

The Mysterious Dinosaur Horseshoe

A Short Story by Gwen Koehler

Debbie and I sat on concrete steps outside the kitchen door, listening to my mother sing along with Frank Sinatra on the radio while we compared mosquito bites. It was the final week of summer vacation, its shine tarnished with endless days and boredom. Things perked up when my cousin Debbie arrived to stay for a few days because her mother had a baby. I was the older cousin by three weeks, meaning it was up to me to show her a good time.

“Frankly, Frank, I’ve had enough of you.” I said to no one. “Come on, let’s go to the mountains.”

“Illinois has mountains?” Debbie asked, putting her hand like a visor over her eyebrows, to scout for them. “Cool. I’ve never been to the mountains.”

I opened the screen door and yelled to my mother, “We’re going on an adventure.” At age eight, I was free to explore all the way around the block. Our house was part of a cookie cutter subdivision on a wide street leading to more blocks made up of a slightly different batch of cookies, but still yummy.

“Ok, honey. Dinner will be ready in an hour. Be home in time to wash up.”

“Washing up’s a really big thing with your Mom,” Debbie observed.

“Yeah, she like’s things clean. But other than that, she’s pretty chill.”

Halfway down the block, Debbie said, “Hey, that house looks just like yours.” In truth, every other house on the block was the same model. “Let’s count how many look just like yours.” Hardly an adventure, as I knew long ago how many there were, but I let her have her fun.

“I know exactly where the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedrooms and the back door are in every one house,” I said. “If I were a cat burglar, I could find my way in the dark to get to the wall with the built-in bookcase and fill my sack with as many books as I wanted before I tiptoed out.”

“Six, seven,” was Debbie’s response.

“Stop,” I said when we reached the corner. I held my arm protectively across her like the patrol guards did at school crossings. After all, as the older cousin, I was responsible for her safety.

“Wait here. If I make it all the way to the other corner safe, I’ll signal you. Then you run as fast as you can to me.”

“Why?”

“Shh. Not so loud. The witch might hear us.”

I took a few deep breaths and ran as fast as I could past the last remaining house for witches who ate little children, according to the neighbor kids. Three stories of brown brick and peeling paint towered over the new ranch homes around it. Apparently, the witches had been there for a hundred or

so years, and the subdivision builders were scared to tear it down. When I made it to the other corner, I waved Debbie over.

When she was standing safely next to me at the opposite corner, I whispered, "Check out the attic. Sometimes when it's just right, you can see shadows. Probably where the witch keeps the children."

Debbie looked worried.

"Don't worry," I said. "someday I'll use my cat burglar skills to break in there and release everyone the witch is fattening up for dessert." Once freed, they would all surround me with hugs and kisses while people snapped pictures. Grateful parents would vie with reporters for my attention. The newspapers my brother threw on the identical porches would be rolled in such a way that my picture would smile up at the occupant who was eager to read about the little girl who took a risk and saved the day.

Debbie looked at the tall grass and the window shades drawn. "I don't know. It looks empty to me. Maybe they're on vacation."

"Nah, it's almost dinner time. You know what that means."

Past the witch house, around the other corner, on the other side of the street, a new subdivision was going to be built here, my mother told me. The holes in the ground would become basements. Holes in the ground meant big piles of dirt next to them, hence mountains appeared on our Illinois prairie. Most of the old buildings had been torn down, leaving only a crumbling square brick structure with broken windows. It had once been a home for the insane, a school for bad kids, or an old glass factory, depending on who was telling the story.

We took in the panorama of the Dirt Pile Mountains. Untouched, uninhabited, unexplored.

"Come on," I said, grabbing her hand, looking both ways to cross the street.

"Wait, can we do this?"

"Come on. Let's play archeologist." I wasn't exactly sure what an archeologist was, but I knew they dug in dirt and discovered things.

And discover things we did. Near one hole we found a rusty tin can that surely once held gold coins buried by pirates. Not too far was the bottom half of a canvas shoe, probably ripped off by a monster reptile slithering nearby.

"Watch out for crocodiles," I warned. I stubbed my toe on something under a layer of dirt and gravel. "What's this?"

I reached down and brushed away the top layer of rubble and saw something hard and white beneath. A bone. No doubt from the person mangled by the crocodile.

"Help me dig this up," I said, my heart pounding. Debbie and I used our hands and brushed and brushed. When it was completely uncovered, we stared. It was much larger than any human bone I'd ever imagined.

"I don't think it's a bone," Doubting Debbie said.

"It's not, "I agreed. "It's a horseshoe."

"It's shaped like a horseshoe, but it's way too big for a horse." She had a point.

"So it's not for a regular horse. Besides, do you see any horses in our neighborhood?"

Debbie shook her head.

"I know!" I clapped my hands together. "It's for a dinosaur. There must have been dinosaurs here. And we discovered one of their horseshoes. Can you believe it?"

"I didn't know dinosaurs had horseshoes."

"How could you know? They lived millions of years ago. I bet no one knew they had horseshoes. This is a really big discovery. We have to get this to a museum."

Together we lifted the horseshoe out of its hiding place. It was more awkward than heavy, even for two eight-year-old girls. We crossed the street to our block, stopped and repositioned it to get a good grip. It took a while to get home, going dangerously slow past the witch house. Dinner would be ready by the time we arrived. Perfect, my entire family would be gathered at the table when we made our entrance with the treasure. True, I was pretty dirty, and Mom wouldn't like that. But she would forget about it when she realized the significance of the horseshoe. My father would call the museum, my brother would call the newspaper, and soon Debbie and I would be telling reporters how we made this momentous discovery.

We carried it to the back of the house because the kitchen was there. Plus, the horseshoe was still grimy, and I didn't want to drag dirt over the living room carpet. Debbie and I entered just as Mom was dishing up a casserole onto dinner plates.

I beamed. "Look what we found. A dinosaur horseshoe."

My mother dropped the serving dish to the floor. It shattered, our dinner now sprinkled with pieces of china. Gravy splattered the walls, the cabinets and her legs. My mother, rarely rattled, was screaming,

"Get that filthy dirty toilet seat out of my kitchen!"

That night we climbed into bed with skin raw from the vigorous scrubbing my mother had performed on us. We were also a little hungry because only vegetables were left for dinner. And I was annoyed at having to explain to my parents, not newspaper reporters, where we found the treasure. Apparently, I was never allowed to go to the Dirt Pile Mountains again.

But next week school would start, and I needed a good night's sleep. After all, I only had a few days left to save the children from the witch.