Documentary corporate & narration scripts

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The Longest Commute

Nature, bird migration · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

[Music: wind over open water]

It weighs about as much as a bar of soap. You could hold it in one hand.

And every year, it flies from one end of the world to the other.

This is the Arctic tern.

It raises its chicks in the far north, in the short, bright Arctic summer. Then, as the days begin to shorten, it leaves.

It does not take the short way. It follows the winds, zigzagging down the Atlantic, riding the weather the way a sailor would. Months later, it arrives in the cold waters around Antarctica, just in time for the southern summer.

And then it turns around and does it all again.

When scientists fitted these birds with tiny tracking devices, the results were hard to believe. A single round trip can run to tens of thousands of miles. Over a long life, one tern may fly the equivalent of about three trips to the Moon and back.

[pause]

Because it chases summer at both ends of the planet, the Arctic tern may see more daylight than any other animal on Earth.

Here, on a rocky shore in the north, the first of them are coming home. Tired. Thinner than when they left.

They have crossed the whole world to stand on this one stretch of stone.

In a few weeks, there will be eggs.

Three Hearts and Blue Blood

Nature, ocean life · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

In a crack in the reef, something is watching.

It has three hearts. Its blood is blue. And most of its nerve cells are not in its head at all, but spread through its eight arms.

This is the common octopus, and it may be the closest thing to an alien most of us will ever meet.

[pause]

It has no shell and no bones. The only hard part of its body is its beak, so it can pour itself through almost any gap the beak will fit through.

Its skin can change color in a fraction of a second. It can turn rough or smooth, pale or dark, until it disappears against the rock.

Tonight, it is hunting.

A crab edges out from the weed. The octopus does not chase. It flows, slow and patient, colors rippling across its body like the shadows of passing clouds.

Then, in one movement, it is over.

And the reef is quiet again.

The Generation That Flies South

Nature, insects · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 2 minutes

[Music: soft piano, a field of milkweed in late summer]

At the end of summer, in a field in the American Midwest, a monarch butterfly opens its wings for the first time.

It looks exactly like its parents. Orange and black, light as a scrap of paper.

But this butterfly is different.

Its parents lived for only a few weeks. So did their parents before them. This one may live for eight months. And it has a job none of them ever had.

It is going south.

Over the coming weeks, millions of monarchs from across eastern North America will begin to move. They ride warm air upward, then glide, covering long distances with surprisingly little effort. Some will travel well over two thousand miles.

Their destination is a handful of mountain forests in central Mexico, high up, where the fir trees grow thick and the air stays cool but rarely freezes.

None of them has ever been there before.

[pause]

No map. No parent to follow. Scientists believe they steer using the position of the sun, with an internal clock that corrects for the time of day. Exactly how they find the same few mountains, year after year, is still not fully understood.

When they arrive, they gather in their millions. They cover the trunks and branches so densely that the trees seem to turn orange. Branches bend under the weight.

They wait out the winter here, mostly still, conserving energy.

In spring, they begin the journey north. But they will not finish it. They lay their eggs along the way, and it is their children, and their grandchildren, who carry on.

By the time the monarchs reach that Midwest field again, several generations will have lived and died.

And at the end of the summer, one of them will open its wings and head south.

Home by Scent

Nature, rivers · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

[Music: rushing water]

Years ago, this salmon hatched in a gravel bed, somewhere upstream. It swam down to the sea as a small, silver fish and disappeared into the open ocean.

Now it is coming back.

Not to any river. To this one. Scientists believe that, as they near the coast, salmon follow the particular smell of the water they were born in, tracing it mile after mile, back to their home stream.

The journey is brutal. They stop eating. They leap waterfalls and fight the current with everything they have left. Their bodies change color, their jaws hook, their strength drains away.

For most Pacific salmon, this is the only journey home. After spawning, they die.

But nothing here is wasted.

Bears and eagles feed on them. What remains washes into the soil along the banks. And the trees that shade this river grow stronger, nourished by fish that came all the way from the sea.

The Bridge from the Window

History, engineering · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 2 minutes

[Music: low strings over archive photographs of the East River]

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the only way between Manhattan and Brooklyn

was by ferry. In winter, ice could choke the East River for days.

The engineer John Roebling believed he could span it. His design called for a suspension bridge larger than any that had been built before, hung from steel-wire cables between two great stone towers.

He never saw it built.

In 1869, while he was surveying the site, his foot was crushed in an accident at a ferry slip. He died of tetanus a few weeks later.

The work passed to his son, Washington.

To build the towers, crews worked in caissons, enormous sealed chambers sunk deep below the riverbed, filled with compressed air. Many men who worked down there fell ill with what we now call decompression sickness. Washington Roebling was one of them.

By the early 1870s, he was too sick to visit the site. He directed the work from a room in Brooklyn Heights, watching the towers rise through a telescope.

[pause]

The person who carried his instructions to the bridge was his wife, Emily Warren Roebling.

She studied the mathematics. She learned the language of cable and stress. For years, she relayed questions and answers between her husband and the engineers on the river, and she became the bridge's link to the outside world.

On the twenty-fourth of May, 1883, the Brooklyn Bridge opened. Its main span was the longest of any suspension bridge in the world.

Before the official ceremony, Emily Roebling was given the honor of being one of the first to cross it.

The bridge is still standing. Every day, people walk across it, and most of them have no idea how many lives it took to make.

Four Days in September

History, London · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

[Music: a single cello]

In the early hours of Sunday the second of September, 1666, a fire broke out in a bakery on Pudding Lane, in the City of London.

Fires were common. London was a crowded maze of timber houses, and most of them used open flames for cooking and light. At first, few people were alarmed.

But it had been a long, dry summer. And a strong wind was blowing from the east.

By morning, the fire had reached the warehouses along the river, packed with oil, tar and coal. From there, it spread faster than anyone could fight it.

For four days, the city burned.

Families fled with whatever they could carry. Boats crowded the Thames. The diarist Samuel Pepys recorded the scene, and, among other things, the fact that he buried his wine and his Parmesan cheese in the garden to keep them safe.

To stop the flames, whole streets of houses were pulled down or blown up with gunpowder, creating gaps the fire could not cross.

When it was finally over, more than thirteen thousand houses had gone, along with dozens of parish churches and the old cathedral of Saint Paul's.

[pause]

Only a handful of deaths were ever officially recorded. How many people truly died,

nobody knows.

What rose in its place was a new London, built in brick and stone.

Three Scripts, One Message

Archaeology, ancient Egypt · Adult (30-45) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

[Music: low, slow percussion]

In the summer of 1799, French soldiers were rebuilding an old fort near the town of Rosetta, in the Nile Delta. In the rubble, they found a broken slab of dark stone, covered in writing.

The writing came in three kinds.

At the top, hieroglyphs. In the middle, a script called Demotic, the everyday writing of ancient Egypt. And at the bottom, ancient Greek.

Scholars could read the Greek. It turned out to be a decree, issued by a council of priests in 196 BC, honoring the young king Ptolemy the Fifth.

And it said something important. The same decree, it explained, was to be written in all three scripts.

[pause]

That meant the stone was a key.

For more than a thousand years, no one had been able to read Egyptian hieroglyphs. Now, at last, there was a known text to compare them with.

It still took more than twenty years of work, by many scholars, across Europe. The French scholar Jean-François Champollion finally announced his breakthrough in 1822. Hieroglyphs, he showed, combined signs for sounds with signs for ideas.

Within a few years, the temple walls and tombs of Egypt began, slowly, to speak again.

The stone itself was taken by the British in 1801, and it has been in the British Museum ever since.

The Ledger at Halvorsen Mill

True crime, historical (fictional case) · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 2 minutes

[Music: a slow, ticking pulse]

In 1926, Ashby Falls, Minnesota, was a town of eleven hundred people and one employer: the Halvorsen woollen mill.

Nearly every family had someone on the mill payroll. And every Friday, that payroll passed through the hands of one man.

His name was Walter Pell. He had kept the mill's books for nineteen years. He sang in the church choir. He lent money to neighbors and never asked for it back on time.

People said you could set your watch by him.

[pause]

In the spring of that year, the mill's owner died, and his nephew came up from Chicago to take over. He was young. He was suspicious of everything. And he asked to see the books.

Walter Pell handed them over without a word.

It took the nephew three weeks to find it. Small amounts, never more than a few dollars at a time. Wages for workers who had left years before, still being paid out every Friday. Repairs that were never made. Wool that was ordered, and paid for, and never delivered.

Added together, over nineteen years, the numbers did not add up.

The money was missing. Nobody knew where it had gone.

The nephew called the county sheriff. The sheriff drove out to Walter Pell's house on a Sunday morning.

The house was neat. The bed was made. The kettle on the stove was still warm.

But Walter Pell was gone. So was his suitcase. And so was the morning train to Saint Paul.

He was never found. No one in Ashby Falls ever spoke of him in church again.

But for years afterward, every Friday, someone at the mill would count the payroll twice.

The Empty Wall

True crime, art theft · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Music: light, pizzicato strings]

On Monday the twenty-first of August, 1911, the Louvre in Paris was closed to the public. Inside, a few workers moved quietly through the galleries.

One of them stopped in front of a small portrait of a woman with folded hands. He lifted it from the wall and carried it to a service stairwell. There, he removed the frame and the glass, hid the painting under his clothes, and walked out.

Nobody noticed for more than a day.

When staff finally realized the Mona Lisa was gone, the museum closed for a week. The story ran in newspapers around the world.

And something strange happened. When the Louvre reopened, crowds lined up to stare at the four iron pegs where the painting used to hang.

[pause]

The police questioned hundreds of people. For a time, even the poet Guillaume Apollinaire was arrested, and the young painter Pablo Picasso was questioned. Both were cleared.

The real thief was an Italian handyman named Vincenzo Peruggia, who had once done work at the Louvre. He kept the painting hidden in his lodgings in Paris for more than two years.

In late 1913, he took it to Florence and offered it to an art dealer. The dealer called in the director of the Uffizi Gallery to examine it. Then they called the police.

The Mona Lisa went back to Paris.

Before the theft, it was admired. After it, it was famous.

The Forger of Marsh Street

True crime, forgery (fictional case) · Adult (40-55) · Irish · 1 minute

For thirty years, Thomas Keane ran a small picture-framing shop on Marsh Street in Dublin. He was quiet, polite and very good with his hands.

He was also, it turned out, one of the busiest forgers in Ireland.

He never copied famous paintings. That was the trick. He painted pleasant, forgettable landscapes in the style of minor Victorian artists, the kind of picture nobody looks at twice. Then he aged them with tea, smoke and dust, and sold them at country auctions.

Nobody suspected a thing. The pictures were too ordinary to be fakes.

It ended in 1974, when a collector had one of them cleaned. Under the dirt, in the corner of a cloud, was a tiny painted shamrock.

Keane admitted it at once. He said he had signed every one.

No one has ever found out how many are still hanging on walls today.

Golden Record

Science, space · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 2 minutes

[Music: slow, shimmering synth]

On the fifth of September, 1977, a rocket lifted off from Cape Canaveral, Florida. On board was a spacecraft about the size of a small car.

Its name was Voyager 1.

Its first mission was to visit the giant planets. In 1979, it flew past Jupiter, sending back images of storms larger than Earth and of moons no one had ever seen up close. In 1980, it reached Saturn and its rings.

Then it kept going.

Bolted to its side is a gold-plated record. On it are greetings in dozens of human languages, music from around the world, the sound of rain, of footsteps, of a kiss, and more than a hundred images of life on Earth.

It is a message, sent on the slim chance that someone, someday, might find it.

[pause]

In 1990, at the request of the astronomer Carl Sagan, Voyager turned its camera back toward home. From billions of miles away, Earth appeared as a single, pale blue point of light, smaller than a pixel, caught in a beam of sunlight.

Everything humans have ever known happened on that dot.

In 2012, Voyager 1 crossed the boundary where the wind from our Sun gives way to the space between the stars. It became the first human-made object to reach interstellar space.

Its power is slowly running down. One by one, its instruments are being switched off to save energy. A radio signal from Voyager now takes nearly a whole day to reach us.

But it is still out there. Still travelling. Still carrying the sound of rain.

Still saying hello.

Twice a Day

Science, the ocean · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 1 minute

On most coasts, twice a day, the sea creeps up the beach. And twice a day, it slides away again.

The reason is above our heads.

The Moon's gravity pulls on the whole Earth, but it pulls hardest on the side closest to it. The ocean on that side heaps up into a bulge.

On the far side of the planet, there is a second bulge. There, the Moon's pull is weakest, and the water is, in effect, left behind.

As the Earth spins through these two bulges each day, most coasts get two high tides and two low tides.

The Sun plays a part too. When the Sun and Moon line up, at new moon and full moon, their pulls combine. Those are spring tides, the highest highs and the lowest lows.

So the next time you watch the water rise, look up.

The Moon is doing that.

The Animal That Waits

Science, microscopic life · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Music: bubbly, curious electronic]

Take a clump of damp moss from a garden wall. Put a little of it under a microscope.

With some patience, you may find one.

It is usually less than a millimeter long. It has a plump, segmented body, eight stubby legs, and tiny claws. It moves with a slow, clumsy waddle.

Scientists call it a tardigrade. Its nickname is the water bear.

It does not look like much. But the water bear has one remarkable talent.

When its home dries out, it does not die. It pulls in its legs, loses almost all the water in its body, and curls into a dry little husk called a tun. Its metabolism slows almost to nothing.

And it waits.

When water comes back, sometimes after years, the tardigrade can swell up, uncurl, and walk away.

[pause]

In this state, tardigrades have survived conditions that would kill almost any other animal. In 2007, researchers sent dried tardigrades into orbit, outside a spacecraft, exposed to the vacuum of space. When they came home, some were rehydrated, and they lived. Some even went on to lay eggs.

That does not make them invincible. In their active state, they are fragile, and they live short lives.

But in a world that keeps drying out, freezing over and starting again, this tiny animal has found a way to pause.

So, the next time you pass a mossy wall, remember: there may be bears in there.

Life Without Sunlight

Science, deep sea · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 2 minutes

[Music: deep, slow drones]

Two and a half kilometers below the surface of the Pacific, there is no light at all. The water is close to freezing. The pressure would crush a human body.

For a long time, scientists assumed the deep sea floor was a near-empty desert.

In 1977, a small research submarine called Alvin descended to a ridge on the sea floor near the Galápagos Islands. The scientists on board were geologists. They had come to look for hot springs.

They found them. Cracks in the sea floor, where water heated deep inside the Earth came pouring out, carrying dissolved minerals.

And all around them, they found life.

Clams the size of dinner plates. Fields of mussels. Crabs picking their way across the rocks. And, swaying in the warm water, giant tube worms with bright red plumes, some taller than a person.

[pause]

It made no sense. Almost every food chain on Earth begins with sunlight. Plants and algae capture its energy, and everything else eats them, or eats something that did.

But here, there was no sunlight.

The answer turned out to be bacteria. These microbes draw energy from chemicals in the vent water, such as hydrogen sulfide, a compound poisonous to most life. They turn that chemical energy into food.

The giant tube worms have no mouth and no gut as adults. Instead, they carry billions of these bacteria inside their bodies, and the bacteria feed them.

An entire world, running without the Sun.

Since then, hundreds of vent sites have been found across the world's oceans. And some scientists now wonder whether life on Earth may have begun in a place very much like this.

In the dark. In the heat. At the bottom of the sea.

Forty to One

Food and travel, maple syrup · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

[Music: acoustic guitar. Steam rising from a sugar shack]

In the hills of New England, late winter brings a particular kind of weather. Freezing nights. Bright, thawing days.

That is when the sap begins to run.

Inside a sugar maple, the swing between freezing and thawing builds up pressure, and the sap starts to move. Tap a small hole in the trunk, and it drips out, clear and thin, almost like water.

It is only faintly sweet. Most of it really is water.

So it goes into the evaporator, and the boiling begins. Hour after hour, the steam pours out of the roof vents, and the sap slowly thickens and darkens.

It takes roughly forty gallons of sap to make a single gallon of syrup.

Forty to one.

When it is done, it is poured off hot, amber and glowing, the taste of a whole season, drawn out of the ground and up from the trees themselves.

The Night Market at Lantern Bridge

Food and travel, street food · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[SFX: sizzling woks, voices, distant music]

At six o'clock, Lantern Bridge is just a road beside the river.

By seven, it is something else.

Trestle tables unfold. Gas burners click on. Strings of paper lanterns go up between the lamp posts, and the smell of charcoal begins to drift across the water.

The first customers are always the workers from the docks, coming off the late shift. They know exactly where they are going.

They are going to see Mrs. Lau.

She has run the same stall for twenty-six years. Two burners. One enormous pan. One dish: flat rice noodles, fried hard and fast with garlic, egg and greens, until the edges catch and turn smoky.

She does not measure anything. She does not look at the pan. She talks to her regulars the whole time, and every plate comes out the same.

[pause]

Further down, there are skewers of grilled squid brushed with chili oil. Steamed buns, split open and stuffed with braised pork. Bowls of sweet soup with ginger and black sesame.

By ten o'clock, there is barely room to walk.

People eat standing up, or perched on plastic stools at the edge of the road. Strangers share tables. Children run between the stalls.

At midnight, the lanterns come down, and the tables fold away.

Mrs. Lau counts the change in her apron pocket, smiles, and wipes down her pan.

Tomorrow, the road will be just a road again. Until seven.

Red Gold

Food and travel, saffron · Adult (30-45) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

[Music: soft strings. A purple field at first light]

For most of the year, this field looks like nothing at all.

Then, for a few short weeks in autumn, it turns purple.

These are saffron crocuses. Each flower opens for only a short time, and it must be picked quickly, usually in the early morning, before the petals open fully in the heat of the day.

So the pickers start at dawn.

They move along the rows, bent low, gathering the flowers one by one into baskets. There is no machine that does this well. It is done by hand.

Back indoors, the real work begins.

Inside each flower are three slender red threads. These are the stigmas, and they are the saffron. Each one is pinched out carefully, by hand, and the petals are set aside.

[pause]

Three threads. Per flower.

It takes many thousands of flowers to make even a small amount of the finished spice. Which is why saffron has been prized, and traded, and fought over, for thousands of years.

The threads are then gently dried, over low heat, until they are crisp and dark red.

What is left is almost weightless. A pinch is enough to turn a whole pot of rice golden, and to fill a kitchen with a scent that is hard to describe. Honey. Hay. Something faintly metallic.

The pickers will be back in the field tomorrow at dawn.

The flowers will not wait.

The Last Ferry to Skerra

Food and travel, island journey · Adult (40-55) · Scottish · 2 minutes

[SFX: ferry engine, gulls, wind]

The ferry to Skerra leaves once a day, in summer. In winter, it leaves when the weather allows.

The crossing takes an hour and twenty minutes. Most of the passengers sleep through it. The ones who don't stand at the rail and watch the mainland shrink to a grey line behind them.

Then, out of the haze, the island appears.

It is not much to look at, at first. A low hump of green and rock. A white beach. A scatter of houses around the harbor. A single road.

[pause]

Skerra has a population of eighty-four. There is one shop, one church, a primary school with nine pupils, and a hall that doubles as a cinema on the first Friday of the month.

There are no trees to speak of. The wind sees to that.

What Skerra does have is light. In summer, it barely gets dark at all. The sky turns a deep, glowing blue around midnight, and the sun is back up before four.

And it has the sea. Everything here depends on it. The fishing. The ferry. The weather that decides whether the ferry comes.

Morag MacLeod runs the shop. She has lived on Skerra all her life, apart from three years at college in Glasgow, which she describes as long enough.

She knows every face that comes off the boat. She knows who is visiting, who is coming home, and who is coming home for good.

Every year, a few young people leave for the mainland. Most years, one or two come back.

That is what keeps an island alive.

At five o'clock, the ferry sounds its horn and pulls away from the pier. Morag watches it go, the way she has watched it go a thousand times.

Then she turns the sign on the shop door, and puts the kettle on.

Under Four

Sports, athletics history · Adult (30-45) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

[Music: a steady, rising pulse]

For years, people had wondered whether it could be done at all. A mile, run in under four minutes.

Some said the human body simply was not built for it.

On the sixth of May, 1954, a young medical student named Roger Bannister arrived at the Iffley Road track in Oxford to try.

The weather was poor. A gusty wind blew across the track all afternoon, and for a while it looked as though the attempt might be called off.

Shortly before the start, the wind dropped.

Bannister had two friends in the race with him, Chris Brasher and Chris Chataway, both fine runners. Their job was to set the pace, lap by lap, and keep him on schedule.

Brasher led through the first two laps. Chataway took over for the third.

Then, with around three hundred yards to go, Bannister went past him and ran for the line alone.

[pause]

He crossed it and collapsed into the arms of the people waiting there.

When the announcer read out the result, he got as far as the word three before the crowd drowned him out.

Three minutes, fifty-nine point four seconds.

The barrier was broken. And it did not stay broken by one man for long. Just weeks later, the Australian John Landy ran even faster.

Once people knew it could be done, they kept doing it.

The Last Five Hundred Meters

Sports, rowing (fictional crew) · Adult (25-40) · Australian · 1 minute

[SFX: oars hitting water, a cox calling the stroke]

Nobody expected the women from Murray Creek to make the final.

They train on a muddy river, in a shed with a leaking roof, in a boat older than two of the crew. They fundraise with sausage sizzles. They share one set of spare oars.

And now, with five hundred meters to go, they are third.

Their legs are burning. Their lungs are gone. The cox is calling for more, and somehow, there is more.

They take the second boat with three hundred to go.

The crowd on the bank starts to notice.

Two hundred meters. They are level with the leaders. Every stroke the same, eight blades in, eight blades out, as if one person is rowing.

One hundred.

The line comes up fast, and nobody on the bank can tell who got there first.

[pause]

Then the board lights up.

Murray Creek. By a third of a second.

The Shelf That Stayed

Social issue, libraries · Adult (30–45) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Music: gentle piano]

The library in Harlow Springs, Pennsylvania, is one room. It has six thousand books, four computers, and a radiator that bangs every morning at nine.

Two years ago, the town council voted to close it.

It was a money decision. The budget was short, the building needed a new roof, and the council said, fairly, that most people now read on their phones.

That is when the town found out who actually used the library.

The retired steelworker who came in every weekday to read three newspapers he could not afford to buy.

The man who did not have internet at home, and filled in his job applications on computer number three.

The kids who came straight from school and stayed until their parents finished work, because there was nowhere else warm and safe to go.

[pause]

They came to the council meeting. All of them. The room was so full that people stood in the corridor.

Nobody shouted. They just told the council what the library was for.

Over the next year, volunteers raised the money for the roof with bake sales, a raffle, and

a fun run that got rained out twice. A retired roofer did the work at cost.

The library is still one room. The radiator still bangs.

But the doors open every morning at nine.

It stayed.

Who Feeds the Feeders

Social issue, food insecurity · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Every Thursday morning, before the sun is up, the lights come on in the basement of Grace Street Church.

By seven, the tables are set out in rows. Canned goods. Bread donated by a bakery across town. Boxes of fruit and vegetables from a farm two counties over.

By eight, the line stretches down the block.

The volunteers know most of the faces. They know whose kids are home sick and who just started a new job. They know not to ask too many questions.

There are about forty volunteers. Retired teachers. College students. A bus driver who comes on his day off.

And some of them used to stand in this line themselves.

They say they come back because someone was kind to them when they needed it. They want to pass that on.

At noon, the shelves are empty again.

Next Thursday, they will fill them up.

The Shape in the Furrow

Archaeology, Bronze Age (fictional find) · Mature (55+) · Irish · 2 minutes

[Music: low whistle, then strings]

It was a wet October, and Seán Dolan was ploughing a field his family had farmed for four generations. He was nearly finished for the day when he saw something in the furrow behind him.

At first, he thought it was a bit of an old bucket. Bent metal, caked in mud.

He picked it up, rubbed it with his thumb, and saw that it was gold.

[pause]

He did not tell the neighbors. He did not post a photograph. He put it in a biscuit tin, drove into town, and rang the museum.

Within a week, archaeologists were walking his field.

What he had found was a gold collar, a crescent-shaped ornament worn around the neck. Objects like it are known from the Bronze Age in Ireland, made roughly three thousand years ago or more. It had been hammered from a single sheet of gold and decorated with fine lines along the edge.

Over the next few weeks, the team uncovered more. Two bracelets. A small gold disc. All of them lying close together, in what had once been the edge of a bog.

They had not been lost. They had been placed there.

Across Ireland and Britain, archaeologists have found many Bronze Age objects deliberately buried in bogs, rivers and lakes. Why people did this, no one can say for

certain. An offering, perhaps. A gift to the land, or to whatever they believed lived in it.

Somebody, three thousand years ago, stood near this spot and let go of something precious.

The collar is now in a museum, under glass, in a quiet room.

Seán Dolan has been to see it twice. He says it looks smaller there, and cleaner.

He still ploughs the field. He says he looks at the ground differently now.

The City Under the Ash

Archaeology, ancient Rome · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 2 minutes

[Music: low drones, a slow drum]

In the year 79 AD, Pompeii was a busy Roman town on the Bay of Naples. It had bakeries and bars, temples, bathhouses and a large amphitheater. Behind it rose a green mountain that few people seem to have feared.

Its name was Vesuvius.

When it erupted, it sent a vast column of ash and pumice high into the sky. Over the hours that followed, the debris rained down on the town, until roofs collapsed under the weight. Then came surges of superheated gas and ash that swept down the mountainside.

Pompeii was buried under several meters of volcanic material.

And then, for a very long time, it was largely forgotten.

[pause]

Systematic excavations began in the eighteenth century. As the diggers worked down through the ash, they found a Roman town preserved in astonishing detail.

Frescoes still bright on the walls. Carbonized loaves of bread, still in the oven. Graffiti scratched into plaster: jokes, insults, lovers' names, and painted notices urging people to vote for candidates in local elections.

In the 1860s, the archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli developed a new technique. Excavators had noticed hollow spaces in the hardened ash, left behind where the bodies of victims had decayed. Fiorelli's team poured plaster into these spaces.

When the ash was chipped away, the casts showed the shapes of people in their final moments.

They are some of the most moving objects in all of archaeology. And they remind us that Pompeii is not only a site. It is a place where people lived, and where many of them died.

Excavation continues today. There are still parts of the town no one has seen in nearly two thousand years.

Pompeii is still being found.

How a Bridge Hangs

Engineering, bridges · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Music: steady, modern pulse]

From a distance, a suspension bridge looks almost weightless. A thin road, hanging in the air.

But every part of it has one job: to carry weight down into the ground.

Start with the deck, the road itself. Cars, trucks, wind, and the bridge's own enormous weight all press down on it.

The deck hangs from hundreds of vertical steel cables, called hangers or suspenders. They pass the load upward.

The hangers are attached to the main cables, the great curves that swoop from one end of the bridge to the other. Each main cable is made of thousands of steel wires, bundled tightly together. Steel is incredibly strong when it is pulled. And these cables are being pulled very, very hard.

The main cables rest on top of the towers. The towers push that load straight down, into foundations sunk deep into rock or the riverbed.

[pause]

But the cables also pull sideways, toward the middle of the bridge. Something has to hold them back.

That is the job of the anchorages. At each end of the bridge, the cables are fixed into massive blocks of concrete or into solid rock. Their sheer weight keeps the whole system in balance.

Deck to hangers. Hangers to cables. Cables to towers and anchorages. And all of it, finally, into the earth.

It looks like it is floating.

In fact, it is holding on.

Lifting Ships Over a Continent

Engineering, canals · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 2 minutes

[Music: broad, building orchestral]

For centuries, ships sailing between the Atlantic and the Pacific had to go the long way: all the way around the southern tip of South America.

The narrowest point between the two oceans was the Isthmus of Panama. And the dream was simple. Cut through it.

Doing it was anything but simple.

In the 1880s, a French company began digging a sea-level canal. Landslides, floods and disease, especially yellow fever and malaria, killed thousands of workers. The project collapsed.

In 1904, the United States took over. Its engineers changed the plan. Instead of cutting all the way down to sea level, they would lift the ships up and over.

They dammed the Chagres River, creating a huge artificial lake, Gatun Lake, in the middle of the route. Then they built sets of locks at each end, to raise ships up to the lake and lower them back down to the sea on the other side.

[pause]

Here is how a lock works.

A ship sails into a long concrete chamber. Huge steel gates close behind it. Then valves open, and water flows in from the chamber ahead, filling it from below. Slowly, the ship rises.

When the water is level, the next gates open, and the ship moves on to the next step. Small electric locomotives on tracks beside the lock help keep it centered.

There are no pumps. The water simply flows downhill, from the lake, under gravity.

Step by step, the ships climb roughly eighty-five feet, cross the lake, and are lowered back down on the far side.

The Panama Canal opened in August 1914. In 2016, a new, larger set of locks opened alongside the originals, built for the giant ships of today.

Every year, thousands of vessels pass through.

And every one of them climbs a staircase made of water.

Built to Sway

Engineering, skyscrapers · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Stand at the top of a very tall building on a windy day, and you may feel something surprising.

It is moving.

That is not a fault. Skyscrapers are designed to bend a little. A building that was perfectly rigid would have to fight every gust of wind with brute strength. A building that can flex lets some of that energy pass through it.

But too much movement makes people uneasy. So some of the tallest towers have a secret weapon near the top.

A giant pendulum.

It is called a tuned mass damper: a massive weight, sometimes hundreds of tons, hung or mounted so it can move. When the wind pushes the building one way, the damper swings the other, working against the motion and soaking up its energy.

The building still sways.

Just not enough for you to spill your coffee.

The Girl Who Found Dragons

Biography, science history · Adult (30-45) · Neutral British · 2 minutes

[Music: waves, a gentle piano line]

The cliffs at Lyme Regis, on the south coast of England, are always falling down. Every storm brings more of them crashing onto the beach.

And every fall reveals something hidden in the rock.

Mary Anning was born here, in 1799, into a poor family. Her father was a cabinetmaker who also collected the curious stone shapes from the cliffs and sold them to visitors. People called them curiosities. Today, we call them fossils.

When he died in 1810, he left the family in debt. Mary and her brother Joseph kept searching the beach to help make ends meet.

Around 1811, Joseph found a strange skull in the cliff. Over the following months, Mary, then about twelve, helped uncover the rest of the skeleton.

It was an ichthyosaur, a marine reptile from the age of the dinosaurs, and one of the first ever to be properly recognized by scientists.

[pause]

Mary kept going. She spent her life on that dangerous beach, often in winter, when the storms had done their work. In 1823, she found the first complete skeleton of a plesiosaur, a long-necked sea reptile so strange that some experts at first suspected it was a fake.

It was real.

Scientists came from across Europe to visit her shop, to buy her finds, and to learn from her. She taught herself anatomy and geology and could argue with the experts on their own terms.

But she was a woman, and she was not wealthy. She was never allowed to join the Geological Society of London. When her fossils were described in scientific papers, her name was often left out.

She died in 1847, at the age of forty-seven.

Today, her fossils are among the treasures of the Natural History Museum in London.

And her name is no longer left out.

Seventy-Two Days

Biography, journalism · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Music: brisk, ragtime-tinged piano]

In 1887, a young reporter in New York took an assignment no one else wanted.

She would pretend to be mentally ill, get herself committed to the women's asylum on Blackwell's Island, and report on what happened inside.

Her name was Elizabeth Cochrane. Her readers knew her as Nellie Bly.

She spent ten days in the asylum before her newspaper arranged her release. What she wrote about the conditions there shocked the public, and helped push the city to spend more money on the care of patients.

She was twenty-three.

[pause]

Two years later, she had another idea.

In Jules Verne's popular novel, Around the World in Eighty Days, a fictional gentleman circles the globe in just under three months. Nellie Bly wanted to do it faster. For real.

On the fourteenth of November, 1889, she set off by steamship, with little more than a small bag.

She crossed the Atlantic. In France, she made a detour to meet Jules Verne himself. Then on, by ship and by train, through the Suez Canal, to Ceylon, Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan, and across the Pacific to San Francisco.

Without her knowing it at first, another reporter, Elizabeth Bisland, had been sent racing around the world in the opposite direction.

Nellie Bly got back first.

She arrived home in January 1890, having circled the globe in seventy-two days, six hours and eleven minutes.

The Keeper's Logbook

Biography, lighthouse keeper (fictional) · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

For thirty-one years, Elias Ward kept the light on Gannet Point, off the coast of Maine.

Every night, he climbed the iron stairs, trimmed the wick, and wound the clockwork that turned the lens. And every night, he wrote a few lines in the station logbook.

Most of the entries are about the weather. Wind northeast, fresh. Fog from four o'clock. Lamp lit at sunset, all well.

But now and then, something else slips through.

Saw the first swallows today. Mended the boat. My daughter's birthday. Sent a letter on the supply boat.

In thirty-one years, the logbook records eleven ships helped through storms, two rescues, and not one night when the light went out.

The station is automated now. No one climbs the stairs.

But the logbook survives, in a small museum on the mainland. And every entry ends the same way.

All well.

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