

*Zack Butovich*  
**Skeletons**

When Jay and Taylor found the car in the woods behind their neighboring houses, they were at first, afraid to go near it. It wasn't so much a car as it was a frame, wheels and windows missing, pimpled with tiny craters, dented inwards, damaged, long forgotten. Covered in orange and red rust, it both matched and stood out against the dead foliage twisting in the furious wind tearing through it. It was the farthest into the woods Taylor and Jay had ever explored.

Earlier that day Taylor went with her mom to pick up her father's ashes from the morgue. He left a long time ago, and she had no memory of what he looked like except as a pile of black and blue ash wrapped in a plastic bag trapped in a cheap pine box.

Jay had spent his day drinking his Dad's alcohol and picking random cities out on a map, imagining his runaway sister living in the Midwest, the North Mountains, the empty Southwest.

"How long do you think it's been here?" Taylor asked, the curls of her blonde hair bouncing like tiny springs on the fringes of her round head.

"Since the 20s for sure," Jay said. "Obviously, this car is from the Roaring 20s."

The wind howled and the faux-confidence of his voice was lost, carried far away.

Taylor stepped closer to the car and Jay followed a few feet behind. He itched at the scars under his shirt that no one knew were there. The older ones were healing and when things healed they got itchy. He knew this but didn't know why it felt so good to make them in the first place.

"We should sit in the driver's seat," Taylor said.

"What?" Jay was shouting against the wind.

Taylor put her hand on the hood of the car. It was rough, like sandpaper, and crumbled away under the pressure of her palm. Metal disintegrated into dust and Taylor thought about when her mom explained why her dad had to be burned to ashes. She said worms could eat his body, but ashes were useless. And he was useless in life, so he should stay useless in death.

The driver's seat inside the car was gone. It had rotted away with time or maybe someone stole it. Either way, it wasn't there. Neither was the driver's side door.

"What happened to you?" Taylor asked.

"I'm right here," Jay said, the wind around them dying down for a minute.

"I mean the car."

Under their tattered matching converses, the leaves crinkled and cracked. They were knee deep in foliage, but that only meant that they could kick piles of leaves at each other while they walked. It meant they

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couldn't see the trail they made. It meant they could get lost, not see the way they came. They started the journey from the log that bridged the creek, just behind the dead dirt patch that used to be Taylor's mom's vegetable garden. It was exhausting kicking at each other over the last two hours of walking in endless north Jersey woodlands. At one point, Jay tripped and fell while crossing a sea of bright green fiddleheads, unrolled and soaking in the late October sun, and Taylor helped him up. She grabbed him by the hand and then they held hands for a few steps until the earth got uneven and maple roots so thick they had to let go of each other to stay balanced. Jay wanted to hold hands again. Taylor had already forgotten they had at all.

"Somebody parked it here," Jay said, rubbing the side of his chest.

"There's no roads," Taylor said. "None." She looked around at the thick layer of trees. "How could it get here?"

"Maybe there was a road here in the roaring 20s." The wind kicked up again. Jay squinted his eyes against the wave of fall debris and dirt and dust that bit around them. It hurt a little bit, the small refuse prickling the skin on his face and neck, but in the way that feels good. Pain can feel bad but when you feel bad pain can sometimes feel good. "I'm sure there was a road here in the roaring 20s."

Taylor ignored the wind and poked her head and half her body through the space where the driver's side door should have been. She hung from the injured hood for support. Inside, leaves and fern and mud piled across the withered floor, packed higher in the corners under a broad dashboard. On the passenger seat sat a small skeleton. Curled into a ball, its skull laid tucked near its pelvis and hip bones.

"Do you think that's how my dad died?" Taylor asked Jay, pointing at the skeleton.

Jay walked around the side of the car to look closer at the small set of bones. Across the width of the car he turned his gaze up to match Taylor's. In that moment he thought he understood her. She was the car and he was the skeleton.

"Your dad didn't freeze to death," Jay said.

"How do you know this thing froze to death?"

Jay shivered in the cold wind. "What?"

Neither of them realized that the sun had been setting all this time. The temperature dropped quickly in the near-winter night.

"It probably just wanted to leave," Taylor said.

Jay inched closer, leaning across the small grave of skeletal remains to better hear his only friend.

"Don't you ever just want to leave, Jay? It probably thought this car would take it somewhere. It probably died waiting for the car to start moving."

"Is that how you think your dad died? Waiting to leave?"

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"He didn't wait." The rust of the car drifted into pieces and floated into the angry breeze. "I wouldn't either."

Jay hesitated a second. "I would wait to leave if someone wanted to leave with me."

Taylor turned down to the small skeleton. Maybe it was a raccoon or a wild dog or small coyote or something. It was almost cute. She wondered if it felt good waiting. If it felt good when it left wherever it came from. She always thought it would. It must have felt good for her dad to leave. But the skeleton was right there, and it didn't look happy. It just looked dead.

"So why don't you leave?" Jay asked. He was hoping Taylor would say she wouldn't leave him.

"When I can drive. Four years." She sat on the floor of the car where the driver's seat should be. She was next to the skeleton, with her knees pulled to her chest, facing the odometer. It read 26,401 miles. Not nearly enough miles for a car to travel before being left behind. "You must have been abandoned for a second car." she said.

"You want to leave just like your dad did?" Jay asked, though the wind ripped up again and drowned out his words except for 'leave' and 'dad.'

"He's dead and can't tell me why," she said, reaching her arms out and pretending to steer a wheel, which looked ridiculous to Jay, because she was seated much too low, and the wheel wouldn't go there and she wouldn't be able to see out the window from there anyway. Taylor made *vroom...zoom..vroom...screech* sounds with her mouth. She forgot Jay was there. She was going to leave but not the way her dad did. There was a difference, though she couldn't quite describe how.

The sun set behind the hillside horizon, just west of the rusted out car. The temperature dropped again, and Jay shivered once more.

"Can we go?" Jay asked.

Inside the car a mound of caked mud broke apart and twirled up in the devilled wind, twisting in a tiny storm. The dust rioted against rusted metal, the dead skeleton of the vehicle, covering Taylor's gaze in black and blue and brown, like the released ashes of a million useless days of waiting.