

The Mummy Wore Combat Boots

Mummies are the stuff of legends. The ancient Egyptians practiced the art of mummification in order to preserve the body for the afterlife. The Victorians were fascinated by them and hosted mummy unwrapping parties. For these events, mummies were shipped to England and literally unwrapped, so the elite might marvel at the remains. The obsession with all things Egyptian abroad led to the creation of a mummy trade in Egypt. To fuel the demand for this morbid industry, ordinary graves were robbed, and poor unfortunates were made into pharonic knockoffs in order to turn a fast buck with unsuspecting tourists.

If I were there, I like to think I would have known. That they were fakes, I mean. My name is Palmer Richardson. I teach archaeology at the University of Toronto in Ontario, Canada. My specialty is forensic anthropology. I'm like those guys you see on television who work alongside the police to identify murder victims, especially when all that's left are the bones. Virtually everything a person does in life leaves its mark on the bones. Things like sex, age, diet, physical activity—it's all there, written in the bones. The trick is in learning how to read the signs.

I was contacted by Suzanne Pascoe, the Egyptology curator at the Royal Ontario Museum, when several unidentified mummies turned up during its most recent

revitalization. The ROM's undergone many renovations since it opened almost a century ago. While it's regrettable, it stands to reason that some paperwork will get lost in the shuffle. The situation was unacceptable as far as Suzanne was concerned. She made it her personal mission to catalogue each of the unidentified mummies. My

job was to help dot the Is and cross the Ts to fill in the gaps in the paperwork and possibly identify the remains. To aid us in our quest, Suzanne had convinced the hospital to schedule overnight X-ray and CT-scans, in a sort of virtual mummy unwrapping. The invitation to get up close and personal with a mummy doesn't happen often in one's career. Wild horses couldn't have kept me away from the opportunity, even though my wife wasn't exactly tickled pink at the prospect. You see, Suzanne's my ex-girl. She also happens to be a merciless flirt, especially where I'm concerned. I dumped Suzanne years ago. When I was with her, I never knew if she ever really considered me her partner, or just a serial one night stand. As corny as it sounds, my wife's my soul mate. Trust me: she has nothing to worry about.

The mummy on deck for X-rays was called Rahotep. A few technicians helped me lift him onto the table so we could shoot some film. Rahotep's mummy was enclosed in a cast-like, cartonnage shell on which had been drawn a series of brightly coloured glyphs in neat, vertical rows. Though I wasn't up on my ancient Egyptian, I was still able

to pick out symbols for "warrior" and "prince", and for "blessed" and "honoured".

Where my ancient Egyptian failed, Suzanne filled in the blanks. She leaned over Rahotep's linen and plaster sarcophagus and reached around me to point out the symbols. As she spoke I was enveloped in a haze of her perfume. Her scent was sweet and distantly floral. It brought back a slew of memories—not all of them disagreeable—in a dizzying flood.

"These symbols tell a narrative, a story, of how Rahotep made a pilgrimage to Thebes to pay homage to Amun-Ra in the time of Amenhotep IV." She traced the

symbols with a gloved finger as she spoke. "And over here?" She stepped around me, allowing a hand to rest briefly on the small of my back and trailing across it before moving on. My body shivered, welcoming her touch as my brain screamed in anger at the violation. Remember who you're with and why you're here, I scolded myself, even as I reasoned that some bodily responses were as autonomic as the beat of a heart.

"There's an account of his family's holdings. How much land they owned, their possessions, and the like." She continued to read from the list. Very interesting, even if it was uncomfortable for our proximity. "Strange though," she said distracted, as she caressed a conglomeration of glyphs near Rahotep's left thigh, "the job looks rushed here, sloppy," as if she were noticing it for the first time.

"We found similar glyphs documented online," she continued, "almost like his handlers chose from stock text, like they chose two sayings from column A and three from column B and that's what they wrote." She looked from Rahotep back to me and smiled. The look lasted way too long, if you ask me. She had smoky eyes. I had forgotten how alluring they were.

"Okay on your end, Paulie?" I hated that name, 'Paulie'. It was a pet name, residual of our old relationship. It was okay back then, cute, even. Now it made my skin crawl to hear it which had a sobering effect. This was Suzanne at my side, amorous, judgmental, (and in all likelihood, promiscuous) Suzanne. I was married to my wife, and happily at that.

I grunted something to indicate I was—ready, I mean—and along with a few technicians managed to give Rahotep the old heave-ho and turn him over.