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FLESH OF LEAVES, BONES OF DESIRE

by Charlee Jacob

It was the day which would eventually turn into the night of Halloween that the seller of skeletons came to our town. Obviously intended as decorations for the traditional celebration of good-natured horror, they were immediately more interesting than those plastic or cardboard types which the five-and-dimes sold. They weren't flat, for one thing, but had three dimensions, having been molded out from an intricate form of *papier-mâché* perhaps. The skulls in particular were startling, almost an origami of macabre beauty. These were nothing mass-produced in some far-off Oriental country, created by near-slave labor who didn't even know what Halloween was.

Simonville was not a big place and the foundling strings of bones soon found niches in front yard trees and on broad, covered porches. The mayor, who ran into the skeleton-seller outside of the luncheonette where he habitually went each noonday, even bought twenty-six to be hung about the park--twenty-six being twice thirteen and somehow appropriate for the light-hearted festival of modern Samhain.

I lived in an apartment so there was no place where I might have put one up. But I noted the skeleton-seller as he took the wheelbarrow from his pickup

truck and peddled his bones from place to place. I followed him when he had sold them all, curious as to where he would go. Did he have relatives in Simonville? Would he sleep in his truck that night or in the park where so many of his wares would be shaking in the branches?

He journeyed to the edge of town where the old surgical instrument factory used to be, before the recession and the popular advent of lasers overcoming more antique steel. The building had been empty for twenty years and the overall appearance of it used to cause embarrassed townfolk to insist on its demolition. One day soon, the city fathers kept promising. If the land sold that would be done. Eventually people just stopped complaining. Every window had been broken by children and the glass spiked like the fangs in deformed jack-o-lanterns. The roof sagged like a broken back and had gaping holes in places where the weather had free access to the rooms below. The grounds had grown up with weeds.

He parked his truck and got out and walked over to me. I was, of course, mortified that he'd noticed I was following. But I'd meant nothing unfriendly in it. I always had all day with nothing to do but walk the town, and there was only so much in such a small, unchanging place to keep me from boredom. I hadn't been able to work since the fire. If it hadn't been for the disability checks, what would I have done? I walked Simonville from one end to the other and had done so for years, for so long that nobody even stared at me anymore, having become as used to my scars as they were accustomed to the eyesore of the former instruments factory.

"Yes, this is where I will be staying the night," the skeleton-seller told me, as if answering a question I had never said aloud.

I noticed how incredible his complexion was, smooth and glowing with

health. And yet he didn't seem to be a young man, and life out of a pickup truck purveying *faux-squelettes* couldn't have been easy. It made me squirm, standing there with the pocks and ripples of my own devastated skin. It made me envious.

"My year is up. Come see me tonight," he said, then turned away and walked into the dilapidated building.

I wondered what he could have meant by that yet I'd replied with nothing. I'd only swung around because this was the edge of Simonville. I began another predictable journey across the face of the town.

But it had piqued my interest and so I didn't return to my little rooms at day's end. Usually I would never be caught outside after dark on Halloween--not with the mask I always wore.

Instead I walked the streets, keeping to the shadows, a strong sense of impending phenomena keeping me more alert than usual. Children ran from house to house, doing their time-honored begging. The air was as still as it had been all day, suffocating with humidity and the cloying rot of fallen leaves. It was terribly hot for so late in the year, the temperature breaking the old record set back in the last century.

The skeletons hung wherever they had been placed, limp but strangely elegant--considering what they represented. They seemed like vessels waiting to be filled. Sweating in rivulets down the channels of ruined skin, I went up to several and examined them, touching them along the straight lengths of thigh bones, tracing with my fingertips the curves of ribs which slid into such pale hollows. I closed my eyes and imagined these were the bodies of lovers, cool and unblemished, never judging with their lips, never reflecting back cruel mirrors with their eyes.

If I'd believed something would happen when I caressed them, I was sorely disappointed.

The hour grew late and children went home. The adults came out to party, some with heavily-painted faces and a few even costumed for fright soirées hosted at the local bars. Drunken stragglers stumbled down the sidewalks. People who were just too hot indoors came out to walk through the park and look at the stars.

The wind came up sharply. The bones jangled in chimes which could be heard clear across Simonville. I watched as those in the park actually seemed to dance, suspended from the ground, limbs moving in graceful, hovering ballet. The leaves on raked piles on the ground rose up as if burst apart by lightning, then swirled about the skeletons, then clung. Whatever trees still had leaves were finally denuded of them in sudden downdrafts of wind that also blew them onto the skeletons.

I rubbed my eyes. What had been strings of bones were now covered with rustling red and gold skins. Crackling hands reached overhead to break the strings which tied them up. They let themselves down and before I could see where they were going, they'd slipped into the shadows and were gone.

I walked on a bit, leaving the park. On Main Street I spied a drunken man weaving past the shops, his face made up like a vampire. I was close enough I heard the whisper which stirred from the dark doorway of a drug store, medicines for sleep and pain advertised in the filmy windows.

"Trick or treat..."

He stopped, looking about him, and a figure stepped from the blackened rectangle. It was a burnished woman, all of sorrel and bronze limbs and breasts, the texture scratchy in the wind. Naked she glided up to him and put

her arms around his neck. She lifted herself up, putting her legs around his hips, pressing the soft thatch of her crotch to his groin. For a moment they seemed to dance, turning in autumn tango, her face pressed to his and his breath soughing into her lips. If he resisted her sexual assault he didn't show it.

Then they collapsed to the sidewalk, she continuing to grind against him, his own pelvic thrusts seismic through his clothes. The wind howled, stray leaves skittering in miniature whirlwinds down the street. The drunk made the soft moaning noises of a wounded animal trapped beneath them and then he stopped moving altogether. The woman climbed back to her feet.

I marveled at the appearance of her flesh now, bright under the lamplight, no longer a beautiful-but-uneven patchwork of brittle rouges and aureolin. She had perfected herself and now walked away from the man she'd accosted.

I crept forward and found his suit full of odd, dessicated bones... and nothing else.

"Trick or treat," I heard murmured from between parked cars at the hospital. I saw one of the leaf men slide out and wrap himself around a nurse coming off her shift. Her white uniform had been spattered with blood as she exited the building, like the dappling on the leaves of some diseased elm.

His member stood out, a thick twig, forked and throbbing like a dowser's rod. He gently pushed her to the macadam and she didn't scream, didn't struggle. I could hear her sighing, heard it rendered sepulchral like an echo down a well as the leaf man swallowed it. Watched while she tore off her own underthings and guided his branch-flesh into herself. Observed as they undulated for minutes and then he got up from her bones, refined, whole, human--or reasonably so.

I went back into the park, saw two-times-thirteen foliage bodies of harvest gold and seasonal blood red clasped about a party of revelers who'd left a midnight barbecue to come count meteors. The withered but brilliantly-colored skins rolled obscenely across these people, folks perhaps I even knew. The rustling limbs moved insatiably, carnal boughs which held the shapes of secret femurs and ulnas and clavicles.

I watched with sick fascination, too much heat in my own flesh. I wanted to lie down with them and be a part of what made them smooth and indefective. I wanted to experience that melting closeness of passion and desperation... for I could see one or two of the people squirm, hands flailing free from the orgiastic assemblage--as of victims left for dead beneath piles of leaves reaching out.

The appetite boiled, then grew chill in the hard wind. The skeletons were left in the disarray of their various garments. The new people rose and walked off in different directions into Simonville. I wondered where they were going, whose lives they were going to assume. If they would need to replenish themselves ever again and if someday all of the town would be made up of such creatures. I tried to guess what other places were filled either partially or entirely of these artificial folk.

The seller of skeletons had left his keys in his truck. I borrowed it and then drove it back to the old factory. I knocked lightly at the door which hung only by half its rusted hinges.

"Come in," I heard from inside. "I've been waiting for you."

The flawless man smiled as I entered the building. Here and there beneath the shadows and dust were glints of razor-sharp metal once used to make scalpels with. A rack of needles gleamed in a corner where moonlight stabbed through one of the rents in the roof. For a moment I almost mistook them for

pine needles instead of the business ends of hypos.

"I've brought all the skeletons in the back of the truck," I told him.

I'd been amazed while doing so how light the bones were, how peculiar their substance. They hadn't seemed like human bones at all. The essence was neither dense nor porous and didn't appear to be anything associated with vertebrate beings. This seemed to indicate that something essential had been drained from them, metamorphosing into what more clearly resembled *papier-mâché*.

He nodded as if this was what he'd expected of me.

"It's... it's my turn, isn't it?" I asked, feeling a little humiliated because I knew my voice had a pleading quality to it. Oh, I was so afraid of being rejected.

"Yes, this will be your year," he replied. He stripped off his peddler's clothes, the glow of his polished skin almost so good it hurt my eyes.

I stripped and rushed forward to let him love me, to allow him to shrivel away in our erotic harvest. I felt his erection of smooth muscle come up between us and then fall away into a twig, semen a spurt of vegetation spore and then dust. The wet sponge of his tongue became a parched leaf against mine.

As for me, my bones rang with desire. I could sense a resonance all the way down to my marrow. I trembled giving my scars, hearing everything which descends in autumn shaking, brittle or reborn in the wind.