



THE SOUL BONE -

Zan Giese

When I was younger, I dreamed of putting together the bones of dinosaurs. I then dreamed of being the person to realize *Jurassic Park*, only, you know, without people getting eaten, unless I didn't like them, like some of the kids from my class, but then somewhere I realized that wasn't the best way to deal with things or to make friends. You can't really get rid of everyone you don't like, you know?

But I never had any interest in being Indiana Jones, even though, for a brief spell, my mother could only refer to me as Indy, and sometimes, when I was in trouble, she could call me Indiana. My real name is Evan, though. It's a name I've come to like, but I mean, really, who wouldn't want to be called Indy? Unless you live in Indiana or Indianapolis, which gets shortened to Indy. That would just be confusing.

It was when I was older that I picked up on what I really wanted to do. I let go of my dreams of dinosaurs, of finding those bones and putting them together. They would have been a much bigger version than the plastic ones I put together as a child. I decided real bones would be much less fun since I couldn't play with them or crash them into walls and then watch all my hard work splinter into pieces.

But then I saw people.

I saw people and I saw the way that they drifted through time, space, and life, and I saw the way they formed groups and the way they talked or didn't talk to each other. And I became

interested in the way that they moved, interacted, and lived. In the way that their bodies could be here in this world, and so I took some anthropology classes. I wanted to understand where we came from. How we came to be. Have you ever stopped to think about it for a minute? To really understand the importance or the profoundness of your being here, right where you are in the body that you have?

I took the intro classes as a second semester freshman. The previous semester had been spent in biology and chemistry classes, learning about the different chemicals that make up life. Chemicals make me think of photography darkrooms. There's a smell that lingers from the developer, and then when you think about science and history you realize that we only have a corner of the entire picture.

In the intro anthropology classes, I learned about the early hominids, I learned about how form follows function, and the changes that the human frame has gone through to survive, and instead of sating my curiosity, the classes only made me hungrier. I wanted to take my textbooks and absorb them through my skin. I wanted not only to read the words, but also to be them, because then I thought I might understand them completely.

In this way, I feel that textbooks fail us.

After I took the classes, I went to museums to look at ancient remains or the casts of remains, because really, skeletons fascinate me. I also hoped to use my knowledge to impress people. I wanted to look at those bones, those ancient bones, and tell whoever was next to me, "Did you know that you can look at the pelvis and the foramen magnum to determine that these creatures were bipedal?"

Bones can tell you so much, and there is something interesting in being able to see them, even if they are only partially complete. I appreciate the ones that are cracked or appear to be made out of rock, because they only reinforce the cycle of life to me. We shall return to the earth, and I hope to

god my bones become hard and rough like rocks when everything about them gets replaced with minerals.

Museums never have a smell, and yet they are distinctive in that way. Somehow, I can always tell what museum air is. It is that lack of smell that defines these buildings. Living things only go by in passing, sometimes bringing in new scents, but at the end of the day, they're gone. Museums have beige walls. Beige floors. Beige lights.

Museums are the churches of culture. They want you to focus on these important pieces, so they draw your attention there, because otherwise you might miss the bones. You might walk through their labyrinth of knowledge without learning anything. Without seeing anything. Follow the signs to the exit and you'll miss everything.

I had been at the museum all day, and I was at the place where they had the remains and all this information that was both generic and informative—and in that way, museum placards fascinate me—I saw this woman nearby. She stood there, staring at the case. She had long, auburn curls that were only sort of pulled back, out of her face. She wore silver and gold bands on her wrists. She stared at the bones that I had also been examining. I thought: *You get it. I can tell. You see the significance of these bones.*

“Aren't these something?” I asked.

She looked at me and started to walk away from the exhibit. I looked back at the bones. There was something old about them in the way that they are. Cloth covered them, although the colors were faded and the fabric worn, and the exhibits sometimes have pictures of what scientists think they looked like. Even the art looked drained of its colors or seemed to retain the color of the earth from which it was pulled. It's like time has drained the colors. We are afraid of vampires for that reason; they are time. They suck the life out of you. The color. What makes you interesting.

I wanted to be the skeletal representation of the past to our future, that mystery. You lose your name, your past, and it's kind of sad actually. None of us know your story, because we

just look at your skeletal fragments. We can't tell what you dreamed of, what you hoped for, or who you loved. If you loved. Maybe you were the loved one. Maybe you got lost or died tragically. We'll never know for sure. We can only know that you walked the earth, probably a very different one than ours, one that we can't imagine because even one million years is simply unfathomable to us. For that, I'm sorry.

The young bones are always the saddest.

Starting in the summer, I bought a membership so I could go to the museum every day. I looked at the bones each time I went, and I would spend hours there, and I named my favorite skeleton Harry. I imagined being able to go through the glass without breaking it. I imagined going through that transparent wall to wrap my arms around those fragile old things, to lie down with them and rest. Let me breathe in the smell of earth and death. Let me put your bones to rest, I told Harry. Sometimes, when no one was around, I touched the glass. The museum people didn't like that. They have told me several times not to—and have on occasion told me not to stand so close—but I would just look at Harry, and man, it must suck to be on display like that.

To think that even after death, you've failed to impress people. Except for the weird kid who keeps coming in. Some days, I wish he would just go away. I hear you, Harry, I hear you.

The museum staff got a little worried, I think, when they noticed that I kept coming in. I explained that I was an anthropology student to one of them, and he just nodded and went back to work, but he kept an eye on me the rest of the time that I was there.

I wanted to say, "It's okay. I look at bones. I'd look at yours too. But not now, since you know, they're still in your body."

Anyway, I visited Harry every day for several months, but then I started to notice the people who were also visiting the museum and stopping by to see him. A lot of people glided

past him. Some stood and really looked at him. Most, though, only paused briefly, glancing at the placard that told them where Harry was from and when he had been discovered. It was those people that I watched before they wandered toward the more colorful items. Art, clothing, pottery. Anything other than these old bones. Who cares about the dead?

I do. We do. Let me tell you a story.

I met a girl once. She had dark hair that went to her shoulders in gentle waves and green eyes that reminded me of figs, olives, and the surf hitting the beach again and again. Spanning an eternity. The only thing older than man is the ocean chiseling away at the sands of the land. That's a lie, though. Man is a baby amongst living things.

Her name was Tegan Alexandra Wolff. I met her at the library during the winter semester of my sophomore year. We bumped into each other, like you might expect in a rom-com. Our books spilled forward onto the floor, and I watched them flap open like they might be birds. They were all mixed up. We both apologized, crouching down to sort them. She had two literature books, three books about poetry, two books about some guy named Oppenheimer, and a book about urban design.

My books were all anthropology-related, and in that moment, I felt diversely challenged. She gathered the books to her, wrapping her arms around them, and I was impressed that she could hold all of them with such tenderness. She walked around me, apologizing once more softly, before going away, and I turned to watch her leave before I picked up my smaller stack of books. I sat at one of the round tables and a few moments later, I heard running on the stairwell. The door burst open like a bomb. I remember heads peeking up from nearby study groups. *Are we in danger*, they seemed to ask.

I heard footsteps approaching me. "I have one of your books," the girl said. "You might have one of mine about Oppenheimer." She pronounced his name as though she had been learning German for years. She held one of my anthro-

pology books; it was that tan color that all old books seem to be.

“Who is he anyway?” I asked as I went through my stack of books and found it. I handed it to her.

“He invented the atomic bomb. I mean, not by himself, but he ran the project,” she said. “He was a genius and a hero until the country thought he might be a communist.” Her words came out quickly as though she had been waiting months to be asked that question.

“Oh,” I said.

She took the book and handed mine over. Her fingers played with the cover and she looked at me. “You should learn more modern history,” she said.

“Don’t you ever wonder where we came from?”

“Who cares? Knowing that isn’t going to change what I do now,” she said. “I’m only interested in modern history. Knowing how people lived millions of years isn’t going to affect my life.”

“Can you even fathom a million years? Over a million? One hundred million?” I asked.

“Who needs to?” she asked, and she started to turn away, pausing and looking back at me. “Why study prehistoric history? How can you be sure of anything?”

“I can ask you the same question. History is only recorded by the victors,” I said. Her face scrunched and she walked away from me.

I’ve never been good at making a first impression.

Two weeks later, I saw her outside eating a green apple, and because they are tart and bitter, I think it takes someone interesting to go for green apples time and time again. At first, I couldn’t place why she looked familiar, but then those eyes—man, I’m telling you. Her hair had been cut short, all of those gentle curls were gone, and her hair was spiked up into a *faux* hawk. Two strands of hair had been pulled down and gelled to look like feminine sideburns. *Wow*, I thought.

She was also reading a book of poetry, sitting on a bench

near a decorative fountain, apple in one hand, book in her lap. She looked up at me.

“Hey, Prehistoric Boy,” she said. “Still reading about evolution and ancient civilizations?”

“Still reading about forgotten people from modern history?” I asked.

She took a crisp bite of her apple. “I’m trying to be friendly,” she said after chewing.

It was one of those days just after the Great Thaw, as I liked to call it. Winter had ended and for the first time, it appeared as though we were going to have a decent day. Not one of those days where it looked nice and then ended up being windy and cold, made worse by the fact that you only grabbed a light jacket. But the real deal. Blue skies with a few thin clouds smeared across the sky like paint. They were there to welcome the warm weather. Skater kids are my other sign of spring, but then again, I just like the sound of skateboard wheels against the pavement.

“I appreciate the gesture, although I’m admittedly baffled by it. I thought for sure we might have fisticuffs right here,” I said, standing near her bench. Her shoes sat next to her feet on the ground, and her toenails had been painted the color of apricots.

“I don’t fight other scholars with fists,” she said, closing her book, which was teal and had no words on the cover.

We stayed and talked for a while about history and people. In this way, we became friends.

During the first few months of our friendship, we often went out to the school soccer fields and watched the moon. I brought a large, pale orange quilt for us to lie on. It didn’t offer much between us and the lumpy ground, but it was better than just dirt clods and weird indentations from soccer cleats running around and around in the same patterns.

I looked at the stars, but mostly, I tried to see her in the darkness of the field while she stared straight up at the pale

orb of the moon. She had taken off her shoes, and her limbs were stretched out in a dead man's pose.

"Where do you go when the world overwhelms you?" I asked her before I moved to sit up. She didn't say anything for a while. I thought maybe I had asked the wind or that the wind had carried my question away.

"The world doesn't overwhelm me," she said. "I overwhelm it." She smiled, but she sat up and drew her legs to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. She never parroted back my questions, so we sat there quietly.

After a great while, Tegan stood up and dusted off her grapefruit colored sundress. I watched her turn circles, spreading her arms out like a child pretending to be an airplane. Old goal posts littered the center of the field. I could just see their shapes in the distance when she moved. While she spun, her dress lifted and spread out and I could see her thighs until she slowed down, wobbling for a moment before she came to a stop.

"I go to the museum," I said.

She stood in front of me, and the moon acted as a sort of halo or a funny hat. "What?" she asked.

"When the world overwhelms me, I go to the museum," I said.

"Oh," Tegan said. "Why?"

"Because it gives me something to aspire toward. I could be those bones someday," I said.

"You'd have to die first," she said. She came back over to sit on the blanket.

We listened to cars pass and I thought I heard some frogs in the distance. I looked up at the stars and I thought about the constellations, about the stories behind them, about the people behind them. I saw parents and those in charge of knowledge, those ancient scholars, telling their children and others, explaining the world, because that is one of their roles. It's fascinating because we all seek to explicate the world. The sun. The moon. And our own private pains, which are great

like the quests of the demi-gods. If we just keep moving, we might not drown.

“It’s a bad night for the moon. Let’s go,” she said. She got up before rolling up the blanket and handing it to me.

We walked back to my apartment. We then sat on my couch and watched an old movie. She said she wouldn’t be able to sleep otherwise. She rested her head on my shoulder and I slid an arm around her. The volume was down low, coming out as a murmur. I couldn’t even pay attention to the people on the screen. I was too aware of my heart beating and hoping she wouldn’t be able to hear it, and also hoping that my heart wouldn’t beat so fast that it would just stop. She smelled like hair products, but it smelled good. The smell of chilled earth and grass also lingered around her.

“You should let me be your Prometheus. I’ll bring you fire,” I said, about halfway through the movie.

She laughed, not because I was funny, but because she thought I was an idiot. “I already have fire, and I don’t need a man to bring it to me,” she said.

“I could be your Hercules or your Achilles,” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “One, they’re dicks. Two, I don’t need a god or a demi-god. Just try being human for awhile,” she said.

She kept her head on my shoulder.

In this way, I learned that Tegan had no interest in the heroes of ancient worlds.

Tegan is someone who is in a state of constant motion. At least, she always feels like she’s in motion, even when she’s sitting or lying down. We can be sitting and talking about Openheimer or some old movie, and she’ll be fiddling with a band on her wrist, twisting and looping it around her fingers like she might change its form permanently. Even when we go out to the field, there is just something that seems to be moving, maybe just at the molecular or cerebral level. I feel like her brain is always going while she’s looking up at the moon as though she expects it to tell her the secrets of the universe or

why things happen the way they do on this little, but huge planet. Sometimes, I told Harry about these kinds of things. He listened pretty well.

I took Tegan to go see him once. It had taken days of pleading before she agreed.

“I don’t go to museums. People take what isn’t theirs and put it up to fascinate others so as to alienate other cultures,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Just this once. If you still don’t like museums, then I will never take you to another one,” I said.

She sighed. “You get a half- hour.”

I smiled.

We went the following week. My insides had been humming for seven days. Humming with bright lights and the forces of the universe coming together to aid me with this task. Humming still as we walked up the steps to this colossal building as though it were the first time that I had ever been there. Tegan hopped up the last couple of steps at the top and looked back at me as I moved to catch up with her. Her sundress had stars on it, carmine red drops of hardened sugar. Inside, the museum had the same set up, and yet, its beigeness seemed warmer somehow.

So, we walked through the museum. I led the way to Harry’s exhibit. Tegan stopped to read the other placards and to look at the art, though I’m not certain she admired any of it. I looked ahead, and we were so close to Harry that I thought the murmuring brook of light inside of me might burst forward and crack me open like dusty bones. Exposing my marrow. Her face was impassive and the humming glow twisted in my gut. We continued along our path.

After we approached the display, Tegan read about those old bones just as I had watched others do before her, and she looked up at Harry, an ancestor of modern humanity. A hominid who helped fill in the evolutionary link to our modern form. A skeleton with a purpose. With a need to continue to exist. And she walked on toward the next case. I reached for her hand.

“Wait. Just look a little longer,” I said.

She glanced at the case with those eyes before looking back at me. “Evan, they’re just some old bones.”

Her hand felt warm in mine, and I watched her for a moment before letting go. That warm humming glow slowed, growing thick like sludge or cookie batter before growing solid and heavy in my stomach. We made our way through the rest of the museum. We saw the pottery and the art and followed the signs to the exit.

Toward the end of the semester, we went out to celebrate the survival of another round of tests: Joyce’s *Ulysses* for her and Chinese geography for me. I wouldn’t have traded places with her for \$100 or even \$1,000,000. Tegan ordered us each a beer after we sat at one of the small tables.

We were at a bar in a neighboring town. It was simply called “The Pub,” even in the bigger city. We went there because they had yet to regulate their shot measurement and still allowed smoking inside. As soon as we walked inside, I knew we would leave smelling like a well-used ashtray that hadn’t been emptied in years.

“I’m in love with a girl who moves like a swan,” Tegan said.

Tegan was always falling in love with girls who reminded her of birds. She liked girls with skinny legs, feathery hair, and flighty attitudes. I never stood a chance. I played soccer and would probably never remind her of a bird.

“Is she bitchy like one too?” I asked.

Those green eyes landed on me. For one of the few times in my life, she gave me a look that paralyzed my tongue and I feared she might stab me in the neck with a pen.

“Sorry,” I mumbled to my beer. “So what’s the problem?” I asked.

“Who said there was a problem?”

“I can tell by the way you announced it.”

She sipped at her beer. “She’s straight.”

“That’s rough,” I said.

“You’re preaching to the choir,” she said. Her lipstick was the color of ripe raspberries.

“I’m in love too,” I said after a beat.

“That’s news,” she said, but she didn’t ask for any details, so I drank my beer. We listened to drunk country boys sing karaoke and play pool.

We went back to my place, and she took over the couch before I could, curling up under the blanket that my grandmother made years before I was born. My roommates were in bed and the apartment was dark. Even if the lights had been on, the student housing had given us shoddy lights that never seemed willing to shine brightly enough.

Tegan looked at me after wrapping up in the blanket. “Is she nice? The girl you’re in love with?” she asked after I locked the front door. I turned toward her.

“No,” I said. “In fact, she’s often not very nice to me at all.”

“I hear that’s a sign she might like you,” she said.

“You said that was a bullshit excuse to indoctrinate young girls into rape culture,” I said.

She smiled. Her lipstick had faded, but her lips still appeared stained. “I like the way you listen,” she said.

I came over to stand near the couch, leaning against the back of it. She glanced up at me before lowering her head to the pillow and closing her eyes. She told me good night before she fell asleep. I looked at her for a moment and then moved to my room with a deliberate quietness, uncertain of what might wake her up. I lay in my bed and thought about the thin wall of white plaster that separated us. It was thin enough that I could hear Tegan shift on the couch. I then thought about the walls that people put up in their homes or their lives and part of me wanted a house without enclosed rooms. I wanted rooms with big doors that didn’t really count as doors because they were just open spaces so that rooms just transitioned into each other.

In this way, houses mirror their owners.

When I woke up, Tegan was gone, but she always woke

up early and left my apartment before anyone else was up. Still, there is something odd and disappointing about waking up to find your couch empty when your friend had been there the night before. She had folded the blanket neatly, setting it on the couch, which looked lonely somehow.

It'll be okay, Couch., I wanted to say. *It's just part of the human condition. Keep moving. Just keep moving.*

Tegan once told me about the time she had gotten her first car and been in her first accident. Her father bought her a white car for \$600. Two months later, it snowed in April, of all months, and she had taken the back way home from her grandparents, only to slide on the thin layer of snow before bouncing between the median and the wall of a bridge and listening while her car scraped against that wall. She smiled as she told the stories of those last years of childhood in a city I was unfamiliar with, and she leaned over toward me while she talked about how her head had hit the top of the door or the roof of the car, how it had bumped one of them, but she was uncertain which. And of how she had continued her drive home even though her car fishtailed if she went over 15 m.p.h. It was one of the few times I hadn't seen her in a sundress. Instead, she had worn only a peach colored t-shirt and shorts that made her legs go on forever. We had been in my room, sitting on my bed.

"You can still see the mark I left," she said. "If you ever drive down that road, you'll see it."

She stretched out along my bed. Her feet were bare and her toenails were the color of pomegranate seeds. When Tegan had first taken off her shoes, I remember looking at her toenails and knowing why and how Persephone had been tricked into eating those seeds by Hades. Next to her was a copy of my favorite book. Her palm rested on top of the pale cover. She hadn't read it before, and I had convinced her to give it a try.

"What happened to your car?" I asked.

“I broke the rear axle,” she said, shrugging. “The mechanic was surprised I got it home.”

It was hard to focus when she was like that. She looked up at me and her lips tilted up into one of those smiles where I feared she might be able to make sense of the patterns, of the dark whorls, of my brain.

We watched a movie and she rolled onto her side to see the small TV in my room. I was aware of the space between my hand and the top of her head where the longer strands of her hair had been forced up. We had maybe millimeters between us. It’s funny how millimeters somehow seem shorter even though I could be talking about any range of them. Are 500 millimeters shorter than mere inches? I touched her hair lightly and set my hand on the back of her neck. She reached and set her hand on mine, not moving it, but just resting it there.

She slept in my room that night.

But we never talked about it.