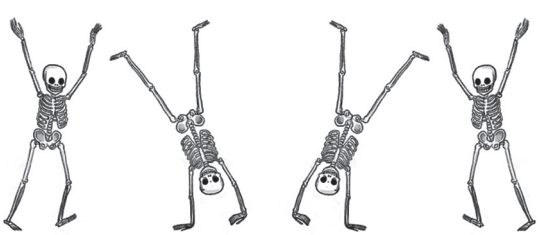
Skeleton Tree

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To my grandmother, who inspired me to write, and my grandfather, who taught me that whimsy and wonder often hide in the most ordinary places.

CHAPTER ONE

The day the rain stopped, Stanley Stanwright found a bone in the garden, poking up out of the dirt. It could have been a bean sprout, only it was white and hard and shaped like the tip of a little finger.

Stanley bent down to investigate. A shiver tickled his toes and curled all the way up the back of his neck. He touched the bone, quick, like it might bite. Cold seeped from the bone finger into his fleshy one. Wind slapped his face, blowing orange and brown leaves in from the neighbour's garden.



In that moment he felt like an explorer, like Dagger Rockbomb, hero of his favourite video game, *Skatepark Zombie Death Bash*. He might find something good hiding underground, like a dinosaur fossil. Or he might awaken a horde of slimy, flesh-eating zombies.

Some days were like that. One little thing happened, and nothing else was ever the same. The day Stanley's sister was born, for example. Or the night ten months ago, when his father took a taxi to the airport and never came back. Finding the finger bone felt the same way.

'Hey Bony-Butt, don't you know it's treasure time?' said Miren, racing down the cracked stone path and punching Stanley in the chest.

'Stop it! That hurt!' He stepped in front of the bone so Miren wouldn't see. The bone was his discovery. If Miren saw it, she would tell Mom and ruin everything. Mom never let him dig in the garden any more, since Dad left. 'You know what Mom said about running too fast.'

'I can breathe fine.' She shrugged and sprinted back to the house. 'Last one to treasure's a rotten nobody.'

'Egg,' said Stanley, shaking his head, but Miren was already gone.

Seven-year-olds get a lot of things wrong. Like how

Miren told him cows pee milk, and playing video games can make your fingers fall off. Stanley wondered if he'd said dumb things like that when he was seven.

He didn't think so.

When he was seven, he already knew how to read and change nappies and get Miren to take her medicine. The kind that smelt like canned worms. Even Mom and Dad didn't know how to do that.

'Stanley, you promised you'd be in the garage by five to ten. Your sister's waiting,' Mom said through the kitchen window. Her hair hung in wet curls around her chin. The one time something really important happened to him, and he had to leave. He felt bad about Miren going to the doctor, again, but why couldn't he do what he wanted just this once?

Before he went inside, Stanley snapped a shot of the bone with his old Polaroid camera. He would have used a phone, but he didn't have one, and Mom's was so old it couldn't do anything but make calls. The photo came out all grey and blobby, because Polaroids take ages to develop.

'Stanley, hurry up!' Mom shouted. He shoved the photo in his pocket and ran for the garage. Before he got in the car, he grabbed a Diet Coke from the mini-fridge

he'd helped Dad pick out last year at a garage sale. The sides were still rusty, because Dad had left before he could repaint them.

In the car on the way to the doctor, Miren started coughing. Big, wet coughs that made her entire body shudder.

'I don't want to go to the doctor,' Miren said. She cupped her eyes and started to sniffle, like she was still three instead of seven.

Mom rolled down a window so some air could reach Stanley and Miren in the backseat. 'What about the treasure chest?' Stanley said.

Even though it was filled with baby stuff, Miren loved to pick out a toy from the inflatable treasure chest in Dr Cynthia's office. She loved it even more than cheeseburgers or those spinny things you get at the school carnival. She told him once. In those exact words.

She sucked in a deep breath that rattled in her chest. 'Nope, I changed my mind. I'm allowed to do that, you know?' Miren's jaw jutted out, tears teetering on the edge of her eyelids. 'I hate Dr Cynthia and her stupid treasures.'

Inside, Stanley sighed. A tiny part of his brain hated how Miren always acted like a baby, and how it was

always up to him to make her feel better. But Stanley knew what to do when he felt like that.

He sliced off that part of his brain and fed it to his pet zombie. The zombie had green skin, two bulby eyes, and chomping teeth that were always hungry. His name was Slurpy, just like the pet zombie in *Skatepark Zombie Death Bash*.

'I want to go home!' Miren cried.

Chomp, chomp went the zombie in Stanley's head.

That was the nice thing about Slurpy. He was always ready to gobble up Stanley's problems. No matter how big and stupid.

'Why don't we play a game?' said Stanley. If Miren didn't stop screaming soon, he was pretty sure his head would actually explode.

'That's a good idea,' said Mom, hands clenching the steering wheel. She always got stressed out when she had to drive in traffic. 'Why don't you play I Spy? OK, sweetie?'

Miren squinched up her face, suspicious. 'What if I don't want to play?'

The stoplight turned red at the last minute, and Mom slammed on the brakes.

Stanley knew it was time to step in. 'Come on,

Mir-Bear. I'll even let you go first.'

'And second?'

'All right, and second.'

'OK.' She squeezed her eyes shut, which she always did when she was thinking really hard, and then she blurted out, 'I spy with my little eye something white hiding in the garden that Stanley doesn't want me to know about!' Miren was so excited, she pounded her fists on the seat, knocking over Stanley's drink.

'Ugh, stop doing that!' Stanley snatched his can and wiped up the bit that had spilt with the inside of his T-shirt. In his mind, he fed a little bit more of his frustration to Slurpy.

'Tell me, Bony-Butt! Bony-Butt, Bony-Butt! Tell me about your secret!'

'I don't have any secret!' Stanley didn't mean to shout, but he couldn't help it. Miren always got whatever she wanted, no matter what, but the bone was different. It was his. Besides, the last thing Stanley needed was for Mom to find out about the bone. She'd probably call pest control to come remove it. Since Dad left, she hated everything that reminded her of him, like dusty books or digging or the smell of his cinnamon aftershave.

In the front seat, Mom turned up the radio so loud it was mostly static.

Miren curled into a tiny ball and buried her head in her hands. Stanley didn't like seeing her like that, but sometimes she made him so angry. Good thing he had Slurpy to keep the whole brain-exploding situation under control.

'Let's just keep playing, OK?' he said.

Miren didn't answer. She curled up tighter and sniffled into her hair. That was her little sister superpower: No matter how annoying she got, she could always make you feel bad for yelling at her.

'I'll let you go first, second, and third,' he said, staring at the droplets of liquid sinking into the fabric.

Miren peeked out from behind her fingers. 'What about fourth?'

'Fine, you can go fourth, too.'

'I spy with my little eye . . .' Miren paused. Stanley was sure she was going to say something else about the bone, but just then the car lurched into the Spring Hill Pediatric Clinic.

Mom pulled Stanley aside once they got to the waiting room. 'Thank you for taking care of Miren back there . . . It's just . . . things have been really hard lately.'

She squeezed him so tight her orange peel shampoo clogged up his nostrils. 'I'm proud of you, Stanley. You've been a big help with your little sister. I hope you know that?'

For a moment, Stanley felt guilty for keeping a secret from Mom and Miren, but only for a moment. 'It's OK, Mom. No big deal.'

They sat down in comfy chairs with stiff arms. Mom flipped through a copy of *Dog Fancy* magazine. She ran her chipped fingernails over a picture of a Pekingese with perfect, flowy hair. Last year, she'd saved $1,500 to go to school to be a dog groomer, but then she'd spent it all on Miren's doctor bills.

'She'll get better soon,' Mom always said.

Stanley sure hoped so. If Mom could be a dog groomer instead of a cashier at Walgreens, things would be better, like before Dad left. She would smile more, and she could work from home, so Ms Francine wouldn't have to come watch them after school. And maybe Stanley could finally afford a computer that didn't crash every time he tried to install the latest version of *PixelBlock*. Or a camera that didn't take a hundred years to develop.

'The doctor's ready for you now,' said a nurse in light

purple scrubs. She gave Miren a lollipop shaped like a duck. The kind of thing you'd give a two-year-old. 'Follow me, sweetheart.'

'We'll be back in a few minutes,' Mom said. 'Find a magazine to read.'

Stanley never got to see the doctor with Miren and Mom. Like all of a sudden he was too young to hear about her problems. He slouched down in his chair and stared at the wall. It was covered in faded Halloween decorations. If he had an iPad, like Jaxon, he could play *PixelBlock* or *Ancient Aliens Attack!* or, even better, *Skatepark Zombie Death Bash*.

Instead, he picked up an old copy of *National Geographic* magazine. His dad used to buy him a subscription to it every year, but this last year he'd forgotten. Stanley skimmed past articles about owls and hunters in Alaska until he found a section about some guys in Africa who had uncovered the skeleton of a new type of dinosaur. One nobody had ever heard of before. An image flashed inside his head. There he was, wiping sweat from his brow as he swung his pickaxe into the rock. Ping, ping! The rock would crumble away, and there, underneath . . . a bone.

The daydream faded and was replaced by an image

of a finger sticking up through blades of grass. He still had the archaeology toolbox his dad had given him for Christmas two years ago. It had chisels and tiny brushes for uncovering bones. Going to Egypt or India or somewhere far away to dig for bones would be amazing, but what if he had an undiscovered species buried in his own garden?

He flipped through the rest of the magazine, and then his heart stopped. On the back cover was an ad for something called the Young Discoverer's Prize. It showed a picture of a boy holding a dinosaur tooth in his hand, but that wasn't the best part. Next to the boy's head, in puffy gold text, was the number ten followed by three zeros. As in $10,000.

Stanley skimmed all the way to the end of the ad, his palms tingling. 'Send us a picture of your discovery by midnight on October 31, and you and one guest will get a chance to win a trip to a real archaeological dig site worth $10,000!'

That was a lot of money, but it wasn't the part that leapt off the page and pinged, pinged, pinged in Stanley's head. The article said, 'you and one guest.' Stanley scanned the fine print. The guest could be anyone the winner wanted, as long as they were over

eighteen. Well, that was fine by Stanley.

Dad might not be good at returning calls or checking his email, but if Stanley won this contest, he'd *have* to come and see him. He'd be his one guest. Archaeology had been Dad's one true dream, before he gave it up to go to law school. No way he would turn down a trip as awesome as this one, no matter how busy he was at work.

The door to the doctor's office swung open. Stanley had to think fast. He ripped the page out of the magazine and slipped it into his pocket before Mom could see. He knew that tearing up other people's magazines was wrong, and Mom would flip if she saw it, but he had no choice. The contest was too important.

'The specialist will call you to set up an appointment.' The nurse put a hand on Mom's shoulder. 'We'll find out what's going on. Don't you worry, Ms Stanwright.'

'Look, Stanley, I got a horsey and a sticky hand. See?'

The sticky hand slapped Stanley's forehead. 'Yup, I see.'

Miren giggled. 'Hold up your hand.'

'OK.' Stanley sighed.

Miren gave him a high five with the sticky hand.

'Amazing,' Stanley said.

'Let's go, you two. I've got to be at work by twelve.' Mom's eyes were red, like she'd been crying.

'What's wrong?' Stanley said as they walked out the front doors into a drizzly rain.

'Help your sister get strapped in, OK?'

Miren gave him a big, wet kiss on the forehead when they dropped her off at Happy Friends PlayHouse, aka baby day care. 'Bye Stanley, I'm sorry I called you Bony-Butt, so don't be mad at me, OK?'

Stanley couldn't help but laugh. Miren might be mega annoying, but she was still his little sister. Also, she had a sad face that made her look exactly like a baby spider monkey he'd once seen on the nature channel. It was her second little sister superpower, and it was impossible to ignore. 'OK, I guess I'm not mad at you. For now.'

'Score one for team me!' Miren punched the air and ran for the front doors, Mom chasing after her.

Stanley was too old for day care, and Ms Francine had that Saturday off, so he got to spend the day at Jaxon's house. Which was way better than sitting at home all day while Ms Francine boiled cabbage and played sad songs on the radio.

Outside, rain splattered the car window, making

Stanley's reflection go all long and wobbly. They pulled up to a stoplight, and Stanley caught Mom frowning at a doctor's bill in her lap. The edges of her mouth went all creasy, and he thought he knew why. Down at the bottom of the page was a number in bold, red type. He couldn't see the first part, but it ended in three zeros.

A car honked behind them. Mom stuffed the bill back into her bag and slammed on the accelerator.

'Have fun today,' she said once they got to Jaxon's house. 'Call me if you need me.'

Stanley didn't say anything. He was too busy thinking about the Young Discoverer's Prize. Maybe he could trade in the trip for cash. He was sure $10,000 would be enough to pay off Miren's doctor bills, maybe even with enough left over to buy a new camera or an iPad. But then, he might never get to see Dad.

'Sweetie, are you all right? You look a million miles away.'

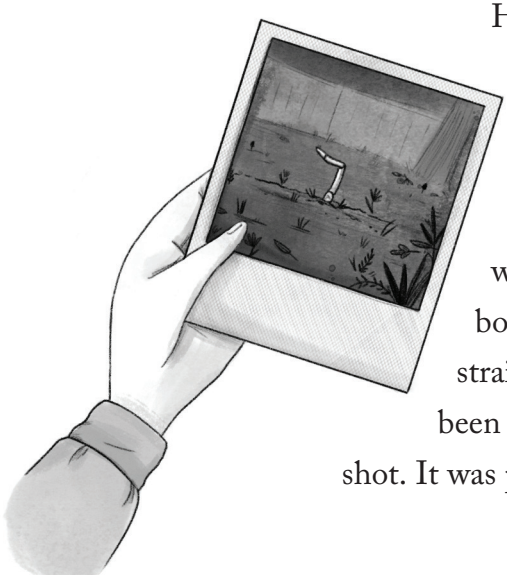
'What? Oh, it's nothing, I'm fine.' He looked at Mom, the way her eyes were still pink and puffy. 'Did something bad happen today at the doctor's?'

Mom's thin lips cracked into a smile. 'Oh, Stanley, you don't need to worry about that. It's just . . .' The

words caught in her throat. 'Promise me you'll have fun today, OK?'

'OK, Mom.'

Stanley watched the car drive away. He wished Mom would tell him what she was thinking instead of always keeping secrets. He crammed his hands into his pockets, and that was when he remembered the photo.



He smoothed it out and held up his jacket to keep it from getting wet. It didn't look like a grey blob any more. It was definitely a finger bone. And it wasn't pointing straight in the air, like it had been when he'd snapped the shot. It was pointing directly at him.