



STORYLANDIA

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by Julie Travis

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Collected Stories

by

Julie Travis

From the Bones

Of all of the wildness of Dartmoor, Fernworthy was probably his favourite part. The reservoir—an obvious man-made mark on the land—was balanced by the boggy forest that ran around one side of it and then, beyond that, the moorland with its two stone circles, adjacent to one another, open to the sky and the elements. The stone circles were also man-made but their age made that forgivable and they seemed as natural as the grasslands they stood in.

He had parted from his wife and daughter at the car park, leaving them to walk the relatively easy path around the reservoir while he had the prospect of slopping his way through the trees and out to the stones. The summer had so far been reasonably dry, so his booted feet only sank an inch or so into the mud, making his progress through the forest much quicker than he had anticipated.

And so to the stones. He had them to himself and spent a while in the southern circle, eyes shut, taking in the ambience before heading a few yards back towards the forest. It was only then that he took the metal detector from the bag slung across his shoulder. It was legal—probably—to search here, as long as he gave the area immediately around the circle a wide berth. He switched the metal detector on and began sweeping the area, in a circle around the circles.

When the detector beeped, it was due north of the northern circle's centre. He grabbed the trowel

from the bag and dug gently at the wet, peaty soil. He used the detector again, passing it over the small mound of dug soil and then over the hole, where it gave a pleasing, stronger bleep. He dug a little further and there, in the blackness of the soil, was a glimpse of that most precious metal, used for thousands of years to denote status and wealth: gold.

He dropped the metal detector and brushed soil away with his fingers to reveal thin threads of gold twisted over and over to form a solid torc, a neck ring, quite likely from prehistoric times. He reached down to claim the treasure and it was only when he grasped it that he realised that the coldness underneath was not vegetation but well-preserved flesh, and that the ancient jewellery still hung around an ancient throat.

As the prehistoric body was being carefully excavated by Devon archaeologists, two women looked down from the top of Rough Tor towards King Arthur's Hall. Unaware of the excitement in the neighbouring county, they focussed their binoculars on the strange rectangular site, named after the legend that King Arthur himself frequented the place, rather than evidence of its actual use, which was likely a Neolithic mortuary house. The site, often waterlogged after rain, had never been excavated, a fact that was not lost on either of the women.

"How long is it since you've been here?" asked Zoe.

"Years. Ten, maybe," said Vivienne. "It was after a dry summer then, too. A few of us managed to walk right across the site."

"And it spooked you?"

"In a good way. We definitely weren't alone there, but we weren't scared."

“Let’s get there, then. I’m keen to see a Neolithic site that isn’t circular.”

They put their binoculars away and clambered down the rocky slope of the tor. Forty minutes of hard walking later, they came to the fence that surrounded King Arthur’s Hall.

And there came the first surprise. Despite having had no more than drizzle in the last week, the Hall was almost completely under water. Large tussocks of grass poked out. They looked solid enough to stand on.

“I wasn’t expecting it to be this wet,” said Zoe, failing to hide her disappointment.

“It really shouldn’t be,” said Vivienne. “And we haven’t walked all this way to look at the Hall from outside. Come on.”

She opened the gate and they walked through, testing the ground with their sticks as they went. As they approached the Hall, still partly surrounded by its ancient stone fence, Zoe gasped.

“This place is amazing. It *feels* amazing. I’m not sure if it’s good or bad.”

Vivienne nodded. “I think we can get to the middle of the enclosure. Follow my path.”

She tested the tussocks thoroughly before stepping onto them as they slowly made their way into the Hall. When she found a mound that was big enough for both of them, she beckoned Zoe to join her, then pointed her stick at the nearest corner.

“The stone slabs are lying over there. Nothing’s been found anywhere else.”

“That’s because no one’s looked,” said Zoe and dipped her stick into the water. She was expecting some resistance and, finding none, stepped forwards to regain her balance. The edge of the tussock gave

way and she was in the water. She had a moment of panic, imagining that she'd sink forever and never find the bottom, giving birth to a new legend about the place, until the temperature of the water hit her and she swore, soaked up to her knees.

“Shit! It's freezing.”

Vivienne was already holding out her stick for the other woman to grab. “The walk back will warm you up. Now get out before the mud sucks your boots off.”

After an ungainly struggle she made it back onto the tussock, swearing again as rain began sweeping across from Rough Tor. She was just about to berate her stupidity when she heard a sound, like a plug being pulled out of a bath. They both watched a huge bubble burst at the surface of the water, at the exact spot where Zoe had been standing moments before. It was followed by dozens of smaller bubbles. Then a dark hand appeared from the water and held itself aloft, silently demanding attention.

“Oh Zoe, what *have* you done?” murmured Vivienne. The ground rumbled beneath her as if in disquiet.

In Derriford Hospital, Professor Adam Caviler stood over the two bog-bodies. They had been brought to Plymouth for preliminary analysis and the first x-rays had been taken. Adam looked at the bodies again then returned to his study of the x-rays, hoping they would make more sense this time.

He had been expecting to have found a clear cause of death by now. Many bodies of this age, at first estimate around 2500–3000 years old, had suffered ritual deaths. A slit throat or a pierced skull was commonplace. But there was no such damage to the well-preserved flesh of either body, and the x-rays

showed that both skulls, though flattened by the weight of time and the bog, were intact. Both victims, one male, one female, had old, healed fractures, but there was no evidence of violent death.

There were only the marks on the bones. Deep scratches covered every visible bone on the bodies. It was something he had never seen before.

Vivienne Vale had just arrived. For once, it was useful to have one of the finders present.

“Is the find in the press yet?” he asked her.

“Just sketchy reports, no real detail or mention of the torc. More of a novelty piece than anything of importance. Thanks so much for letting me come. I’m sure you’ve had loads of requests.”

Adam smiled. “Only from every archaeologist in the West of England, as well as everyone back at Exeter.” Then, with just a hint of condescension, he added, “But you should be here. You found him and you might be able to help. Would you like to see our two guests?”

Vivienne nodded enthusiastically and Adam carefully peeled back the wet cloth that covered the bodies. One was in a crouched position, standard burial practice for the era, but the other, the man found at King Arthur’s Hall, had, as far as could be ascertained, lain flat like a modern burial.

“I’ve only just started my investigation, but there’s no obvious cause of death, the bodies and skulls are intact. Of course, they could have been poisoned. We’ll have to wait and see. But I want you to look at the x-rays. They’ve come up with something very unexpected. The bones are marked, as if they’ve been scratched or cut and I don’t know how that’s possible.”

He handed her his iPad and Vivienne, butterflies of excitement in her stomach, saw the bones of the

ancient dead. The body from Dartmoor still had the torc around her neck, in x-ray more like a slave's shackle than a display of high status. The body from Bodmin Moor had no such adornments. It seemed entirely ordinary—until she looked at the x-rays.

Every bone was marked.

“Could it be a disease of some kind?” she asked, at a loss for an explanation.

Adam shook his head. “No. Well, nothing that I'm remotely aware of.”

“What about an animal? I've heard of raptors taking live lambs and marking the bones in the struggle.”

“There are no wounds on the skin. What could have been big enough to cause that much damage?”

Vivienne enlarged a detail of the x-ray and peered at it.

“The marks are all different. Not like claws or talons. Could you possibly email these to me? I'd like to take some time over this.”

“As long as you keep them to yourself. I'm going to do a few more x-rays, then I'll send you the lot.”

Vivienne handed the iPad back and sat down on Adam's chair, with that familiarity he found so irritating. “Seems to me you need to take some of the flesh off to have a proper look. What about the bloke who found Fernworthy Woman? Has he been here?”

“No he hasn't, but he keeps ringing the University. He wants money for the gold torc find. Typical treasure hunter. As for chopping some skin off, I'll be removing a section of finger from each of them to do just that.”

He motioned for Vivienne to vacate his chair and tried to make a joke of it. “Now leave me to my work or I'll call security.”

Vivienne smiled and got up. “Perhaps these bones will change our knowledge of prehistory.”

Professor Caviler said nothing and Vivienne closed the door quietly behind her as she left.

The email arrived two impatient days later. Vivienne printed off copies of the x-rays and studied the marks. They weren’t haphazard, as she had seen before when bones showed evidence of attack, either by sword, axe, or animal, and they were of an even depth, shallow enough not to have greatly damaged either bog-body. In short, they weren’t the cause of death, unless they were the results of a disease new to science. She compared the two bodies. The marks showed similarities but were far from identical. While it was almost certain that Fernworthy Woman lived and died during the Bronze Age, it was probable that King Arthur’s Man dated from Neolithic times. How could two such similar cases date from such different periods in prehistory? If the venerated Professor Caviler was stumped, then how could she hope to find the answer?

She returned to Adam’s email, then shut down the computer. The laptop, outdated before she’d even used it, took its time while she waited like she always did, not quite trusting the machine to turn itself off unless she was staring at it. At last it did and she was left with a black screen—momentarily.

In the screen’s reflection appeared a shape; a human figure. Vivienne whirled around and, in what would later be to her shame, a light trickle left her bladder. The size and slender frame of the figure was that of a young girl, but the features were that of a monster. The naked figure was white, the whiteness of a creature that hides from daylight. The girl’s skin

had the texture of pastry; sagging in places, thin and almost torn in others. Her head, completely hairless, had a doughy appearance, the nose barely protruding, the face rounded with no allowance made for a pair of eyes. There was, at least, a mouth—a slit like a jab from a knife. Blind, she nevertheless stared at Vivienne.

“The answers you seek are in the landscape,” she said. The words were slightly muffled. “Look to the landscape as well as to the bones. Let *John-of-the-Stars* guide you.”

Was she dreaming? Vivienne felt like a child again, wanting to pull the blankets over her head after a nightmare, but unable to move.

The girl reached out towards her. Vivienne inched away.

“What do you want?” she whispered.

“I’m ravenous! I smell meat!” said the girl.

Vivienne backed away towards the fridge and took out the shoulder of lamb. It seemed heavier, more raw than when she’d bought it. She tore open the bag and gave the contents to the girl. In her plaster-white hands the meat looked like a hideous wound. The girl ripped the meat from the bone, opening her slit-mouth as far as it would go to push the food in quickly. She finished and held the bone up like a trophy. Then she dug her nails into it, carving marks around the surface. In the next instant she slipped down a gap in the floorboards and disappeared, and the bone dropped to the floor.

As she got out of her car at Fernworthy, Vivienne tried to fathom why she’d never visited the place before. The place was littered with rich archaeology—that alone should have made her a regular visitor.

After the nightmare girl had disappeared,