mooch sleeping on my couch.”

Switch grunts but doesn’t wake. The room is filled with quiet, labored breath.

Zack goes back to his room. He lies in bed fingering the ring in his pocket until he sleeps, wind knocking around outside the window. In

his sleep, he dreams of Molly. She is across the street and holding a yellow balloon. When Zack steps to cross, the balloon suddenly flickers into an ugly human skull—brown and rotted, with these black, bottomless eyes that ooze from the darkness—and Molly lets it go. Zack watches as it rises clumsily into the sky and becomes a tiny, invisible dot before it disappears.

In the morning, Zack wakes to the sound of boots thumping down the hallway. Switch busts through the bedroom door so fast he stumbles. Mom is behind him, her face worse in the morning light, hacked and bruised, and her eyebrows are slanted so much that Zack can't tell if she's confused or angry.

"Where the fuck is it," Switch says, his eyes electric and snapping around the room from Zack to the girls to Mom. "Where's the ring?"

Zack pretends that he's confused, shaking his head and promising he'd never seen it, though he's already reaching into his pocket and scooping the thing into his hand. His chest is an aching knot. He wishes he'd never taken the ring. He almost pulls it out and lets it clatter across the hardwood floor, but Switch's eyes land on Molly. He steps closer to her. "Little sneak," he says. "You got a habit of taking people's shit."

Zack holds his breath, thinking, *Punk-ass. Punk-ass.*

Switch peels Molly from her bed as if lifting a doll. He stands her next to Mom. "Just say where it is," Mom says, her voice buttery and low.

"I didn't take it," Molly says. "I swear!"

"Fucking thief," Switch says, shaking her.

Mom looks like she wants to stop him, but she doesn't. She's jittery and she's thin, an alien creature standing useless in the doorway. Even Deana, at four, is off the bed with her fists balled, yelling, "Quit it!" And as Switch is calling Molly a thief, pushing her against a dresser with one hand, opening drawers and dumping them with the other, shouting *Show me! Show me!*, Zack says, "Chill, man."

"The fuck you say, Freak?"

"It's cool," Zack says, searching for any excuse, any story or word that can make it right. "Don't spook the vibe." But that's wrong because it angers Switch, who lets go of Molly and slams Zack with incredible strength, knocking the wind from him. Zack pulls the ring out, adjusting his tone. "Middle of the night last night, I found it. I swear to God I found it, and I was like, 'I'll grab it and give it to him in the morning, man.'" Switch snatches the ring, slips it back onto his battered hand. "I'm sorry, Dad," Zack says.

Switch laughs. Same tin-can-in-a-barrel laugh Zack's come to love, and he almost thinks he'll be forgiven, that Switch will chill and Mom won't look so stupid and frightened, but Switch says, "Bunch of blood-sucking leeches." He lifts his hand and points at Zack. "Fucking junkie's kid. A thief and a liar."

Then Switch is gone.

There's the sound of the Lincoln starting outside, Mom shouting for Switch to stop, then running back into the house. Zack doesn't have a chance to explain before she's in the room again, shouting, "Why do you have to lie?," her scabs breaking, bleeding around the swollen edges of her cuts as she swats and smacks. "Why are you always lying?"

When Mom leaves, Zack and the girls sit quietly in the bedroom. The door is open, and the sound of the television in the living room, the rattle and ring of some cartoon, is loud and banging through the house.

Zack gets up and walks down the hall. He can smell the burnt vinegar and rot before he enters the living room, where he finds Mom slumped in the recliner in a hazy half-sleep, trying to talk but mumbling instead, the way Jerry does, as if she's swallowed her tongue. In her lap is a small, folded leather case, and beside her are two empty baggies. She keeps lifting her arms, as if reaching, then dropping them.

Zack changes the channel. The exhumation story is on three different stations. There's no Officer Brenda, no Rod, only reporters and strangers. Everything is cordoned off behind them, yellow caution tape strung from tree to tree. Excavators are clawing away; thirty men and women are scattered along the creek with shovels; cadaver dogs run on leashes, barking. Everything is gutted: dirt piled against trees, tripod cameras posted along the perimeter, and holes—fifty, a hundred. They pock the ground, spilling into the woods.

Zack turns the volume down. He can still hear the beeping excavator, the barking dogs, the chattering crowd that's come to watch the spectacle. If he were there, he'd be sifting all that dug-up dirt, because that's the only part he'd ever seen on TV: the sifting, the panning, gold showing up in flakes, promising more. But for Zack, there was always nothing. He'd empty his pan and fill again, frustrated and ashamed—no color, no gold, no flakes or dust—just an empty, dirt-stained pan. He thinks maybe he is a liar. Maybe he's a punk-ass freak and no matter how much dirt he'd shake, there'd only ever be an empty pan.

When the girls come in and sit on the floor beside him, he turns the TV even lower. In the middle of the screen, he sees a man standing off from the diggers and the crowd. He's tucked in the shade, but a sliver

of sun illuminates his clean-shaven, bulletproof cheeks. The man stares toward the camera as if looking right into the living room at Zack, exposing him. For a moment, he's spooked. This man, he swears, is a taller, meaner version of himself, hiding and defeated. Zack tries blinking him away as he would a bad dream, but the man stares until the camera pulls away, cutting to a reporter with steel-blond hair, and a caption rolls across the screen—POSSIBLE REMAINS OF CARLO "THE BEAST" VANZETTI DISCOVERED IN THE EAST EMPORIUM WOODS—as the woman says, "Police and investigators have uncovered what is speculated to be the skull and teeth of Carlo Vanzetti, New Jersey crime boss missing, now, for almost a decade." She smiles every word. "The teeth, twelve of which are gold-crowned, are an unmistakable and notorious signature of Mr. Vanzetti." And hovering in the corner of the screen is a picture of an old man with white hair.

"Mom's being weird," Molly says, her voice throaty as if from screaming. Deana says, "I'm hungry."

Zack is so excited looking at the picture of Vanzetti on the screen, gold teeth clattering his mouth, that he feels almost light-headed. He imagines that somehow he's dug up the bones of this big-time mafia boss. He imagines he has, on a necklace, the spine of Carlo Vanzetti, "The Beast." He turns to the girls, wondering how they can ignore the stink. Or how they can ignore Mom, who, bruised and scabbed, looks less like Mom and more like the husk of some long-rotted animal. "C'mon," Zack says. "I'll make hot-dogs-on-a-fork."

The girls follow him into the kitchen. The story of Vanzetti going missing the winter of '95 is an excited noise whispering in the living room, urgent and severe, and Zack smacks frozen hot dogs on a pan, flicks the flame on, waits for it to warm. While he waits, he watches the girls, ripping his brain to pieces trying to think of a story to tell them, of anything that will stop them from gleaming with wonder and fear at the unintelligible version of Mom. The look of them, so young and dirty, and the look of the kitchen and of Mom, ravaged and stinking, is a place he wants to take them away from. But there is only Buffalosburgh. There is only the Vanzetti necklace. And there is Zack, who doesn't know how to protect his sisters, or how to save them all from whatever it is they need saving from, except with his lies. Because after all, he is a great, great liar.

"What you don't know," he says, pulling them to the middle of the kitchen, taking their hands into his, "is that everyone in Buffalosburgh gets to see the future." Because this is as close to love as he can imagine. Because Deana, who's four, accepts happily, as if Zack had never said the

city wasn't real. Because Molly, who's seven, too old to forget, is young enough to let the damaged picture of the city restore itself in her mind, to believe in the place, to pretend, and that's all that matters.

Zack pulls his necklace from under his shirt, then over his head, and onto Deana. In the dimly lit, hot-dog-smoky kitchen, the necklace looks almost unreal—these pieces of some dangerous, powerful man around her neck. “This thing's as good as a ticket for the three of us,” he says.

“And Mom, too?” Deana asks.

“You're kidding,” Zack says. “Mom's queen of the city.” Ice from the hot dogs sizzles on the stove, blurring even the sound of the Vanzetti story on TV. The smell rises in the kitchen, pushing Mom's rotted mouth and skin and rubber far away from the girls.

Zack tells them to close their eyes. Then he tells them their future.

Deana, he says, is a famous actress. Molly, a famous singer. Zack, a famous hero. He's sure to say *famous* all three times—as if somehow he can guarantee they'll be remembered. He doesn't say that Deana will become a bitter runaway who'll scoff at the mention of a made-up city she'll deny ever believing in; or that Molly will be the storyteller, the creative one, imagining all of them from different perspectives in different cities as different people, a writer who will write and rewrite these years that she can hardly remember, desperate to give meaning to them; or that Zack will never become famous but will be a quiet father to a daughter—because that's not how a lie works. A lie is not meant to last as a story lasts. A lie is to surrender—a chance to suspend reality for as long as the lie can suspend it, so the liar might be better than he was before, even for a moment.

This is a lie:

Zack ignoring the smell of burning hot dogs and the blast of the television and stink of their mother so that whatever it is he's created in the kitchen might last a minute longer. Him telling the girls that if they spin—all of them—in circles, they can float into the air and disappear to Buffalosburgh, where the future waits, where they'll eat ice cream every day and dance every night and leave the city only as stars. Him saying not to look back, because they're lifting from the floor. The tender sound of his sisters laughing as they spin, and him laughing, too, as the kitchen swirls into an unrecognizable, electric tunnel, and each of them waits to take off toward the ceiling. Zack telling them, finally, the secret to Buffalosburgh: that everyone is forgiven.

And it's so damn good, even Zack almost believes it.