

The Vial Truth

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Claire brushed the caked-on dirt from the cylindrical object retrieved from her excavation unit. Dating from the time of the original Fort Astoria, the glass vial had miraculously survived the passage of centuries. What a find! It stood out from the bent nails and broken pottery usually discovered at the site.

Back at the lab she cleaned, photographed, and cataloged the object. Though the stopper still remained sealed, the small bottle appeared empty. Perhaps its contents had leaked over time. She finally decided to gently remove the cork from the bottle and test for any residue. There was no smell, or sign of previous contents, but she took a swab of the inside of the vial. Carefully sealing the swab to avoid contamination, she sent it off for testing.

Knowing that she would have to wait for the results of the test, she resolved to spend the next few days researching further into the history of the fort, hoping to find a hint to what the vial might have contained. After a fitful night's sleep, she made herself a large cup of coffee and spread out her books on the table by her laptop and decided to tackle her investigation.

She looked through various primary resources and excavation reports discussing early 19th century glass bottles, and decided that her specimen most closely resembled containers that were used for the preparation and storage of medicines as part of makeshift hospitals at early trading posts. Though excited by her discoveries, she felt exhausted, sore and a bit feverish. She decided to have a lie down.

Alternately feeling too hot and too cold, she slept little. Her throat now hurt as well, but she decided to get up and try to distract herself with some further research. She could always lose herself in books. After shuffling between various volumes, her attention was drawn to a report describing a meeting of local chiefs at Fort Astoria in 1811. Duncan McDougall, the commander of the fort, had produced a small glass bottle with which he threatened the native inhabitants. Though empty, he proclaimed vial contained an evil spirit. If the tribes attacked the fort, he would uncork the bottle and the Indians would die of smallpox.

Could this be it? What are the chances that such an object would not only be saved, but could survive intact all these years? Perhaps she was just getting over excited, or lacking critical judgement due to her need of sleep or her fever. It must be just a simple medicine bottle. One of many that had been at the fort.

She closed her eyes and sat back in her armchair. She was so tired. Her throat burned and her fever raged. Now her skin began to itch as well. Sleep. All she wanted was to sleep. She would feel better in the morning. Closing her eyes, she drifted in and out of consciousness.

Confusing fever dreams overtook her. Reality blended with strange visions. These swirling images coalesced into a dark figure that seemed to be in the room with her. First just a shadow, it increasingly took on human form as it approached her. She seemed unable to move or cry out as a tall man with long, dark hair loomed over her. He was dressed in animal skins and had a bark cloak wrapped around his shoulders. His face was weathered and held a sad countenance. Missing one eye, the figure gazed down at her.

In a gravelly voice the figure began to speak, "The sickness takes all. It cannot be stopped." It wasn't clear if this was a threat, a premonition, or a memory. "Medicine men capture the soul of the one who releases sickness."

Claire tried to ask what he meant, but her throat burned and seemed filled with sores. Nothing but a croak escaped. The man just stared into her eyes, but his outline became indistinct and the figure faded back into the shadows. She weakly reached out to him, sliding out of her chair and hitting the floor. The shock focused her mind and she looked around. She was alone.

Confused, lying on the hard floor, she felt worse than before. Looking at her arms, she saw them covered with pustules. What was happening? She knew she needed help. She tried to stand but was too weak. Her phone was on the desk. She only had to make it that far.

Slowly she crawled along the floor, her joints aching. What was normally a few steps across the room became an interminable journey. Finally, she made it to the desk and pulled herself up the table leg. It took all her strength. She was just able to grab her phone before collapsing back onto the floor.

Pressing a button on the phone, nothing happened. It was dead. Distracted by her research and illness, she had forgotten to charge her phone. Looking into the dark screen she could see her face reflected, it too was now covered in scabs and sores. "Oh god" she thought, "someone help me!" Help was surely nearby, but she had no strength left. There was nothing she could do. She couldn't even cry out. She collapsed back on the floor, sickness and hopelessness overtaking her.

That is where she was found days later. Her body riddled with scabs. Tests proved inconclusive. There were no signs of a virus. But what could have caused such an illness? Authorities searched her home for some clue as to the cause. Among her effects they found an unopened envelope from a laboratory with the results of a swab test she had sent in days before. However, tests were negative. The vial appeared to be empty. No cause of death was ever determined.