

Hoping For Bones

by Angi Becker Stevens

In the backyard with Joey, I make the mistake of answering him honestly when he asks what the gray brick in the dirt is for. "My parakeet is buried there," I say. And he asks, "can we dig it up?"

Joey's grandma lives down the street; he comes over some afternoons when he stays at her house until his mom gets home from work. But even if we both lived on this street, we wouldn't be classmates. We're in the same grade, but he goes to a Catholic school, and I go to a gifted one. In a way, we're shipwrecked here together, both without the camaraderie of neighborhood friends. Joey is the only person my own age who has ever acted like going to the gifted school is something to be proud of. He asked me once, "don't you feel special? It's like you have this gift from God." I still believe in God at nine years old, but only in the loosest of ways. He exists somewhere in my periphery, but He isn't someone I go around crediting or blaming for things, or casually bringing up to my friends. Joey's mention of Him made me uncomfortable more than flattered. I didn't tell him how the kids in the neighborhood make fun of me when they're walking home from school and I get off the bus, that as far as they're all concerned, being really smart and being really stupid are equivalent afflictions.

Joey is mine in a way he could never be if we did go to the same school. We listen to my current favorite bad record, "Make Me Lose Control," over and over again in my basement. We jump on the couch. We use old wooden tennis rackets for guitars. These are not things we would do with the people we have to face in school.

Especially not people of the opposite sex.

Joey tells me about his girlfriends. He tells me all the boys and girls at St. Raphael are already kissing in the third grade. I believe him, even though I know I'm lying when I say we do the same thing at Webster. I think: maybe Catholic kids are different. Maybe it's got something to do with the girls wearing skirts, everyone knows who

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they are. Or maybe at my school we're just geeky and slow. Joey says they kiss with their mouths open and no tongues, and also sometimes with tongues. He says that, believe it or not, it's less messy with tongues. Without them, there's too much open space for the drool to go everywhere.

I feel lame and uptight, because I want to kiss Joey, I want him to put his arms around me, I want to kiss him the way Luke and Laura kiss on General Hospital, with their heads tilting from side to side like metronomes. But I do not want his tongue in my mouth. And I do not want to dig up my dead bird.

I don't know how long Charlie has been dead, exactly, but it wouldn't matter if I could remember, I've got no concept of the stages of decay. He could be just bones for all I know, but I'm picturing something like Freddy Krueger's burned and blistered skin, or the actual mummy I saw under glass at the historical museum. I'm not even a little morbidly curious which is closest to the truth. I know that I don't want to see it, and I can't understand why Joey does. I'm suddenly disturbed by him, sure that he's flawed in some vital way. I am conjuring more and more grotesque images in my mind. I have always had nightmares easily, was born with too much imagination. I know how this will haunt me. I'm petrified, repulsed.

But I don't say these things.

Maybe I say "okay," or maybe I say nothing at all. Is there really any difference between the two?

In the future, maybe a month or so from now, Joey will ask me if I want to kiss. I will say sure, casually, while my heart feels ready to accelerate right out of my chest. He will ask me if I want to do it with tongues or without, and I will say without, for now. And he will count to three, and give me a swift, terrified peck on the lips. I will know what a liar he is, will savor the moment anyway. He will put his arms around me and do it again. I will never find out, from him, if it's messier with tongues or without.

But that's the future. Right now, I'm hoping for dry, brittle bones,

like the mouse skulls we picked out of owl pellets in school. Right now, Joey is digging. Alongside him, I'm digging too.

After we kiss, if you can even call it kissing, neighborhood boys will call me a slut, a word I just barely know the meaning of. Joey's grandma will stand on her front porch, arms akimbo, and shout at me that she knows what I did with her grandson in my basement. I will realize that Joey tells his bullshit stories to everyone. Even at my age, I know that "slut" is not a label you earn with kisses of the "count-to-three" variety.

But it won't be those chaste pecks that make me feel ashamed. What will make me feel ashamed is this day in my backyard, in the damp grass and soggy leaves. The soil under my fingernails. The protest I don't stage.

We won't find the dead bird. Maybe the whole shoebox has long since decomposed. Maybe Charlie is part of the dirt on my hands. Maybe we just don't go deep enough. Whatever the reason, I won't have to see how much of him is left. Instead, my lesson in decay will be this: that I learn how to silence myself for the flimsy promise of something I think is called love.

