



For five years, I struggled to write a novel about Neanderthals. Or perhaps it's more correct to say I struggled to write a worthwhile novel about Neanderthals—I proved proficient at writing a bad one. I completed the first draft of a manuscript that was about 300 pages in length. The moment I finished, I realized it was no good. I threw the whole thing out. I started again, thinking the second time lucky. Again, I got to the end of a draft only to realize that the voice wasn't right. I decided I lacked the skill to take on an ancient subject and worked on something else, but soon was called back to my Neanderthals. I started from scratch. By the time I had restarted and finished the fourth full-length manuscript, I was despondent. There was something wrong with the way I

portrayed the Neanderthals, but I couldn't figure out how to fix it.

An answer came to me one day as I sat at my computer, a blank Microsoft Word document glaring out from the glass. I glanced at a photograph of The Lovers of Valdaro that I kept pinned to my wall. The photo showed the famous pair of skeletons as they were found near Mantua. Having died about 6,000 years before, their arms and limbs were intertwined as if locked in an embrace. That day I saw them in a new light. Maybe all my failed drafts had caused hallucinations, but I swear one skeleton in the photo moved. She lifted her palm as if to press it against his. And at the same time, something inside me shifted. I turned to my computer and started my novel again on page one. I wrote. This time the Neanderthals came alive.

To explain how the Lovers provided inspiration, I have to go back. In school I was taught that Neanderthals were a more primitive version of us—an evolutionary step between modern humans and the apes. I remember reading a story written by H.G. Wells in 1921 called, “The Grisly Folk.” He described a Neanderthal as an ogre-like monster, “a repulsive strangeness in his appearance...his beetle brows, his ape neck, and his inferior stature.” More recently, when David Cameron was still in power in Great Britain, he called Tory Opponents of gay marriage, “Neanderthals.” He used the term as the ultimate insult—not only were they uncivilized, but their politics primitive.

But in 2010, something astonishing happened. The first draft of the Neanderthal genome was published and it showed that many people of European and Asian descent have inherited between 1-4% Neanderthal DNA. Most scientists agree this means that not only did modern humans encounter Neanderthals, but we also interbred with them.

Since then, there has been a marked change in how scientists present findings about Neanderthals. Now research often illustrates how similar Neanderthals were to us. A few examples, they had a hyoid bone that anchors the tongue and a larynx in a good position for speech. This combined with the FOXP2 gene, which is connected to speech in modern humans, leads some to speculate that they might have had language. We know that their genome differs from ours by only about 0.12 percent. And we shared more than biology, but also behavior that was previously believed to be exclusively human, like burying our dead, making jewelry, and using toothpicks. Rather than ogre-like monsters, it's now accepted that Neanderthals were our closest cousins.

But in our popular culture, the reputation of Neanderthals has yet to be restored. We still accuse each other of acting like Neanderthals and most of us still think of them as hairy, grunting, knuckle draggers. When I started to do research for my novel, I

decided to shape the characters using the revised scientific view. However, as evidenced by the number of pages I threw out, I found it difficult to write.

Staring at the photograph of The Lovers of Valdarò, I imagined the connection between the two skeletons. The skull of one is positioned as if looking into the eyes of the other. The finger bone of one seems to be resting under a chin. Though they have been gone for so long, their gestures seemed so familiar. I knew exactly how it feels to lie alongside a loved one. I could imagine myself in that photograph, the warmth of a lover's body, the touch of skin, and the heat from his eyes. They lie in death in a way that expressed how they might have felt in life. As I stared, their experience started to intertwine with mine. I wondered about my own death and how it might go. Would I die close to the person I love? Or would I die alone?

The Lovers of Valdarò were found and excavated by a team of archaeologists led by Elena Maria Menotti. I would have loved to be at the dig site when they made the discovery. Maybe they found one of the skeletons first. That would have been special enough, a well-preserved Neolithic burial site is rare. But to find two skeletons together must have taken their breath away. What was it like the moment they realized that the two skulls were level, as if staring into each other's eyes? Did the archaeologists gasp?

Menotti and her team were sufficiently struck by the position of the Lovers to keep them together. The skeletons were removed from the earth in a block to keep their position preserved. They currently lie together in Mantua's Archaeological Museum.

The Lovers were probably between 18-20 years old. They were both around 5'2" tall. He was found with a flint arrowhead near his neck. She had a blade along her thigh. But with no signs of trauma, the arrowhead and blade might have only been objects that they were buried with. Maybe the Lovers were injured or poisoned and died in an embrace, their last breaths taken close together—just as those who love the story of Romeo and Juliet might want to imagine. It can't be ruled out, but according to Professor Silvia Bagnoli, the president of the association Lovers in Mantua, it's much more likely that they were placed into their position after death.

There is so much we will never know about the Lovers. And that is part of the reason why I find them so captivating. Like them, love is mysterious. The reasons we are attracted to another person can be hard to understand. Even more confusing is why some couples stay together. And is it death that pries us apart? Love exists in a physical form. Skeletons can't feel it. A body needs a heart to create heat and feel love. Blood must circulate to her brain and electrons must fire for her to know she is loved. I've always

assumed that death must be the end of love. But when I look at the Lovers, it seems possible that they have found a way transcend the loneliness of death. I look at them and dare to ask myself a hopeful question. Maybe I won't die alone?

That day I stared at the photo of the Lovers, I wondered what would happen if one of them was a Neanderthal. This is, of course, impossible. The Lovers are about 6,000 years old, whereas modern humans and Neanderthals might have lived at the same time in Europe over 40,000 years ago.

But like the Lovers, we don't know much about the relationship between modern humans and Neanderthals, or how they made contact. The complete story is lost to time. As the archaeologist in my novel says, "A relationship, a feeling, or a glance—it's the things that don't fossilize that matter most." Scientists are restricted to interpreting the evidence they find, whether in fossils or DNA. We can't and will never know all the answers, but a novelist should take on the risk of imagining one.

Like many of us, I had believed that Neanderthals were less than human for much of my life. That's why those early manuscripts were terrible—I had a main character, a Neanderthal, who I couldn't completely know. The Lovers, on the other hand, were thousands of years closer to me in time. Though they were fossils, I could imagine how it might feel to lie where she did and look through her eyes. That day, I was able to transfer my feelings for the Lovers into an older kind of fossil. And in my mind, the Neanderthals came alive.

From there, my ability to imagine Neanderthals grew. If, in my make believe world, one of the Lovers was a modern human and the other was a Neanderthal, they would be equally extraordinary. On seeing them, everyone would gasp. I imagined that the skeleton on the left was a female Neanderthal. I saw her lift her hand, as if to press her palm against his. I could feel the heat of her palm, so much like my own. This set my imagination on fire. Time collapsed. Lungs breathed new air into ancient things. The two bodies start to warm. Blood flowed. I could feel a character as if I knew her, a female about my height. I am sure she would smell strange. But if I kept calm and approached her slowly, maybe I could get close. And if I got to look in her eyes, our differences might drop away. I could know her. She might know me.

With this in mind, I started to write.

[Begin excerpt *The Last Neanderthal*]

If you happened on one in the woods—say, a female named Girl with a shock of red

hair—it would not be by accident. She would have sensed you coming long before, felt curious about another upright primate, and allowed you to approach. She would make a noise in the brush to let you know she was there. Maybe she would drop her spear to show that she didn't mean you harm. She would spread the fingers of her left hand and raise that palm to greet you.

The polite thing to do would be to raise your right hand the same way. Walk slowly toward her.

Her body is streaked with dirt and only partially covered with a loose cloak of bison fur. She is often too hot and doesn't like the feel of tight animal hides on her skin. Her breath comes in plumes from her nose, expelling heat from her broad body into the cold air. Look at her densely packed muscles. They hold a kind of strength more on par with a bear's. As you get closer, notice the earthy smell of bison meat and sour stomach. There is nothing wrong with her; that's just from how she lives.

Take a deep breath because you will feel intimidated. And you should. This is your instinct taking hold. You've never seen such a magnificent creature before, but your ancestors did. They knew from experience that she could close up your throat with one squeeze. They passed this sensible fear on to you.

Don't run, though. You feel scared because on an instinctual level you acknowledge that you are weaker. Remember that she isn't worried about you. She knows she is stronger and she can afford to stare. The thing to focus on is that you are the most spectacular thing she has ever seen. Because the Neanderthal population was always small, she has seen only a handful of other upright bodies in her lifetime, and never anyone like you. What she feels is a sense of wonder.

Hold up your palm. Spread your fingers out like hers in a greeting. Walk up to her, slowly.

When you are close enough, press the skin of your palm against hers. Feel her heat. The same blood runs under the surface of your skin. Take a breath for courage, raise your chin, and look into her eyes. Be careful, because your knees will weaken. Tears will come to your eyes and you will be filled with an overwhelming urge to sob. This is because you are human.

When you look into her eyes, you will feel an immediate connection. All the difference drops away. You each know with certainty that you can feel the mind of the other. You share a single thought: *I am not alone.*

[End excerpt]