

Two Decorated Skulls in the Miramonte Swamp

Mom and I ran to the end of a just-built trail around a lake that formed when the river flowed for a hundred days straight and flooded a basin that was once 800 single-family homes. No, *flood* is the wrong name for the rains, which came and came and came until we accepted that we now lived in a wetland, not a desert, and a wetland does not flood. It just lives up to its name.

Mom stopped her watch. “You know what I think about, from the second I wake up until the second I go to sleep? Doing an ultramarathon, maybe one in the mountains. I can’t shake this idea that the only way to get through pain is pain.”

“I could do it with you,” I said, without thinking I could, without knowing if I was the daughter who liked running, or if it was one of you two. My muscles forfeited, and the clothes I had scrounged from your dressers pulled and scratched at my body. The sports bra too tight, the shorts too loose, the shoes just right.

Between us at the lake were hundreds of saguaros, toppled over and split open by all the water they were never evolved to carry, now showcasing all their boots, the excavations where woodpeckers once had their babies.

Mom ran her hand through the flare of my ponytailed hair, asking “Are you ready?” and then galloping away, me trying to keep up with her tempo pace, tasting blood in my mouth that reminded me of the smell of the room where the sorcerer had cut you two into the little pieces that you are now. I realized that I knew what a *tempo pace* was, that mine matched hers, and together our muscles were cambering joyously. All I could hear was Mom’s footsteps, my heartbeat, and what sounded like someone brushing a sidewalk with a skyscraper-sized broom, but that was just more rain on the southern side of the mountain, which was, all at once and just like us, saturated and sloughed and sublime.

I was working on your bones all the time, trying to reassemble them in a way that would make the magic work, but none of them made sense, like

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your human pieces had gotten mixed up with a wolverine's. I spent a hundred nights on those bones, thinking how you had first been named *missing* and then *assumed dead*, believing I had all the time to rearrange what the sorcerer had done to you.

Once, Dad saw me carrying an armful of your clothes into my bedroom. He asked me what I was doing, and I said I wanted to try wearing them. I was getting older, and they would start to fit. Hand-me-downs, you know?

"We'll just buy new ones," he said.

"Yeah, we would," I said, not thinking about the difference between *would* and *will*. But I loved the idea: We—you and you and me—would walk to the mall with your skulls sheathed with skin and your fingers latticed together again, and we would buy ourselves new clothes. New paintbrushes, new mirrors, new hair ties, new binders and belts and bras!

I would have liked to buy us all new names, too. That's how words are made, after all. We survive a phenomenon and then we douse it with a name.

Dad and I hid under blankets to keep the mosquitos away, under umbrellas to keep the drizzle off our optics, each of us with a birder's life list in our laps, with Dad eavesdropping on the six o'clock weather from the television inside for news, please, that the monsoon might not come again tonight. I looked at my life list, saw all the species I didn't recognize. When had I last seen a long-billed thrasher? What was a verdin?

I asked, "How are you feeling, Dad?"

"Good. Good! Excited to see a pyrrhuloxia."

"I don't mean how you're feeling about bird-watching."

"You mean *birding*," Dad said. "I guess I've been thinking a lot about cars. I was thinking about the SUV, and I really like that mint-green crossover, but maybe we should just get the sedan instead. Goes farther on the same amount of charge."

I couldn't believe they had gone car shopping when you two, their two older daughters, went missing. I couldn't believe they hadn't brought me.

I buried my face into my binoculars, saw a Cooper's hawk stalk off with a bundle of prey, a Costa's hummingbird iridescent flinch, a house finch, its red breast a red herring for the pyrrhuloxia's red crest, and the television told us to *turn around, don't drown* after another night of monsoonal downpour would fill the washes and streets.

"Are you enjoying this?" Dad asked.

"Not particularly," I said, without thinking it might hurt him.

"Good. Neither was I."

I wondered: Is it possible to simply exit the state of drowning?

I thought I had time to fix you, but then I saw the stain growing from the

corner of my bedroom, water that had leached through the brick and up the plaster, across the carpet, destroying one of your dressers. I took all the clothes out, distributed them among the remaining two dressers, and when Mom helped me move the dresser to the curb for the brush and bulky trash pickup, and then move the two dressers into a second bedroom. Mom stared at the stain for a while, like she was afraid to step closer and touch the malignancy we all felt was growing within us, but then she retreated for the living room, bringing her accoutrement for tired muscles into the living room and rolling her body while watching the news, groaning out every pain of hers but you.

Dad had decorated the living room with a pair of easels, two canvases warped from being left out in the garage, a plastic bin of oil paints, two wicker chairs, two palettes, a dozen brushes each for the two of us. I started by remaking the colors of desiccation I'd nearly forgotten, painting the land around the sorcerer's cabin before I burned him alive: the land equal parts purple and green and eager gold, summertime's blue-dry sky, saguaros still standing with each arm a certificate for surviving another decade. I settled into a trance, adding color to an emptiness until we tinned.

After a while, Dad sighed, put down his brush, and said, "One thing no one told me about having kids is that they make you feel younger."

"Is that what I do?"

"Yeah, you do and then some, and then some more."

All things in threes. I looked over at Dad, who wiped a tear from his cheek and left behind a streak of marigold that had been living on his thumb, and then looked blankly at his canvas, as though he had already expended all the caring he could offer.

He asked, "Where is that?"

"Oh, I just made it up," I said.

"I'm so glad that at least one of us is really good at this."

"You taught me a lot," I said, without even thinking if he had, then thinking it was more likely that I channeled one of you. Dad leaned over and kissed me on the forehead, a second tear cruising down his hydrophobic highway of paint. Under his arm, I could see the canvas he had been painting on: In an arctic scene—a purpling sky and sugarcoated pines foregrounding a briquette of ashy mountains—Dad had poorly painted two wolverines, silkily lunging for their next prey, or the possibility of a life unnamed, just out of frame.

There's wasn't yet a good name for what I wanted you to do. *Un-desiccate*? *Rehydrate*? But all good phenomena don't yet have names, and despite the satisfaction I got from running with Mom and trying out all these failed

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hobbies with Dad, I still worked at your bones. When I got two of your pieces close enough, they hummed like tuning forks rang long ago, the capitata calling for the hamate, the malleus and incus and stapes harmonizing a hymn they'd once heard. You were still a possible phenomenon, a puzzle I believed I'd still complete if I didn't end up dead after the mountain biking trip Dad was planning.

The hobbies were their own puzzle, in that way. I couldn't tell if I loved running because I have loved it before, hated birding because I'd always hated it, loved painting because Dad helped unfold a talent I'd never known I had, but I knew was afraid of that bike more than all the other possible failures put together. More than the idea of failing at putting you back together. But, I realized, while a new stain formed in the second room and split the plaster into a dust just like your joints make when they don't marry, that I was starting to carry parts of you upon myself, like a new bra, a new hair tie. I would learn to love what Dad loved, to meet him halfway, because it was the best thing I could do for you, aside from carefully moving your bones, lunar and lancelet, from one shadowy sovereignty to the next.

Mom and I ran on a waterlogged trail up into the mountains, thunder roughhousing with canyon walls, with me setting the pace. We climbed above all the fallen saguaros, which had been dead long enough that their flesh stripped away to reveal their bones, and to a pass where we looked down on the city, which was just as flooded and reworked as us. Instead of an airport, a sea; instead of cars, waves.

"I found the perfect ultra for us," Mom said. "It's in the mountains. Tons of elevation gain. We'll have to spend a lot of time up here together to get ready."

I swallowed an energy gel, glowed.

Mom said, "I already wrote out a sixteen-week training plan for us. All the workouts, the long runs, our goal times, even our schedule for what we're doing to eat during the race and when. Dad and I already bought plane tickets for the three of us."

The three of us. The simplicity of a triad sounded so beautiful, and it was the clearest Mom ever was about you two being dead. I realized Mom and Dad weren't trying to rediscover who I was through those hobbies, but rather wedging me into the shape of all three of us daughters. The three within the three.

"I'm so happy, Mom," I said. "I know it's wrong, but I am." I hugged her from the side, pinning her arms to her sides, because I was afraid of what she'd do if she had a choice.

"I'm happy, too," Mom said. "We start next weekend with sixteen- and ten-mile runs, back-to-back, and then it keeps getting more painful."

“Painful is good,” I said, without even thinking that what I really meant was the good in figuring out how to live alongside the pain.

We had been so distracted, so together happy, that we hadn’t even noticed the streams around us growing from storms higher on the mountain. As we descended the zigzag trail, as we crossed the fast-running wash again and again, I found fear in the currents that felt like grabbing hands of the dead, because couldn’t simply turn around as the newscasters demanded, and I realized we already had a word for the opposite of desiccation: *drowning*.

After the stain appeared even stronger in the second room, the plaster cracking and revealing the brick beneath, I moved to the last bedroom, sliding everything down the hardwood floors that rifted from all the moisture. This time Dad helped, even though it was only one girl’s quantity of clothes and a single dresser.

After it was done, I told him I wanted to donate some of the clothes that I’d realized I didn’t need any more, and we drove together to a boxlike store where people accepted, graciously and excitedly, what they said were the first damp clothes they had seen in months, and damp was better than soaked.

As we were walking back to the house from the car, I noticed that Dad was holding something folded between his shaking hands, and when I asked what it was, he flashed open a picture of you and you and me, smiling, standing arm-in-arm-in-arm with the Grand Canyon awing behind us.

“Where did you find that?” I asked.

“In the clothes. We almost gave them away.”

“Can I see it again?”

“I’m worried it’ll get ruined,” he said, holding it to his chest and acknowledging that you were, once, tableaux to be scarred unrecognizable, and maybe it was better to keep you lost than worry over what you might’ve become.

I knew I would have to take that picture away, but for now I told Dad how excited I was to go mountain biking, and that was enough to send him away, crying with what I hoped was joy, into the dampened garage.

Dad and I left behind in his new ocean-blue SUV at the trailhead and set off onto the trail, which dodged fallen cacti and puddles that had lingered long enough to grow toads that flattened themselves at our quick presence and departure. I was wearing special shoes that clutched to the pedals and spent the first twenty minutes struggling over what each of the many levers accomplished, had only fallen four times before reaching the first intersection.

“I thought I would dig a trench outside your bedroom, build a French

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drain, so that the water stopped leaking into your room, but I kept forgetting,” Dad said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Dad. It’s the rain.”

“But what if it is? You and Mom have running, but I don’t know about us. I’ve been so caught up.”

Thunder croaked over the land. In the west, a still column of rainfall, still. Dad took a long squeeze from a water bottle that lived in the cage in the middle of his bike. He took out a first-aid kit from his pack and tended to my deepest cuts, wiping the blood away with alcohol, pressing the skin back together with adhesive butterflies. A lizard watched us, doing pushups from its perch on top of a serrated rock, like it was either showing us its strength or dancing for less rain.

“Caught up in you,” Dad said. “Caught up in wanting to love who you’ll become. Hoping I’ll be a part of it. Hoping I won’t miss out. Isn’t it funny? I was so worried that I didn’t even help you build that stupid French drain.”

“I’m loving this,” I said, knowing it was a lie.

The way Dad smiled reminded me of you. He mounted his mountain bike again, clipped into his pedals, took off down the trail with a newfound recklessness, no longer hesitating on the mud-slicked rocks or the cacti roots, trying out little *yews* of unleashed joy. I started copying him to distract myself from how much I hated this, all the bad hurt from running with Mom and none of the good, mud flicking off his back tire and into my teeth, and our chains, for now, still so happily oiled.

I’d lost. The time, the will, the belief. You, you, myself.

The ultramarathon was only days away, and the television was full of voices lamenting over the regiment of five hurricanes, lined all the way down to the equator, spooling up more rains, pestilent and glorious, that wouldn’t stop until our city became a swamp, a lake, an abscess. Mom and Dad watched more than they used to, asking when the rains would go away, when the floodwaters would recede, when we could return to *how it was before*, followed by other voices arguing over exactly what they meant: dry heat, kitty-litter dirt, Gila monsters licking shadows, rivers that flowed only a dozen times a year, tortoises eating flowers when they’re thirsty? When you were still alive?

I decorated your skulls with talismans of the lives that you used to be yours, or maybe they were mine: amaranth-colored earrings, rings, stickers of unicorns, the fur of a stuffed rabbit like one of you had decided to buzz your hair, two wreathes I made with the purple flowers from the bougainvillea. I placed the rest of you into the basket that the sorcerer had used to carry you home, covered you with gold, but left your skulls on my

windowsill so you could see the flood that I knew was coming, the one that would wash out our doors and crack our windows, unearth our trees and relieve your bones. I wanted to give you the time to realize we're not living in the story where you get to come back. We're not in the story where a helper washes up from the swamp and fixes your dead.

During the ultramarathon, I left Mom behind on the climb up to the mountain pass, my legs sinister with strength, and when I reached the top, I found myself alone.

I ran off behind some heathery shrub and removed two small bones from my sports bra, one from each of your bodies, round like a hummingbird's eggs, followed by the picture Dad had found of us, dampened all over again from my sweat. I placed them all into a new foliose home away from everything but the chatty pikas. Your bones were no longer yours, mine were: There was no more *you* and *me*. There was us.

The pain of the last miles passed by me chanting aloud everything Mom and Dad would have to buy us now that our house would soon be ruined: new house, new beds, new dressers, new running clothes, new paintbrushes, new mountain bikes. New binders and belts and bras. Binders and belts and bras. Binders and belts and bras.

I ran and ran and ran, down into a mountain town with galleries filled with oil paintings that would never sell and western-themed bars with saddles for barstools, people cheering along both sides of the road. As I collapsed across the finish line into Dad's arms, I heard the announcer say, "Give a big round of applause to your first-place finisher in the fourteen-to-nineteen category!" I nodded along, agreeing that we were all born between fourteen and nineteen years ago, when Mom came barreling through the finish corral, falling to her knees behind me, pulling me into a hug that Dad joined.

"I've never been so happy," Mom said.

"Me too," Dad said.

"Me three."

Later, I was shepherded on Dad's shoulder to a stage, to the top of a podium, next to two other girls, and I realized we had won because they were only one girl, and we were three in one. The announcer arrived with three medals in one hand, a trophy in another, and began an incantation, starting with the third-place girl's time, a sincere congratulations for her effort while looping a medal around her neck, and then her name, certified through the microphone. He repeated the same for the second-place girl.

The announcer turned to us and declared our time, gave us a sincere congratulations, handed us a trophy of a gold-plated girl cruising at her

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tempo pace. No matter how much sweat dripped off me and onto the trophy, she shimmered sublime and unsloughed. As the announcer slid the medal over our head and around our neck, the crowd cheered wildly for the phenomenon we had become. Now, all we had to do was wait, the microphone rising to his lips once again, not to douse, but rather crown us, with our fourth and final name.