

A few days earlier, I found some similar bones in Sonia's pocket. The evening had caught us by the dirty, bare calves. I spent half the day drifting about the courtyard, until the orange sun slid across the concrete into the darkness. The holidays are always boring, the heat lays a hand over your mouth and you can't make yourself do anything, everyone else is off vacationing. Mum was dozing after her shift at the market, Grandma was dozing because she's old, it was up to me to haul my sister to the tub, though she wasn't having it, she runs away bawling, screaming she can't stand me.

I let her scream, hoping Mum would wake up and give her a piece of her mind, but she didn't stir – she was sleeping off all those groceries she'd scanned. For her part, Grandma didn't give a shit whether we stank or not, all her senses were pretty much clogged – her nose, her pores, her heart – after all, under that apron of hers was all death and disease, and that came before our hygiene.

Anyway, I grabbed Sonia by her frail wrist and pinched her until she finally calmed down – she could see there was no sense playing games. She was afraid of me, and that hurt, but I didn't say anything, I took her and pulled the ice-cream-splattered shirt over her head and mussed her hair, which seemed oddly stiff, like wood chips. With my other hand I turned on the faucet and then poured a bit of soap into the bottom of the tub. Then I yanked down her shorts and wiped her bloody knees. Sonia's toes and ankles were nearly black, she'd been walking around all day in sandals and playing with her dolls in the dirt.

"What kind of Barbie are you?" I asked. "A mole-Barbie?"

She didn't respond, she balled up like a larva and crossed her arms over her protruding belly. Defenceless and scrawny, she was like a miracle in need of protecting, and I wanted to cry. But the water was still pounding away on the cast-iron tub and I had to turn it off – I'd heard enough in nature class about water shortages for animals and people, and from Mum about the bills that her supermarket wages never seemed to cover.

"It's hot! It's hot," Sonia wailed, and I had to pour in a bit of cold. Then more, and some more, until the water was too cold for a bath, but my sister climbed in anyway.

"Why can't you bathe by yourself? You're big enough," I snorted, reaching for the dirty clothes.

I tried cramming the clothes into the overflowing laundry basket, but then I touched something weird. (...) Sonia hadn't been watching what I was up to, but when

she did, she screamed for me to stop. It was too late – I'd managed to shake maybe a dozen brown bones into my open palm, and there in the bathroom it suddenly got unbearably stuffy.

"Where'd you get these?" I asked.

Again she was silent – instead of answering she leaned over the edge of the tub and threw up all over the pyjamas laid out on her towel. Hello Kitty crumpled under the weight of the girl's vomit. I threw a towel over her. She only had the one pair of pyjamas, and now they were going to need washing.

"Go to bed," I told Sonia.

As I was doing the laundry, I looked at the bones scattered near the toilet. Jumbled up like a jigsaw, they totally stood out. They were pretty broad, definitely not from poultry. They were speckled brown. I didn't dare touch them again, so I just knelt by them and stared at the grooves and swirls carved into their surfaces. I found a plastic bag and went back to the washroom, cleaning up the dirt that was tracked in. I didn't want to sleep, my head ached. I slipped the plastic bag with my trove under my pillow – I could feel it poking through. Sonia and Daniel had nodded off. I could see their dark silhouettes from my bed. I began crying, just like that, and I couldn't stop. I cried and cried, and the bones lying nearby vibrated. I dreamed of them: I saw the earth outside our house, full of mingled human and animal bones.

Excerpt translated by Soren Gauger

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