Mariah Montoya
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Professor Michael Landreth

about 3,800 words

The Severed Bone

2017 – Boise, Idaho

A woman picks a slice of celery from her teeth, inspects her powdered pores in the mirror, gropes for a tube of nude lipstick and reapplies. Apparently satisfied, she clips her purse together again and slips out of the restaurant bathroom, almost knocking over a waiter balancing a tray of greasy dishes. The waiter apologizes like she might sue him.

The woman peers around for her date, but he is nowhere, not at the table they sat at, where a busboy is now attacking the surface with a gray rag. Nor is he waiting by the door, hands jiggling in his pocket, smiling. She weaves through the aisles of tables, hearing, “Have a great evening, thanks for coming in!” Once outside, the babble from the restaurant dissolves into a night chill; ghostly cars sit in a parking lot illuminated by faraway lights from the freeway. Her date’s silver Hyundai still glints right where they parked, but when she approaches it, the windows are black, lifeless, faintly frosted around the edges.

The woman whispers his name into the dark.

A car honks from the freeway. Crickets chirp in the bushes to her left, where a dark lawn slopes downward to the Boise River. Her ears pick up the rumble of the river that had blended into the night before now, and when she squints that direction, she sees him, like a silhouette on a canvas: hands in pockets at the base of the hill, staring out at the greenbelt before him.

Maybe the woman has the freedom to turn around, high-heel her way toward the freeway, march under the Boise lights all the way home. But gravity is easier, pulling her down the sloped

grass until she is trotting, stumbling in the sudden weeds that sprout under her feet. The man doesn't turn or flinch when she comes up behind him and places her hand on the broad of his back, inhaling the trees and water and mud.

"You found me," he says.

"Where else would you be?"

The corner of his mouth twists upward. "Remember when we swam across here?"

That had been two years ago, a random excursion to the greenbelt: picnic of soggy peanut butter sandwiches and coffee in thermos cups, geese waddling up to them on the hunt for crumbs. A baking sun. Fully clothed, they had waded into the water, said, "Fuck it," and kept going, their shoes squishing in mud. The woman laughs.

"I almost had to lug you across. You could barely swim, remember?"

She expects him to protest, to flirt. Instead he inhales, turns, and takes one of her hands. He dives into a watery speech about how they met, how much he loves her, how he promises to always wake up early and brew coffee for the two of them. He has never loved a woman more. He laughs and tells her he'll always give her sex and buy her clothes. Nuts and clothing, the woman thinks. Nice. Then, of course, he bends down on one knee.

The hand surfaces from the pocket, harvesting a black velvet box that snaps open, revealing every girl's dream in sparkling facets that reflect the blue of the night.

He asks the question. It sends a dark thrill up her tailbone.

The woman's future was always an exciting abstract portrait, in which she couldn't decipher what images would loosen themselves from the brush strokes and take charge of her life. There were swirls of blues, purples, yellows, oranges, where flying to Africa, learning classical ballet in New York, or catching fireflies in Washington D.C. were ripe with possibility.

Now a vision of her life lodges itself firmly before her: husband, house, job. There will be a yellow apron and failed cooking experiments, a broken doorknob that will take months to fix, the TV blinking at night, repetitive lovemaking. She tries to imagine a child, but instead of the baby growing in her womb, she envisions one propagating from the belly of the earth, rising from the riverbank mud, smiling at her from among the willows.

The diamond in the velvet box sends sparks of bluish light bouncing into her retinas.

"Of course," she tells the man.

He wipes his eyes, takes out the ring, clumsily slides it onto her extended finger. That finger no longer belongs to her. It is his, a whole bone dedicated to their union, the diamond sitting there as proof. As her fiancé reels her in for a kiss she thinks, huh, a diamond is really just a stone, a stone someone could pluck from the banks of a river.

But without it there would be no commitment, no fixed future, no promise of love. So as they walk back up the grassy slope hand in hand, toward the restaurant parking lot, the freeway, the lights, the woman decides that her diamond is beautiful, beautiful because it comes from him.

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2004 – Mumbai, Maharashtra

So, I think as the door tinkles, as the scraggy Liberian saunters inside, laden with jewelry and a red checkered button-up. You're back again, you son of a bitch. I thought you'd be dead.

He grins at me, stomps up to my customer chair, and pulls off his buckskin boots. A horde of diamonds falls from the sole onto my vinyl, clinking and rolling in mud that his shoes dragged in. Impressive. I thought he'd only managed to snag the ones hanging around his neck, glimmering on his bony fingers.

"What's up, Paul?" the Liberian asks.

My name's not Paul. Son of a *bitch*.

"To be perfectly honest, Ishmael," I say, shuffling files at my desk, "I thought you'd be dead by now. Smart smugglers don't wear their diamonds on their sleeves."

I relish the way his jaw pops open, how his smile slips. Behind him, my black-rimmed clock ticks a minute closer to closing time.

"Now look here," he says. "I'm no Ishmael. You know that, man. Remember me from last year? I paid you two grand for a few bits of paper. I paid you good."

Of course I remember him, but he doesn't need that information. I raise my eyebrows, pull out fake I.D.'s, crumpled birth certificates, anything to not look at this man who, one year ago, barged into my office with an AK-47 and half a dozen well-armed friends on their way to the warehouses. Oh hey, man, I need these diamonds to be legitimate for polishers and retailers. I need them to know for *certain* that no limbs were split from bodies in the process of extracting these rocks. No blood. No fuss. No guns. Nice, normal diamonds. Make them legitimate or I blow a hole through your skull.

I remember shoving the barrel away from my head, how the Liberian seized my hand and crushed the fingers together, twisted my wrist until I dropped to my knees.

Now he says, more urgently, "C'mon man, these diamonds aren't no blood diamonds, these are *mine* hanging on my neck. They aren't for sale, and you know why? The smartest smuggler in the world wears diamonds all over him and no one thinks he's a smuggler. They just think he's a faggot. Am I right, am I right?"

My nails on the hand he once fractured dig into my palm, breaking skin.

"Didn't bring a gun this time?" I ask carefully.

"Thought you wouldn't need persuading anymore. But I have a few right outside if you want one. My friends are out there. Guarding."

"One day your friends are going to kill for the paper I give you."

The way his bottom teeth clench upward forces me into action. I grit my own and pull out the needed materials, paper, printer, ink, a real KP certificate stashed in my lowest drawer: "*The rough diamonds in this shipment have been handled in accordance with the provisions of the Kimberly Process International Certification Scheme for Rough Diamonds.*" Congratulations to the United Nations. I'll even copy the certificate's delicate blue border to validate what my hands are forging.

The Liberian, apparently bored, nudges his diamonds with bare toes while I set to work, sending them rolling across the floor. I refuse to use what he injured. One-handedly, I scan the certificate, copy it, white out the information, and begin etching my own information in – date of issue, importer, karat weight/mass. *A diamond is forever.* Not an idea that's been around forever, of course, only since 1947, manifesting on billboards, consuming the Western mind, brought to you by De Beers Jewelry Company. I shouldn't blame the Liberian for being a part of the system. He is a smuggler, I am a forger. Corruption is the crux of life. If it weren't, there would be justice, and if there was justice then all humans would be dead, sucked back into the mud, no more alive than compressed carbon under the earth.

Forty seven minutes past my closing time. When I am finished, the Liberian shuffles toward me, grabs the top certificate from my counter and reads with narrowed eyes. Satisfied, he grins, takes the stack, reaches into his pocket, and hands me a wad of American bills. I take them with my right hand. The left is so numb from clenching that it seems the Liberian took it with him, sliced it at the wrist and pocketed it along with his diamonds.

"See how nice it is doing this kind of service?"

He thumps me on the shoulder, then turns around, gathering his scattered diamonds and stuffing them back into his boots.

Forty eight minutes past closing time.

When he leaves, I collapse back onto the stool behind me. I hope his friends kill him. I hope his friends kill him because if they don't, if he reads the rest of the certificates before he reaches the warehouses, he will come back for me, he will blow a hole through my skull.

The first paper was perfect, flawless, a fine piece of art on my end, and there will be at least one diamond, glinting vaguely of yellow or green or blue, that will make its way to one of the diamond exchange warehouses with a valid KP. It will be mixed with other diamonds, transported to Surat for polishing, shipped to Israel or Russia or the U.S. for cutting. The cutter will place the diamond in cement, cleave along its delicate tetrahedral plane, wiggle a steel blade into the groove and strike, strike like he's dismembering a human limb. And I can just see it – that cut diamond sold to a manufacturer, who will set it into a twisted ring and sell the ring to Kay, Zale, Jared. Some poor blinded man will stumble straight into the mouth of the jewelry store, straight into that trap. He'll mutter a size to the jeweler. The jeweler will brighten and tell him in chirpy tones that the perfect diamond is *here*.

But not all of my certificates look as legitimate as the first. I forged the others to reflect the smuggler, to show the world that some diamonds come from him. Even the dimmest manufacturer will notice the "date issued" on each paper he did not check: *2017*, I wrote, a date that has not come, an impossible future ambiguity, evidence of crookery. I did it because he took my hand. I did it because in a way, he has taken many hands in his lifetime. And he will keep severing and stealing until someone cuts off his own.

But as I bury the American money in my desk drawer, as my clock pulses closer to 2017, I know that if the smuggler reaches the warehouses alive and still squirms his way out of arrest, it is a date that my tired bones and rigid fingers will never live to touch.

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1991 - Pujehun, Pujehun District

Aminata Touré bellows for her four-year-old son after the first round of gunshots, after birds blast from mango trees and hut doors fly open, releasing swarms of fleeing neighbors. She tramples onto the main road of Pujehun, barefoot, cassava leaves still clenched in her left hand – monkeys shriek, ducks unstick themselves from puddles in the street and run in wild circles. To her right, more gunshots, screams. Against the purpling sky, a thick corset of smoke coils toward the half-moon, and she cannot find her son.

Then his high voice behind her – "Mamma, Femi is hurt, Mamma."

He stands in the middle of the street, round-eyed, jostled by a hysterical woman jogging past, a jagged rock in one of his hands like a weapon.

"Samuel," Aminata breathes.

She runs to him and in one swift motion picks the child up; both the cassava leaves and the rock spill to the ground, but where to go? To the coffee farms, where her husband is working? To the Waanje, swim across it? In her swaddled buzzing brain, with gunshots ripping through the night all around her, she can only think one word: *home*. Her husband will come looking for them, he will barge into their home with hands stained from coffee seeds, they will all flee together.

She runs, Samuel bouncing against her breasts, and when she reaches her hut she slams them inside, crawls with him to the bedroom, holds him there in the corner; nobody is home, not

her husband, her parents, her cousin. Outside, the shots are louder, closer. Samuel whispers, "Femi is hurt, Mamma, he is really hurt, he's bleeding." Her jaw is paralyzed, but she manages to kiss the delicate back of his neck.

Voices pierce them from outside now, loud and excited. *Please no, God no.* Aminata tries to recite a prayer, but her eyes are plump, unable to shut. All she can recite is the rap song Samuel learned last week, strange rhythmic words through his friend Femi's radio: *She sweet as brown sugar with the candied yams*. But no, the shrill voices outside overwhelm even this, and her fixed vision of stealing away with husband and son morphs into vagueness, an eddy of dark, unknown colors.

The hut door blasts open. People bang their way inside, into the bedroom. They are boys, *boys*, the oldest about sixteen, all holding rifles or Berettas and wearing pale green collared shirts, smug, delicious smiles at the sight of Aminata and her boy. The oldest one yanks Samuel's arm, throws him off his mother. She reaches for him, but the soldier slams the butt of his rifle into her head.

"You know who we are, *pod marani*?"

Samuel stretches out his hand, and the soldier points his rifle at him. "Don't you make a sound. Now I asked." He bends down until he is eye-level with Aminata, who tries to refocus as the world spins, spots of light constellating her view. The other boys titter. "Know who we are?"

Samuel, don't make a sound, baby. "Revolutionary United Front," she answers. She heard it sputtering on the radio countless times, but the war in Liberia had been a dream, an abstract portrait until now.

"That's right." The soldier's voice swells.

Aminata knows what will happen next. She stares at the thatched ceiling as they rip her gara off, use a knife to slice her pants. There are six of them, and they each use her, laughing, egging each other on as Samuel watches, as screams from outside join seamlessly with the blood whistling in Aminata's ears, and she thinks, I must not make a sound. If Samuel hears the agony in her throat, he will cry.

When the last one finishes with her, his skinny body shuddering, Aminata makes the mistake of redirecting her gaze from the ceiling to Samuel; the child was staring at the scene before him mutely, but now, seeing the twist on his mother's face, he whimpers.

He starts to say, "Mamma –"

The oldest soldier turns his rifle on Samuel so fast, the gunshot explodes before Aminata can twitch. Samuel is tossed back into the wall, surprised, his shirt blossoming purple, and Aminata wrenches herself away from her perpetrator. The soldiers mumble to each other, rubbing their arms. She doesn't look at them, only edges to her Samuel, and when she has him lodged against her naked chest the soldiers leave. She rocks Samuel, saying, "It's okay, baby, I'm here. I'll get you healed."

She carries him all the way out of Pujehun, through the abandoned coffee plantations where other escapees streak past, stomping on fallen seeds that squish beneath their feet. "*I need help*," she shouts. "*My son is hurt*." Nobody answers her. She expects her husband to be lurking behind one of the coffee trees in the orchard, but he does not answer her calls either.

When Aminata arrives at the Waanje, she sees hordes of civilians diving into the water, swimming across to the forest on the opposite banks. A woman lies in the mud by the river, her newborn still strapped to her back in a turquoise lappa. The bullet, Aminata realizes, went through the baby's back into the mother's, killing them both.

She rushes into the Waanje and struggles across, keeping Samuel's head above water. When she treads, dripping, into the forest, she keeps him pressed firmly against her, hoping this might staunch the flow of blood from his chest. The night chill snakes around her.

She lugs Samuel for days, stumbling into Zimmi, Bomi, other mangled villages that fume from fires. Someone, a man hiding within the remains of his hut, sees her picking popcorn kernels from the mud and comes out to give her kola nuts and clothing. She asks if there's a working hospital anywhere nearby, or a muthi. The man says, "Bury him."

Samuel bloats in her arms, his lips crack, blood seeps from his ears. He is so sick that his eyes cannot focus on his mother's pleading face. She does not stop walking. On a sweltering, dry day, God knows how long after the initial siege, Aminata walks straight into Bomaru's mining district, where a group of older rebels puts a gun to her head and prods her toward the mine.

"Do you know who we are?"

RUF, she opens her mouth to say. Only a dry cough comes out.

Disgusted, the soldier with the rifle to her head says, "Revolutionary United Front. Now drop the body. It reeks."

What body? Aminata walks forward, over the crest of a dried hill until she can see the mine spread below her, a pit of gray-brown mud in which hundreds of men, women, and children stand knee-deep, hunched over with their backs to the glaring sun, arms rotating in the muck. The soldier lets her walk downward until her feet are slapping in the mud, and then he says, again, "Drop the body."

Aminata realizes he is talking about Samuel, who is dying, stiffening in her arms. She finds her tongue.

"No, I will not."

"Drop it or I'll shoot you."

The sun has already baked her sweaty hair into her skin. She cannot distinguish Samuel's breathing from her own, as if they had one breath together, one heartbeat.

"Shoot me then. I won't let him go."

The soldier kicks her tailbone, sending her careening forward; she manages to catch her balance with a lurch, the mud now licking her thighs.

"Drop the body or I'll shoot *him*."

Aminata knows that Samuel cannot survive a second gunshot. She will not let the child suffer like that. She squeezes his rigid fingers, then untangles the boy from herself and lowers him to the mud, letting go, watching the thick brown mucus suck him under, consume his blood-dried body, his forehead, gone. The soldier thrusts a rusted metal basin into her hand.

What do I do with it? Aminata asks. Or perhaps she doesn't.

"*Diamonds*," the soldiers say.

She peers at a nearby amputee, a woman whose stump of an arm, rounded off near the elbow like gums without teeth, makes careful circles in the basin held by her remaining hand. Aminata tries to copy, and for a peculiar moment she feels she must be looking at her own reflection, that the air around her is actually water flashing back images of herself. *She* is an amputee now. The arm looped under Samuel's buttocks, supporting his weight for all those days, all those years, must have sunk into the mud with her boy, and now her severed bone is supposed to be searching for something she doesn't want within a bowl she doesn't own.

The amputee inches closer. Moved to copy, Aminata does too. When the two women are bowed down side by side, the one with no arm whispers, "They feed us you know. Rice. And

they let us sleep. March us over to that town nearby, I forget the name." Her stump pumps its rhythm. "It's alright you know. They say they'll give my son back if I do this."

Around them, other miners slog through the mush, scooping handfuls of earth into their tarnished basins and swirling the gravel in circles, trying to catch distinct reflections among the sand. Aminata bends crookedly like her reflective counterpart, her fingers reaching into the sludge and exploring the bottom, hoping to maybe touch Samuel's arm or leg.

She only feels rocks, pebbles, grit. It is as if the earth has absorbed him completely, though she knows this cannot be true. Samuel is down there, moving, swimming through the mud, fishing for stones.

All day she digs by her amputee, searching for just one piece of crystallized carbon. Always, the guns are pointed at their backs. Some miners collapse from exhaustion. A finger on a rifle blasts their faces from their necks. Once, a miner next to Aminata drops his washbowl, swivels around, and tries to run for it; four RUF soldiers jump forward to tear him from the pit instead. Aminata hears a machete thud against bone, hears the man retch and vomit and cry. The world swirls into many dusks.

Some muggy morning, as she stoops in the pit murmuring rap songs, Aminata actually captures one among the mess of other gray and white pebbles: a bluish lump of diamond the size of her fingernail, easy to miss. Before the soldiers take it from her, she thinks, how ugly and unnecessary it is. You drop a baby to pick up this.

But at least the diamond is, for a slice of time, warm between her gritty fingers. At least she knows that Samuel's little hand closed around this very rock, that he swam to her feet and, on his knees, placed the diamond in her groping hand.

Yes, at least the diamond comes from him.