

The Nature of Comets

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We found the remains just below the embankment of an antediluvian oxbow. She had been lying there a long time, before the Cayuse and Lewis and Clark and the Grand Coulee Dam and long before that fifties ranch on the ridge to the west.

How old was our girl? Around thirteen or fourteen. The skull was there, the torso intact. She was buried and nothing had disturbed her sleep for ten thousand years. The eruptions and deluges of the Northwest plateaus are mighty brooms that sweep clean any human dust, but here she was, after all these years, my great find.

The field work has taken the better part of a summer. We'll remove the entire grid and bring it back to the lab. Her leg is the big news: the femur, twisted like a tree split by lightning, growing along a warped track.

We need to give her a name. I should call the local Umatilla Council and ask for something native, but all I need is a lab name. I am the expert, the old man who squints at the horizon and gives orders, so I run my hand across the fractured bone, and tell them "Charlotte."

For years my mother blamed the playground slide, the swimming pool, and the lunch trays in the school cafeteria. But we would never find the cause, any more than I will ever know what caused our prehistoric girl's injury. Even if my mother had followed my sister around with a bucket of bleach and swabbed everything in sight, it would not have made any difference. I know that.

I've traveled the world, and there are many who thought they'd escape. They crouch under cliffs and swim across rivers, and I discover their secrets thousands of years later. I look at their bones and see peace and despair and terror.

On the shores of Herculaneum, there was the slave girl found beneath the boat shed, buried in Vesuvius's ash and mud. She was cradling a

baby, the master's child. Those scars on her humeri—they had worked her hard! From a young age, she lifted things that were too heavy for too long, and we found her, after two millennia, protecting the heir.

There was another child, wrapped tenderly in a hide, placed in a niche overlooking the Douro River, Portugal. Her arms lay close to the side, a delicate necklace around her neck. It was a difficult excavation under cramped conditions and secrecy. I never betrayed my excitement. I was the consummate professional, a prehistoric detective. But I was thrilled, and the crescent of little shells and deer teeth at rest on her heart remains a sweet memory.

I remember how it began. It was just a fever, and, of course, it wasn't. The doctor came the next day. Mother said, "You don't think. . . ." before every sentence until the awful truth. He felt my sister's forehead and took out a rubber mallet and tapped her knees. Her legs didn't move. Then he ran his finger along the bottom of her feet. "Do you feel this?"

At the hospital, they heated towels and stretched her limbs. There were special fasts and prayers, but that wasn't enough. She couldn't breathe. "I'm trying, Mommy," she said. The nearest iron lung was in Salt Lake, and we had to leave. Not in a few days, not tomorrow, but that night.

We moved to an apartment near the hospital. I needed to be there for my mother. I went to a new school, and word got around. The stories were in the papers, and, remember, there wasn't a cure or a shot, not yet. The kids felt sorry for me, but no one got close. The parents panicked, and I don't blame them. After all, Daddy comes home from the South Pacific, safe, and then what's this? Hadn't they paid their dues?

My father drove back and forth over the pass that winter. Once, he hit and killed a young buck. He threw it in the back and we butchered it in the neighbor's garage. That was our annual deer hunt. "Look at this," my father said. He pointed to the car's grill and then to the antlers. "Now why didn't that do more damage?"

We were all tied to the machine. I could visit, but I suited up in a room, with all the other brothers and sisters. We were told to bathe when we got home. I began to pattern my speech against my sister's: the pause and the whoosh of the machine as it forced the air in and out of her lungs. My mother noticed and told me to speak normally, and then she wept.

Each week an orderly came in and set up a special projector that placed the films on the ceiling. They only showed cartoons: they didn't want the kids to see what other kids could do. I did my part, too. I made

up stories, sang songs, and did just about anything to entertain a seven-year-old.

There was that boy next to her. He had requests: war stuff. I sang "On a Wing and Prayer" and "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition" until I was hoarse. Then I acted out a romance between Tokyo Rose and Lord Ha Ha, which I titled "Traitors in Love." He laughed so hard there was a loud clang, and the nurses came running. They scolded me and told to me take care.

And I am careful. When I examine a site, I circle around, look at the land, the terrain. There may be desert varnish on nearby rock. I examine the over-burden and any surface disturbance. I sweep my hands across the soil. Then I make an inventory of the scatter—broken bird or mammal bones? That tells me about scavengers. I pay special attention to weathering and staining. A faded red usually speaks of ceremonial dyes. Carbon dating is important, but it doesn't tell everything.

I place the year of her—Charlotte's—injury at around six or seven years old. The lesions on the bone were large and painful. Few survived a fracture like this, and gangrene should have killed her. No doubt, the outward scar was ugly. A young assistant tells me, "They cared for her. It's obvious. Her tribe carried her around for years." She smiles, and I recognize that smile, a smile for an old man, and adds, "They weren't barbarians, you know." Oh, I knew that. The barbarians came later.

Alone in the lab, with the light burning into her bones, I wonder. In a time when survival itself was precarious, they kept her alive. It doesn't make sense, but our hunters and gatherers took care of her at great risk to their own lives.

I tried to imagine I was a hero, a great doctor, who would come into the room and lift them out of the machines and send them out to play. Or maybe there was a trade, and my sister came out of the machine and I took her place, and my father clapped my back and mother cried, and my sister would ride her bike up and down the street.

But few left the lungs. On my last visit, I adjusted her mirror, kissed her cheek, told her about school. She was tired. Mother came in and shooed me away. On my way out, I leaned over the boy, pulled out my comb, and placed it on my upper lip. In my best German accent, I said, "The Fuehrer sends his greetings."

I remember the report I gave in class the day before she died. I can tell you that Isaac Newton was born on Christmas Day in Woolsthorpe, a

small village in England. The story about the apple falling out of the tree might not be true. While a plague devastated London, Newton lived in the country and laid out the laws of the universe—the terrible laws that pulled and pushed my sister's lungs up and down. And in 1664, a comet arrived, so brilliant that Newton and other great scientists wrote about it. They wondered at its fiery origins and the great sweeping tail. It lit up the sky and never returned. Newton was a lonely man who never had a wife and child. He was buried among kings, in Westminster Abbey, but what did he know about love and grief and parents who cried during the night?

During that last interview, I was a bit soft in the head. I couldn't help it. I was attached to her. I threw my professional assessment out the window—

Question: Professor, why did they carry her around for so long?

Answer: During this time, the search for food required constant movement. Life was difficult. They didn't do this out of duty. There was something else. . . .

Question: Would you explain this for our viewers?

Answer: I can only say they did this out of love.

Question: What can we learn from this?

Answer: It's a lesson from the past, and a bit baffling. Because of all those who lived in this area, over ten thousand years ago, why would she be the one to come down to us intact? (And here I looked directly at the camera.) It really does restore your faith in our humanity.

My colleagues had a laugh. I was sentimental, but I don't care, really. In a few days, I'm done. The others, like my young assistant, are eager for their own finds, their great discoveries. A few more years of grandchildren and a garden, and—well, there won't be an interment on a riverbank, in a soft skin, the ochre staining my thighs and forehead.

As for our girl, she will be in safe hands. There's talk about a visitors' center, where parents with cranky children will stop to use the bathroom. Maybe some will listen to her story; and at the end of the day, she will be alone. They cannot leave her under the stars.

But during the ancient night, they wake her and bring her out into the cold, while others whisper and murmur at the marvel in the sky. Her wounded limb makes a furrow in the earth. The old pain begins. She shifts her weight, and her fingers trace the arc soaring over the vast starlit plain.