

# Back to the Stone Age

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The head flight attendant had given us the customary briefing before takeoff. It was obvious that her first language was not English. I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement as the powerful engines on the 757 pushed me back in the seat.

We were a cosmopolitan bunch. Experience (and numerous Goofy hats) told me that some on board had been to Disney World. Others, apparently from the upper socioeconomic end, had probably come to the land of malls and shopping extravaganzas to update their wardrobes. But there were also some who had the coarse hair and weathered skin of the mestizo, those born from the mingling of Spanish conquistadores and descendants of the Inca Empire they conquered.

## **BACK TO THE STONE AGE**

I love to fly, but not back where I was sitting. I like the front left seat, where I can select my destination through the smallest manipulations of the controls. My stomach goes queasy every time a pilot I don't know—with my life in his hands—pulls back the power levers and we begin to decelerate while still pointed up at an alarming angle. In the small aircraft I fly, reducing power with the nose pointed at the sky is an invitation to stall and spin.

But my mind was on other things this night. I tilted the seat back and closed my eyes.

On the other end of this flight I would spend a short night in the Andes Mountains. I hoped I would not get that crazy, suffocating sensation that had kept me awake in Quito's thin atmosphere on recent visits. Years before, when I lived and went to school almost ten thousand feet up in the mountains, I could play a full game of basketball and feel fine. Now, twenty-five years later, I had begun to understand what tourists complain about: "I can't catch my breath" or "I wake up gasping for air."

*If they have Aunt Rachel's body ready, I should be on my way down to the jungle early the next morning, I thought.*

Just the day before, I had been sitting at home after a long day of the same old, same old—driving around, talking on the cell phone, haggling over a few cents now that could make a difference of thousands of dollars down the road—the usual knockdown, drag-out life of a businessman. When the phone rang, I almost didn't answer. At home, Ginny answers the phone. She is a lot nicer to telemarketers, and after a day with my hand to my ear, I didn't want to talk into a machine anymore.

We had been expecting the call, but I still was not ready for it. “Hi, is this Steve?” I could tell the voice on the other end was calling from outside the United States. “I’m sorry to have to tell you that your aunt Rachel died this afternoon. I think it would be good if someone from the family could come down. Remember, down here we have to bury within twenty-four hours. I can ask the doctor if he can do some embalming, but that will only buy us a few hours. If we take too long, the authorities will make us bury her in Quito.”

Aunt Rachel had been in Quito to receive treatments for cancer. But I knew she had wanted to be buried at home in the jungle, with the people she loved—the Waodani. Mom and my stepdad, Abe, were out of town. I knew they wouldn’t be able to get down to Ecuador in time. I would have to represent the family and help bury “Star,” as the people there called her.

As we cruised high over Cuba, I wondered how to best get my dear old aunt’s body down to the jungle. And I contemplated how I could keep the Waodani who had loved her from being overwhelmed by “outsiders” wanting to get in on this historic event.

I woke up to the same voice that had put me to sleep: “Pleeze fosten yur-e seat bels fur ourr londing in Quito.” Now I was glad I wasn’t sitting in the left front seat. Quito lies in a tight valley rimmed by Andean mountain peaks. The city spreads right to the runway threshold, and on this night there was a heavy fog hanging over the valley floor. If we couldn’t make a landing on our first couple of tries, we would have to divert to the coast and spend the night in Guayaquil, and I would almost certainly miss the reason for which I was coming. But thankfully, we made it.

By the time I got to the Quito airport early the next morning, Aunt Rachel’s body, wrapped in sheets, was already lying on the floor of the Cessna bush plane that would take us home. I took the seat beside her body. As we flew down the Avenue of the Volcanoes, regal snowcapped peaks rose above our flight altitude and disappeared into the overcast sky above us. Normally, we would have made a fuel stop on the edge of the great Amazon rain forest, but we were in a hurry. I heard our pilot request that another plane deliver the casket and bring extra fuel for him. I watched as we flew over the little town where I had spent my most formative years. Aunt Rachel had been a big part of those years. I felt a yearning to tell her just once more how much I loved her and respected her willingness to risk everything for what she believed. She was the most humble, but also the most stubborn, person I had ever known. Without the humility, she never would have been willing to live in a thatched hut in the middle of nowhere. Without the stubbornness, she never could have survived the violent cultural chaos that characterized life among the Waodani, known to the outside world as “Aucas”—savages. Without her, it is possible that there would have been no one left to welcome us at our destination.

The Waodani heard the plane coming and were standing by the short gravel-and-grass strip when we landed. The makeshift runway was surrounded on all sides by a sea of dense jungle. Dayumae, Aunt Rachel’s closest living “relative” in the tribe, was the first one I saw after I opened the plane door. She greeted me and then saw what was left of the *cowodi*—foreigner—she had adopted as her sister more than four decades before. Her reaction was chilling. She began to wail,

taking me by surprise. The Waodani, her own people, don't do that. But Dayumae had spent fifteen years living with the Quechua, a neighboring tribe, and had adopted much of their culture. Their death wail is a dark window into the excruciating agony of a human soul that has little control over its own destiny. The rest of the group retreated from Dayumae's grief.

Finally, the pilot and a couple of Waodani and I unwrapped Aunt Rachel's shroud and lifted her body from the plane into the simple plywood box that would serve as her coffin. It seemed appropriate for this old Saint who had never worried about luxuries or her own comfort. Its rustic simplicity matched her house, which sat just a hundred yards down the trail. We carried her there for final preparations.

No one had thought to tie Aunt Rachel's mouth shut before rigor mortis set in. So the doctor had tied a head scarf around her head and under her chin to keep it closed. The Waodani women surrounded the coffin to get a last glimpse of this woman who had become as much one of them as her ruddy complexion and white skin would allow. Immediately, they began an animated discussion. They spoke much too rapidly for me to catch the details of what they were saying, but it was clear that they were not pleased with the doctor's choice of scarf. They untied it to find a replacement, but when they did, Aunt Rachel's mouth opened just as though she were going to speak. A gasp ran through the crowd, and they instinctively recoiled. But not even mismatched accessories were going to bring Star's eighty-two-year-old, cancer-ravaged body back to life.

I retied Aunt Rachel's mouth shut with the piece of bright cloth that the Waodani women finally settled on. We carried her body over to the rustic little church just a few feet away. I was surprised to see that there were quite a few foreigners mixed in with the Waodani. But these were Aunt Rachel's close colleagues and friends, who had made flights for her, kept her two-way radio working, and helped her help the Waodani. I could not object to their presence, although I did ask them to let the Waodani bury Star their own way.

The Waodani, however, have no chief or other recognized authority. Over the past forty years, they had become accustomed to giving decision-making power to the *cowodi*, who can fly and make little metal boxes talk, who have little seeds that make diseases go away, and who perform a myriad of other unimaginable feats. I realized they were waiting for one of the foreigners to take charge. I stepped in.

I handed a nail for the coffin lid to each of the people who constituted Star's closest family.

Brave, impetuous Dayumae had adopted Star and given her the name of her young sister, Nemo, who had been hacked to pieces in a spearing raid when she and Dayumae were just girls. It was because of Dayumae that the tribe had invited Aunt Rachel to live with them, along with Elisabeth Elliot, whose husband, Jim, had also been speared when my dad was killed. Aunt Rachel and "Aunt" Betty were the first outsiders ever to receive such an invitation.

I also handed nails to handsome Kimo and nubile Dawa, the first ones to believe what Aunt Rachel and Dayumae taught them about a new way to live, a way without hating and killing. Kimo had taken a big risk in building a house for Aunt Rachel. Others in the tribe had been displeased and told him it would be his grave.

I gave a nail to Mincaye, who didn't take well to allowing foreigners in Waodani territory. He had threatened to spear Aunt Rachel and Aunt Betty. Then one day, Mincaye mysteriously had a change of heart and told Aunt Rachel that he had decided to follow God's trail. After that, Mincaye became jovial and almost happy-go-lucky.

Old Dyuwi also received a nail. When Dayumae had first returned from the outside world with the two foreigners, he was already a seasoned killer at age twenty. But he went from hating and killing to peacemaking almost instantaneously.

I kept the last nail for myself.

Just before we carried Star out to the hole that had been dug between her house and the little tin-roofed church with chicken-wire windows and chainsawed boards, Kimo offered an impromptu eulogy.

“Waengongi Taado ante odomoncaete ante Nemo pongantapa”—*Teaching us to walk God's trail, Star came.*

Aunt Rachel was large by Waodani standards and had grown stouter as she aged. When we reached the burial site, several of the Waodani men jumped into the grave to help lower her coffin. I was moved to see the care and almost reverence with which they handled the old shell that had been so precious to those of us gathered in that little clearing. This was the second member of my family to be buried here.

Dyuwi missed the signal to jump out of the grave and found himself alone, under the coffin, as it was lowered the last couple of feet. In desperation, he struggled to extricate himself. In doing so, he tipped the coffin, and we all stood horrified as we heard Aunt Rachel's body roll to the side. With all the weight on one side, the box fell to the bottom of the grave with a thud. No one moved.

I could almost hear Aunt Rachel giving instructions, with Dayumae passionately countermanding them. At first, we reacted like schoolkids whom the teacher had caught cheating. Were we in trouble again? But I could tell that Mincaye was trying to keep from bursting out laughing. Finally he let out a little involuntary snort, and we all broke up. Even Star would have enjoyed the irony of her mourners laughing at her interment.

Strange circumstances, combined with providence, had led this silver-haired old woman to spend half of her long life in the wilds of the Amazon jungle with an egalitarian and once violent Stone Age people. Aunt Rachel's mother had been a daughter of wealth, growing up with luxury and pampering. Her father was a well-known stained-glass artist.

Rachel was Lawrence and Katherine Saint's third of eight children and only daughter. Because her mother was frail, Rachel became something of a second mother to her younger brothers, including my dad, Nate.

As a young girl, Rachel caught the attention of a wealthy Philadelphia widow who had no children of her own. That woman lavished Rachel with the accoutrements of prosperity that Katherine had rejected but her daughter had never tasted. Coming home from a summer in

Europe—as was the custom of the old moneyed families in New England—the wealthy dowager informed a teenage Rachel that she had decided to make Rachel her heiress.

Such an inheritance would have ensured the care her mother so desperately needed for tuberculosis, fine educations for her brothers, and the opportunity for Rachel to be the financial protector and provider for the family she already nurtured. But Rachel refused the offer because it would require her to be a companion to her wealthy benefactress until her death. “I have already made a prior commitment to do whatever God wants with my life,” she told the woman. “I cannot make any commitment that might cause me to compromise what I have promised to God.”

Unaccustomed to rejection of any kind, the wealthy mistress scolded Rachel harshly for her lack of gratitude and her idealism. She summarily cut off any hope of help for Rachel and her family. “You will not receive a cent from me, you ungrateful girl,” she informed Rachel; and she meant it. When she died years later, she had her executor send Rachel a set of inexpensive cuff links. “It was the only cheap possession she owned,” Aunt Rachel told me.

Feeling rejected, and uncertain about what her family would think of her hasty but principled response, Rachel sought privacy in the bow of the passenger liner on which they were voyaging home. In the mid-Atlantic she poured out her heart to the One to whom she had betrothed herself emotionally and spiritually.

“This never happened to me before or since,” she told me on one of my extended visits with her in the jungle, “but while I was in the bow of that ship, I had a vision of a dark-skinned tribe of people who had never heard that the Lord Jesus loved them. And God promised me that if I continued to be faithful to Him, He would one day allow me the privilege of being the one to take His precious Word of love and peace to them.”

She went on to finish high school and then spent the next twelve years working in a Christian center for drug and alcohol addicts. The family needed help financially if her brothers were to get adequate educations. She was content that when her responsibility to them was satisfied, God would keep His promise to her.

Although Rachel was past the normal age limit, Wycliffe Bible Translators accepted her as a translator candidate and sent her to Peru to temporarily replace a translator who had been working with a head-hunting tribe there. On the way, she stopped in Ecuador to visit my parents, Nate and Marj, who were missionaries there. Dad flew her to several jungle stations, carefully skirting “Auca” territory in the process. Rachel was keenly observant and asked why Dad avoided flying over that area.

“That part of the jungle is inhabited by people who have killed everyone from the outside world who has ventured inside their borders,” Dad explained. “If we had a forced landing there, we might survive the crash, but we would not survive the ‘Aucas.’ ”

“As soon as Nate told me that, I knew that they were the very ones God had promised to let me take His Good News to,” Aunt Rachel told me. She never wavered in her confidence, even when tragedy struck several years later and the “Aucas” speared the little brother she loved like a son.

I watched as the Waodani filled the grave. Kimo and Dyuwi were watching me.

I had been near this spot years before. Kimo and Dyuwi had been watching me then, too. I was only fourteen. Of course, there was no village and no airstrip back then. We had trekked over from the next valley to the south with a group of Waodani.

My sister, Kathy, had decided she wanted to be baptized. Because our own dad was dead and could not do it, Mom suggested that Kathy choose a couple of men who had influenced her life spiritually. Only two years younger, I decided it was time for me to take this step too.

I understood that baptism was a symbolic, though important, gesture that signified my determination to live by a standard that *Itota*, the Creator's Son, had established for His followers. My hunting buddy, Iniwa, and Oncaye, a Waodani girl about Kathy's age, said they wanted to be baptized as well.

Mom had always wanted to see where my dad and his four friends had been killed, so she and Aunt Rachel decided to do so on this trip. We would trek over to the Ewenguno River to visit Dad's grave for the first time in the nine years he had been gone. And we would be baptized there.

We slogged over muddy jungle trails for several hours and then poled down the Ewenguno in dugout canoes, arriving just before dark. There was a set of jaguar tracks on the beach to inspire my imagination, and there was dinner to be caught. I helped with the fishing while the Waodani demonstrated their jungle skills, gathering materials to make shelters for the night. I never ceased to be impressed by how little the Waodani took with them and how much they had when they arrived.

Since Aunt Rachel had started living with the Waodani, I had looked for every chance I could to stay with her and the tribe. That is, after Aunt Rachel figured I could visit without being killed. The Waodani had a long history of killing outsiders and being killed by them. I was just a nine-year-old kid when I first visited Waodani territory, but I was almost as tall as some of the adults in the tribe, though pitifully skinny.

By the time the evening mist began to settle over our little encampment and the night sounds began their serenade, the shelters had been made, the fires were going, and fish and monkey were in the pot. It didn't get much better than that in my book—and there was always the possibility that the jaguar would come back. That would add some excitement for sure.

The next morning, after drinking the Waodani's customary breakfast of plantain mashed in warm water and finishing the meat from the last night's meal, we were ready for the baptismal service. Kathy wanted Kimo and Dyuwi to baptize us. They were both warriors I had learned to respect, and they treated me like family. Kathy's choice was good by me.

Kimo spoke to *Waengongi*—God—as some of us bowed our heads: “A long time ago we came to this place to do a bad, bad thing. But now, speaking Your name well and keeping You in our hearts, we have come back to do a good thing. Taking these four young people into the water, they will die to the old way of living and will show that they truly want to walk Your trail now, following *Itota*, Your only Son, who marked Your trail for us.”

It didn't occur to me until Kimo was praying that he and Dyuwi knew this sandbar well. The men we had chosen to baptize us were two of the very same men who had speared my father and the others—at this very same place. It seemed strangely out of character that such kind and gentle men whom we all liked so much and who obviously liked us could have done such a terrible thing. I hadn't forgotten the pain of losing Dad, but I couldn't imagine not loving Kimo and Dyuwi and all the other Waodani who had come to visit this terrible, wonderful place with us.

Then Kimo and Dyuwi took Kathy, Oncaye, Iniwa, and me into the water and lowered us into it as though they were burying us. When they lifted us back up, they told us to live happily and at peace, following God's trail.

We all gathered back on the beach while Dyuwi prayed. Dyuwi, normally a man of few words, covers a lot of territory when he talks to *Waengongi*. I opened my eyes, wondering why we should keep them shut when there was so much to look at. On the sand, right in the middle of our circle, was a bright yellow butterfly that looked an awful lot like my dad's little Piper Cruiser.

When Dyuwi finally finished his address to our Creator, the butterfly was still there, in the exact place where "56 Henry," as Dad's plane was called, had died. I wanted to ask Kimo and Dyuwi why they had destroyed the plane, but I didn't know how. And I was sure Aunt Rachel would disapprove. I also wanted to know why they had speared my dad and our other friends. But again, I remained silent. I was too young to realize how strange it would seem to other people that Kathy and I were baptized at the same place and by the same men who had speared our dad and hacked his body with a machete. These were people Aunt Rachel loved and Mom had been praying for since before they killed Dad and the four others. Following their example, it had never even occurred to me to hate them.

When we finished praying, the Waodani warriors took the four of us into the jungle beside the beach to show us the stump of the tree where "the five foreign God followers built their sleeping house when they came to bring us God's carvings and teach us how to live well." The bodies had been buried right here. We had no idea at the time, however, that one of us would also die and be buried in this same place. Nor did we have any clue that 56 Henry would one day reappear here.

As we prepared to leave the grave site, Mom noticed four bright red flowers clustered together nearby. It seemed almost odd that there were not five of them. Then Aunt Rachel noticed one more just a short distance farther back. I remembered then that Ed McCully's body had not been buried with Dad, Jim, Roger, and Pete. His body had been found too far downriver to safely bring back for burial. Surely that fifth bloom was for "Uncle" Ed.