

The Birthday Gift

So Hayley's birthday is coming up and I am in the throes of finding her a suitable gift. I'm not quite sure how it happened, but over the years we have both become more than a little competitive when it comes to buying presents for each other. We spend far too much time and money trying to outdo the other when it comes to Christmas, Valentine's Day and wedding anniversary gifts. But the real bitch kitty is the birthday. It's the one anniversary where the giving is one-sided, so there is no comparative judgement, just judgement. Now, I'm not saying that I have to buy a bigger diamond for each successive birthday. I wouldn't do it even if I had the money, which I don't. Fortunately it's not all about the money, although you have to keep it in mind. It's more about the thought that goes into the gift. And the effort. The more difficult it is to make the gift, or find the gift, or pry it from the manicured hands of the failed-artist cum proprietor of some snooty pop-up shop on Kloof Street, the better. And if it's something that they mentioned a while back and thought you would have forgotten about, especially with a birthday looming, then it's got 'winner' written all over it. A few years ago I spent months typing up the screenplay of *Romeo and Juliet* in the half-hour spaces between my arrival home and hers, just because she has a fondness for typewriters and Baz Luhrmann's version of the Shakespeare. And the ribbon reverse key on my second-hand machine doesn't work, so I had to wind it back with a pen after every seventy-third line, but anything for the win, right?

So, Hayley and I find ourselves in a place called *The Treasury* in Woodstock a while back. It's a little second-hand store that calls itself an antique shop so that it can charge silly prices for sepia-toned photos of someone's grandmother's dog. You know the kind of place I'm talking about? The fella who runs this store, whether owner or manager I know not, wears a black silk waistcoat over a white shirt with a pair of bamboo-frame glasses and a felt fedora. Enough said. Hayley spies in said store a neat row of three bell jars standing on three turned wooden bases upon each of which is perched the bleached skull of some sort of rodent. 'Ooh, can we get one? It would look so cool on the bookshelf in the lounge, wouldn't it? Or on the bathroom shelf?' But I do not share her enthusiasm and I feign all-encompassing interest in the item closest to me, which just happens to be a porcelain candlestick in the shape of a penis. I kid you not.

Now, Hayley keeps a notebook on her person at all times – coincidentally the one that I buy her every Christmas – and in it she lists the things I mention most often. So, when the time comes for buying me a gift, she usually has a smorgasbord of options to choose from. I, on the other hand, make mental notes hoping for a similar result, but most often these notes take wing from the unsteady perch of my mind and fly like birds from an open cage the moment I turn to other things. But a few months after our antique-shop visit, her birthday flaps its way to the top of my to-do list and I remember those skulls; I do not know why. So, despite my loathing for 'antique' shops and the people who run them, I decide to take a closer look at the rat bones in Woodstock.

The same fella is there behind the counter and he is looking as smug as ever because he can, no doubt, smell my desperation. Although I initially refuse his offers of assistance, I am eventually forced to ask him how much the damn skulls in the bell jars cost because out of all the trinkets

in the shop he has conveniently left these items unmarked. I think R200 would be a fair price, but because I am running out of time and I have not been able to secure the other gift I had in mind (an Erlenmeyer flask with a pool ball as a stopper that Hayley would absolutely love as a whisky decanter), I am prepared to pay as much as R300. But our man informs me that they're not R200; they're not even R300. You betcha – he's asking the princely sum of R550 per bell-jarred cranium and I can hear him rub his mental hands together in anticipation of the sale. I walk out. Fuck you. And your felt hat.

At home, I am fuming. And panicked. So I go online and type 'skulls' into Google and, as you might imagine, I find a host of weirdness lurking on the interwebs and it is an awful but intriguing foray into the convolutions of the human psyche. A few of the taxidermy sites prove helpful, however, and I start cross-referencing websites and collating notes. By the time I am finished, I have a list of simple instructions about maceration – the bacterial decay of dead flesh – which you can recreate in the comfort of your own home, should you so choose. I have limited options, so I so choose. I am now dead set on slicing flesh from bone (a scalpel is your best friend here, followed by a stiff wire brush), scooping out the brain and eyes (using a paper clip – the recommended method according to three out of five sites) and pickling the remainder (using a solution of warm water with a half-teaspoon of washing powder, which provides the enzymes that start the maceration) until I'm left with a pure white skull.

The only flaw in my plan is that I now need the head of a small animal, which may be in plentiful supply while attached to living birds and rodents across the city, but are scarcer than hen's teeth when detached from the body. So I mention my predicament to my work colleagues, who think it's rather odd for a pretty lady such as my wife to be enamoured by the skeletons of dead creatures, but they nonetheless agree to help me in my quest. But after a week of polite queries in the awkward intimacy of the office kitchen, I have drawn a blank. No dice. Or severed heads for that matter. But they doggedly continue their search and I can't help imagining them slowing down in the morning traffic to check the usability of whatever road kill might be about.

In the meantime, I am driving out to Claremont to pick up a few spares for my bike and I stop at a traffic light on Liesbeek Parkway. There is a car on my left and a car on my right and the light turns green and off we all go. The fella on my right is in a hurry and pulls away from me quickly. The girls in the car on the left are taking it easy and fall gradually behind. Some huge oak trees overhang the road ahead and under the branches of one of these old grandfathers is a deep pool of shadow inhabited by a small flock of hadedas. (Hayley has commented in the past that a hadeda skull would look more than a little cool in the close confines of a bell jar and I have even given some thought to demising one of the few that drill for worms in our garden.) I think to myself how convenient it would be if the speeding car hit one of the hadedas and killed it so that I could harvest it's head (I understand from my online research that a vigorous twisting action will effectively separate skull from spine), and in the next few moments of expanded time that prove, more than Einstein himself ever could, the theory of relativity, this is exactly what happens. At least the first part . . .

The speeding car in the right-hand lane obviously doesn't see the hadedas in their dark livery and charges straight into the shadowed gloom beneath the trees. I watch in disbelief as the birds unfurl their wings and flap up and out of their morning darkness. It's just a few flashes of black movement imprinted on my retinas. A couple of birds fly up and to the right and settle on the island between the two roads. A few manage to get up and over the car as it plummets through the shadows. But one flies straight out to the left and the speeding car clips him abruptly. He didn't even try to slow down. The bird crosses my path low and stuttering in its broken flight and it lands like a ballerina that has fouled her landing on opening night. I see the collapse when it tries to stand on legs that no longer support it; the wings plunge down to the ground to prevent the inevitable face forward fall onto the tarmac, but they are soft and frail and probably as broken as the legs beneath them and the bird sort of crumples into itself, a fragile, dark vampire withering within its own robes. As I look back, I see a few spasmodic movements on the road, but it's a marionette freed of its strings. A broken thing. And I think to myself, very clearly and with more implicit meaning than I've ever used before, 'Ah, he's fucked.'

The car behind me in the left-hand lane slows down and I watch the events in my rearview mirror as the scene diminishes behind me. I'm not sure what the girls will do with the bird, but I hope they'll do the right thing and just smash its skull and end its pain, its confusion. I consider doing a U-turn at the robot next to Starke Ayres and going back to do it myself, but I am awash in the terrible sadness of it all and I am almost at the point of tears and I am suddenly disgusted by the idea of keeping an animal skull in a jar as a decoration or otherwise. I drive on and go about my day and I don't tell Hayley about this awful thing even though it has affected me deeply.

When she opens her gift on her birthday morning, sipping on the cup of tea that I have made her, I am relieved by her response. (Simon from the office managed to source an Erlenmeyer flask for me from a laboratory supply store and I may have lifted an eight ball from Stone's on Long Street – I'm not proud of this, but the ends justify the means, yes?) She chides me for having bought her a gift that will be almost as much use to me as it will to her, but I know she loves it. I also know that every time we share a whisky I will see flying across my vision the dark silhouettes of hadedas.