

Today I walk away from my life. I've spent the last thirteen years as a firefighter/paramedic, working among the congested streets of Orlando, Florida, where I've treated an endless array of patients and conditions. From transients to tourists, shootings to stabbings, hangings to hangnails, this job has provided an endless landscape of human drama, played out on the streets of the city. But time is wasting and a new road stretches before me. I'm leaving a hard-fought and hard-won career to become a bioarchaeologist. What does archaeology have to do with firefighting? Not a damn thing.

It's a cold clear morning in January and I've been up most of the night. The sky is still dark but there are fingers of daylight creeping over the eastern horizon. All that I own is crammed into boxes loaded onto a truck that sits quietly street side, awaiting the three-hour drive that will take me from the urban sprawl of Orlando to the shady hills of Tallahassee. In one week, I will enter the graduate program in anthropology at Florida State University. Today marks the beginning of a journey, one that will lead me to the excavation, analysis, and interpretation of human remains.

The days of heavy gear and chaotic emergency scenes are behind me: the weight of an air pack on my shoulders, the acrid smell of burnt synthetics in my nose, the pounding heat of fire as it consumes the room around me. These experiences slide into my memory, filed away with the drama and tragedy I've witnessed over the last decade. I want nothing more to do with pain. No more blood, no more cries for help, no more looking into the eyes of parents who have just lost a child. I want a clean slate, where I can explore life as it was lived thousands of years in the past through the bones left behind.

I walk out onto my balcony perched high above the city. It overlooks a small lake and the early morning sky is reflected in pale shades of copper. I look down on the truck that holds all my earthly possessions, a pale rectangle against the dark street. This is the last time I will stand here and watch the sky inch toward daylight. I've spent my entire career in this apartment, watching the seasons change: the sun sailing south with the approach of winter, then sliding north as spring arrives. I've seen countless full moons floating in the darkened sky, surrounded by faint stars that taper toward the horizon. My life has been here in these rooms, now stripped of all sign of me.

I shower and dress, packing the last of my things away for the short trip. By the end of the day, I will be settled in a new city with a singular goal: to make it through the next several years of grad school, tackling a Masters and PhD in Anthropology and learning everything there is to know about the human skeleton. Little do I know that this journey will take me well beyond Tallahassee.

I will travel to the gritty streets of London, the manicured lawns of Paris, and the rustic cities of Italy. I'll experience the tropical beauty of St. Croix, the vast landscapes of Ukraine, and the medieval countryside of northern England. I will work within the extensive collections of one of the world's best museums and experience the horrific drama of a forensics lab. I'll travel to these places with a primary purpose: to work on the bones of individuals long dead. I'll apply my experience of dealing with the sick and injured to those of the past, examining how they lived and how they died. I'm on my way to becoming a bioarchaeologist.

It's time to go.