

Blessed Down to Our Bones

WORDS NICOLETTE TOUSSAINT

Last summer, my six-year-old buddy Sam Stableford spotted a foot-long bone in my garden. “What’s that?” he asked.

“It’s a bone.”

“Where did it come from?”

“From a cow.”

I offered it to him. He fingered it gingerly. “Did the cow die?”

“Yes. My brother’s dog found the bone. The cow wasn’t using it anymore.”

Like me, Georgia O’Keefe collected sun-bleached bones for their beauty. But Sam seems more scientifically inclined. He eagerly asks about the names of plants, how they grow and die, where their seeds hide, why they wilt and how to revive them.

Stroking the bone’s chalky surface and peering into its cavity, Sam asked, “Why is it hollow?”

“It wasn’t hollow when the cow was alive. There was marrow inside.”

“I know about that!” he exclaimed. “The stuff inside bones helps me fight sickness. Bones send your blood to fight germs.”

“That’s right. Your veins carry blood all around your body.” I knelt and rolled back my sleeve. “See these blue lines?” Sam placed his fingers on my pale wrist and pulled it toward him. “Those are my veins. You can probably see mine, but not yours.”

“That’s because you’re old,” Sam observed gravely.

“Well, yes,” I ventured. “I’m a lot older than you. But it’s also because I’m pale, like your sister.”

Sam’s sister Annabelle is a blue-eyed blonde with hair like corn silk. Sam has black lamb’s fleece and ebony eyes as graceful as a gazelle’s. From the first time I saw him, I knew that he was originally African, not African-American.

Sam examined the bone for a moment, then said, “I will be sorry when you die.”

I was taken aback, then quickly reflected that it was good that *someone* would miss me. My husband Mason is a generation older than I am, and I have no children. “Well, I won’t die for a long time, Sam.”

“Will you be around when I finish college?” he asked.

“Yes. I’m 62. Not that old.”

“Will Mason be alive when I finish college?”

“Maybe. Mason is 83, and when you live past 76, the doctors really don’t know how long you will go on. Americans live a long time.”

“Am I an American?” Sam asked.

“Yes.”

“What’s an American?”

Hmm. At the time, I didn’t know how my neighbors came to adopt Sam, and I didn’t know why Sam’s mother Megan had encouraged our relationship. So I was thoughtful about what I said.



Sam once asked me the name of a certain blue flower: a bachelor’s button. Then he asked me what a “bachelor” was. I said, “a man who never married.” When he asked *why* the man never married, I told him he’d better ask his mom! I lived in San Francisco for many years, I wasn’t sure whether Megan would approve of where *that* line of questioning might go.

When Sam comes bounding across the street, calling my name, his arms spread wide in a welcoming hug, my heart leaps up. Grace is a blessing that one has done nothing to earn, and that’s what Sam is. I say thanks for my wonderful neighbors and don’t ask prying questions.

I thought for a moment and said, “Where were you born, Sam?”

“Ethiopia.”

“You’re lucky. Your forever-family found you and brought you to America, a very different country. If you were still in Ethiopia, you might live only about 40 years.”

“When I was born, I had a very bad cough.”

“You were very sick?”

“Yes. I needed milk and the lady who found me didn’t have any.”

“I don’t think you will ever go hungry again, Sam. You had good doctors to make you well. That’s part of what it means to be an American.”

Sam held up the bone and peered at me through its cavity, across the years that separate us.

“I’m glad that your mom and dad adopted you,” I say. “That way, you could come across the street and adopt me too. We’re both very lucky people.”

Since this essay was written, Masamo Stableford has announced that author Nicolette Toussaint, is his "Carbondale Grandma." Sam's family, Nicolette and the Carbondale community have consented to that decree.