

Nowhere Man
By
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Bev's hand-shovel hit something hard. A fossil. She knew the feel of it from the distinctive vibration it made. She looked at the others – Ray and Marilyn – good workers, with an intuitive sense of where to find fossil, but Bev always found the fossils first, as if it were destiny. No matter where she went, it always happened this way. Pulling out a finer instrument, she picked away.

She glanced toward the horizon, saw East-of-Nowhere mottled with a dense array of craters climbing the sky after West-of-Nowhere. Lost Souls streaked overhead, none of them bigger than a fist, lighting the sky with brief white flickers as they burned their way into the atmosphere. And Purgatory, this system's big gas giant, hovered beyond them all, so close it was visible as a beige smudge the size of a small coin.

Before long, she uncovered a skull.

Her eyes widened.

Hominoid, by the look of it.

Who would have thought? She brushed more dirt away, then took out her calipers and measured. Twenty-two centimeters from front to back, fifteen centimeters from side to side, and now, getting a better look, she saw that her first suspicions were correct, that it wasn't just any old skull, but indeed a hominoid one.

Way out here.

"Marilyn?" she called.

The doctor came over. "What is it?"

"A skull. From a hominoid."

They both stared.

"Wow," said Marilyn.

Bev nodded. "A cousin. I can hardly believe it. "

For several seconds they looked at the skull, as if they were waiting for it to do something. Then Marilyn got her own fine tool and knelt next to Bev.

They worked with delicacy and reverence, as if the nature of the find, both poetic and profound, demanded a ceremonial approach. They labored methodically over the next half hour – like picking an eggshell out of a block of concrete, the implications of the discovery shimmering around Bev with the esoteric thrill of an epiphany, lifting her from the acute sadness of a woman who still hadn't finished with her grief to an exo-paleontologist who uncovered dead things for a living – dead things from other worlds.

When they at last pulled it free, Bev held it up and looked at it in the waning light of Lethe. She picked some dirt from its left eye-socket with a dental tool. Stone had replaced bone, but the stone had retained the skull's essential shape. She shaved a dead bug out of the nasolacrimal canal. Hominoid, yes, but not human. A wondrous find, maybe even the capstone of her career, certainly something that had, at least for the time being, dimmed her memories of Chavez.

She glanced around the desert, then focused on the skull again. "He was well on his way to development."

Marilyn looked at the desert. "I wonder what happened to him."

The women stared at the desert together. The emptiness of the place unnerved Bev. "I don't know." She stroked the skull tenderly. "But whatever it was, he's gone now."

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Day five. We've recovered more of the skeleton: seven vertebrae, part of an ilium, a femur, a tibia, a splinter of patella, and a foot. We've named him Nowhere Man, after the planet. The shape of the patella and the foot confirms a bi-pedal creature.

I found a fragment of hand today, a complete finger with a distinct difference from my own, an extra phalanx. Nowhere Man's hands were longer. I'm not sure about a thumb yet, but the shape of a partially recovered carpal strongly suggests it. Nowhere Man is as human as anything we've ever found.

Tomorrow we move to a river basin five hundred miles east of here. Sub-surface sonar reconnaissance indicates more fossils there.

As for Ray, I don't know. It's still there, whatever I feel for him. I don't trust it. Mainly because I still dream of Chavez. I think of Chavez, his last troubled days, his final walk into the surf at Corpus Christi. At times I blame myself, even though I know I'm blameless. When I feel what I feel for Ray, I want to push it away. I don't want to have anything to do with it. I keep as far away from Ray as I can because I always end up thinking about Chavez. And I try to keep my thoughts focused on Nowhere Man

Nowhere Man. Why did he die out? Why didn't he evolve into something like modern man? We've found no evidence of cities, nothing remotely technological, no trace of organized agriculture. Nowhere Man stopped a long time ago.

We haven't unearthed any evidence of tool making. He was primitive when he stopped, at least according to the current fossil record. He couldn't have gone much past the hunter-gatherer stage. He was a primate on the road to evolution, but something got in the way. Was he sentient? I think so. Nowhere Man looked up at the Lost Souls each night and wondered what they were. In the end, was never able to reach them, like we were.

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Hills to the west, hills to the east, and a wide floodplain in between. A dry riverbed meandered north and south to dusty horizons. Bev stood at the edge of the campsite gazing at the ancient riverbed, feeling the ghosts of long-dead Nowhere Men all around her.

Under a nylon canopy next to the research vessel, Marilyn fixed dinner. Ray was out with the backhoe, the thin whine of its engine penetrating the sound of the incessant wind. Lethe had set, and the two moons, now waning, rose in a dark sky.

Bev sank to her knees and looked at the ground again. The fossilized remains of a million-year-old fire lay before her. She looked at bits of crockery. Nowhere Man, really still at an ape stage, had fashioned pottery? What cultural or environmental pressures had prompted this sudden and unexpected rise to pottery making? She shook her head, perplexed.

Marilyn looked up from her cooking. "Why are you shaking your head?"

Bev gestured at the bits of crockery. "This amounts to chimpanzees in an arts and crafts class. It's a major leap forward for them, much faster than us." She held up one of the larger fragments. "This isn't a pot, a cup, a mug, a vase, or a platter. It's a crude ten-gallon basin. That's all I'm finding. Large basins. Again and again. The same primitive design." She pointed to the ancient charcoal. "Maybe this is a million-year-old kiln."

Marilyn looked around. "Perhaps they used the basins to carry water?"

Bev shook her head. "Yes, but why would they need to carry so much water? This whole place was a river basin a million years ago. There was water everywhere."

The backhoe stopped.

In a minute, she saw Ray on top of the hill waving to her.

"I better go," she said.

Bev left the ancient fire and walked up the hill. Overhead, Lost Souls streaked by, the first of the evening, skidding across the upper atmosphere, showering sparks as they burned toward Nowhere. She looked at Ray. Here it was again, the tug, the pull, that unavoidable something she had to accept, like an allergy, bothersome, an itch she could hardly resist.

When she reached the top of the hill, she stood next to Ray.

Ray pointed down the other side. "What do you make of that?"

He'd uncovered a wide ditch, roughly oval in shape, surrounding five hectares of dry rocky land, an obvious enclosure. She was puzzled. Why had Nowhere Man made this enclosure? She took a few steps toward the ditch, the wind blowing sand against her bare arms.

"Did you date it?" she asked.

"Nine-hundred-thousand years old," he said. He swept his palm eastward. "And look at that over there. It's a canal. It leads to the river." He put his hands on his hips and shook his head. "It's not an irrigation ditch, is it? We haven't found any evidence of agriculture yet."

She felt the ghosts again. She tried to picture it, a band of chimpanzees digging and digging, undertaking this crude engineering project at a time in their development when they could barely walk upright. What would force such an undertaking? The ghosts here were trying to tell her something – she felt them all around her – but they weren't giving her the full picture yet.

Her brow settled. "It's a moat." She scanned the canal, followed it to the dried-out riverbed, and struggled to divine from the silent chill of the land the events that had happened here all that long while ago.

"A moat?" said Ray.

The word hung ominously between them. Not an irrigation ditch, no, for it was far too wide. Far too deep. A perimeter. A military fortification.

"I think he was trying to protect himself from something," she said.

Yes, she thought, as she looked more closely at the moat. Nine hundred thousand years ago, the primates of this place had been under attack. But under attack from what?

"We haven't found the fossilized remains of any large predators," Ray pointed out.

"I know."

No large predators, yet Nowhere Man had built this moat.

Just as she was really starting to lose herself in the puzzle, Ray caressed her hair. She stiffened. She didn't turn. She didn't rebuff. She froze. She stood there hoping he would stop. But he didn't.

"Please," she said.

His hand dropped. He shrugged, sighed.

"Bev, I ..." The wind kicked up a spiral of red dirt. He looked at his hands. "I thought you ... but obviously I'm wrong ..."

The thing she felt for Ray was there, stronger than ever. But she couldn't do it. He smelled of dirt, of tangy masculine sweat, not unpleasant, no, much like Chavez, and maybe that's why she couldn't go on. She felt disoriented. He was giving her this chance, but she couldn't take it, couldn't see past the tides at Corpus Christi, nor break free from the ache that had numbed her for the last nine months.

"I'm sorry, Ray."

She made no excuses for herself, and no excuses for Chavez.

She felt exactly like that ancient fire back at the campsite: cold, burnt-out, and as if nothing was ever going to light her fire again.

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Day nine. This journal is filling up. We took sonar readings from one thousand feet. Ray flew. I worked the scanner. Marilyn stayed at camp analyzing the DNA structure of the indigenous bugs. I'm beginning to doubt if this planet is suitable for colonization. We detonated two-hundred-and-fifty charges over a five-hundred-hectare area and found subterranean echo patterns indicative of another sixty-two moats. We've dated these moats. All roughly nine hundred thousand years old. None any later. The digging stops. And Nowhere Man disappears.

I'm sitting at the table under the canopy inputting this data while Ray and Marilyn commune by the fire. I don't know who I am anymore. I try to remind myself that I'm one of the most fortunate exo-paleontologists alive, that I have at my disposal the best tools, the finest vessels, and the most qualified crews. I try to remember where I came from, that small nameless place in East Texas, where the dust blows red the way it does here, and where rain always seems to be a childhood memory, but I'm a million worlds away from home, and I seem to have lost the essential center of myself. Yet the question still gnaws, keeps me up at night. Why did Chavez do it? Was it something I did? Or were there things I simply didn't know about, just like there are things I don't know about Nowhere Man? Focus on Nowhere Man, I tell myself. Even though Chavez himself was like a Nowhere Man. Try to figure it all out.

The moats. What do they represent? And the crockery. Ten-gallon basins. Over and over again. Obviously built for water. Water as a means of defense? What was so important about the transportation and manipulation of water? I try to force a connection. Defense against fire? Not likely. A million years ago it rained here all the time. Built for spiritual reasons? I doubt it. Nowhere Man was too primitive, still an ape, a creature of dire necessity. He built these moats as an imperative of survival.

Ray and Marilyn sit close together.

I've lost my chance with Ray. I regret it. Along with the usual ache, I now feel forsaken. I can't blame them. Nowhere is a lonely place. There's no one here. The need to cling overwhelms.

I try to ignore it, force myself to concentrate on Nowhere Man. A good name for him, because where is he now? He never got his chance. Something killed him, a threat he had to defend against, but the fossil evidence remains elusive.

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They flew to the small landmass in the middle of the western ocean the next day. Flew over an ocean to get there – a gargantuan moat. Bev glanced at the latest readouts. Satellite reconnaissance suggested more fossil remains on this mid-ocean continent. Also a lot of caves.

On day sixteen, and they explored the twenty-fifth cave. So far the search had been disappointing, yielding little in the way of clues.

Bev hoped the twenty-fifth cave might be different.

She swung her flashlight from side to side. Stalactites hung from the cave ceiling like teeth from a giant beast. The place was bone dry. There hadn't been any water in this cave for a long time.

"Look at this," said Marilyn. "A footprint."

Bev turned around and found the doctor stooping. Marilyn shaved away hardened dirt. Yes, no doubt about it, a heel, an arch, and some toes, a slender foot, nearly fifty centimeters long, much longer than a human foot, hardened right into the rock. Bev knelt beside Marilyn and took a reading with her hand-set. The complex tool hissed, gobbled microscopic evidence, and subjected the gathered molecules to thermoluminescent dating.

"Not as old as the other evidence," she said. "Younger by a hundred thousand years."

Ray looked at her inquisitively. "Nowhere Man?"

She stared at the footprint. "I think so. Then again, this place is isolated from Nowhere's other land masses. It could be a different species." She inspected the print more closely. "It's a lot bigger than some of the footprints we found on the primary continent. Yet it's precisely the same shape. If this is Nowhere Man, he's gotten bigger. And stronger."

"Yes, but how did he get all the way out here?" asked Marilyn.

Bev pondered the question. "He would have gone by boat. The time-frame is too short for continental drift."

She stared at the footprint. A bigger, smarter Nowhere Man. A Nowhere Man who had developed sea navigation and boat-building, maybe living in a culture as advanced as the early Vikings. She was wonderstruck by the notion. A tremendously accelerated development. Ships, of all things, at a stage when he should have been groping toward his first hand-axe. By comparison, man, with his four-million-year trek from ape to homo sapiens, seemed like a slow learner. Had things gotten so bad that they had had to flee the primary continent and come to this tiny one at world's end? Only the certainty of annihilation would have driven them to this smaller, less abundant place.

"Let's go further and see what we find," she said.

As they worked their way into the winding cavern, the air grew cooler. Bugs crawled on the walls, different from the bugs on the primary continent, but still with exoskeletons as hard as rock.

After feeling their way through the cave for another ten minutes, the twisting passageway opened into a larger cavern. The ceiling rose thirty feet. Bev swung her flashlight along the white calcite wall and found some cave paintings. She stumbled backward, as if pushed by a physical force. The cave paintings had been entirely unexpected. The ghosts were here again. Ray caught her elbow.

"You okay?" he asked.

She didn't answer. She stared. After twenty-five caves, she had finally found the prize. The paintings were reminiscent of the Upper Paleolithic cave paintings at Lascaux, France. But why paint them way down here? Certainly the limestone wall offered an excellent surface. Then again, what better place to hide from attackers?

She stared with wide eyes. Bands of Nowhere Men roamed everywhere, with spears and clubs, human-looking, but taller, with elongated limbs, hunting beasts as big as buildings, animals with long tails and sweeping necks, creatures covered with shaggy fur, painted in red, yellow, white, and brown. No sign of natural predators anywhere. That puzzled her yet again. If Nowhere Man had no natural predators, why did he die out? Hand prints in yellow adorned the top – three fingers and a thumb – all digits with the extra phalanx.

“Look, there’s more up here,” said Marilyn, and she went ahead.

“You’re shaking,” said Ray.

Shaking because they were gone now. The ghosts were still here, but opportunity, and the sweet chance to exist, had vanished. She stared at the paintings, couldn’t take her eyes away from them, so many Nowhere Men all over the wall, now long dead. Nowhere Men running across the plains, herding fantastical beasts, roasting carcasses over open flames. Nowhere Men burying their dead, the cadavers wrapped in gold. Nowhere Men looking up at a sky full of Lost Souls, building a shelter out of animal bones, stretching hides in the weak orange light of Lethe. She was shaking – of course she was shaking – because this way of life was never coming back, just as Chavez was never coming back.

Marilyn disappeared around the curve of the cave wall. Bev let her guard down as the glow of Marilyn’s flashlight disappeared up ahead. She let whatever it was she felt for Ray take over. She needed it, at least for a few minutes. She pressed herself against Ray ... and instantly knew it had been a mistake.

“Uh ... Bev ...” he said. “In case you haven’t noticed ... Marilyn and I ... we’ve got this thing now ... and I ...”

“I miss Chavez,” she said, pulling away.

He looked at her, his face sympathetic in the peripheral glow of their flashlights.

Marilyn called to them, breaking the paralysis of their embarrassment.

“Bev?” The doctor’s voice echoed in the cavern. “Ray?” Marilyn’s flashlight swung in their direction, its cyclopean glare shining in their eyes. “You should see this. There’s a huge mural over here.”

Bev and Ray glanced at each other. They moved forward over the rough cave floor and joined Marilyn.

Bev looked at the mural.

Marilyn said, “I’ve never seen anything so ...” But was too astonished to finish.

The mural portrayed, in snap-shot form, the story of Nowhere Man’s extinction. Arranged in eight columns of eight, the sequence of paintings was striking in its effect, a grim testimonial to everything Nowhere Man had suffered, a desperate time capsule hidden down here in this deep cavern, painted by artists who had perhaps hoped that some day, someone – anyone – might know their story.

“They thought in base-eight,” commented Ray, venturing a guess about the eight-by-eight configuration of the painting sequence. “Eight fingers, eight toes.”

The first paintings showed the night sky: East-of-Nowhere, West-of-Nowhere, Purgatory, but no Lost Souls. Instead, a third planet, blue with white swirls like Earth, hovered between Nowhere and Purgatory. In the next column, Nowhere men and women watched a large explosion in the sky. No more planet. Bev’s eyes narrowed. The planet exploded? The sky was now streaked with Lost Souls. Planets didn’t explode for no reason. Maybe the immense gravitational pressures of the gas giant, Purgatory,

had shaken it apart with overwhelming tidal forces. She shook her head. One way or the other, the planet was gone, now no more than a collection of Lost Souls.

Among the tinier Lost Souls was a much larger one, a meteorite thousands of times bigger than the usual fist-sized chunks of debris that brightened Nowhere's sky each evening. This meteorite rocketed toward Nowhere, burned through the atmosphere, and crashed into the plains of the primary continent.

In the next picture, wispy swirls of gold floated away from the impact crater. What were these swirls of gold? She couldn't begin to guess.

The top painting in the last column showed these same swirls moving across the central plains, devouring trees, beasts, and insects. Swallowing the indigenous hominoids of this place. Exterminating Nowhere Man. Sweeping him into yellow coils, then dropping him in heaps of charred bones and ash. A scourge of horrific proportions.

Now the moats made sense. And maybe even the water basins. The exodus to this ocean continent wasn't so mysterious anymore. Gold funnels sprouting from the ground like dust devils, disappearing just as quickly, spirals of flame leaving only death behind.

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That night, camped on the coast of the island continent, in a place that reminded her a lot of Corpus Christi, Bev sat at the outdoor table looking at the stars. Lost Souls fell, pieces of that other world, a planet as tragic as Nowhere, a place that never got a chance. Ray and Marilyn were out walking. From over the ridge, Bev heard the sound of the surf tumbling onto the rocks. No moons tonight. Just Purgatory oozing like an open sore, a baleful overlord watching tonight's crew of Lost Souls plunge with final blistering glory to their demise. Sparks streaked everywhere ... but those heavenly flashes weren't the only fireworks.

Her eyes narrowed.

She now saw sparks on the ground as well.

And not only sparks, but small yellow flames dancing over the hillside. Gas flares? Her eyes widened. Fireflies? No. She checked her scanner. Too much heat for a typical light-producing organism. Too much for even a gas flare. She got up, left the campsite, and climbed the ridge to investigate, her hiking boots clutching the hard-scrabble dirt, her eyes never straying from the small flames that danced over the hillside. She walked up to the flames.

The ground beneath her feet was bright with tiny gold spirals, miniatures of the ones she had seen in the mural. She also saw bug larvae – succulent, soft, moist – each no bigger than her thumb, crawling up the hill away from the spirals, trying to get away. But on the way up, they became food for these ... these what? The small gold spirals leapt out of the ground like escaping jinn, swirled like miniature fire tornadoes, lifted one or two of the larvae into their funnels, devoured them, then moved on. As fireflies produced light, so these ... these life-forms produced flame. She stared, mesmerized by the tiny fire-producing entities ... then knelt down and touched one, unable, against her better sense, to stop herself ... only to have her hand severely burned.

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Later on, in the tent, Marilyn treated the burn.

Bev said, "They behaved just like the larger swirls in the mural. And did you notice on the primary continent how even the bug larvae have protective shells? Maybe that's why we didn't see any gold swirls over there. Anything it can eat over there has evolved protective strategies. Not here. The larvae are succulent, with no shell, and burn up

nicely. The swirls gorged on them. I poured water over two of the swirls. I easily extinguished them, or at least made them retreat back into the ground. It made me think of the ten-gallon basins that Nowhere Man had fashioned. Then we have all those moats. And Nowhere Man emigrating to this island continent. Water as a defense. But in the end, it wasn't enough for him, was it?" She gazed through the tent flap at Purgatory. "No matter what he tried, they finally got him."

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Day twenty-two. We orbit Nowhere waiting for our pickup. Lost Souls knock against our impact tiles with delicate pings. Ray and Marilyn sit beside each other. Whatever I felt for Ray is now gone. Whatever I felt for Chavez is gone too. I know I'll never understand why Chavez walked into the ocean. Some things just are. I know we say some things just are whenever we don't understand, but accepting the unknowable is sometimes the only way out.

We've named the new life-form Demon. What better name? It fits in with Nowhere, Purgatory, and Lethe, so appropriate to this system's nomenclature. We have no idea what the Demons are. We've never encountered anything like them before. We can't figure out where they get their energy from, the fuel they need to swirl and devour, but they must get it from somewhere. I think we've rightly concluded that they're tiny ancestors of the ones that killed Nowhere Man. They attack, there's no question about that. They're predators. Predators Nowhere Man, despite all his ingenious devising, couldn't stop. Are they animals? We don't know. They're more like phantoms. Infrared analysis indicates temperatures well over fifteen-hundred degrees Celsius, high enough to incinerate most creatures.

What a hell it must have been for Nowhere Man. Demons leaping out of the ground, ensnaring Nowhere Man with their fire, and reducing them to charred corpses. No wonder he crafted those ten-gallon basins and dug mile-long moats. And can we blame him for finally fleeing to the island continent in the middle of the western ocean?

The island land mass is the only place these smaller Demons haven't exhausted yet. Some day I'm sure the larvae there will develop hard shells such as they have on the primary continent. And Ray raised an interesting point about the thornbush. The ones on the island continent don't have fire-resistant sap the way the ones on the primary continent do. That's another food source for the miniature Demons. Some day the thornbushes on this island might develop fire-resistant sap. When they do, the Demons might finally die out. They, too, will go the way of Nowhere Man.

What are we going to do about Nowhere? Nothing.

For now, it's a tomb. We'll recommend against colonization. Let the Demons eat all they can, and once they've devoured everything, let them find their own way into eternity. Until then, there's no point in stocking their larder with colonists. That might just make them big again.

As for my millions of dead cousins, let them rest. They did their best under the worst of conditions. We can learn from them. I can learn from them. All this has given me perspective on Chavez. I can let him go now. Chavez was one man. This was a whole race. Rest in peace, my cousins. We've taken extensive photographs of your murals and cave paintings. We'll take your images, your struggle, and your death back with us. We'll make others understand what you went through. You won't be forgotten. Just as I'll never forget Chavez.

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