

STORIES OF DWARVES

- **Museum exhibit GC13687**
- **Lisa's story**
- **James Jack's story**



Museum exhibit GC 13687

Skeleton of Dwarf (female)
Achondroplasia.

Skeleton of an achondroplastic dwarf showing the typical deformity of the skull.

Diminution in length of the long bones. Deformation of the bone ends with a tuberculous lesion associated with marked kyphosis at the level of T12

Presented to Professor Struthers (1823-1899) by a former pupil. It is seen that there is an acute curvature of the spine at the junction of the dorsal and lumbar regions.

Achondroplasia, by Joyce Gunn Cairns
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Lisa's story:

Dr Lisa Wallace, mathematician.

Sometimes subjects cycled in and out of one's life, entering without warning and remaining for a day or more, then exiting again as though erased. This weekend dwarves and babies had pushed their way in, small but not the same, one group stalled by a malfunctioning gene, the other with genes that had yet to function.

Yesterday, coming off the motorway at a large roundabout, Lisa had seen banners draped along a fence on the far side of the road: 'Car boot sale, Saturday and Sunday! Smokers welcome. Dogs welcome. Cross-dressers welcome.' Delighted, she had circled the next roundabout and returned to drive slowly past. 'Residents of Appleby welcome. Lap-dancers welcome.' Smiling to herself, she had debated going in to see what was on offer for such an eclectic mix of customers, but the distant hills had a stronger pull, so she circled again and resumed her journey. Contouring around the feet of Blencathra's ridges, the road headed inexorably downwards into the bowl where the small town of Keswick nestled as though poured.

'Chamonix of the North-West'. Who had said that, perhaps mockingly? She could not remember, but narrow streets were further narrowed by climbing-gear that festooned doorways and spilled out of shops, and there was an air of concentrated enthusiasm for the Great Outdoors amongst the ambling pedestrians. Serious walkers would surely be out on the hills at this time, late morning, Lisa thought: those remaining at ground level were the dreamers and the unfit, and those people who lived here, going about their

normal lives in this town that was not, after all, a theme-park - people who paused only occasionally to remind themselves that their horizons were unusually high, an undulating rim of rock and heather. It would be good to dream, to drift like a somnambulist ... But the main street was crammed with market stalls and she quickly became distracted by local fudge and mint-cake, which she bought for her research group, and a display of woven rough-wool rugs.

‘It’s Herdwick, love,’ the woman said. ‘That’s its natural colour.’

Lisa remembered the grey sheep that Madeleine had shown her, the sheep with the kindly faces, and she tried to imagine how this rug, with the variegated colours of lichen-mottled stone, would look in her own house. She pushed her fingers into the weave, feeling the strong wiry fibres; the woman pulled out a wider selection and spread them over the scarves and hats at the front of the stall, and Lisa dithered over the different shades.

The owner of the adjacent stall which glittered with cheap brass and baubles, occasionally interrupted his patter to slurp from a mug of tea. His long bony nose dipped into the steam and after each gulp, he wiped it with his sleeve. He caught Lisa’s eye and winked.

‘I’ve been telling Beattie there to weave me a nose-bag,’ he said. ‘It gets that cold. But she won’t do it, dunno why.’

‘I keep telling you, Derek, I haven’t got that much wool to spare. You’d need a flock of alpacas to cover that one!’

Lisa laughed with her while Derek continued, ‘A few years back I thought I’d get one of those balaclava things with just my eyes showing but then that Bush declared war on all terrorists and I was scared he’d send in the

cavalry to nuke me.’ He passed a hand-mirror to a girl who was looking at some ear-rings. ‘Here y’are, lass, use this mirror. “ Mirror, mirror on the wall”. This mirror never lies, we’re all beautiful people here.’

‘He likes it ‘cos it makes his nose look small,’ Beattie whispered loudly. ‘Now, love, have you any preference?’

‘As long as it’s only me nose. Look at these necklaces now, did you ever see such workwomanship? All the way from the mountains of Tibet, these - *Blimey!* Any minute Snow White’ll be coming round the corner, too!’

Lisa looked round sharply at the change in his tone, half-knowing what she would see.

Two achondroplasics were browsing along the stalls. They could not have failed to hear Derek’s loud joke and the woman had stopped to examine a display of locally-smoked trout with great concentration. The man, perhaps her husband, had glanced up and had caught sight of Lisa.

There was that awkward moment, the half-smile, the indecision that Lisa experienced on the very rare occasions when she met another achon. The mirror-image that she had forgotten about, that she felt had nothing to do with her daily life; the transient exasperation and the silent question, ‘Why should I greet you like a brother, sister?’.

‘Here come your friends.’ Derek was inexorable, but not unkind.

The small man’s crumpled, ridged face collapsed even more into a toothy smile. ‘No, hadn’t you heard? Snow White’s banged up in jail. We always suspected she was a paedophile, and she was lousy at housework, too. Hi there.’ He nodded at Lisa. ‘How’re you doing?’

‘Fine.’ Lisa smiled. Passing shoppers were looking at them covertly or even with the classic double-take.

‘Nice rugs. Come and look at these, Sheila, one of these would do very nicely for Johnnie’s flat. Johnnie’s our son. This is my wife, Sheila. I’m Terry, by the way.’ He held out his hand to Lisa. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

‘Hallo. I’m Lisa. They are attractive rugs, aren’t they? They’re made from the local Fell sheep.’

Beattie was looking at them in surprise. ‘Don’t you all know each other, then? I just assumed, well, that you were all together.’

‘Bit of a coincidence, isn’t it,’ Derek agreed. ‘Something of a rare breed, not often we see -’

‘We’re just like buses. You don’t see any for ages then three come along at once, eh?’

Derek roared with laughter. ‘That’s good. You wouldn’t like to come and help out here, would you – Terry, did you say? We’d make a good team, I reckon.’

‘We’re not that rare, you know. But I don’t know where we all hide ourselves, do you, Lisa?’

Lisa realised, unhappily, that Terry had evangelical tendencies: he would always be ready to ‘fight our corner’.

His wife had clearly heard it all before. ‘Terry, they’re busy and we need to go.’

‘If you reckon that one of us is born in every 20,000 live births, that should be about thirty new children a year with our sort of restricted growth.’

Our son is like us, of course. We knew he would be, and we were happy about that, weren't we, Sheila?

'Thirty? That's a lot,' Beattie agreed, uncertainly.

'But you don't see them, do you? And it's not just because we're so small and are beneath your notice. It's a mystery. But it just goes to show that you shouldn't be surprised to see a few of us at one time in normal circumstances.'

'I think I'll take this one, I like the mixture of colours.' Lisa raised her eyebrows at Beattie, who grimaced sympathetically.

Derek had been briefly distracted, helping two women choose a pair of candlesticks, but now he leant across the wooden bar that separated the stalls.

'Colour. What about colour then? You three are white, but where's the black and brown ones? Don't they have persons who are vertically challenged or whatever we're supposed to say, too, or is it a culture thing? The wrong 'uns get left out on a hillside to die. Or get shut away.'

'Derek! You can't say things like that!' Beattie was shocked, but Terry laughed.

'In Brixton and Bradford? No, it's a valid point.'

Lisa suddenly wanted to be far away, preferably soaring in tandem with one of the paragliders who were circling beneath Skiddaw. Counting out the correct money, she grabbed the rolled-up rug from the front of the stall. 'Sorry, I really have to go.'

'Join us for a coffee, Lisa. Sheila and I would be glad of your company, wouldn't we, dear?'

For a moment the two women made eye contact. Eye to eye: the realisation was like a physical blow. Almost simultaneously Lisa understood that for Sheila and Terry this was unremarkable, routine. At home, in their kitchen, bathroom, sitting-room, at whatever time of day, they could see each other face to face and for them this was normality. Normal proportionate family life. And they had had a normal proportionate baby, who had now grown-up to be their size. Only outside their front door was the world a difficult and disproportionate place.

Lisa hesitated.

'He means well,' Sheila said softly. She could have been in her fifties; she wore a badly-fitting tweed coat and a knitted woollen hat from which grey curls escaped, but she held herself within a shell of calm.

'Yes.' Struggling to hold the rolled-up rug, Lisa held out her hand. 'But a friend is expecting me. Thank you.' When Sheila took her hand to shake it, Lisa suddenly leant forward and not quite knowing why, managed to kiss her on the cheek. 'Thanks. 'Bye, Terry. Enjoy your day.'

Lisa takes the slip-road that will lead her back to Liverpool. For a while she has been thinking about the paper she must work on tomorrow, but now she is tired and the density of the traffic is increasing; she must concentrate fully on reaching home. But, for perhaps the first time, the image of her home is empty, and resonant with echoes. She imagines Sheila and Terry and a tiny, short-limbed baby who is playing on a Herdwick rug.

© Ann Lingard: This is an edited extract from *The Embalmer's Book of Recipes* (Indepenpress 2009). More details about the novel can be found on Ann Lingard's website, <http://www.annlingard.com/writing/novels/the-embalmers-book-of-recipes/> where there are also three short, amusing and thought-provoking videos made by Dr Tom Shakespeare and Professor John Burn, about achondroplasia.

In memory of James Jack



"In 1922, Charles Cathcart, Conservator of the College Museum, recruited James Jack to help William Wardie, Technician, with the maintenance and remounting of specimens. He also acted as projectionist, displaying the glass photographic slides at lectures and talks."¹

"On the outbreak of war it was decided that the specimens in the Museum would best be saved from the risk of damage by storing them in the basement of the College. They remained there until 1943 when it was apparent that the risks of air raids were diminishing and it was desirable that the College activities should, at least in part, be resumed.

During these years the only work conducted in the Museum was the repairing of damaged specimens by the one and only member of staff, James Jack. In addition Smith, the College Officer, and Jack undertook firewatching duties in the College buildings."²



"James Jack was a well-known, popular figure, who lived at No.7 Hill Square. In addition to working in the Museum, he helped the local newsagent on Saturdays by selling newspapers at the College gate.

It was said that 'he brought to his task skill, hard work and always a delightful sense of humour'." ¹

"James Jack was an unusually small person, described popularly as a 'circus' dwarf. In scientific terms he suffered from *chondrodystrophia fetalis* (achondroplasia), a disorder of the growth of bone that is inherited. The abnormality affects stature but neither physical activity nor mental function." ¹

James Jack's arrival is also attributed to Professor David Middleton Greig (1834-1936).

"In 1922 Greig 'procured' for William Waldie [*sic*] an assistant from Dundee - an achondroplastic dwarf, James Jack." ²

"During his years of surgical practice in Dundee David Greig had been an ardent collector of pathological specimens, especially those relating to diseases of bone and abnormalities of the skull. ...

Many stories are told about Greig and his collection, some of which have been related by his nephew Dr B S Simpson who recalls visiting the attic of his uncle's residence in Dundee and finding the place full of this material. Some of the stories suggest that the collection was acquired with an unusual enthusiasm.

The actual number of items thus added to the Museum [collection] is difficult to ascertain but it ran to several hundreds and included 300 skulls." ²



The Greig skull collection, boxed in the basement, and on display

"Initially Mr Jack was employed in a temporary capacity on a wage of 30/- per week, but he stayed with the Museum for over 40 years, eventually retiring in September 1964." ¹

"There was no question of Greig's fascination for achondroplasics and there are in the College a large number of clinical photographs of the new assistant." ²

But, "James Jack long outlived David Greig and at a much later date, still working in the College, he pronounced: '**He didn't get me, and he's deid**.'" ²

Notes:

1. *From the text accompanying James Jack's photograph in the Surgeons' Hall Museum*

2. *From The Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh by Violet Tansey & D.E.C.Mekie, 1978*

http://www.museum.rcsed.ac.uk/docs/museums_history.pdf