

The Anatomy Lesson



SCOTT SANDERS

A medical student assembles an unusual skeleton that tests his knowledge and may change his future.

Reading Prep

Take a moment to review the following terms. Becoming familiar with the terms and their definitions will help you to better enjoy the story.

affixed (v.) fastened; attached
anatomy (n.) the structure of a plant or animal
awry (adj.) wrong; amiss
fastidious (adj.) overly refined; too dainty
flange (n.) a rim on a bone to hold it in place, give it strength, guide it, or attach it to something else
gingerly (adv.) carefully
knobbed (v.) protruded with round edges
malicious (adj.) intentionally harmful or mischievous
nodes (n.) knotty bumps
protruded (v.) jutted out; stuck out
rent (n.) a hole or gap in fabric made by ripping or tearing
slouching (v.) hanging down or drooping
splayed (v.) turned outward
tarnished (adj.) dulled; discolored
unsettling (adj.) disturbing; troubling

Keep a dictionary handy in case you get stuck on other words while reading this story!

By the time I reached the anatomy library all the bones had been checked out. Students bent over the wooden boxes everywhere, in hallways and snack bar, assembling feet and arms, scribbling diagrams in notebooks. Half the chairs were occupied by slouching skeletons, and reclining skeletons littered the tables like driftwood. Since I also would be examined on the subject the next day, I asked the librarian to search one last time for bone boxes in the storeroom.

"But I tell you, they've all been given out," she said, glaring at me from beneath an enormous snarl of dark hair, like a fierce animal caught in a bush. How many students had already pestered her for bones this evening?

I persisted. "Haven't you got any damaged skeletons? Irregulars?" Ignoring my smile, she measured me with her fierce stare, as if estimating the size of box my bones would fill after she had made supper of me. A shadow drooped beneath each of her eyes, permanent sorrow, like the tear mark of a clown. "Irregulars," she repeated, turning away from the counter.

I blinked with relief at her departing back. Only as she slipped noiselessly into the storeroom did I notice her gloved hands. *Fastidious, I thought. Doesn't want to soil herself with bone dust and mites.*

While awaiting my specimens, I studied the vertebrae that knobbed through the bent necks of students all around me, each one laboring over fragments of skeletons. Five lumbar vertebrae, seven cervical, a round dozen thoracic: I rehearsed the names, my confidence building.

Presently the librarian returned with a box. It was the size of an orange crate, wooden, dingy from age or dry rot. The metal clasps that held it shut were tarnished a sickly green. No wonder she wore the gloves.

"This one's for restricted use," she announced, showing it over the counter.

I hesitated, my hands poised above the crate as if I were testing it for heat.

"Well, do you want it, or don't you?" she said.

Affraid she would return it to the archives, I pounced on it with one hand and with the other signed a borrower's card. "Old model?" I inquired pleasantly. She did not smile.

I turned away with the box in my arms. The burden seemed

lighter than its bulk would have promised, as if the wood had dried with age. Perhaps instead of bones inside there would be pyramids of dust. The metal clasps felt cold against my fingers.

After some searching I found a clear space on the floor beside a scrawny man whose elbows and knees protruded through rents in his clothing like so many lumps of a sea serpent above the waters. When I tugged at the clasps they yielded reluctantly. The hinges opened with a gritty shriek, raising for a moment all round me a dozen glazed eyes, which soon returned to their studies.

Inside I found the usual wooden trays for bones, light as bird-wings; but instead of the customary lining of vinyl they were covered with a metal the color of copper and the puttyish consistency of lead. Each bone fitted into its pocket of metal. Without consulting notes, I started confidently on the foot, joining tarsal to metatarsal. But it was soon evident that there were too many bones. Each one seemed a bit odd in shape, with an extra flange where none should be, or a socket at right angles to the orthodox position. The only way of accommodating all the bones was to assemble them into a seven-toed monstrosity, slightly larger than the foot of an adult male, phalanges all of the same length, with ankle-bones bearing the unmistakable nodes for—what? Wings? Flippers?

This drove me back to my anatomy text. But no consulting of diagrams would make sense of this foot. A practiced scrape of my knife blade assured me these were real bones. But from what freakish creature? Feeling vaguely guilty, as if in my ignorance I had given birth to this monstrosity, I looked around the library to see if anyone had noticed. Everywhere living skulls bent studiously over dead ones, ignoring me. Only the librarian seemed to be watching me sidelong, through her tangled hair. I hastily scattered the foot bones to their various compartments.

Next I worked at the hand, which boasted six rather than five digits. Two of them were clearly thumbs, opposite in their orientation, and each of the remaining fingers was double-jointed, so that both sides of these vanished hands would have served as palms. At the wrist a socket opened in one direction, a ball joint protruded in the other, as if the hand were meant to snap onto an adjoining one. I now bent secretively over my outrageous skeleton, unwilling to meet stares from other students.

After tinkering with fibula and clavicle, each bone recognizable but slightly awry from the human, I gingerly unpacked the plates of

the skull. I had been fearing these bones most of all. Their scattered state was unsettling enough to begin with, since in ordinary skeletal kits they would have been assembled into a braincase. Their gathered state was even more unsettling. They would only go together in one arrangement, yet it appeared so outrageous to me that I forced myself to reassemble the skull three times. There was only one jaw, to be sure, though an exceedingly broad one, and only two holes for ears. But the skull itself was clearly double, as if two heads had been squeezed together, like cherries grown double on one stem. Each hemisphere of the brain enjoyed its own cranium. The opening for the nose was in its accustomed place, as were two of the eyes. But in the center of the vast forehead, like the drain in an empty expanse of bathtub, was the socket for a third eye.

I closed the anatomy text, helpless before this freak. Hunched over to shield it from the gaze of other students, I stared long at that tri-angle of eyes, and at the twinned craniums that splayed out behind like a fusion of moons. No, I decided, such a creature was not possible. It was a hoax, a malicious joke designed to shatter my understanding of anatomy. But I would not fall for the trick. Angriily I disassembled this counterfeit skeleton, stuffed the bones back into their metal pockets, clasped the box shut, and returned it to the counter.

"This may seem funny to you," I said, "but I have an examination to pass."

"Funny?" the librarian replied.

"This hoax." I slapped the box, raising a puff of dust. When she only lifted an eyebrow mockingly, I insisted, "It's a fabrication, an impossibility."

"Is it?" she taunted, laying her gloved hands atop the crate.

Furious, I said, "It's not even a very good hoax. No one who knows the smallest scrap of anatomy would fall for it."

"Really?" she said, peeling the glove away from one wrist. I wanted to shout at her and then hurry away, before she could uncover that hand. Yet I was mesmerized by the slide of cloth, the pinkish skin emerging. "I found it hard to believe myself, at first," she said, spreading the naked hand before me, palm up. I was relieved to count only five digits. But the fleshy heel was inflamed and swollen, as if the bud of a new thumb was sprouting there.

A scay, I thought feverishly. Nothing awful.

Then she turned the hand over and displayed for me another palm. The fingers curled upward, then curled in the reverse direction,

forming a cage of fingers on the counter.

I flinched away. Skeletons were shattering in my mind, names of bones were fluttering away like blown leaves. All my carefully gathered knowledge was scattering. Unable to look at her, unwilling to glimpse the socket of flesh that might be opening on her forehead beneath the dangling hair, I kept my gaze turned aside.

"How many of you are there?" I hissed.

"I'm the first, so far as I know. Unless you count our friend here," she added, rapping her knuckles against the bone box.

I guessed the distances to inhabited planets, conjured up the silhouettes of space craft. "But where do you come from?"

"Boise."

"Boise, *Isaho?*"

"Well, actually, I grew up on a beet farm just outside Boise."

"You mean you're—" I pointed one index finger at her and shoved the other against my chest.

"Human? Of course!" She laughed, a quick sound like the release of bubbles underwater. Students at nearby tables gazed up momentarily from their skeletons with bleary eyes. The librarian lowered her voice, until it burbled like whale song. "I'm as human as you are," she murmured.

"But your hands? Your face?"

"Until a few months ago they were just run-of-the-mill human hands." She drew the glove quickly on and touched her swollen cheeks. "My face was skinny. My shoes used to fit."

"Then what happened?"

"I assembled these bones." Again she rapped on the crate. From inside came a hollow clattering, like the sound of gravel sliding.

"You're . . . becoming . . . one of them?"

"So it appears."

Her upturned lips and downturned eyes gave me contradictory messages. The clown-sad eyes seemed too far apart. Even buried under its shrubbery of dark hair, her forehead seemed impossibly broad.

"Aren't you frightened?" I said.

"Not anymore," she answered. "Not since my head began to open."

I winced, recalling the vast skull, pale as porcelain, and the triangle of eyes. I touched the bone box gingerly. "What is it?"

"I don't know yet. But I begin to get glimmerings, begin to see it

alive and flying.”

“Flying?”

“Swimming, maybe. My vision’s still too blurry. For now, I just think of it as a skeleton of the possible, a fossil of the future.”

I tried to imagine her ankles affixed with wings, her head swollen like a double moon, her third eye glaring. “And what sort of creature will you be when you’re—changed?”

“We’ll just have to wait and see, won’t we?”

“We?” I echoed, backing carefully over the linoleum.

“You’ve put the bones together, haven’t you?”

I stared at my palms, then turned my hands over to examine the twitching skin where the knuckles should be.

Think About It!

1. Why might the librarian have given the skeleton to the student; knowing what would happen?
2. Why wasn’t the librarian horrified about what was happening to her?
3. Compare the way evolution takes place in the story with the way evolution occurs in the real world.
4. The librarian tells the student, “For now, I just think of it as a skeleton of the possible, a fossil of the future.” Write your own definition for a “fossil of the future.”
5. The author writes the story in the first-person, which means that the story is told as if the narrator is speaking directly to the reader. Imagine that you are the librarian, and write a first-person narrative. Your story should begin when the medical student asks if there are any bone boxes left in the store room.

Who’s Scott Sanders?

Scott Sanders (b. 1945) writes many different kinds of stories—from folk tales to science fiction. Early in life, he chose to become a writer rather than a scientist. He explains, “I have long been divided, in my life and in my work, between science and the arts . . . When I began writing science fiction in my late twenties, I wanted to ask, through literature, many of the fundamental questions that scientists ask. In particular, I wanted to understand our place in nature, trace the sources of our violence, and speculate about the future evolution of our species.”

Through his essays, stories, and novels, Scott Sanders has tackled many of those questions. He has written about folklore, physics, the naturalist John James Audubon, and the settlers of Indiana. Much of his work is nonfiction, and it includes essays about things that have happened to him personally. In fiction, however, he likes to transform “the familiar into the fabulous.” His work has been printed in many different newspapers and magazines including the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Harper’s*, and *Omnis*. Currently, he lives and teaches in Indiana, where he belongs both to writers’ groups and to the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth.

Read On!

Check out some of Scott Sanders’s other works. The following are just a few of his works:

- *Terrarium*, Indiana University Press, 1996
- *The Engineer of Beasts*, Orchard, 1988
- *Hear the Wind Blow: American Folksongs Retold*, Bradbury, 1985