

Treasure Seeker

Whalers say that all memory on Cape May Island is stored in the trees. Older memories are found in a tree's roots, newer memories are located within its leaves and branches. Sassafras trees, Sweet Birch, Hazel Alder and Silver Bells, even the Pine and Red Oak hold memories. Each tree, whether its roots are ancient and deep, or new and close to the surface of the ground, guards and protects these memories, preserves and nurtures them like a venerable old Bede. All memories are of varying strains and varieties, just like the trees themselves. There are beautiful memories, magnificent memories, and memories that terrify, causing the wind to exhale a bone chilling scream that reverberates all the way down to the earth's core.

An old memory exists deep in the roots of a Red Oak tree that still grows on the north side of the island. The memory is of an eleven year old boy who once lived not far from the tree on the edge of town near the shore. This boy could often be seen standing close to the base of the Oak holding a large silver metal detector. The metal detector was twice the size of the boy who was tall for his age, and it created a loud buzzing noise like a vast swarm of bees whenever he turned on the switch at the front end of the handle. The boy used to hold the machine out in front of his body with his arms parallel to the ground, as though he was holding a divining rod. He would spend each day after he finished his summer job at Jenkin's General Store taking his metal detector out to the tree. There he would search until dark for treasure thought to be buried near the tree's roots by the first whalers to arrive on Cape Mae's shore. The boy's name was Rowan, and his hair was as red as the berries that grew on trees of the same name throughout the Island.

Rowan learned about whalers and other adventurers from books he read while confined to a hospital room the previous winter as he recuperated from a severe mastoid infection. The only treatment for the boy's malady at the time was to have doctors cut pieces of the infected mastoid bone out of the inner ear, and keep boys such as Rowan hospitalized for weeks on end. No visitors were allowed to visit

an infected child at the hospital except on Sundays, when Rowan's mother would dutifully come and bring him a variety of books to help him pass the time. She brought him books about underwater sea life, about battles in the Arabian desert, and about pirates and their own search for lost treasure. Besides the books about pirates, Rowan most enjoyed reading books his mother brought him about exotic primates, containing numerous pictures of monkeys, lemurs, bush babies, and galagos.

At first the summer months of treasure hunting near the tree were filled with endless yellow days, but their yellow brightness would not last. Too soon the days were swallowed up by the crisp autumn dark, and Rowan's search for treasure left him empty and wanting. Summer was as short lived as firefly light, yet Rowan went on with his search.

One week prior to the start of the fall term at George Washington Elementary, Rowan walked five paces beyond the Red Oak, holding out his metal rod. He realized he was late for dinner. The sun had already gone down, it was getting cold outside, and he was expected to be home. As he thought about leaving he suddenly heard a noise that was different from the normal buzz and hum of the machine. He heard this noise as he passed by the north side of the tree. He swung the metal rod back and forth and back and forth. He swung the rod a third and then a fourth time a few feet beyond a low hanging branch of the Oak to make sure of what he heard. Once he was convinced that the noise he heard coming from the metal detector was indeed a different kind of sound, Rowan placed the metal contraption on the ground and started to dig.

Rowan dug with an old knife he swiped from his father's grey fishing tackle box. One day a few years back his father walked out of the house and never returned, so Rowan did not think his father would ever miss this knife. He carried it as a memory more than any other reason, even when he was not using it as a scraper, a trencher, or a digger. Placing the wooden handle of the knife firmly in his right hand, he first carved a large oval shape into the dirt, creating a perimeter the width of the tree trunk itself. He then began to dig from the edge of one boundary to the center of the oval. The blade of the knife, although

dulled from years of use, was eight inches long and proved an extremely effective tool for scraping dirt and sediment away from the area where he first heard the unusual sounds.

He stopped his digging at one point, turned on the metal detector again and waived it two or three more times around the area he dug up. The buzzing and beeping got even louder at that point, so he put down the metal detector and continued digging. He dug for what seemed like hours, until the knife hit something solid. Rowan pulled out of the dirt an old animal skull. Buried along side the skull was a rusty key, corroded with grime and dirt.

Rowan wiped off the key on his trousers and poked it. He next took a closer look at the skull. It was medium in size and could fit in the palm of his hand. Rowan thought it looked almost like the skull of a spider monkey or a chimpanzee. The oddest thing about it was the two calcified horns he could see sticking out of each side of the cranium. The horns were large skull outgrowths from what would have been the middle ear.

It was an unusual find, but it was not the treasure he was seeking. He took the skull and kicked it so hard that it flew high in the air and then came back down with a thud onto the soil. Seeing that the skull was still in tact, Rowan continued to kick it. He kicked it outside the park where the oaks grew. He kicked it down Arrowwood lane, down Butternut Road, and then down Cake Street. He kicked it all the way down Breakwater Road and Bottle Creek Drive. He even kicked it up the steep incline which led to his own house, and then he let it roll all the way back down the hill. He left the skull lying in a puddle of mud at the bottom of the incline by the side of the road.

It was late when Rowan came inside the house. His mother scolded him for missing supper. He told her he was no longer going to search for treasure by the Red Oak trees, and then carefully put his metal detector away in its cardboard box on top of his closet. That night he fell asleep and dreamed of enormous funnel clouds that continuously rose out of puddles of muddy rain water which lay stagnant down the hill from his house in the same spot where he left the skull. When he woke up the next morning

it was dark outside. The sky looked damaged and bruised, like it had been beaten up in an all night fist fight. He quickly got dressed, drank a glass of milk in the kitchen, and then opened the back door by the mud room. As he prepared to leave the house for school he saw that the skull he left laying in a mud puddle down the hill the day before was now lying right at the door's threshold. He grabbed his coat, yelled good-bye to his mother, and kicked the skull a few feet away from the door with his foot. He closed and locked the door, left the skull, and walked off to school.

School was comprised of the usual reading, writing, history and mathematics lessons. When Rowan prepared to leave school for the day after the last bell had sounded, he went to the cloak room in order to put on his coat. He immediately saw that the skull was lying on the floor, half hidden beneath another child's fallen jacket. Although he knew he had left the skull by the back door of his house earlier that morning, there the skull lay with both horns sticking upright. This time Rowan decided not to kick the skull. Instead, he picked it up by one of its horns and brought it to the school washroom where he proceeded to turn on the faucet and wash off some of the mud and sludge that had accumulated in many of its holes and crevices.

He then proceeded to carry the skull out of the school house, holding it by its left horn. He walked all the way towards the center of town, still holding the skull in this same precarious manner. The closer he got to the town square the more menacing the sky became. He walked quickly past two enormous stray dogs that started to growl as he passed by with the skull. They were short haired, dirty white, with eyes the size of pocket watches. Each had mud puddle brown colored eyes. He half expected funnel clouds to rise out of their eyes the same way the funnel clouds rose out of the mud puddles in his dreams. Instead, these dogs began to chase Rowan and the skull all the way down the street. Their barking turned into piercing screams as they gave chase. Rowan ran fast, but he was no match for the frenzied wild dogs until he let go of the skull and let it roll over into a patch of wild mustard on the side of the road. Only then did the feral frenzy subside. The dogs sniffed the skull in the weeds and walked away.

Thunder rumbled and rain fell once the dog attack subsided. Rowan was troubled not only by the odd behavior of the dogs, but by the odd weather. He hoped to reach his destination before he got completely drenched. He kicked the skull further down the road until he finally arrived at an old shop at the far end of the street. This store front was a taxidermy shop where men would often bring their deer, elk and bear for preservation and mounting as hunting trophies. Inside the shop the walls were covered with enormous heads of bison, buffalo, and rhino. The shop was owned by an old taxidermist and town historian named Myron Windslow, who had been in business for forty seven years.

Rowan picked up the skull, opened the door, and walked inside. The large brass bells that were hung on the inside of the door noisily announced his arrival. Mr. Windslow came out from the back room where he did all the major skinning and preserving of animal parts, and Rowan placed the skull on the store room counter.

“What do you have here?” he asked without touching any part of the animal skull. He peered down closer with his spectacles and then asked in a low, solemn voice,

“Where did you find this?”

Rowan explained the circumstances under which he found the skull, and asked Mr. Windslow if he was able to identify the type of creature that possessed this sort of horned cranium.

“Why this came from a two-horned black monkey” he said knowingly. Mr. Windslow had never actually seen a two- horned black monkey before in his life, but had once read an antique treatise on the history of the region that discussed the siting of such an unusual creature.

“I don’t want to disturb the skull by doing a full examination. Such an oddity might be worth something to a collector, but I am not in the market for such things.”

He told Rowan that if wanted to know more about the history and lore of this creature that he should speak to Alma Neruda Escobar who lived on the other side of the island.

“She is even more of a historian than I am. Her people settled here hundreds of years ago, and she is steeped in the lore and the mystery that surrounds us. I cannot tell you the story of this skull, but I know that she can.”

He then took a newspaper that was to the left of the counter, rolled it up, and used it to push the skull closer to Rowan, still refusing to touch it. He indicated with a hand gesture that he wanted Rowan to take the skull off the counter. Rowan grabbed the skull by one horn, thanked Mr. Windslow, and left the shop.

He knew where Alma Neruda Escobar lived. Everybody did. Madam Escobar was a fabled, time-worn woman who dressed in black and forest green to match the dark forest green Victorian house she lived in. The house rested high upon a cliff. Rowan had heard a few years back from other boys at school that she was a witch. She was not an evil witch, but a witch none the less. He knew how to walk to the other side of the island to find her, but it would take a long while for him to get to her house. Meanwhile, the rain was coming down in blinding gusts of ice numbing cold, and Rowan was wearing nothing more than that same old pair of trousers, long sleeved shirt, and flimsy overcoat he had worn the previous day when he went over to the Red Oak tree to search for treasure.

As he started down a side road he could hear through the rain and thunder a wailing and keening of stray dogs in the distance. Frightened by their raw, mournful cries, he began to run. He ran with the speed of a jack rabbit, as though he was being hunted by mountain lions. As he ran he kept the skull tucked firmly under his arm. At times he skid in the puddles on the road, at times he slipped in the muddy terrain, but he never stopped running. The day turned into a night that was black and starless, but still he ran.

He did not stop until he got to the far side of the island where he could almost make out a large house on the hill. The house appeared as a mass of black shadow in the dark. When he finally made it up

the steep incline and came to the door of Madam Escobar's home, she was waiting for him in the doorway.

"You are wet to the bone" she said, and handed him a dish towel to wipe his face. He put the skull on the ground and used the towel to clean himself off. Madam Escobar then ushered him into her home. He left the skull at the entrance and walked inside.

"I don't often get visitors up here in crazy storms like these. I thought I sensed someone coming so I kept the light on. I hope it helped you find your way. I don't see well, so I don't use the light. Why are you here? Can I help you with something?"

Before he could answer she led him into the parlor and told him to sit by the hearth where a large fire was burning. She handed him a glass of hot water with whiskey, clove, and lemon peel, then asked him once again to explain why he had come. Rowan proceeded to tell her all about the two horned monkey skull that he left at the threshold of her doorway. She did not see him holding it when he first arrived, nor did she see him set it down by the door. She went back to the doorway, felt around on the ground for it, and brought the skull inside.

Madam Escobar examined the skull thoroughly by feel. She then held it up close to her eyes. She did not seem at all disturbed by its peculiar nature. Rowan went on to tell her how the weather changed abruptly immediately after he started to kick the skull away from the oak tree. He told her about the crazed dogs that chased him, dogs acting like they had been released from an asylum for disturbed animals. He told her how the two horned skull showed up everywhere he went.

After he spoke Madam Escobar was silent for a moment. She then went and warmed her hands by the fire. When she finished warming herself, she turned to Rowan and asked him if he ever found a key near the skull. Rowan stood up and dug deep into his wet pocket. It took several minutes for him to retrieve the old rusted metal key from the pocket he had placed it in the day before.

“I am going to tell you a story that will explain everything you ever wanted to know about this two horned black monkey skull and that key. It is a painful story that begins with my maternal great great Grandmother Neruda, her younger sister Magdalena, and their father, Alfonso Emanuel Escobar. Alfonso brought with him from Spain a magnificent necklace fashioned entirely of rose-gold and rubies. His mother had sewn the necklace into the lining of his overcoat before he boarded the ship that eventually took him to America. The necklace was hand crafted by a master goldsmith and was made to be worn at the décolletage of a woman, where the light of every ruby would shine brightly onto her neck and face.

On his deathbed Alfonso told Neruda, his eldest and favorite daughter, that he wanted the necklace to be hers. He instructed Neruda to have her betrothed place the necklace around her neck while standing at the altar in church on her wedding day. Neruda took the necklace and kept it in a wooden lock box, saving it for that very special day. Although she had many suitors, she had unfortunately fallen in love with an unworthy shipping clerk named Edward who courted her night and day during the warm months of summer. He made many tenders and representations of love, but he had not yet proposed marriage.

Magdalena coveted Neruda’s necklace as well as her many suitors. She especially coveted Edward and longed for him to fall in love with her. She danced for Edward, played the guitar for him, and even promised him riches and rubies beyond his wildest dreams if he married her. Edward was weak and easily seduced. He succumbed quickly to Magdalena’s advances and promises. She and Edward soon came to Neruda and told her of their plans to wed.

Neruda listened quietly as they told her the news. She hid all signs of anger. She told them that she wished them a long life together. She then went to her lock box, opened it up, and cast a dark spell on the ruby necklace. Neruda’s magic was powerful, far more powerful than any of Magdalena’s beguilements and charms. She handed the necklace to Edward and told him to place it on her sister’s neck after the church ceremony, as they stood together at the altar.

Of course young man, the rest of the story you must have figured out by now. On their wedding day, after the priest gave his final blessing and Edward and Magdalena were married in the eyes of the church, Edward fastened the necklace around Magdalena. No sooner had the clasp snapped in place than Edward was transformed into a two horned black monkey. At first, the congregation was delighted by this clever trick, what they thought to be a temporary illusion. They soon realized, however, that Edward had actually become this hairy creature. Magdalena was horrified that she had married such an animal. She was destined to walk with Edward on a leash for the rest of their long lives, in order to prevent him from climbing up walls and behaving unruly. Magdalena put the necklace back in the lock box. When Edward died Magdalena buried his small dark body along with the lock box key in a forlorn, damp place where trees and untamed shrubs grew wild.”

Alma Neruda Escobar got up and left the parlor. When she returned she held in her arms an old wooden lock box. She held the box with arms outstretched as though holding a metal detector. She told Rowan to take it.

“By digging up the two horned black monkey skull you have unleashed fury and darkness. You have set the world askew. Things will fall apart until put back in place. Whirlwinds and funnel clouds and widening gyres will be loosened with the ferocity of all rough beasts until the spell is broken.”

The box had been locked ever since Magdalena placed the necklace back inside it and later buried the key. Madam Escobar told Rowan to take the key he was still clutching in his hand and unlock the box. Although Rowan was scared to unlock this old wooden coffer, he followed her instructions. When he looked inside after opening it up he saw the beautiful rose-gold necklace embedded with its multitude of hand cut rubies. The rubies shimmered and glowed in the light of the hearth fire. He somehow understood that the only way to break the spell and set things right, the only way to reorder the world was for the necklace to be placed on the neck of Neruda’s direct descendant, Alma Neruda Escobar.

Rowan got up and placed the necklace around Madam Escobar. Once he heard the clasp snap in place, he could no longer hear the howling of the wind. Once the necklace was secured on her neck, the constant pounding of rain lessened until it became only the sound of fingernails tapping on glass. Soon the rain stopped entirely. The dogs with mud puddle eyes were no longer howling in the distance. There were no more whirlwinds and widening gyres. The sky began to clear.

Rowan looked down at the two headed black monkey skull and saw that it had turned into a pile of gray dust. Madam Escobar went to the closet and brought out a large broom. She swept the dust into a dustbin, then retrieved an empty mayonnaise jar from the kitchen and instructed Rowan to put the contents of the dustbin into the jar. Once the mayonnaise jar was sealed they hugged and bid each other farewell. She told Rowan to take the jar with him.

The stars came out and it took Rowan almost no time at all to return to the other side of the island. In the new stillness and nighttime calm, he decided not to go directly home, even though he knew his mother would worry. Rowan had one more very important task to complete. He walked to the old Red Oak tree on the north side of the island where he had once looked for treasure. He learned after all his days of treasure seeking that the world was full of the inexplicable. He knew that the world was strange and difficult and sad, even after the storms had ended, even after the world was put back on course. He recognized the value of Madam Escobar's story. He knew about the pain of betrayal and loss that Neruda suffered the way he knew his own father was never coming home. He opened the lid on the jar and emptied the contents around the tree where he had spent those long months of summer searching, and then he walked on home.