

Strange Appearance

by
Greg Didaleusky

“Ocala National Forest is the third largest national forest of white pines in the United States east of the Mississippi River,” Robert Jenson stated to a group of thirty people standing in front of him at the park’s museum building. “Brown bears, black bears, wolves, deer and a variety of poisonous snakes make their home here. There are areas in the park people haven’t explored due to its wooded density and remoteness. Over the past hundred years, officials estimated that over fifty people have wandered into the forest and were never found. They were either eaten by predators, succumbed by poisonous snake bites, or had died of exposure to the harsh environment.”

A young man in his late teens chuckled. “Maybe they were taken by Big Foot?”

Robert grinned. “You’re partly right.”

“Really?”

“Yes. According to legend a half-man and half ape creature called Skunk Ape has been sighted throughout Florida from the Everglades to the northern region of the state, including here.”

A middle-aged woman asked, “Why do they call it Skunk Ape?”

“Because when the creature is nearby and the wind is blowing right, it has a pungent odor like that of a skunk.” This was Robert’s seventh year as a tour guide for the summer months. He completed his third year as a medical student at the University of Florida two weeks ago. Almost every tour group for the past six years--and now this year--have had at least one person making a comment about Big Foot.

“Mr. Jenson,” shouted a middle-aged, burly man behind him. He was wearing a ranger’s uniform.

Robert didn’t have to turn around to recognize Samuel Tallquist’s voice. His boss never liked him from the first time they met seven years ago after Robert graduated from high school and was hired as a forestry guide for the summer. Robert had taken the job to help pay for college, but after the second summer, he looked forward to talking to visitors and answering their questions about the history and sites of the park. After undergraduate studies followed by medical school, the job also gave him relief from the complex information in medical books. He liked interacting with people and considered himself a congenial extrovert. Robert turned around. He could never figure out why he agitated Mr. Tallquist. “Yes, sir.”

“You don’t need to frighten these people about a mythical creature that doesn’t have any scientific proof it even exists. No pictures or videos of this thing have ever been taken. People’s imaginations are keeping this mythical creature alive.”

“What’s that smell?” asked a gray-hair man toward the front of the group.

A pungent odor permeated the area around Robert, Samuel, and the group of park visitors.

“Is it the odor of the Skunk Ape?” asked the teenager who had started the topic of Big Foot.

Other people in the crowd were nodding and making comments that a terrible odor was overwhelming them.

“No,” Samuel answered, shaking his head back and forth. “I don’t--”

“It’s the odor emitted by a decomposing body,” interrupted a young woman in her late twenties, who stood toward the front of the group.

Samuel stared at the woman and frowned. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because human decomposition has a very distinct smell. Once you smell it for the first time, you’ll never forget it.” She raised her head, turning it slightly to the right. “And since the wind is coming from the west, I’d say the odor is originating from over there.” She pointed to the left of Robert and Samuel.

“Why should I believe what you say is true?” Samuel asked skeptically.

“I’m Cynthia Davidson, a pathologist’s assistant for District 5 Medical Examiner’s Office here in Marion County and surrounding counties. I am very familiar with this particular odor, since I deal with dead bodies every day in the morgue.”

Robert grinned and chuckled to himself. *That ah girl, put Mr. Tallquist in his obstinate place.*

“Oh. Maybe you should check it out?” Samuel suggested. “Why don’t you, young lady, and Mr. Jenson go find out if what you said we all smell is a decomposing body? I’ll stay with the group of visitors while you track down the odor. Call me on my cell phone if you find something.”

“Don’t you think we should call the sheriff’s department?” Cynthia asked as she stepped away from the visitors and stood in front of Samuel. She glanced at Robert, then back toward Samuel.

“Yes. That’ll be a better idea,” Robert agreed. Sure, he dissected a cadaver with fellow classmates for anatomy class, but he never felt comfortable being with a dead body.

Samuel glanced at Robert. “No. It’s not a better idea.” He then turned toward Cynthia. “If you find a body, you can call the sheriff’s department. We don’t want to jump the gun.” He paused a moment. “I guess that’s not a good choice of words.” He chuckled. No one laughed.

Robert led Cynthia through a meandering trail wide enough for one person. Cynthia walked a few steps behind him. “So you’re a pathologist’s assistant for the county?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you go further and become a doctor?”

“I don’t think it’s any of your business. We’re here to check on a dead body, not my personal life.”

Robert felt like his jaw dropped a foot as he became speechless. This attractive, petite female with short-styled hair, minimum make-up put him in an awkward state of mind. His good-natured personality was shattered by someone he thought was mild mannered. He enjoyed her comeback comment toward Samuel, but when it was now toward him, he didn’t like the rejected feeling. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry into your life.”

Cynthia snickered. “I was being a brat. I do this sometimes to get a reaction from people. I can see it affected you.”

Robert sighed, letting out all the unpleasant feelings created by Cynthia’s derogatory comments toward him. He felt reprieved. “You definitely were convincing. I got to say that about you.”

“I’ll try not to show my brat side of me toward you. Although I don’t like anyone prying into my personal life. But I’m sure you were creating small talk.”

Robert nodded. “I won’t ask you any more personal questions.”

“Don’t promise something you can’t keep. You never know what the future holds.”

Does it mean she wants to get to know me? Or did she have many disappointments from empty promises in her life? “Like you said, we’re here to find where the odor of human decomposition is.”

“The odor is getting stronger,” Cynthia said.

“I agree.” Robert slowed his pace. His mind visualized a hiker lying dead on the side of the trail after being bitten by a poisonous snake. It wouldn’t be the first time someone discovered a body in the forest. But it would be his first direct encounter of one. If this was what a pathologist or medical examiner dealt with every day, he was glad he was going to be a doctor who treated living patients.

“Stop,” she said. “Don’t move or say anything. I hear something to the right of us.”

Robert’s first thought was a bear or some other predator was about to charge them. He held his breath and listened for any movement. He heard the wind rustling leaves and branches of trees--and a buzzing noise.

“Do you hear it?” Cynthia whispered.

“Yes. A buzzing sound.”

“Exactly. I believe we’re close to the decomposing body. What we’re hearing are blowflies. Follow me.” Cynthia began making her way between the pine trees to her right. Robert followed behind her.

After walking about twenty feet, the buzzing sound intensified, along with the overwhelming odor.

She stopped. “There it is.”

In front of them several feet away in a circular clearing with a diameter of about twenty feet was a dead body. Flies encompassed the body, laying their eggs on its human host. The completely bald, small-build body was lying face up with a full-face, fleshed-colored plastic mask molded to the shape of a normal appearing person. The corpse was fully clothed with a three-button, blue pullover shirt over a chest without the presence of breasts, along with slightly soiled, beltless faded blue jeans and a newer pair of white tennis shoes. The arms were lying against the side of the body, and the legs were straight out with the ankles touching. The deceased person had the appearance of someone lying peacefully in nature’s open coffin.

Robert made a choking sound. “Damn, I can hardly breathe. The smell is terrible. How can you deal with this odor every day?”

“You get used to it after a while. You can put wintergreen salve under your nose to lessen the odor of decomposition.”

“Do you have any of the salve with you, by chance? I’d be your friend for life if you have some.”

“Sorry. I don’t. Breathe through your mouth.”

“That’s what Dr. Tracy told us the first day in his human anatomy class. I’d have to say formaldehyde is more tolerable than decaying flesh.”

“Oh. So you’re a medical student and a tour guide?”

“Yes. I finished my third year of med school at the University of Florida recently. I do this job as a tour guide during the summer break. It gives me extra money. Also, it’s enjoyable. Although, I wouldn’t call finding a dead body enjoying. It’s more like being in a real-life horror movie.” He quickly looked around. “Right now I’m waiting for a crazed killer with a meat cleaver or chain saw to appear from the woods and make us one of his victims.”

“You sure have a vivid imagination,” Cynthia said as she looked up at Robert and grinned.

He glanced into her brown eyes. “I’m not sure if what you mean is that I’m a little weird.”

“Not at all. It means you’re a thinker, expressing your creative mind.”

“Thanks.” He liked this young attractive woman. “So, do you think this person has been dead for a while?”

“From the bloating of the body and this amount of flies present, I’d say off hand, the corpse has been here at least a couple of days. The daytime temperature for the past week has been in the high eighties and nights in the high sixties. This temperature range determines the calculated decomposition rate.”

“What do you mean by a calculated decomposition rate?” Robert asked as he squatted to get a different look at the body.

“There are five anthropological research facilities in the United States studying the decaying process in human bodies.”

“You mean body farms?”

“Yes. ‘Body farms’ is the name coined by Patricia Cornwell in her 1995 crime fiction novel. Different outside conditions will affect decomposition. Cold weather slows the rate of a decomposing body, whereas higher temperatures, direct sunlight and elevated humidity speeds this process up. There are various other parameters discovered by the researchers at those facilities having an effect on exposed corpses in nature’s environment.”

“I’d say you know your pathology business.” Robert peered at the bottom of the corpse’s tennis shoes. “These tennis shoes appear brand new. The tread to the soles don’t have any wear to them. This person picked up quite a bit of debris on the bottom of their shoes. The debris is dry and hardened which supports your estimated time of death.”

Cynthia stooped next to him and leaned forward, peering at the soles of the tennis shoes. “Very good observation.”

“Also, the shoelaces look new.”

“I’d have to agree,” she said, as she stood up. “You have an astute observation of the crime scene and a keen eye for details. This will be an attribute when you become a doctor.”

“Thanks.”

“I better call 911 and let’em know what we found here. We’ll need the sheriff’s department and the CSU unit here.”

Robert pulled out his cell phone and called his boss, Samuel. After informing him what they found in a clearing of the forest, he hung up. Cynthia was still talking with the 911 operator. He stared down at the body and wondered why did someone carry this person into the clearing of the

woods and dump them like a piece of garbage? And why would someone want to put a mask on a dead body?

~*~

The Marion County Sheriff Deputies had completed unwinding a spool of yellow plastic tape that stated CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS around trees every ten feet apart warning any unauthorized people not to enter. The tape created a circle around the twenty-foot diameter clearing of the crime scene.

Cynthia and Robert stood at the edge of the small clearing with the unidentified body several feet away. A slightly overweight man in his early fifties wearing a white shirt and tie with a sheriff's badge hanging from his neck stood facing them. He had walked up to them from the other side of the clearing while another detective in a light blue shirt and tie stopped at the body site.

"Detective O'Conner this is Robert Jenson. We're the ones who found the body. It's my day off and I was here with a group of park visitors. We all were standing listening to information about a mythical creature when everyone smelled a putrid odor. I immediately knew it was the odor of death. I was asked to investigate where the smell was coming from by a park ranger." Cynthia had met Phillip O'Conner, a major crime detective, on several other suspicious death cases the past two years. He was a bit cantankerous without small talk. All business.

O'Conner glanced down at Robert's embroidered Ocala National Forest emblem. "What is your position with the park?"

"I'm a park guide. I talk with visitors about the history of the park, sites of interest, and general information."

"Did you touch the body?"

"I didn't--"

Before Robert could finish his answer, Cynthia interjected, "You don't think I know crime scene protocol?" Her voice projected resentment. "We were together and neither of us came any closer to the body than a couple of feet."

O'Conner flinched, taking a step backwards. "I'm sorry. Didn't mean to offend you. But as you know, I have to ask this question for my records."

Cynthia felt embarrassed by her piercing remark to the detective, but she wasn't going to apologize to him. It would imply she wasn't correct in what she said and was incompetent in her profession as a forensic pathologist's assistant. She worked mainly with male colleagues in the ME's office and had to prove to them--and Detective O'Conner--she was good in what she did. "Everyone has to do their job."

“It’s like what Ms. Davidson said, Detective. “We were only a couple of feet away from the body.”

Robert obviously sensed the tension and tried to defuse the situation between Detective O’Conner and me, thought Cynthia. She knew she had a tendency to be brash when standing up for herself at times.

“It was obvious the person was dead,” Robert said. “And being First Responders, there wasn’t anything we could do to help.”

“Oh. Are you an EMT, too?” There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

“No, sir. I’m a fourth-year medical student. I mean, I will be in a couple of months.”

“So you’re more than a guide for the park?”

“Yes. I work during the summer months as a guide when I’m not in school.”

“I see,” he said, writing down the information in his notepad.

Robert asked, “Have you ever seen a dead body wearing a plastic mask?”

“No. Not in this type of crime scene. I’ve seen it during a Halloween night party murder. But nothing like what I’m seeing here.”

“Are you saying this person was murdered?”

“No. I’m not saying the person was murdered,” he said as his partner, Sean Robinson, was examining the body behind him.

“I don’t see any obvious trauma to the body,” Sean said. He was a short, medium-build, forty-five-year-old veteran of the Marion County Sheriff’s Department. He was kneeled next to the corpse, checking for any bullet or knife wounds, or any limb or neck deformities. He didn’t have wintergreen salve underneath his nose to block out the putrid decomposing odor of the body lying on the forest floor.

A one o’clock Florida sun now illuminated the previously shaded opening.

“Remove the mask,” O’Conner requested. “Let’s see if the face has any distinguishing features.”

“Won’t the face be distorted due to decomposition?” Robert asked. “Ms. Davidson had told me earlier while we waited for you and your partner that the gases of decomposition cause expansion of the skin. It’s like someone taking a massive amount of corticosteroids, creating an image of an obese Pillsbury Doughboy. The expanding gas is why a submerged body at the bottom of a lake or river eventually floats to the surface.” Robert glanced at Cynthia.

She nodded, followed with a smirk. *You learn fast.*

“Yes. You’re correct, Mr. Jenson. But we still need to see what’s underneath the mask.” The crime scene unit investigative team arrived and Detective O’Conner directed one of them to take pictures of the mask on the body. A moment later, Detective Robinson reached down to lift the mask off the corpse.

Cynthia and Robert stood there with anticipation of what was hiding underneath the mask. Would there be a distorted face from trauma, severe burn scars or a congenital deformity? They and the detectives would soon find out.

**Review and purchase my novels—Frozen Death/Concealed Warnings/Sudden Blindness/Strange Appearance—at my web site: www.gregdidaleusky.com
My books are available at Amazon and Barnes & Nobel and several other venders.**