

The Artifact
By Avery Maltz

Queenie was the one who found the deer skull. It was at the bottom of the ravine, already mostly picked clean. The heat of summer had accelerated the rotten feast. Queenie and Little were not supposed to even be there. From as far back as they could remember, the older kids would tell stories about strange things happening down in the ravine that the grownups wouldn't talk about or couldn't explain. Queenie's mother and Little's mother both told them not to play down there, but they liked to go on adventures and made sure to look all around them when they went down. One time Little had seen a man with a dog sitting on a log eating a sandwich. He looked harmless, but Little ran silently back the way she came, never even stepping on a single twig.

When Queenie saw the skull she'd been fixing her ponytail just the way her sisters did, a technique that she had been perfecting all summer. Little's hair was short and usually full of snarls, but she just pushed it back behind her ears and didn't give it another thought. Queenie flipped her hair over her head and gathered it at her crown in one motion. She smoothed the hair and pulled it through the elastic over and over so that it was tight against her scalp. As she straightened up her eyes landed on the deer skull right there in front of her, half submerged in an oily puddle, and she let out a quiet squeal of surprise.

Iridescent slime swirled around the skull as Queenie lifted it from the stagnant water. Queenie and Little stared wide-eyed into its empty eye sockets as flies zigzagged around their heads. The bone was yellowed, its crevasses packed with mud and dirt. The brains and fleshy bits were long gone along with the jaw and a portion of the skull at the base. Most of the upper teeth were still loosely held in place. Queenie glanced at Little, a grin starting at the corner of her mouth, and shook the skull vigorously. Dirt and bits of plant matter showered the ground below as water droplets were flung in all directions. Queenie shook the skull and the teeth rattled like a crackling fire. Queenie and Little started to giggle. Looking at each other with wild glee, their laughter grew to squeals and cackles until Queenie was chasing Little around in the mud shaking the skull at her, the teeth rattling and rattling.

Finally, out of breath, they stood in the middle of the tall grass gazing at the skull with wonder and breathing heavily.

“This is a Sacred Artifact,” Queenie said definitively.

“What’s that mean?” Said Little.

“It’s like something special, like they’d put in a museum.”

“Let’s put it in the treehouse!” Little said, her eyes gleaming, waiting for Queenie’s approval.

“Yeah!” Queenie said and turned on her pink sparkly sneakers and squelched through the mud up the side of the ravine, Little close behind her.

The treehouse was in Little’s backyard, but it belonged to both of them. It was high up in the branches on the north side of a thick old oak tree. Moss had grown through many of the

boards and almost covered the roof, but the floor was solid. It had two windows, one faced the old farmhouse that Little called home and the other looked down on the ravine.

Queenie and Little scrambled up the ladder, Queenie balancing the skull on her hip and climbing with one hand as the teeth gently chattered. The girls pulled themselves up through the doorway and went about brushing out the fallen leaves and bits of debris that had settled in the treehouse since their last visit. Queenie propped up the skull in the northeast corner, farthest from the doorway. They sat in the middle of the floor and studied the skull. Its vacant eye sockets seemed to mock them while its upper jaw curled into a sneer where the teeth met what was once the connection spot for the lower jawbone. The snout curved down past the teeth, an undulating slope of bone that culminated in a jagged edged hole where the soft tissue of the nose had been.

Queenie was idly chewing on her cuticles, spreading glitter chapstick from her lips to her nails, and Little twirled a piece of hair that had fallen from behind her ears around and around her finger.

“I bet it has powers,” Little said after a long moment.

“I bet it got dropped by a witch riding past on her broom!” Queenie said and they both giggled. The skull stared back. They all sat in a soft silence until the light began to turn from gold to grey and Queenie and Little ran to their houses for dinner.

Later that night, Little lay in bed listening to the faint sounds of her parents watching TV downstairs. The yellow light from the streetlight outside mixed with the blue light of a late summer dusk and there was a sweet smell of dew in the air. Little was held in the stillness of the

moment. Half covered under soft sheets, she sighed and closed her eyes. Her head was heavy on her pillow and her thoughts drifted like fish that were too quick to catch.

Her breathing became rhythmic and slow, then quickened as her mind came back into focus. Something wasn't right. Her head was too heavy, it felt odd, as if it was not her head at all. Little brought her hands up to her face and groggily ran them over her cheeks. These were not her cheeks. She felt a sliver of panic start at the base of her spine. It was like that time her older cousin had convinced her to jump off the high diving board at the pool and those couple extra seconds she spent hurtling through the air felt like they would never end. She was so glad to hit the water, even though it slapped her skin, because a part of her really believed that she would just keep falling.

She felt this same rising terror now as a tingle shimmied up her spine, but this time there was no relief of a cannonball splash into a pool. She ran her hands over her face and her hands felt smooth, dry bone where her skin should be. She could see through her eyes, but all she felt were empty holes. Her hands moved down her face, but her face was too long and her hands just kept moving over unfeeling bone until they came to the jagged point of what was now the bottom of her head, way past where her chin once was.

Her heart pounding, she dragged her heavy head upright until she was sitting wide-eyed in her bed in the semi-darkness. She sat on her hands, gently rocking, as she exhaled and burst into silent tears. She could not feel the tears on her cheeks, she couldn't feel her hands on her skin, and it was taking all of her strength to hold her head upright. She sobbed and rocked and wished as hard as she could that she could just fall asleep and have everything return to normal.

Moments stretched into each other and her tears gradually became sniffles. She touched her face and quickly drew her hands back. She willed her limbs to move, slowly placed her feet on the old wooden floorboards of her bedroom. It was fully night now, but she could still make out shapes in the dark and the streetlight outside cast a long rectangle of muddy ochre light through the window.

She saw her dark silhouette as she approached the mirror and dug her nails into her palms to muffle a scream. Her whole head was shaped like the deer skull in the treehouse. She squeezed her eyes shut and slowly opened them, but her skull head remained the same. She shut her eyes and thought of her parents and how mad they would be that she went down the ravine and how this was all her fault for not listening. She willed herself not to cry again and opened her eyes to face her dark, grotesque silhouette. She had to fix this.

Little took one shaky step after another towards the mirror. As she stepped into the murky patch of light from the window, her full form came into view against the darkness of her room and she let out a tiny moan of despair. Her head was not her head. She had no face, no eyes, no mouth, just the deer skull perched on top of her shoulders. Her hair stuck up at odd angles and fell loosely around the off white bone of the skull. Her eye sockets were so dark that they looked as if they were full of the thick blackness of deep space. She could see clearly, but was afraid to investigate closer to see if she still had eyes. She could feel her tongue on the inside of her mouth and her lips, but when she tried to speak the sounds just echoed out through the hollow bone and she heard the faint sound of rattling teeth.

“Oh no oh no oh no no no...” She whispered, rattling the teeth, “please no.”

Overcome with determination, she pulled at the skull and felt shooting pain through her whole head and down her neck. She quickly released it in frustration and agony, her hands dropping to her sides in defeat as her skull head sat heavy above her slumped shoulders. Pacing as quietly as she could, she walked over to the window, then back to her bed, then back to the window. She finally crawled back into bed and sat cross-legged, resting her huge skull head against the wall. Her mind cycled through panic and possible solutions and then back to panic. She thought of Queenie and hoped that she was ok. She hoped that they could still be friends now that Little had a skull for a head. She closed her eyes and fell asleep imagining how sad the rest of her life would be.

Little awoke in a tightly curled ball in the corner of her bed, pressed against the wall and her bed frame. Sunlight was streaming through her window and for a moment she forgot all about her horrible night and her head that was not her head. Then it all came crashing back to her and she grabbed her face in both hands. Her face was her face! She ran her hands through her hair, over the back of her head, and back along her jawline. Her familiar shapes brought her such relief that she almost started to cry again. She took a deep breath and jumped out of bed to the mirror, thoroughly inspecting her reflection. It was the same old Little, hair askew and cheeks lightly freckled.

At breakfast Little said nothing of the night's occurrences. Afterwards, she ran over to Queenie's back door, shouting her name through the screen. Queenie came running, sliding on her pink sparkly sneakers as she pushed through the screen door to join Little. Queenie was talking a mile a minute about sneaking out of her room the night before to watch some movie that her sisters were watching downstairs. There was too much kissing in the movie and that was

gross and boring, but the outfits were great and someone even got murdered and there was tons of blood. Little was half listening to her as Queenie led them towards the treehouse. They reached the ladder and Queenie had a hand and foot on the rungs when Little stopped her.

“Wait, Queenie, did you have, like, any weird dreams last night?”

“What, you mean like from the movie? No.”

“No, I mean just anything. Like anything weird?” Little lightly kicked at the ground with her shoe, looked down, and then looked back up at Queenie.

“No, I slept fine. Why? Did you have any dreams?”

“Um, no, I guess not, not really.”

Queenie narrowed her eyes at her friend, and waited for Little to say more. Little just kicked at the dirt and Queenie shrugged and turned back to the ladder.

“Hey Queenie?”

“What, Little? What’s up with you?”

“Um, maybe we should get rid of that skull. It could have, like, rabies or something. I don’t know.”

“Little! I know what’s wrong with you! You’re just scared!” Queenie stretched out the word scared for as long as she could, ending it in a mischievous giggle and punching Little gently on the shoulder.

“I am not! I just think it's gross and weird.”

“That’s not even how you get rabies, Little. If you want to be a baby, then be a baby.”

Queenie turned and started climbing the ladder. Little sighed, kicked the dirt one more time, and then followed slowly behind. She watched Queenie’s sneakers disappear over the edge

of the treehouse floor and a moment later she peeked up over the floorboards. The skull was still exactly where they had left it the day before. Its huge hollow eye sockets were lifeless in the daylight and its teeth silent and still. Little only hesitated for a moment, not wanting Queenie to think she was scared, and pulled herself up into the treehouse. Queenie picked up the skull and casually rolled it from one hand to another like she was playing with a ball.

“See, Little? It’s totally fine. It’s not even that dirty.”

Little forced a laugh and let Queenie toss her the skull. She would have rather touched anything else in that moment, but she caught the skull by its forehead and spun it around in her palms.

“Yeah, I know, I just wanted to see if you were scared.” Little held the skull up in front of her face, leaned forward, and roared at Queenie until they were both giggling.

“Ohh so scary!” Queenie squealed in mock terror, shrieking as Little started to tickle her while still pretending to wear the skull as a mask. They rolled around the treehouse until Queenie had the idea to go swim in the river and see if they could find any good skipping stones. Little tossed the skull aside and followed Queenie down the ladder. As she stepped down the rungs, she glanced back into the treehouse. The skull lay vacantly on its side and she felt that familiar sliver of terror at the base of her spine. She hurried down the ladder to join Queenie and didn’t look back.