

Buried Secrets
By Jackson de Jong

Enthralled with my discovery, I examined the two bones. They were brown, lightweight, and porous. The holes on the surface looked like a sponge. After adjusting my desk lamp, the focused beam of bright halogen light revealed a blackish crumbling mass inside the bone. It could be a cracked rib. The other one was freakishly like a foot bone. Every fiber of my being was electrified; I sat upright and rigid knowing these could be human bones.

Unbelievably, just an hour earlier, I had slumped over this very desk, trying to wrap my brain around quadratic expressions. Desperately needing a break, I crashed down the three flights of stairs enjoying the riotous amount of noise my Justin work boots made on the wooden steps. I flew out the back, and the screen door made a loud whack that announced my freedom. Grabbing Spike's tennis ball from his empty water bowl, I threw it over the sleeping dog and across the back yard. Spike was up and speeding toward his target before it even landed. After a good game of fetch, I collapsed on the patchy green grass that covered my new yard. Thankfully, Spike, tired of giving my face a series of sloppy, wet licks, moved on to hunting ants and beetles. Half-awake, I heard a lawnmower hum in the distance and smelled the fresh mown grass. Upstairs in our new, yet very old house, the mind-twisting equations were patiently waiting my return. Spike clawed his way on top of me and dropped something dirty and misshapen on my chest. "Spike! What's this?" Sitting up, my eyes focused on something that looked like a gnarled foot bone. A zing went through my body. Spike, doing his crazy happy-dance, ran over to the far corner of the yard and back to me, beckoning me to follow. Half-hidden by the shade of the red maple, Spike's other treasure lay in the fresh dug earth. Another bone.

Running into the house, I bellowed "MOM!" My mother emerged from our old-fashioned kitchen, looking both alarmed and irritated.

"Why are you screaming? Is your algebra homework done? Why are you wearing those filthy boots in here?"

All of a sudden, my mother looked very tired, and I realized that our recent move to Detroit and her new night job were taking a toll on her.

"Mom! There are bones in the backyard! I think they're human! We have to call the police!"

With a clenched jaw, my mother said, "Chris, get rid of the bones right now. Striding back to the kitchen wafting the aroma of meatloaf, my mother shouted, "Get on the math work!"

Back at my desk, the algebra papers were carelessly scattered on the floor as I made room for the bones. A detailed medical illustration of foot bones glowed from my computer screen. This foot bone had its calcaneus, the heel, and some of the metatarsals, the bones in the middle of the foot. The phalanges, or toes, were all missing. With a click on the mouse, I was into a description of the ribcage; and although cracked, the other bone was definitely a rib bone. They were once part of a person, I thought, a person who was not properly buried. Reverently walking to my bookcase, I selected a mahogany box where I kept interesting things. I dumped out the contents: a few comics, a Chinese coin, sharks' teeth, and a note from a girl. Wrapping the bones in a hand-towel, I gently settled them into the box. After school, I would go to the police.

The next day I went to the Bloomfield Township Police Department. Bright lights, shiny floors, and a chrome reception counter manned by an intimidating officer deflated my good intentions. "B-B-Bones, I found some bones in my yard," I stuttered.

"What kid? You found b-b-bones? Ha Ha," he laughed to his fellow officer. "The kid's got Hoffa's b-b-bones! Let me get Detective Buckhill."

I looked at my watch every five minutes, and it soon became an hour. Giving up, I headed for the door, and a man grabbed my arm and yanked me outside. Detective Buckhill's hard, scowling face glowered at me. He lit a cigarette, spit on the ground, and blew toxic fumes in my face.

"So kid, let me see those bones of yours," he said sarcastically.

Jerking open the box, Detective Buckhill squinted his eyes and peered in. He took a long drag off his cigarette and barked, "Those bones look like something from an old pig roast, kid. We don't have money to spend on crazy Hoffa tumors. After that wild goose chase spent digging up that whole horse barn, well that took all our credibility and funding."

"Who's Hoffa?" I asked. With that simple question, the detective put the lid on the box and left.

That night at home, I googled 'old bones' and up popped 'forensic anthropologist.' With another click of the mouse 'Detroit' and up popped Wayne State University (WSU) and the resume of forensic anthropologist, Dr. Cornelius. *"Dr. Cornelius is a forensic anthropologist who works with numerous local and state forensic agencies. He teaches a broad range of undergraduate and graduate courses in physical anthropology, biology, forensic anthropology, the anthropology of culture, as well as a multitude of advanced seminars."*

"You have one last chance before I toss you out," I told the bones. The next day was Saturday. Mom was gone all day, doing a double shift, and I would navigate my way to WSU's science building to find Dr. Cornelius.

Inside the science building, it was dead quiet. Then a clatter, bang, bam came from the end of the hall. Peering into the lab, I saw an old man with wild hair who was wearing a white lab coat. He was trying to put a skeleton together that he had clearly just broken.

"Sir, are you alright? Do you need help?"

The man mumbled to himself, "Just need to get the fibula attached to the patella." Then he grunted and looked at me. "Young man, did you know that the skeleton has 206 bones?"

"No, sir, but I have some old bones in this box. The policeman said they look like bones from a pig roast. Do you know if Dr. Cornelius is here today?"

Ignoring my question, the old man reached for the box. Carefully laying out the bones, he examined them. Once again, it was dead quiet. After some time, the old man, speaking with authority said, "Except for the skull, few persons are able to distinguish between human and animal bones. When the remains are fragments, one may require verification of human origin by applying certain tests. Once they have been determined to be human, the bones of an unknown skeleton are investigated to establish the sex, age and height of the deceased."

Was he reciting from a book, I wondered? "Leave the bones with me, boy," he said, "and I will see if these bones are that of *Sus Domestica* or more plainly speaking, the domestic pig."

"Oh, I can't let you have the bones, sir," I explained quickly. "In fact, I am here looking for Dr. Cornelius, so I can get his opinion on the bones."

"Son, you have found Dr. Cornelius." With that, Dr. Cornelius packed up the bones and limped out of the lab.

As I watched him walk down the hall, he seemed to tilt to one side, his head gently bobbing along.

"How can I contact you?" I shouted after him.

"Call the lab in a week," he shouted back, not bothering to turn around.

When I got home, glass was shattered all over the living room floor. A window had been broken. Someone had burgled the house. Drawers were dumped out on the floor; everything was a mess. Up in my room, the bookshelves were toppled; books littered the floor. My mattress was half-hanging off the bed frame. Oddly, my computer was on, and I was sure I had turned it off before I left.

Mom and I had a few horrible days after the break-in, and I was relieved to escape the house and visit Dr. Cornelius at the science lab. He was in his office and his hair looked as wild as ever.

“Well, young man, how are you? I should have gotten your name and phone number the other day. Here, sit next to me,” he said kindly.

Pulling a chair over, I asked, “How about the bones, sir?”

“First things first. What’s your name, boy?” He certainly seemed more interested in me this time.

“My name is Chris Jones,” I said patiently, “and my Mom and I just moved here. We move a lot. My Dad is, well, we don’t know where my Dad is. I’m in eighth grade, and I’m fourteen. We’re renting a house in Bloomfield Hills, and I have a dog named Spike. He’s really the one who found the bones. We had some bad luck last week ‘cause our house was broken into. It’s a real mess.”

“Oh this is worse than I thought,” Dr. Cornelius said cautiously. “The science building was broken into, as well. Maybe they were looking for your bones, Chris, but they didn’t get them because the bones were safely tucked in a cooler in the trunk of my Volvo.”

“Who are ‘they’?” I asked, “and why would ‘they’ be interested in the bones?”

Dr. Cornelius, ignoring my question, began reading from a report on his desk. *“Mitochondrial DNA profiles were generated from two bones of possible animal origin submitted for investigation. Samples were processed individually and extracted in parallel with a control sample throughout testing. A portion of bone was cut from the main sample using a rotary cutting wheel. Cross-sections of the bone shaft were used for grinding into powder and then the DNA was extracted via Organic Extraction.”*

“Sorry, Dr. Cornelius,” I interrupted, “but you’re losing me.”

“The bones are human, Chris.” Dr. Cornelius revealed sadly. “I’m pretty sure the mitochondrial DNA from the bones matches the DNA from a 1975 hair sample found on the DNA Databank.”

“The bones might belong to a man they believe was murdered by the Mafia.”

A chill spread through me. After my run-in with Detective Buckhill, I had researched the old teamsters leader, Jimmy Hoffa. "Are the bones from Hoffa?" I reluctantly asked. Dr. Cornelius looked at me and slowly nodded. "We have to call the police, Chris. Maybe this time they will listen."

That night, our whole block was cordoned off. Yellow crime scene tape lined the street, and our backyard was completely dug up. Bright halogen lamps made it look like daytime. Police were all crawling everywhere. Mom broke through the hordes of reporters and news station camera crews that were clamoring outside the house. She slammed the door behind her and quickly locked it. "What is going on, Chris?" she demanded.

Standing straight and tall, I queried, "Mom, do you remember those bones I found in the backyard?"

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