

SKULL TREE

AS TOLD BY A GIRL WHOSE TWIN
SISTER, SHE ALLEGES, WAS A VICTIM
OF THE HEADHUNTER

Skull Tree was a copper beech tree. Its leaves were the color of coagulated blood. Skull Tree sat atop the highest hill in a rolling meadow. Skull Tree was the only tree in sight and therefore its shade provided the only refuge from the sun for miles. From Skull Tree's lowermost branches hung seven threads of ten-pound neon fishing line. From each line hung a large and rusty hook. Each hook dangled with its own decapitated head, all of which spun aimlessly, like ornaments, a few of which hummingbirds had hollowed out to use as weather-proof homes.

'Revivify me at once,' said the newest head upon arising from its post-beheading slumber. 'There are things in life that I must settle.'

'You are dead,' said a brittle old skull. 'Your story is complete.'

The lower mandible of this old skull then fell to

the ground and crumbled, exposing a swarm of maggots.

‘New Arrival,’ said a disgusting bloated vagrant head that had been hung up six weeks prior. ‘Tell us your tale: How did The Headhunter sever you?’

‘Did you see him coming?’ said the skull of a once great paleontologist.

‘Did he get you with the axe?’ said a skull that had been transmuted into crystal by a bolt of lightning. ‘Or was it with the blade?’

‘Did he get you with the guillotine?’ said the skull of a queen whose crown had been knocked off by a squirrel.

‘Or did he behead you with some newfangled apparatus?’ said the brainless skull that had once belonged to Albert Einstein.

The seven severed heads, all in various stages of decay, hung from their rusty hooks groaning frequently. The veteran heads droned on in airy throated phrases, insisting without tact or sensitivity for the new arrival to explain in technical detail just how she’d parted from the rest of her anatomy. Like spoiled demonic fruit, the heads hung together swinging, dreaming, screaming now and then with phantom pain that could be heard moaning out across the meadow. The new arrival, though she’d hardly settled into rigor mortis, spoke with grave remembrance of how she’d met her dreadful end:

‘The Headhunter told me that if I struggled, he would boil my head and shrink it until my soul was

trapped inside. He said that if I were to cooperate, he would honor me in my afterlife by embalming my head in honey and hanging me on Skull Tree.'

'We all cooperated,' said the dreary skull of the paleontologist.

'The Headhunter enclosed me in a circle of thirty some-odd pikes — *each was topped with its own scowling shrunken head* — and instructed me to join him on a platform built of tibias and fibulas in the center. I complied. He recited an incantation, then handed me two swords and told me to behead myself.'

The skull of Albert Einstein quivered and spun. Two hummingbirds then exited his brain cavity. The birds began to fly in place above him, as if they were ideas.

'You cut off your own head?' he said, the sound of his astonishment intensified by his lively German accent.

'I had no other option.'

'You have a nice, clean cut,' said the queen, pretentiously. 'For how long after were you conscious?'

'Only five or six seconds,' said the new arrival. 'My head rolled for three or four of them.'

'I only lasted for two seconds,' said the sparkling crystal skull.

'I saw my body drop down to its knees — *My God, my blood was gushing!* — But before I could watch myself fall forward, the headhunter picked me

up by a pigtail and spun me round and round until my life drained out of me.'

'I'd say it's likely you were flung,' said the skull of Albert Einstein.

The putrid-smelly-and-disfigured vagrant head then cleared a couple of grubs out from what was left of his festering nostrils and said, 'The Headhunter employed me as a head shrinker for a year and a half before he beheaded me with a cannon to the throat.'

The brittle old skull then let out a dry and dusty heave and mumbled something completely unintelligible.

'Was The Headhunter a good employer?' said the new arrival.

'Until the very end,' said the leaking, reeking vagrant head.

'How do you shrink a head?' said the skull of Albert Einstein.

The hummingbirds by then had curled up inside his eye sockets, painting them a verdant green.

'It's simple,' said the vagrant head. 'Skulls don't shrink, so they must be extracted from the skin. Once the head has been decapitated, all you do is make an incision at the base of the skull and then perform a sagittal slice all the way up to the crown. Next, peel the skin over and detach it from the skull. Once removed, stitch the cut you made, along with the eyelids and the lips, then put the head into a pot of simmering water. Be careful not to boil... If the water boils, you will ruin the hair. Essentially, what

you are processing is leather. Let the head simmer overnight, then remove it in the morning and pack it with hot sand and basalt stones. This will help soak up additional moisture from the skin. Next, tie the head off at the neck and hang it over a fire of pinewood that you have split ahead of time. Add crude oil, tires and diesel fuel as necessary. The heavy smoke will help dry out the skin and supplement the further shrinking of the head. In my prime, I could shrink a head down to the size of a tennis ball.'

'Alas,' said the skull of Albert Einstein. 'Another kindred scientist.'

'Here, here,' said the paleontologist.

'He was a vagrant,' said the queen.

'He was the scum-of-earth,' said the crystal skull. 'It would have been better if he never died.'

'Not fair,' said the vagrant head. 'I was a much-respected practitioner of the chemistry of death at the time I lost my head.'

The new arrival, who was still gathering her senses, tried to gulp, but with no neck, her gulp was left unsatisfied.

'Head shrinking must have been a very difficult enterprise,' said the skull of Albert Einstein.

'It was nothing of the kind,' said the pale-green, stinking vagrant head. 'It was a simple step by step procedure through which logic was itself the guide.'

The skull of Albert Einstein then sighed in wistful reverie:

‘It is often by a paradox in logic through which we gain a further comprehension of our universe.’

The brittle old skull then fell from its hook. When it hit the ground, it disintegrated into a puff of chalk-white smoke that lingered and then slowly dissipated.

‘What was his name?’ said the new arrival.

No one knew. Not a single piece of biographical information could be stated about him.

‘Even the dead continue to die,’ said the queen.

‘Not so,’ said the skull of the paleontologist, whose dream in death was to become a fossilized item. ‘I have classified the dead into the following three sub-categories: Those who die and are never found again. Those who die and are reborn the very moment they’re discovered. And those who remain forever dead while they’re still living. Oh, and I almost forgot — I’ve recently added a fourth: Those who die and are reborn with each new breath released. This bitter, old, pedantic skull long ago had ceded his existence to eternal inactivity. For most of his adult life, one could say that he had already been decapitated; he had no sense of wonder to propel his being forward.’

‘It’s hard to believe that he cooperated in the end,’ said the crystal skull, whose thoughts could be seen developing as they took form inside his head.

‘I did not cooperate,’ said the skull of Albert Einstein. ‘After I died from an abdominal aortic aneurysm, I was stripped for parts against my will.’

The Headhunter came for my brain, but since that had been already stolen, he had to settle for my skull.'

'You were not beheaded, sir?' said the new arrival.

'Only after I was dead.'

The new arrival gasped.

'Sir, I don't mean to pry, but are you still...'

All remaining heads then said together:

'Smart?'

The new arrival's face then stiffened into a permanent expression of curiosity. Like this, her rigor mortis had officially set in.

'I am without my greatest asset, but I still manage,' said the skull of Albert Einstein.

A squirrel descended nimbly and with grace from its nest in the copper beech canopy. It then began to gnaw at the oozing flesh of the repulsive, swollen vagrant head.

'New Arrival, did you ever see The Headhunter's face in flesh?' said the crystal skull.

'I only ever saw him wearing an iron mask.'

An image of a man in an iron mask then swirled into manifestation inside the crystal skull. The image was mottled at first, then it became clear and iridescent.

'He wore the same with me', said the once all-powerful queen.

The heads, as they conversed, ignored the frantic protestations coming from the now flayed and half

devoured vagrant head. There was nothing they could do to shoo the rabid squirrel away.

‘Did anyone ever catch a glimpse of the man behind the mask?’ said the skull of the paleontologist.

Save the vagrant, not a head that now hung helplessly suspended had been permitted with the luxury of mind to be concerned with what or who exactly hid behind the mask of their executioner. They had each been a bit too overwhelmingly distracted by the blades they knew would soon be swinging through their meaty, oblong throats.

The vagrant let out a wretched wheeze and sputter. He was now three-quarters devoured by the squirrel.

With this, the crystal skull began to recount the final seconds that led up to his beheading:

‘The expanse of my indeterminate future suddenly collapsed into a single moment,’ he said, the scene galvanizing with brilliant clarity inside his translucent cranium. ‘As The Headhunter raised his axe, I lived out the remaining instant of my life in thorough review of every memory I’d ever had, even the mundane moments of extreme boredom. I revisited every one of my countless follies, all my inconsequential errata and every last inappropriate act I’d ever made. Each impactful memory then coalesced and was displayed alongside every moment I’d repressed or simply hadn’t gotten to. When the sword struck, I saw, in one prodigious flash, a great

electric cloud in which I could clearly recognize the everlasting story of my life.'

Though spoken with a spinster's eloquence, the visions frothing up inside his skull were those of dark, unsavory character. It appeared that, in life, the crystal skull had been a dangerous, scheming psychopath. All but him could see this. At the sight of this, the other decapitated heads tried to swing away from him, but their attempts were sad and futile.

'Blessed be The Headhunter,' said the crownless queen. 'For at least he beheaded you.'

The squirrel then lumbered away, full-bellied, having left nothing but a greenish nub drooping from the hook that once beheld the vagrant head.

'He was probably the only one among us who had ever seen our slayer's face in flesh,' said the new arrival.

And then there were only five skulls left hanging from Skull Tree.

'YOU GOOD, ALBERT?' said the queen.

'One moment, please,' said the skull of Albert Einstein.

He was mumbling:

'Carry the one. Bring down a zero. Yes, that's it. Throughout my life, I took approximately six-hundred-and-forty-million breaths.'

A hummingbird then began to fly in rapid orbits around his skull. In a blur, like an electron.

‘Paleontologist?’ he said.

‘Speaking.’

‘You lived a life devoted to the rigors of scientific discipline. You spent your days in search of the once prosperous who became forgotten. You say you have devised a theory of the dead?’

‘That is correct.’

‘Let me ask you this.’ (He said this insincerely.) ‘If I was reborn with each new breath released, does that mean that there are just as many Einsteins?’

The paleontologist responded with fawning overemphasis:

‘You, of all people, sir, have extended your reach beyond your—’

‘Quiet!’ said the queen.

Silence reigned out across her queendom.

Time, it seemed, began crawling slowly on its belly. The five remaining heads were all soon staring dead-eyed at a lump of the vagrant’s left cheek’s crusty buccinator muscle which had fallen to the ground before a snake hole.

‘Hello friend,’ said the crystal skull.

A viper’s forked tongue was flicking at the scrap of steaming meat above its den.

‘Is it venomous?’ said the queen, teeth clattering, falling groundward (one by one) and pinging off her crown.

‘It doesn’t matter if it’s venomous,’ said the crystal

skull. 'We're dead. But that chunk of meat before it likely is.'

As if heeding these words, the saw-scaled viper slithered onward from the slice of fetid vagrant meat, the look on its snake face resembling something of a grimace. It then curled up beneath the queen inside her crown. When this occurred, the queen screamed and passed out.

A bolt of lightning then flashed inside the crystal skull.

'God save the queen!' said the paleontologist.

Lightning rained down across the meadow.

'Death, so far, is not what I imagined,' said the new arrival.

A dark cloud began to swirl above Skull Tree. The same cloud could be seen taking shape inside the crystal skull. Blood fell in globules that plopped and instantaneously sizzled as they splattered across the ground. The rolling meadow soon glistened bright red, as if the whole earth had been murdered and disemboweled. Albert Einstein, a pacifist at heart (though this he no longer had), was dismayed at what he saw unfolding in skull and sky.

'What evil machinations,' he said, shocked, horrified, jaws agape in absolute fear.

A buzzard then flew across the sky, as if slicing it in two. It seemed to move along some forlorn meridian to which only the dead were privy. The sky east of Skull Tree became day; the west, night. A moment passed where there was no gradient. The

crystal skull then turned red, like magma, and began to laugh maniacally. Fire was shooting from the sockets of its eyes. All leaves on Skull Tree fell down in a single instant. The squirrel died. Two spiders spinning silver webs inside the queen's eyes were giving her a look of final reflection. The queen then fell from her hook, still sleeping, and cracked her skull into a million pieces upon the jagged sapphire of her crown.

And then there were only four skulls left hanging from Skull Tree.

TIME, at this point, was oscillating at a slither, fast and slow in peaks and troughs. The viper was brooding over the fine dust of the queen's remains, licking up what mass exodus of insects were fleeing their once royal habitat. Though tears were streaming down the new arrival's face, her expression of curiosity had remained unchanged the entire duration of her rigor mortis. And though Albert Einstein didn't have his brain, he could still discern with shrewd, insightful prophecy the oblivion of which the crystal skull was reckoning:

'When a life deprives another of its living, now that is wicked. But when a death deprives another of its pure, eternal peace, now that is more wicked still.'

The crystal skull then swung on its neon fishing

line and headbutted the paleontologist, fossilizing him at once.

‘Oh!’ said the paleontologist. ‘Oh! How wonderful!’

This was followed by a tremendous peal of thunder. One so immense and deafening that it drowned out the crystal skull’s accursed declarations on how he didn’t mean to do this.

The paleontologist was shedding a single amber tear of joy when the crystal skull headbutted him a second time, vaporizing him instantaneously.

And then there were only three skulls left hanging from Skull Tree.

STARS WERE FALLING west of Skull Tree in a fury. And in the dim skies east of Skull Tree, something darker than night was settling over the horizon. Wildflowers were wilting, the wind had gone still, and though lightning still struck, it struck slowly, as if even it had lost its spunk. All had given way to the great force of annihilation the crystal skull was conjuring.

‘Destroy all this and it would be as if we never were,’ said the new arrival.

‘Destroy all this and it would be as if nothing ever were,’ said the skull of Albert Einstein.

Crimson rain was falling in a great deluge. With the lone exception of Skull Tree Hill, the terrain in all directions soon became a vicious sea of sloshing

bloodmuck. The blood sea's tide had yet to calibrate with the bone white moon and had thrown Earth's majestic flight through space off kilter. Earth now wobbled in a drunken hula-hoop around the barely fusing sun.

'That's it,' said the crystal skull. 'Lights out. Time to shatter the hourglass.'

'I was under the impression that hanging from Skull Tree would be a deathlong honor,' said the new arrival.

'There is no honor in death,' said the crystal skull. 'We have no reason hanging here one moment longer. In death, there is no purpose.'

'There is purpose in everything,' said the skull of Albert Einstein. 'Though we hang here lifeless on Skull Tree, we are still entangled with the great unfolding story of the universe.'

The crystal skull began to revolve slowly on its hook, like a disco ball. Within, a scene developed of The Headhunter.

'Let me reveal to you just how that story is unfolding.'

Inside the crystal skull, The Headhunter could be seen wearing his iron mask; his eyes two flat-black chilling beads that cracked like flint without a luster. The Headhunter was sharpening a sword of great length and trepidation. Behind him, an endless line of victims queued; enough to decorate a whole forest of Skull Trees. With one stupendous swing, The Headhunter beheaded a line of forty some odd

victims simultaneously. He then lined up thirteen others and clipped their heads off with various macabre devices. After this, he hiked a leg up on his platform built of bones and held himself as if sculpted for a drawn out, self-proud moment. The Headhunter — this great unmaker, this man of brutal regard — was a formidable opponent in the zero-sum game of the universe. His executions seemed not so much barbaric as steeped in some inscrutable tradition; they were repugnant and yet stunning in the depths of their horrendous rationale. He had the certain malfeasant dignity of an unloved virtuoso. Although by no means a benevolent beheader, there was something verging on the indispensable to his unequalled spectacle of terror, as if with each head he lopped off, he incited a void that could only be filled thereafter upon a vengeful act of good.

After the scene dissolved inside the crystal skull, the skull of Albert Einstein said (very careful with his phrasing):

‘Speaking as the only one here who has not been beheaded, I must admit, I have a little envy. What fear you must have felt in those dark preceding moments? How much you must have felt alive? How in that moment of the swinging blade you got the chance to look your life so squarely in the eye? I, for one, have never seen my whole unraveling condensed into a single moment — And yet I discovered spacetime.’

The crystal skull responded not with words, but with inner fusion. Heat began to bubble until fire seethed inside.

‘Dear crystal skull,’ said the skull of Albert Einstein (and these would be his final words as a skull upon Skull Tree), ‘if you wish to find a purpose in your death, know this: Your every deed that you performed throughout your life will continue to suffuse the world beyond you and your time until every last drop of your spirit has been externalized into the very fabric that holds this whole universe together. Once this happens, you need no longer consider yourself as something dead. Death is not eternal. Only life.’

The crystal skull internalized none of this. It shivered for a moment and then blew a torch-like flame at the brainless skull that once belonged to Albert Einstein, incinerating him into a mist of ashes that drifted to the blood-soaked ground like so much falling snow.

And then there were only two skulls left hanging from Skull Tree.

THE NEW ARRIVAL observed the preceding obliteration of Albert Einstein’s skull like a waxen figure, unmoving in her rictus half-grin of wonder-stricken curiosity. Though honey still dripped from her nostrils, ears and throat, her color had all but

drained out of her. She now looked pale as a corpse.

‘Is this what you thought that death would be like?’ said the crystal skull.

‘To be honest, no.’

‘What do you think happens after Skull Tree?’

‘I don’t know,’ said the new arrival. ‘Everything? We wake up in another place from which to die again? The only thing of which I’m certain is that I should not discount the possibility of anything.’

On the ground beneath Skull Tree, the viper was eating itself by the tail. It would have food forever, or at least until it finished feasting.

‘Death is the one thing all beings have in common,’ said the crystal skull. ‘Given that our time spent living is nothing more than a flash in a galactic pan, death is really all there is. The void of darkness is all too powerful.’

The new arrival’s memory of life, as she’d been dangling from her hook, had faded beyond recall, but not quite recognition. She was realizing, in a gradual procession, that she would no longer remember her life as it was, only what it felt like. She had once thought that death would be like before she was born, except after; the irrevocability of her existence a fundamental truth that would be forever present as time continued marching on without her. She began to wonder, absentmindedly, what had become of her now that she had crossed this final threshold. The unity of what had once defined her

had been ineffably released. Her vantage point, in death, it seemed, had turned into something like reverse omniscience; instead of an all-seeing eye *over* everything, she was now seeing *out* of everything. The sensation was extremely liberating. In death, life did not collapse upon itself into oblivion; it expanded. What had once constituted her was now spreading across the earth, leaking through its atmosphere, drifting on without restraint in all directions throughout the entire cosmos.

‘Watch closely, dead friend,’ said the crystal skull. ‘What I’m about to show you, I will only show you once.’

The new arrival’s pigtails then turned green, like vines. With this, a massive sulking silence enshrouded Skull Tree Hill. The only sound that could be heard was the earth creaking as it seesawed on its presently out-of-control axis.

Inside the crystal skull, the new arrival’s entire life then played out for her, from birth to beheading, from her point of view, as if to remind her of all she had endured. It was uncanny at first, then she became so transported that at times she forgot she’d been decapitated and that her head was now hanging from Skull Tree. For every sixteen hours she spent watching the replay of her life, she would pause and ponder for eight more with her gaze fixed upon the stars. In these occasions, particular aspects of her life would be revealed to carry indecipherable significance. As she watched her entire life unfurl

again, her most monumental moments were only registering as a subtle form of *déjà vu*. She could see now (since she was now perceiving as an outsider) that something of her had imparted from her in every scene she'd ever contemplated, into every object she'd ever touched. She could see how her presence, in every moment, had sent forth something like a wave that was still crashing through *everything*. She could see how her life spread out beyond her; how every detail of her existence was still expanding its tendrils in some unfathomable corner of the universe. Her life was a story that would never be complete. It was a story that would continue to propagate in surges that would forever rip through, alter and profoundly sway every story that ever was or will be even if she were to die again another ten-thousand times. In this way, she was immortal. Though this is what she saw, her former life, as she reviewed it from Skull Tree, now existed in a fantastic netherworld that had become to her just as distant and unlikely as a far-flung dream... But this dream was no illusion.

When the new arrival finished watching the replay of her life (the last scene, to put it mildly, was appalling), the crystal skull turned her decapitated head into a gnarled knot of woodgrain whorls that stuck out with the faint impression of her face from the lowermost branch of Skull Tree. To this day, it is said, the imprint of her face can still be seen, her mouth half agape in wonder.

ACCORDING TO THE ORPHIC CODEX, the crystal skull remains hanging on Skull Tree attempting to self-destruct, but it cannot. The only power that it has is imagination, a force so potent that the only thing it cannot destroy is itself. For this reason, the crystal skull spends its eternal purgatory hanging from lowermost branch of Skull Tree, unable to escape its immortal agony.

It is said that The Headhunter occasionally hangs new heads on Skull Tree, none which last for long. Apparently, there comes a time each year when Skull Tree Hill becomes surrounded by a thrashing sea of blood. When this happens, The Headhunter is rumored to sail to Skull Tree Island on his ship made out of bones.

The precise location of Skull Tree is unknown. There is conflicting speculation with regard to its whereabouts, the most reputable reporting that it sits on either the high plains of Transylvania or the Argentinian pampas. There could be more than one. Several adventurers have set out to find it. None have returned. The remains of a few of these unfortunate explorers have been discovered years after their disappearance in remote areas with their heads shrunk and impaled on iron pikes. To state the obvious, it is not advised to set out in search of this infamous tree. It is advised, however, that if someone is unlucky enough to come across it, they should

turn around and run, lest they wish to become the next victim of The Headhunter.

Some say The Headhunter no longer lives; that he belonged to another era and only exists in our time as a legend. Some say he never did exist; that he is nothing more than myth. Some cult followers worship The Headhunter and believe him to be a fallen god.

If anyone were to ever retrieve the crystal skull without themselves getting strung up on Skull Tree, they might be able to settle the mystery once and for all. Perhaps it's a mystery better left unsolved. Whether The Headhunter is a legend, a myth, a god or a grotesque butcher who is still alive today, the jury is still out. Even if he never did exist, he still is real, for he is feared. Please be wary of The Headhunter.