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## Edmund Tells No Tales

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## EDMUND TELLS NO TALES

*Lisa J. Morris*

*“You know if you don’t give it a rest, Ed, you’re going to turn into one of these guys!” said Tim. Edmund Masters slowly looked up from the skeleton he was analyzing and smiled back at his friend. Unlike Tim, Ed was tanned from being out in the field and while Tim sported a buzz cut Ed kept his blond hair long and tied back in a ponytail. “Hey, Tim, my man,” said Ed, as they high-fived without touching.*

*“Come on, TGIF man. It’s five o’clock, twofers time at Max’s! Time to do some damage!” said Tim. “Hey, an Steel Jinx is playin’ at the PlowShare tonight so Josh and I and some of the guys are heading out there later. Are you in or are you in?”*

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“Can’t,” replied Ed. “Got too much to do.”

“You’ve been working on this stuff for months, it won’t kill you to take one night off!”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. But, I can’t. I’ve got to give a paper at the Physicals next month. If I don’t finish these analyses I won’t have anything to talk about and the Board will start wondering where all their grant money went.”

“Well, if you change your mind, you know where we’ll be.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

“Healed compound fracture of the lower left tibia, Level 2 osteophytosis present throughout the vertebral column progressing to Level 3 in L4 and L5.” Ed finished the entry into the human paleopathology database and stared bleary-eyed at his watch. It said 3:00 a.m. Sighing, he stretched his arms over his head and cracked his stiff neck with a quick twist. The water and steam pipes above him clanked, and with a faint chill, he thought he heard voices. “Probably mice,” he mused.

continued

The anthropology museum's storage facility for human remains was in the basement of the men's gym under the pool. There were always noises — from the pool, from the gym, and from the steam heating system — that warmed the entire campus. Two more skeletons to analyze and he would be done. The facility held hundreds, if not thousands, of mummies and skeletonized human remains from all over the world. And here he was alone on a Friday night locked in the basement with them.

"Oooh weee ooooooh," said Ed aloud. His voice deadened in the vast space of the storage facility. He could never understand people who were afraid of a bunch of old bones and dried flesh. Ironically, at that very moment he would have sworn he heard the voices again — something high pitched and just on the edge of perception. The hairs on his arms stood up.

"Get a grip, Ed, you're giving yourself the willies." A cold chill slammed through him. He shivered as he tried to catch his breath. Involuntarily, he remembered an incident on the Reservation at the end of last fall's field season. It had been cold then, too.

**T**he cold had insinuated itself through the seams of his Gore-Tex coat penetrating its polar fleece lining and his polypropylene underwear. How much longer was he going to have to sit out here? What did the old man want with him? The night sky was painfully clear and the stars too bright to look at. The scent of burning pinion wafted up to them from the houses in the Pueblo below. Ed looked

enviously down the valley at those warm, distant lights. About a half-hour ago he had lost the sensation in every part of his body in contact with the block of ice that was the ground. Who would have thought the damn New Mexican desert could get so cold? Impatiently, he switched the wad of Red Man from the inside of his left cheek to the right and exhaled a hard, white fog of irritation. But, the old man just sat there staring at a distant mesa that glowed in the moonlight. He looked as comfortable as one would have if he were on a sunny beach in Acapulco.

Ed considered himself one of the University of California's brightest and he wasn't the only one who thought so. He hadn't become valedictorian of his undergraduate class by being a wimp. Now that he was a hotshot first year graduate student at UCLA with an unprecedented fat grant, he'd be damned if he'd let himself be outdone by some old Indian geezer. So, he ignored it when his nipples began to sting and turn hard like pebbles and when everything else but his goose bumps shrank and puckered. He clamped his teeth down on his tongue to keep them from chattering.

"The bones of the dead cry at night." The old man said at last. Ed had started in surprise. "If they are disturbed; they cry. Sometimes you can hear them." The old man raised his chin slightly and folded his thin lips over toothless gums never taking his eyes off the mesa. Ed shifted the chew in his mouth again and put his arms back behind him to stretch his back but regretted it immediately when the cold shot into the few warm places left on his body. Crazy old man, Ed thought angrily, and I'm just as crazy for being

out here with him. Now, how am I supposed to respond to this nutty-ass bullshit so I can get back to bed?

"Those bones you archaeologists are digging up," the old man continued, "they need to be reburied." Ed would have snickered if he weren't so cold, instead, he rolled up his eyes as he puffed out his cheeks and exhaled. When he had managed to clear his face of expression, he looked over at the old Indian and caught his breath. An eerie sheen clung to the man's gaunt leathery face. It was still and hard like polished jade. The man's eyes were shadows; his mouth, a slash. Long white hair flowed from his scalp with a strange wild life of its own under the piercing moonlight. The face had become a mask. For a moment, Ed thought he was looking at a Kachina dancer; one of the personators of the Gods who comes to earth in human form. Ed shivered as something colder and darker than the night coiled up his spinal column.

"The spirits of the dead must continue their journey. They cannot do so if their bodies are in museums and universities being poked and prodded. They suffer. It is desecration. You understand? You must return them to their home." Ed did not want to get into an ethical argument at this time of night, so he lied and said "yes." The old man grunted and nodded his head. He got up slowly and Ed trailed after him as they hiked down to the road where one of the old man's granddaughters patiently waited for them in a warm car. No words were spoken until he thanked her when she dropped him off at his trailer on Black Rock. The field season was over, his students had packed all the equipment yesterday, and tomorrow—well today now—they would be leaving the Reservation.

*"The  
bones  
of the  
dead  
cry at  
night."*

Ed shook himself out of his reverie. “Focus Ed,” he said aloud. Those Indians and their superstitious BS. Crying bones, right. But, to his disgust, he found himself straining, listening for any sound above the knocking on the pipes. He got up a little unsteadily with the drawer of bones he had been analyzing. A hollow, weak sensation like a yawn bloomed in his gut as he started down the long narrow corridor passing row upon row of shelves full of human remains from Ethiopia, California, Egypt, and so on. The New Mexican collection was just beyond the Peruvian mummy section.

He took short, shallow breaths as he listened superstitiously for more noises. Naked bulbs glared surreally above him reminding him of the stars above the Reservation that cold, fall night. The familiar scent of moist dust that invariably clings to excavated remains grew stronger. Heart beating in his ears, he passed the Peruvian mummies, their desiccated black arms and hands with fingernails still intact, reached out beyond the shelves. With macabre grins, filed teeth and luxuriant black hair they almost looked alive though folded into drawers too small for them.

Slowly, he continued down the corridor feeling light headed as his heart pulsed louder. “It’s all in your head, it’s all in your head Ed, old boy, get a grip.” Trembling, he spun around as he heard a soft moan like the wind through an ill-fitting window. Had it come from the Peruvian mummy section behind him? He froze and held his breath. Straining to hear beyond the deafening roar of rushing blood in his ears. Higher sounds like the screaming of mice now. It was getting louder. What was happening to him? Tim had been right. He must have been working

too hard nothing else could account for this. Maybe he should have gone out tonight. As his heart beat faster he felt himself growing weak and clammy. He had to get outside—into the fresh air. He had to find the exit. Now! The screaming was building and to his horror Ed thought that he could distinguish words. It became deafening, like a macabre THX test gone deadly wrong. He tried to stuff bits of his T-shirt into his ears with his free hand but nothing helped. He had to go back; back past the mummies get to the exit. Taking a deep breath, he retraced his footsteps. The muscles in his arms shook, as the drawer of bones grew heavier. A furtive glance down the first isle revealed a full row of mummies staring malevolently back at him from empty eye sockets, their bodies, twisted, and contorted, fingers pointing, accusing. For one eternal second, he couldn’t catch his breath; then, he dropped the drawer tripping over it as he tried to run. He fell and hit his head on the cement floor.

When Ed woke, he was stiff and more tired than he had ever remembered being. He stretched, but found that straightening out his body was beyond him. His vision was blurred but when he went to blink his eyes the lids would not move. His tongue felt like a walnut and a violent thirst threatened to overcome him. Where was he? If he could just get his mind to focus. As his vision slowly cleared he realized he was up high looking down, at what? Drawers of sticks? Out of the corner of his eye he could see his blond hair cascading over the platform he seemed to be on. He lay on his side in the fetal

position. But instead of his healthy arms and legs all he saw were light-colored desiccated limbs extending out from his body. His watch hung loosely like a bracelet on his skeletal wrist. He looked across the isle and found he was positioned so he was on eye level with the grinning face and folded body of one of the Peruvian mummies. “Welcome,” it said continuing to grin. Ed began to scream.

**T**im followed Dr. Saddler, Dean of Anthropology; into the analysis area where he had talked to Ed last Friday evening. “So, Dean Saddler, you haven’t seen Ed all day either?”

“No, he missed teaching his Anthro. 101 class. Sheri, the Collections Manager found the box of bones on the floor at about 8:00 a.m. this morning. The door to the storage facility was still locked, the lights were on and so was Ed’s computer. In fact and all of his things are still here but no sign of Ed.”

Ed heard voices. It was Tim and Dean Saddler. “Over here,” he shouted. “Tim! Dr. Saddler! Over here. Help me! Help! Oh, God help me!” Other voices chimed in growing louder and louder as Ed tried to shout over them to his friends.

“What’s that sound?” asked Tim.

“Mice or rats,” said Dean Saddler. “No, matter what we do we can’t seem to get rid of them.”