We began to excavate there almost exactly two years ago. Today, I am the only one left.

At first, nothing about the dig seemed unusual. We were a small team largely augmented by students from the university. Only Ash, Nat and I had any real archaeological experience of major sites, and none of us could possibly have predicted what we would find.

It started as a simple exercise; in an area already known to have rich deposits of Celtic and Iron Age artefacts, our task was to scour the thick, fractured mud and swell the ranks of existing samples. Our bosses expected mainly small items—the kind of thing ancient people might have tossed into sacred pools or brooks, the gateways between worlds, in the hope of benediction, salvation or intercession. I can still see Ash, at the time writing a paper on the role of sacrifice in Celtic religious practice, crouching in the dirt with the breeze tousling his dark brown hair. The sun had brought out the freckles on his nose and he had discarded his shirt, bare-chested and khaki-kneed as he sifted through one particular patch of darkened earth at the end of the trench.

“Hey,” he said, “this is interesting. Looks like pollen.”
We all gathered around, agreed that yes, it did, and wasn’t it strange to see a deposit like that there? We dug further. Nat—her henna-orange hair piled up on top of her head and bound with a tie-dyed bandanna—suggested maybe we could be looking at bunches of flowers, or garlands of offering. The three of us discussed it, an earnest and protracted huddle in the silt-rich sunshine. A smell of old woodland and the dankness of recently turned earth threaded through the air. Then one of the students cried out, a shriek of glee.

It was a finger.

Old, worn almost past recognition—more like a chicken bone wrapped in leather than any fleshy human digit—but it was there. We spent ages debating what to do, how to proceed.

Urgent phone calls streaked to and from department heads and private mentors. Old friends and colleagues were dragged from their desks to give advice. It took hours to plan every move. Late into the night we worked, painstakingly slicing away at the earth, marking out the area to be dug, preparing the ground to yield its secrets.

He came to us slowly over the following days. Inch by inch, suggestions and hints, though nothing prepared us for the moment we were actually able to look into his face, a bridge of years across forgotten times. Millennia had passed since light last touched him, but now here he was, revealed in the eerie glow of our halogen lanterns. We hardly dared breathe. The thick clay had preserved him beautifully—a miracle when so much of this area had been broken under bulldozer or plough. A major ‘A’ road ran not half a mile from the field, heavy with traffic and the assaults of modern life. He seemed to stare out at us from his earthen tomb, though his eyes stayed firmly shut, his face crumpled into a perpetual sleep, mouth a tautened death grin and knotted rags of hair clinging to his head. His skin, tanned to the consistency of goat hide and stretched tight over his bones, still bore the tattoos, the marks and etchings that had covered him in life, the majority of his body burnished to a deep, warm ochre colour with some kind of powdery pigment. From that, we drew his name.

When we took him out of the ground, it was an occasion clogged with onlookers, journalists, academics, and general gawpers. Someone’s wagging tongue brought them running, though I’m still not sure who leaked the information. I suspected Ash. It all fitted so well with his paper, and he took such easy delight in talking to everyone, mentioning his theories and his work.

We watched The Red Man being carefully laid into his new coffin—a hermetically sealed, thermostatically controlled box which would see him safely transported back to the university for further study, and the observant among us should have realised the date. It was the first of August: among the Celts, the feast of Lughnasadh. Fire marked it, for those ancient believers. Bonfires—bone fires—for the bright one, the reflex of divinity they found in the sun; a blazing, startling god of many gifts, both giver of life and bringer of death.
Different mythologies have put different names to it, and to him, over time. Even then, varying religions squabbled between themselves, usurping and changing each other’s pantheons. The Irish Celts, the Romano-British incomers… the Druids.

That night, breathless with thoughts of what our discovery might be able to reveal, we toasted the departure of The Red Man. We sat close to the trenches, bathed in the light of a blazing white moon, full and round as an old sixpence, and drank bottles of warm, flat beer.

“You do realise,” Ash said, “that we’ll never live this one down? Any of us. Thirty years on, he’ll still be defining all our careers. We’ll never get away from it.”

We laughed. Sure, we all agreed, Ash probably had a point. But who could begrudge giving their whole career, their whole life, over to something as momentous as this? The Red Man—possibly the most complete, most unique burial of his period ever discovered—would keep us all in employment for the foreseeable future. All he asked in return was our undying devotion, dedication, and… well, what more than that?

Of course, plenty remained on the dig site to require our attention, so despite the lingering excitement and impatience among the team, we needed to finish what we’d started. Days passed, full of nothing but shards of pottery, the occasional part of a brooch or perhaps something that might once have been a figurine. In any other circumstances, these discoveries would have excited us beyond measure; tiny glimpses into a past we couldn’t hope to recapture. Yet, with him so many miles away, lonely in some pristine laboratory with scientists and historians rubbing their hands in a rapture of indecision over how they should begin to analyse him, I found it hard to think of anything else.

Study of something so magnificent takes years, naturally. Decades. Just look at the Rosetta Stone, or the *Darwinius masillae*. Yet the hunger we felt was immediate. Even then we spoke about him incessantly, wondered who or what he’d been. A warrior, a shaman, a willing sacrifice? A criminal, a priest, or a king? How had he lived, and what sights had he seen? We tried to conjure his landscape, his world, around us, weaving possibilities from hope and conjecture. Nat was the first to confess something odd.

There was a huge team barbecue on the green opposite the village pub, the night before we all left. We’d become quite the local celebrities in our time there.

Nat spoke to me then.

“Weirdest thing,” she said, looking at me with pale, drawn eyes. “Last night, I had this dream. There was— I don’t know. Drumming. Flames. I was running through this woodland, but I kept falling, and I felt like I was being watched. There was… something, in the trees. It was horrible. I woke up, couldn’t go back to sleep afterwards.”

I told her she needed time off, that the madness of these past weeks was enough to send anyone’s
imagination spiralling out of control, and she should take a few days completely out of the loop. She gave me a slightly peculiar look, but nodded and promised she’d do exactly that. Her fiancé had a boat they used to spend time on; I got the impression that was what she planned to do.

So, the chapter closed. I had supposed we would all see each other soon enough, now the heavy lifting and the bone-kicking was done, and the real work had to begin. It’s never the physical completing of a puzzle that marks its end, after all, but rather the deciphering of how it came to be made.

However, my assumption—that we would remain a team, however loosely joined in our study—proved flimsy and false. Months passed. I heard only infrequently from Ash, who had taken a leave of absence from the university and claimed to be busy writing. Nat was apparently still off on board the boat somewhere, or so her supervisor at the museum said. I had yet to see The Red Man again; there was a considerable degree of complexity to the political alliances and embargoes of the facilities holding and studying him. It would have been easier to arrange a poker game with the Queen.

Ash was the one to call me.

Nat’s body had been found, washed up on a beach in Scotland. The fiancé and the boat were both missing. Though I didn’t know it at the time, he would later re-emerge in Panama, claiming amnesia and some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder, and saying nothing about the accident except that he couldn’t save her. It was devastating news. Someone so young, so bright, so talented, and so full of life… all the usual, inadequate tributes swept in. I made my speeches to the press when they called me. Nat, being female and pretty, had been so much the face of The Red Man’s discovery. A few of the tabloids, making that connection, muttered darkly at hints of a curse, but all that was quashed and considered very poor taste. Besides, the absent fiancé and the suggestion of murder sold just as many papers.

Speaking of which, Ash brought out his paper, almost a year to the day since we had exhumed the Red Man. Or, I should say, he brought out his book. It had grown vastly in size and complexity; no longer destined for an academic journal, but rather the shelves of every local store, chemist, grocery and train station newsagent. It now boasted a fashionable publisher, a ‘ground-breaking’ theory and a new title:

*The Red Man: Druid Victim?*

The embossed gold print on the cover, the ghost-writer’s standard of prose, and the copious photos of the dig site used out of context to promote his ridiculous hypothesis all shocked me, but not as much as the fact that—judging by the information he provided—Ash had been allowed recent access
to The Red Man. When I questioned him, he didn’t lie. Yes, he admitted. He had leaned on an old professor of his, twisted a few arms and struck a few deals. He didn’t see why I should be so concerned. All was fair in love, war and archaeology, wasn’t it?

He said it with a glassy, greasy smile on his face and he tossed me a shallow laugh. I didn’t buy any of it, but I was too damn furious to argue. I walked out without a word and—less than nine weeks later—Ash was dead.

There remains a great deal of mystery over how it happened, even now. They say, that great and nebulous ‘they’, that questions will be answered at the inquest, but what those questions actually are, no one seems keen to state.

The police only spoke to me out of politeness, I think. I hadn’t seen him since we argued and—had I planned to poison him out of spite—I would surely have done it with rather more alacrity. I didn’t say as much to them, of course. They tend to disapprove of comments like that. It was drugs, though. An overdose of sleeping pills washed down with single malt. Odd, I thought, because Ash had never been a spirit drinker. Neither had he ever had trouble sleeping. I wondered what would cause such a sudden change and—I can’t deny it—did perhaps uncharitably ascribe it to guilt over that awful book he’d cobbled together and thrown out so fast.

I have never read such a loosely collated pack of assumptions, idiocies and outright lies. We had no evidence to suggest that The Red Man had been a direct religious sacrifice… though initial examinations of the body showed he had been stabbed, strangled and possibly drugged with a draught of something not unlike mistletoe. Still, we had no way of knowing it wasn’t a judicial execution, or a completely secular murder.

Yet, Ash had determined and boldly claimed The Red Man had been killed by druids, part of a chain of human sacrifices that had littered that order’s dying days in Romano-British history.

He wove tales of ritual cannibalism, fountaining blood and sacred flesh that—in my opinion—owed more to Hammer Horror than any scientific fact, but he shot straight to the top of the bestseller lists. The book made people who’d never nursed an interest in the past think about it in new ways, and stoked up interest in the case that generated more documentaries and column inches than I would have thought possible. His own death caused an equal sensation, and people began to chatter widely of The Red Man’s curse.

Nonetheless, a lingering unease clung to me, and it wasn’t quelled when I learned Ash had bequeathed me his notes and photographs. I went to his lawyer’s office to pick them up, pacing through the grimy London streets. The pale façades of Portland stone, rising up on each side of St. James Street and riven through with the tiny traces of fossils, the death masks of ammonites and trilobites set into the very bricks of these grand buildings, reminded me that the past never dies. It is always around us.
The Ancient Greeks believed that. They thought that, rather than standing on a narrow line of time, facing bravely forwards as the future hurtles towards us, we are in fact facing the other way and looking into the past. It made sense, to their logic. The past, until it recedes to the vanishing point on the horizon, we can see, while the future—to which we are blind—comes at us from behind, slipping stealthily over our shoulders and enveloping us before we have a chance to run. And, all the while, we stand there and gaze back at the past, even as it changes before our eyes, a constantly flowing ribbon ebbing away from our grasp.

It seemed so very odd to see his face again. Odd, too, to see the faces of friends so recently lost—Ash and Nat, grinning in the trench photos, with all the glee and joy of a new discovery—but strangest of all to once again confront The Red Man. In black-and-white and in colour, he captivated me from the still frames. His stretched, hardened skin, his arms outflung and yet his body curled like a foetus, protecting itself... or perhaps protected? Had he been carefully laid out, as Ash’s book suggested, by killers for whom his death was sacred? Had his last visions been of a world pushed to the brink of collapse, a taboo ritual enacted in a desperate attempt to save the only order his people had ever known? By the time I was allowed my own audience with The Red Man, my curiosity was at fever pitch.

He looked weirdly peaceful, resting on the stark white of his examination bed. The climate was strictly controlled, my hands encased in double layers of gloves, lest the acid or moisture of my skin should damage him. The university, the museum and the institute—that holy triad behind the funding of our excavation—were all fighting over the best way to preserve him for posterity and future study. They seemed to be coming down on the side of freeze-drying, blasting him like supermarket coffee or mixed herbs in a foil packet.

I tried not to think of it, tried to focus on what I was there to see. Years of my work on Iron Age communities, how they lived and how they died, could be validated or exploded by what he had to tell me. My fingers traced the outline of his broken, wounded body. He had suffered horribly before he died, struck in several places by something blunt—a club, perhaps a fist—and pierced by blades to his chest, arms and thighs. His neck had been tied tight with a cord of deerskin, still embedded in the mummified flesh all these centuries later.

Presumably at some opportune point—at some climactic part of the ceremony, if Ash’s so-called theories were to be believed—his throat was slashed, and maybe that had finally killed him.

Yet the clothes he wore, the fine cloth preserved in dribs and drabs, stained and frayed almost beyond recognition, did not seem to have been sullied by the blood of his death. Had his killers redressed him after the act? Or was it simply that we modern onlookers had so little left to go on, our understanding so patchy, that we were missing something obvious?

The frustration of having this tangible monolith of ancient culture right before me, yet his secrets
remaining so hard to unravel, threatened to overwhelm my sanity.

At least, when I heard the whispers, I blamed it on that.

Day after day, The Red Man taunted me with his silence. Every study, every test, every isotopic analysis revealed ambiguous or mixed results. Yet when I went home, shut my door behind me and let the world drown itself out, an ancient tongue seemed to whisper my name.

The dreams came soon after. I remembered what Nat had said that evening on the village green: flames, running, and unseen eyes among the trees. The knotted boughs of a primordial wildwood snatched at me, bracken whipping my bare legs as I ran. Drums beat ceaselessly somewhere, howls of a faceless agony against the sky. I knew I was dreaming, yet I could not wake.

And all the while a voice whispered to me in a language I didn’t understand.

My nights became a battleground, my mornings a trial to be endured. Work—supposedly teaching undergraduate classes four days a week at the university, as I usually did between bouts of fieldwork—quickly became pointless, and my department head called me into her office to find out what had gone wrong. Pleading illness was easy enough as I already looked half-dead, and she sent me home on the spot, demanding I see a consultant or find some way of staving off imminent collapse. My commitments for the rest of the semester removed, I found myself remanded to the prison of my home, with nothing to occupy me but my books… and my dreams.

It’s been this way for weeks now, and I can see no way out. Anyone in whom I could confide would just think me mad—perhaps not without cause—and I can’t stop thinking of Nat, and of Ash. We disturbed something that day, I’m sure of it. The Red Man had rested at peace in that sacred ground, among the relics of ancient belief and forgotten myths. Had we left him there, perhaps my friends would still be alive.

He came again last night. He touches my dreams, and in them he lives. He speaks my name, and with it he owns me.

I think I am beginning to understand… if not fully, then at least in part. What we unearthed should have been left buried. The days are at their longest now, just past the mouth of the equinox, with Lughnasadh fast approaching. There will be bonfires again. There are still believers, though their ways are not the old ways. They echo what has gone before, yet they do not truly capture it, because the past is an ever-flowing ribbon. No bridge may ever be stood upon twice, and yet The Red Man brings to me a bridge of years that he tells me I must cross.

He crawls to the side of my bed in the night, his chicken-bone hands and legs oddly bent and attenuated, like a spider half-crushed or a twig blown in the breeze and—for a strange, ethereal moment—given life. His ochre skin glows deepest red, his dead lips part around a mouth of cavernous, repellent horror, and his eyelids graunch open to reveal rotted, empty sockets of blackened, worm-eaten decay.
His smell is heavy with death, with the soot of the bonfires and the sweetness of the earth, and he tells me that they could not kill him. Every wound they inflicted—those who sought to guard their people from the evil he had done—is healing. Every part of him they bound, that he should bring harm no more in this world or the next, he is unbinding. He has awoken, and I know that by the time the blazing white moon rises once more into a sky filled with flames, my blood will bathe it as surely as the firelight does.

The Red Man has awoken, and he walks among us.

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**About the Author**

Anna Reith lives behind a keyboard in the wilds of southwest England. She is the author of several novels, novellas, and short stories, under a variety of pen names. Her artistic and written works have been featured in mixed media exhibitions, festivals, and on radio, and she writes across a range of genres. When she is not frantically scribbling, Anna enjoys long, muddy walks with her dogs, dabbling in her herb garden, and falling off horses… but not all at the same time.

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