

THE LAST ANCESTOR

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*We should always be aware that what now lies in the past once lay in the
future.*

FW Maitland:

*In Pohjola there are thick, dark forests that dream wild dreams, forever secret.
Tapio's eerie dwellings are there and half-glimpsed spirits, and the voices of
twilight.*

Jean Sibelius

Chapter 1

OLD BONES

There were better ways of spending a Saturday morning than being dragged off for a talk about old bones. Kate had insisted that Scott accompany her to some lost Parisian suburb to listen to Michel Brunet, a renowned palaeoanthropologist, talk about his discovery of an important fossil in Chad, that of one of man's early ancestors.

It was wet and windy and spending the morning in bed with Kate would have certainly been more pleasant. Fitznorman, however,

rationalised, at the worse that could be put back to Sunday, if he agreed to her expedition, or not at all if he baulked at her project.

There was not too much traffic and they arrived early at the brand new and expensive looking mediatheque where the talk was to be held. It was just as well if they were to have a good seat since the receptionist did not even mention the reservations Kate had taken the precaution of making.

The doors opened at ten and they made their way into the small conference hall. At the entrance, to their relief, they were told that those who had made reservations would find their seats marked by 'Postits' in the front rows. Michel Brunet sat alone on the low stage, behind him projected on a screen was the photo of a fairly battered looking skull.

Brunet, after a brief introduction by a representative of the local municipal council, commenced his talk. He was a man of about sixty with an unassuming appearance, wearing a close cut greying beard, bespectacled, and sporting a worn blazer, he was not unlike an older version of an off duty explorer.

It soon became evident that he was a passionate exponent of human evolution with a finely developed sense of humour and a fascinating talker. He started by recalling to his audience that the teaching of evolution was still forbidden by law in the State of Alabama, then going on to explain that during the greatest part of human civilisation, man had no past history, man was the result of divine creation, he was its *raison d'être*, and at the centre of the universe.

Brunet's twenty year search for the common ancestor of man and the great apes had finally borne its fruit in the harsh Djurab Desert, five hundred kilometres north of of N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, in the form of a seven million year old fossil he had named 'Tuomai'.

The climax of the talk was the presentation of Tuomai's skull, when the suburban audience of mostly not too young people pressed around the table to touch what was in fact a resin copy.

As they returned to Paris, Kate enthused about Brunet's account of adventure and exploration in the vast expanses of the African desert, which he had provokingly described to his gawking audience, trapped in their inescapable humdrum suburban existence.

She was so excited by the talk that Fitznorman, in a weak moment and charmed by her girlish fervour, suggested she join him on his next trip to South East Asia in search of ancient ceramics and tribal art for his Parisian gallery.

Kate, whose knowledge of South East Asia, from a historical viewpoint and as a specialist in Asian art, was considerable, had never visited Borneo and jumped at his invitation, accepting it before he had time to change his mind. Back in his apartment they spent the rest of the afternoon poring over the maps and guides that Fitznorman dug out from his chaotically organised library.

Looking at the map of Borneo, she saw that to the north, facing the South China Sea, were the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak with the tiny Sultanate of Brunei squeezed in between the two. To the south were the Indonesian provinces of Kalimantan that covered precisely 87% of the vast island.

From one of the guides, she read that the coastal areas were shallow, surrounded by impenetrable mangroves and without natural harbours, as a result the towns and villages were built well up-stream on the banks of the many vast rivers. The highland areas were far inland and difficult to reach, girdled by dense primary forests, deep rivers and swamps. The first European to cross the island was the Dutch explorer Schwaner, in the mid-nineteenth century.

At the end of the twentieth century all that was changing, fast, hundreds of thousands of hectares of rainforest were burning. A cloud of smoke invaded the region, almost asphyxiating the populations of Sumatra and Borneo. It was part of a recurring cycle of fires that regularly consumed the forests on the east coast of Sumatra and the south coast of Borneo, all of which grew on a layer of turf up to fifteen metres thick.

With the cyclical variations caused by El Niño, less rain fell and the turf dried out, that is relatively speaking, but enough to burn,

sparked by the ancestral methods of shifting cultivation practised by the island's villagers. Each year, towards the end of autumn, they burnt down parcels of forest to make new fields for rice paddies and in the years when the weather became too dry the fires got out of control taking hold of vast swaths of the surrounding forest.

The explosive growth of Indonesia's population brought the need for new agricultural land and an ever growing pressure on the primary forests that were disappearing at the rate of two percent per year. In an arc from Pontianak to Bandjermasin fires raged covering the vast island, the world's third largest, with dense clouds of smoke, which was then carried by the prevailing winds to Jakarta, on the island of Java to the south and Singapore to the north.

In the most part of Borneo, the soil was poor in nutrients which were normally stored in the trees and plants of the forest and recycled by the natural debris, that is dead leaves and plants, which formed the thin humus covering the forest floor. Borneo lacked the rich soil compared to its neighbours, Java and Sumatra, where as a consequence of permanent volcanic activity the soil was constantly regenerated.

Apart from certain coastal regions the ground beneath the humus was a laterite, formed by iron and aluminium hydroxide, up to ten metres deep and once the thin top soil was removed little or no vegetation could thrive, with the exception of tough wild grasses such as alang-alang.

The annual rainfall was as much as three metres and in some coastal cities it rained up to one hundred and eighty days a year, whilst in the mountainous regions it was considerably more with an almost unvarying average ambient temperature of about 28°C. In mid-afternoon hovering around 32°C, falling by between five to ten degrees before daybreak.

The canopy was so dense that little light penetrated to the forest floor. The huge dominant trees literally stood on feet, huge buttresses splayed out over the forest floor, whilst the canopy was supported on the tree's giant pillar like trunks and their huge branches,

intermeshing with an endless variety of creepers to form a vast living tissue woven by the exuberance of nature.

Kate, like many who had studied history, could not help wondering about man's colonisation of Borneo and how he had lived in the dense and hostile forests that Fitznorman described to her.

Ancient man was probably not unlike the present day Punans, a tribe of hunter-gatherers. The forest teemed with game, but hunting by its human inhabitants was always an unpredictable venture, even nature's most experienced predators depend on luck, with kill rates often being as little as one in six for every animal tracked.

Hunting had always been a time-consuming occupation and whilst hunters could starve, mostly herbivorous animals, such as the orangutan, could always find an abundance of fruits and plants, though at the cost of spending most of their lives foraging and eating.

The early men who inhabited the forests were omnivores, eating meat when the hunt was good, though most of the time were satisfied by a diet of fruit and vegetables, supplemented by small animals and insects. Unlike their contemporaries living on the African savannah, the possibilities for scavenging were rare in Borneo. In the hot humid jungle dead animal were difficult to find, they either decomposed rapidly or were eaten by insects, birds and small animals that lived in great profusion amongst the dense vegetation.

Scavenging would have been easier in Africa, in spite of competition from other large animals, where even today in the game reserves of the broad open African savannah, millions of large herbivores live, where zebras, gnu and antelopes graze. The life of these herbivores being about ten years meant that each year one to two hundred thousand animals were born and died, three thousand a day, providing a feast for efficient scavengers.

In comparison the jungles of Borneo were dark and lonely with relatively few larger animals on the ground compared to a profusion of animal life in the canopy high above. Early man no doubt hunted wild pig, deer and smaller animals, as the Punans, tribespeople, do today. The buffalo and rhinoceros that also lived in the forest were certainly too dangerous to hunt.

Fitznorman explained to Kate that little systematic scientific exploration had been carried in Borneo until after World War II, and even then it had been very slow. Before then most of Borneo had existed in its undisturbed prehistoric state for millions of years and only in very recent historical times had a small number of towns and villages been established on its coast and river banks.

During the last ice ages between 18,000 and 40,000 years ago the temperature in Borneo fell by five to seven degrees with a much dryer climate, rainfall was much less than it is at present, as water froze into the huge ice caps that covered the northern hemisphere and sea levels fell by more than one hundred metres opening a land bridge that joined Borneo to the Asian land mass.

The climatic change brought modifications to the forests that covered a vast region that geologists know as Sundaland, where the forests were certainly less dense than they are today in many places. Early men arrived, forced southwards by climatic pressure and slowly extended their habitat into Sundaland and what is today Borneo.

The first Homo sapiens arrived across the landbridge from Asia around 40,000 ago with new tools and weapons, followed thousands of years later by further waves of migrants who brought rudimentary agriculture with them and then boats and all the implements of Neolithic man.

Chapter 2

A TRIP TO THE DAYAKS

It was a cold, rainy, Thursday afternoon at the end of October when the couple left Paris, taking a taxi from Fitznorman's apartment situated nearby the Bastille to Charles de Gaulle Airport.

At the Air France business class check-in desk there were relatively few people and they were informed by the smiling hostess, pleased to be giving some good news for once, that the flight was not

full and they would have plenty of space during the long hours ahead.

The final destination of AF126 was Jakarta with a stop in Singapore where they were to disembark. The news was not good from the Indonesian capital and Fitznorman was pleased that he would be giving it a miss. The political crisis and its repercussions had discouraged a lot of visitors, especially business people.

Fitznorman had not heard from his friend Aris for weeks. Indonesia was going through a bad time and it would certainly become worse.

He and Kate settled into their seats and accepted with pleasure the Champagne offered them. The girl at the check-in had exaggerated when she had told them that the flight was not full – it was almost empty, they almost had the whole business class cabin to themselves.

He congratulated himself on inviting Kate along, being with her over the next three weeks would be great. Their relationship had become serious, perhaps a little bit too serious, though it had not gone as far as her moving in with him, rather she drifted between her place and his, which suited them both. Whatever the situation at that precise moment he basked in the pleasure that radiated from her. She was a lively, slim, blonde, with a very girlish figure, the kind that he was often attracted to. They sipped their Champagne and the steward topped up their glasses as they waited for the departure.

The motors started and Kate took a last look at Charles de Gaulle Airport through the window of the Airbus. Fitznorman knew the airport only too well, it was an evergrowing, faceless and transient crossroad, where people barely paused to wonder why it existed, its army of workers, technicians and officials, all dedicated to servicing movement. He turned his attention to one of the newspapers that a stewardess had distributed, the International Herald Tribune. He scanned the pages before an article caught his eye:

New Demonstrations

Jakarta: A suspected car bomb exploded near the parliament building in Jakarta yesterday. A second blast occurred outside the Hilton Hotel, adding to the tensions, as University student demonstrations have become daily events since mid-October demanding the president's resignation. The students claimed that his government was corrupt and blame his family and their cronies for the nation's financial crisis.

Over the last months Indonesia's rupiah currency has plunged more than seventy percent against the dollar as the crisis deepens and unrest spreads across the country.

In Singapore, they were booked into the Sheraton Towers on Scotts Road in the city centre. After the long and uneventful flight they were eager to take advantage of what was left of the day, the drive in from the airport along the startling tropical green avenues with the bright sunshine had whetted their appetites.

They quickly showered and prepared themselves for the evening, there was a seven hour time difference with Paris, and the sun was fading quickly as it did near the equator, a sure sign that it would soon be time to eat and drink. They opted for the MRT, it was cool and rapid, getting off at Boat Quay and making their way to the riverside restaurants. Not surprisingly it was throbbing with the noise of the usual Friday evening excitement, strangely seeming almost exactly as Fitznorman had left it on his last visit, an endless party for some.

Even after many years, each visit to South East Asia was a new adventure for Fitznorman and the possibility of sharing it only enhanced his pleasure. He had first met Kate Lundy, almost fifteen years his junior, a couple of years previously at the inauguration of an exhibition at the Musée Guimet in Paris, one of the world's leading museums of Asian art, where she was specialised in the research and history of Asian art and especially ceramics.

Kate had been responsible for compiling one of the most complete catalogues on the subject with countless references and photographic records, a good number of which she had taken herself.

He remembered how they had got off on the wrong foot when they had found themselves arguing about the origin of a Martaban, a very large type of ovoid stoneware jar that were made in China, which transited by the Burmese port of Martaban on the Irrawaddy River from the 14th century onwards. The jars had a long history in Malaysia and Indonesia, traditionally considered as precious heirlooms by the tribal peoples, who even gave the individual jars names, attributing them with magical powers.

Things had however improved little by little as Scott and Kate got to know each other better, discovering they shared more than just a professional interest in Asian art and antiquities.

The bars were full of bankers and traders, it reminded Fitznorman of Nick Leeson, and he could not help thinking how the hapless banker spent several years at the invitation of the Singaporean government in Changi Jail, a few kilometres to the east of the city centre, after he broke the Queen of England's bank, the Barings, the United Kingdom's oldest merchant bank, with his huge trading losses on the Singapore stock exchange.

Singapore was not a place to play with the law.

In appearance the crowd had not changed though the bankers had abandoned speculative trading and unrealistic investment projects, turning their attention to oil, gas, or China, where growth continued in a spectacular fashion.

The noisy crowd was dense and overflowed out onto the pavement, although glancing through the gaps Fitznorman saw the bars were not that full inside. The evening crowd consisted mostly of Brits and Australians, who holding their pints of local Tiger or foreign beer, mimicked their respective tribal roles as though they were on the pavements outside of fashionable pubs in the City of London, the Kings Road in Chelsea, or off Flinders in Melbourne. Many of the men still wore their jackets and ties, with the power girls in their dark pin striped costumes. Mixed with them were

fashionably dressed European girlfriends and a scattering of attractive Chinese girls hanging onto the arms of their status symbols.

They strolled towards the bridge at the end of the Quay, pausing to check out the menus, looking at the diners and more exactly what they had on their plates, deciding whether they would eat, Chinese, Indonesian, Indian, Japanese or Thai.

Fitznorman stopped, taking a double look at a table on the riverside terrace of a Chinese restaurant. It was Erkki Erkkila. They looked at each other a couple of brief instants before their faces lit up with startled recognition, then holding out hands and smiling with the surprise and pleasure of their unexpected reunion, they greeted each other enthusiastically.

Erkki was an international lawyer representing several major Scandinavian multi-nationals with large investments in South East Asia. He was an old friend of Fitznorman and was also an avid collector of Khmer art. The empire of the Khmers had been one of the greatest civilisations of Asia covering all of Indo-China, which was a contemporary of Borobudur, built by the Sailendra princes in East Java during the ninth century.

A quick glance at the couple at Erkki's table told Fitznorman they were also Finns, and in addition of no particular interest. After an exchange of friendly banalities Fitznorman left his room and Erkki promised to call him to fix a moment to meet when he was free from his business obligations.

They then returned their attention to food and Kate opted for an Indonesian restaurant where they ordered an old favourite, Satay and Nasi Goreng, it was a good choice. Then after talking of the coincidence and the smallness of the world they quickly forgot Erkki and relaxed in the humid warmth of the tropical evening, more than a pleasant change after the cold Parisian autumn weather, enjoying the spicy food and frothy chilled draught beer.

The next morning they took a late breakfast on Orchard Road like a couple of typical tourists before heading to a small reliable travel agent in Peoples Centre, which Fitznorman had used over the years,

where he checked out flights and timetables for Kuching in Sarawak. On their return to the hotel there was a voice mail message from Erkki inviting them for dinner. 'As long as we don't spend the evening endlessly talking about business,' said Kate only half joking, meaning Erkki's business and the political crisis in Indonesia.

Fitznorman returned the call and they agreed to a restaurant that Erkki suggested in China Town. Amusing thought Fitznorman, if Singapore wasn't Chinese then what was it? The difference however, was that China Town was one of the last remaining districts of the city where the traditional style architecture of the Chinese 'shop houses' still survived. The district had been saved from the demolisher's ball and renovated as both a tourist zone and a souvenir of how the city had once been, before the metamorphose that had transformed Singapore into another faceless city full of sky scrapers, crowded highways and commercial centres, resembling Hongkong, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and to a lesser degree Jakarta.

That afternoon they toured the more serious antique dealers, where Fitznorman chatted with their shrewd owners, trying to worm out the latest collectors' trends and potential new sources of antiques. Business was not good, there were few local buyers, many had lost their shirts on the Asian stock markets. The dealers were tight-lipped, their sources were often illegal, smuggling antiques out of China, pottery and porcelain looted from undeclared shipwrecks in Indonesian and Philippino waters, or from ancient burial sites.

They took a taxi to the restaurant that was situated in a quiet street in the older Chinese Town district of the city a couple of streets away from the dense throng of the evening street market. Erkki was waiting for them, by his side stood an attractive Chinese girl in her early thirties. He warmly shook hands with Fitznorman and gallantly kissed Kate's hand.

'Let me introduce you to Chen Li.'

The girl was tall, she was not Singaporean.

'Chen Li is from Beijing, where she's an expert in Ming porcelain.'

They were shown to their table.

‘This is a Sichuanese restaurant,’ explained Erkki, ‘the food is excellent.’

The restaurant catered to the upper class amateur of good Chinese food, in a discrete Western ambiance, it was tastefully furnished with the simple stylish lines of Qing period rosewood furniture. The tables were set with authentic Kitchen Ming stoneware bowls and plates in perfect condition, more than four hundred years after they had left the kilns in the coastal cities of South China, the chop sticks were in ivory. Both of the girls politely appraised the grey blue bowls and plates as the two men exchanged news.

‘So Scott what is it that really brings you back to Singapore? I’m sure that it’s more than a simple vacation?’ he said with a wry smile.

‘Well it’s my usual tour, half business and half pleasure, always on the look out for bargains, this time I’ve decided to check out the Ibans and Dayaks, there’s a few outlying longhouses I spotted on my last visit that could be interesting.’

Erkki laughed, ‘On the footsteps of Levi-Strauss I see.’

‘Well not exactly,’ Fitznorman replied looking down at his antique plate. ‘What I’m interested in really are the heirlooms of the Ibans.’

‘Ah, I see, beads for treasure!’ Erkki laughed.

‘Well if I can find a few good Martabans why not!’

‘So then, you’re off to Sarawak and Kalimantan, for how long?’

‘Two or three weeks, no real fixed date, it depends on what we find. Kate wants to get up to Taipei.’

‘We’re trying to set up an exhibition of treasures from the National Museum, it’s a little complicated, they’re afraid of Beijing trying to seize them,’ said Kate a little too quickly, embarrassed by the presence Chen Li.

Chen Li laughed politely, ‘Don’t worry about me. In any case the government in Beijing sees Taiwan as part of China, so for them the treasures are in safe keeping.’

‘Chen Li doesn’t get involved in politics,’ Erkki said with a laugh.

He was right about the food, it really was excellent, accompanied by a fine Australian white wine. After many years in Singapore, Erkki knew his restaurants. He was a man of taste and cultivated to a degree untypical of most Finns, even those who had attained a worldly status.

Scott Fitznorman was a reputed and successful dealer in fine antiques and owned a fine arts gallery at the upper end of Faubourg Saint Honoré in Paris, specialised in Asiatic and ethnic art, with branches in Zurich and London, and links to galleries in the USA, notably in Los Angeles, the home of many wealthy collectors. He travelled frequently to Asia in his search of the kind of fine art objects he had on show in his galleries, destined for discerning collectors. On occasions he acquired special pieces on behalf of clients who wished to remain anonymous, from the great auction houses such as Drouot, or Christie's, in Paris or London, but the discovery of rare and original pieces was his greatest reward, which was also question of business. A fine objet d'art discovered in some small remote town or village in Asia could fetch many many times the investment made in finding it when compared to the prices proposed by auction houses and international wholesale antique dealers.

Fitznorman was well-known in the world of rare Asian antique art, especially for his flair in tracking down highly valued collectors items in an ever shrinking world, and also for his discerning taste in valued ethnic art. His spacious apartment in the Marais, on place des Vosges, was a well protected treasure house, decorated with some of the finest objects collected over many years from the remote corners of the Asia.

Pleased with himself, Erkki explained that though technically speaking business was lousy, he personally was doing extremely well, his clients were waiting for the turn around in the local economies, which banks and financial institution were predicting for the end of the following year. Fitznorman, however, was not so sure the things would improve quickly, as news broke of fresh rioting in Jakarta and political corruption at high level in Kuala Lumpur.

‘In any case you could say that we’re in a holding position at the moment,’ Erkki continued. ‘My clients have several major contracts in Indonesia which have virtually stalled and there’s a lot of outstanding monies, in addition to that there’s also contracts they have signed, but not come into force because of the crisis. I suppose it’s a case of wait and see!’

‘And your own position?’

‘As steady as a rock, the bastards can’t do without me,’ he laughed. His fees continued to roll in and would continue to do so. His clients could not just bail out, the financial consequences would be too great. Besides Erkki spoke the local languages and had all the connections, he persuaded them it was not the first and would not be last regional crisis to make waves in their business.

He reminded his Finnish friends their most serious crisis had arrived with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had been a decisive factor for certain of his clients investing heavily in the Asian market.

Since then certain Asian economies had tanked and Russia had started looking up, but that was before Putin got too ambitious. There were not that many other possibilities, South America was one, but it was a difficult market with a reputation for economic ups and downs, in addition they spoke Spanish, which the Finns did not. So, with Erkki’s convincing arguments they decided to hang-in, in the meantime reducing their expenses to sustainable levels, ready for the ‘Rebound’ the Malaysian leader was promising the markets.

In addition to his interest in Khmer art, Erkki was also a keen collector of Chinese ceramics and South East Asian ethnic art. The interests that the two men shared had formed the base for the solid friendship they had built up over the years.

‘So apart from business have you discovered anything new recently?’ Fitznorman asked, changing the subject.

‘Not much, with this mess of a crisis I’ve been pretty busy, you know they’re flying in and out, trying to make head or tail of what’s going on with their contracts, giving me a real headache.’

‘Too bad.’

The two girls had struck it off and were engaged in a deep conversation, uninterested by the men's business, exchanging opinions on Chinese porcelain.

'I've got a little bit of information that might interest you,' Erkki said lowering his voice.

'Oh,'

"Yes, if you can find something interesting for me?" Erkki said with a sly wink.

'Okay, okay,' Fitznorman laughed. It was a little game they had played before. Erkki picked up titbits of information from clients that he had passed on to Fitznorman in return for a something to add to his collection, if the hunt turned out to be good.

'The other day, I had dinner with a couple of guys from a Finnish engineering firm, they'd been carrying out survey work for a mining company near the Indonesian-Malaysian border in Borneo. They visited a few very isolated longhouses and talked about seeing a number of human skulls and what they described as large jars...'

'Martabans!'

'Right, and apparently the villagers have very little contact with the outside.'

'Can you be more precise about the location?'

'I have a copy of their survey maps in the office. Drop by tomorrow and I'll run you off a copy, if you don't flash it about.'

'Don't worry Erkki, count on my discretion, it's just between the two of us.'

Chapter 3

UP RIVER

Fitznorman made reservations at the Hilton Batang Ai Longhouse Resort Hotel, almost three hundred kilometres from Kuching, a four hour drive and a fast boat ride to the hotel jetty. The Longhouse

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