

Remnants

The dirt, black and rich, turns easily, yielding to Beth's spade. She cracks against pebbles, a bottlecap, a piece of green, smooth glass—then here, in the second row of what will be her garden, she unearths a nose.

Glinting white in the sun, its nostrils are plugged with dirt. Beth takes it to the spigot on the side of the house and rinses it clean. It is fragile, porcelain she thinks, perhaps a remnant from a child's doll.

She wipes the nose dry on her jeans and walks into the sprawling farmhouse that she and Doug bought, far away from the traffic and smog, away from their impersonal beige condo and carport in a line of identical units stretching down one street and the next. The house needs work but is surrounded by lovely woods and a pasture where goats used to graze, or so the realtor said. Beth and Doug sleep with the windows open and breathe deep when they wake. They've identified the smell of honeysuckle, of fresh-cut hay.

Months before they moved, Beth knew she wanted a garden and bought packets of squash and spinach seeds from the rack near the checkout at her grocery store. She anticipated the dirt under her fingernails, the sore muscles. A good hurt, an honest hurt.

Doug is drinking coffee in the formal dining room. He sits on a metal chair while his cup rests on a brown card table with a wobbly leg, boxes filled with china and kitchen appliances surrounding him like a fortress. Beth puts her outstretched palm between his eyes and his Sunday newspaper.

"Look," she says.

"What is it?" He reaches for the nose, but Beth quickly closes her hand. "Don't touch it," she says. "It's fragile." She moves her hand farther away from him, slowly uncurls her fingers. He leans in and says, "It looks like a nose."

"I found it in the garden."

"What's a nose doing in our garden?" Doug picks up the paper again, flipping through the car ads. He has been eyeing a Lexus, but they can't afford it, not now.

"I don't know. Probably from an old doll." Beth touches it gently with the tip of her finger and wonders about the rest of the body. If she digs deeper, she might find a hand, an ear. She goes to the kitchen and gently places the nose in an oval trinket box on the windowsill above the sink.

Normally, she would take her wedding ring off and put it in the box as well, so she wouldn't get it dirty while gardening. But she lost the ring in the move. It was not an expensive ring (they had very little money when they got married), but it was pretty, a thin gold band with a small solitaire. She is sure it must be in one of the boxes, slipped off while she was packing. She just hasn't run across it yet. In the meantime, she wears a silver costume jewelry band with inlaid rhinestones. It's a \$20 temporary ring, so she doesn't worry about a little dirt. Doug had brought it home from the mall just after they moved. "Don't want the locals thinking you're available," he said.

Back in the garden, Beth presses her weight against the spade, the handle making an indentation in her stomach where she'll be sore tomorrow. She's already late with the planting, so there's no time to treasure hunt. Nevertheless, she works more slowly now, scrutinizing the dirt and occasionally squeezing a chunk of it in her hands only to feel the moist, slippery body of an earthworm.

She works well into the afternoon, not realizing that she has skipped lunch, that she has eaten nothing but a bagel since dinner last night. She jerks her head up, surprised at the sound of Doug's voice behind her, asking if she wants something to eat.

"You're working up quite a sweat," he says. He stands timidly at the edge of the plot, his white tennis shoes marking the boundary between the grass and the newly turned dirt.

"Stay there," Beth says. "You'll dirty your shoes."