

Category: Adult  
Theme: A day in the garden  
Title: Bone meal

Underneath the tangled blackberries, thirty-year-old rhododendrons and Japanese andromedas were deep-rooted atop the rise. The garden hadn't been touched in ten years, but it had initially been executed expertly. Time had eaten away at the opulence. We were there to reclaim it.

I started on the western edge, a wheelbarrow on the path as I trudge in with a Hori-hori knife and a large plastic bin. I pulled weeds by the fistful at first, excavating ornaments and perennials in the shade of the larger plants. It took me three weeks to discover the stacked stone border around the sloped garden and another two weeks to reveal it fully. Behind me, my husband added mulch to keep the weeds at bay until we could fill in the voids left by the unsalvageable skeletons of neglected shrubs.

Midsummer, I discovered the first bone under a particularly stubborn patch of lawn daisies. It was a long bone of some kind, knuckled at the top. I guessed it to be an unfortunate deer, long since deceased and far into the circle of life. A few days later, another bone came up under a clump of grass, a flat rib. Leftovers from a rib dinner, I assumed. Perhaps the last owner's dog had buried their treasures for later enjoyment. We knew nothing about the previous owners of the house and garden. The bank foreclosure details had been frightfully vague.

Halfway along the stretch atop the hill, I came across a thicket where there were few weeds. I had followed a chain of debris of old cans, plastics wrappers, and decomposing papers to the shaded spot. The limited sunshine restricted growth to stunted salal and the ferns dotting the perimeter.

I was about to turn away, bucket on my hip, when another white bone caught my attention. To my surprise, I pulled out a knucklebone of some kind. Too long to be raccoon or rabbit but too short to be dog, it baffled me. Some digging revealed several more two-inch bones, some of which still had cartilage attached, clumped with dirt.

I placed each bone in the bucket. There were ten in all.

I tried to piece together an animal tall enough for the long bone, but what creature had such small bones as well? I hadn't found any hooves or horns.

My heart skipped. Human? Were these fingers? Had I spent the last month turning up a crime scene in my ignorance?

Panic set in. Who had lived here before? Why had they abandoned the house? Had they attempted to bury the evidence? They had clearly not managed to get deep, but on the rocky terrain, I was not surprised. Had the bones been dug up? How long ago? Do 911 calls apply for human remains years out of date? And how would they react to my efforts to disrupt everything, albeit for innocent reasons?

My legs weak, I sank into the dirt.

Something squished under my right heel.

Looking down, I found a soft pile of poop. A variety of pits, seeds, and wrappers were mixed in the fist-sized stack.

Bear, I identified. We'd found evidence throughout the woods and once in the middle of the driveway over the last month. I'd seen the black bear meandering through the yard just the week before. It was no shock one had chosen this hidden corner for his bathroom. The wrappers matched those I had found turned in with the fallen leaves outside this thicket. In fact, there had been a lot of garbage in the garden, a surprising amount. I'd dismissed it as the neglect allowing for the accumulation of litter. Now that I looked at it, we were quite a bit up the hill. Who was walking this far up to dump garbage or, for that matter, bodies?

Perhaps only a black-furred fellow with a garbage bag in his maw?

I looked again at the bones in the bucket, and it became obvious; they were chicken legs. The rib was leftovers from someone's rib rack meal, and the knuckle bone was a simple ham bone. Along with the cans and plastic, it was the product of someone's unsecured garbage being made into a second meal for the local bear.

I swapped the bucket for a garbage bag and my gardening gloves for nitrile gloves better suited to handling rubbish. Once under the fallen leaves, I pulled trash by the fistful at first, digging through the topsoil for wrappers and q-tips. It took me three trips to clear the section of the sloped garden. With finality, we add the mulch to cover the evidence.

The following week, I found a black bag in the thicket. Tuna cans, take-out containers, and cigarette butts littered my new garden once more. A large dent had been dug into the space under the rhododendron, the mulch tossed aside to make a bed. And, once again, a beautiful pile of seed and pit-strew poop was on my driveway, reminding me whose turf I now resided in.