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Fossil Brothers

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Fossil Brothers

Cover Page Footnote

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Fossil Brothers

*As we acquire more knowledge,
things do not become more comprehensible, but more mysterious.*
—Albert Schweitzer

George said—and you have to trust me here, because George is no longer with us and therefore can neither confirm nor deny any of this—"Pete, don't kid yourself. You don't find fossils. Fossils find you."

Which at the moment sounded like the biggest pile of hogwash I'd heard since one of our associates had suggested that the way to a higher level of consciousness was to build an orgone box and get in it.

George also said that once the ice had been broken—once the first fossil had found me—fossils would be coming on like gangbusters, that I would have to work overtime to keep them away. That's because I would have tapped into the elemental hum of the ancient universe. (I haven't put quotation marks around the latter statement, because I'm not sure those are the exact words George used. He could just as easily have said "the heart of the universal zeitgeist.")

Which is interesting, because George, who to my mind was wrong more often than right when it came to touchy-feely matters, turned out to be right on both counts. In short order I found a fossil, or, perhaps, a fossil found me, and more fossils came on like gangbusters and have yet to stop.

As evidence of the latter I offer a subsequent experience one winter in England. I was staying overnight in Lyme Regis, a tiny town on the seam between Dorset and Devon, on the South Coast overlooking the English Channel. After supper I strolled up the street to a nearby pub, The Volunteer, for a pint or two of bitter ale. The publican, in response to my query about whether his town had a claim to fame and what that might be if it did, said, "Fossils."

"Really?" I said.

"Really," he said. "Tomorrow morning, if you have time, walk up the hill over there to the second lane on the left and take it down to a path that leads to the shore. Follow the shore to the base of a cliff. The fossils are there."

So the next morning after breakfast, before I pulled out of town, I took the lane, the path, the shore, the cliff. There were seagulls and salt grass and crashing surf. There were driftwood, flotsam, and jetsam at the high-tide line. There were million-year-old fossils sticking out of the face of the cliff like nuggets in El Dorado. I picked up enough to set off the "Overweight" light at the airport on my return flight, including a piece of ancient shell so big and heavy that it can be used for a door stop.

George, on seeing the haul when I got home, said, "See what I meant? Gangbusters."

My first fossil came some time in the early 1970s. My guess is that it was in the late

spring, because I recall the weather was cool yet we were already slapping mosquitoes as we walked.

I had taken the ferryboat from Rockland, on the western side of Penobscot Bay, to the island of Vinalhaven, in the middle of the bay, to see George. George was living with the fishermen. He was also trying to make a go of it as a freelance writer. I used to travel out there every few weeks or so, and we would take long walks around the island and tell each other long, shaggy-dog tales about things we had seen, or heard, or thought we knew.

Mostly it was ranting and raving.

George might ask what I had been doing for fun in the last few weeks, and I might say I had been organizing my workshop to build a rowboat but I was having trouble finding the right tools, and that would set him off:

"You can't get decent tools, you know," he'd say. "You can go into a hardware store and they throw blister-packed trash at you. If there's any steel at all in them it isn't tempered steel. And most of the time there's only one size of each tool—medium and useless. Who ever heard of medium for crying out loud? Everything is either small or large. Look at a proper tool kit and the medium-size tools are the least worn. And of course the bloody good tools that used to be available are all hanging on restaurant and barroom walls. Oh sure, you can send off to these fine tool catalog outfits and get English and German planes at piles of money apiece, several-hundred-dollar workbenches, monogrammed screw extractors, and full-size drawings for a seventeenth-century mandolin, but try to get a boatslick or a lipped adz, show me a ship auger and I'll quit smoking, lead me to a boatbuilder's bevel, backing iron, or spud and I'll take esoteric vows, and materials to work with, Great Hornitoads you can't get the wood, and no copper rivets and roves, it's a conspiracy, some heinous troll is sitting atop a mountain of OUR TOOLS, OUR WOOD, and we gotta find the bastards to liberate what is ours, to find peace and freedom and the knowledge that we can do it ourselves once again, to know joy again in the beatitude of one's very own shop where personal expression once again blossoms across the land, and oh Lordy..."

"Right," I'd say, taking a hit off my can of beer. "But what exactly do you mean by joy?"

Generally, we had an informal division of labor when it came to rants. George took care of technology, science, what he called "psycho-emotional matters," and manly-man stuff like guns, fishing, dogs, thickness planers, with a strong emphasis on geology, coastal ecology, and the management of woodlots. I was in charge of personal history, interrelationships, the meaning of things, nostalgia, politics, and gender studies, which in those days came under the heading, "Women." We tended to share literature, rock 'n' roll criticism, and the analysis of stupidity.

The way it worked was this: I'd come in on the early-morning ferry. George would meet me at the landing, usually in an old rusting pickup truck with his dog Sylvia, a long, lean, high-strung Borzoi, pacing around in the back. We'd drive into town for fried eggs and home fries at a little greasy spoon, and we'd always have lots of coffee. Lots and lots of coffee. Enough so that afterwards it seemed as if our eyeballs were rolling around on sticks.

"What'll it be today, Pete?" George would say, out in the street, wired.

"What've you got?" I'd say.

"Let's see," he'd say. "I've got summer beach, winter beach, woods and fields, bushwhacker's paradise, historical quarries, heights with an overlook, lighthouses and headlands, or free-form. You're king for a day. Take your pick."

On the day in question, I took winter beach, so we got in the truck, drove over to the East Side, and parked on the side of a dirt road that led down to an old saltwater farm. Sylvia took off like a rocket into the puckerbrush.

We walked down the dirt road for awhile and then took a shortcut through the woods. George went off on a monologue about the deleterious effects of blow-downs on stands of mature spruce. We came out into an open field. I countered with an analysis of why exposing Richard Nixon as a pathological liar was right and good for justice but bad for the future of rational political discourse. While we crossed the field, we both agreed that if we had it to do all over again, we'd learn lead guitar, strike a pose, and join a rock 'n' roll band. ("Stratocaster," George said. "Pink lacquer body with powder-blue appliqués.")

At the far edge of the field was a berm of loose stones, broken lobster traps and crates, bits and pieces of frayed pot warp, rusted oil cans, and plastic detergent bottles brittle from exposure to salt water and ultraviolet light. This marked the limit of the most extreme high tide—the highest high tides—the most awe-inspiring tides, at once pulled by the moon and driven by the furies of winter. (The existence of such a berm was what identified this as a winter beach.)

We climbed over the top and bango! There we were, face to face with one of the most spectacular sights on the coast of Maine. Ocean and ledges and islands and half-tide rocks to the horizon. Wreck Ledge, Bunker Ledge, Old Horse Ledge; Sheep Island, Hay Island, Brimstone Island; Shag, Yellow, and Diamond Rocks. The lighthouse on Saddleback Ledge to our left, the one on Heron Neck to our right.

In the far distance the ocean rose and fell in long, undulating swells, as if it were breathing. In the middle distance it surged through passages between the ledges and rocks. Immediately offshore, it gathered itself together, drew itself up to full height, rolled forward like a freight train without brakes on the steepest of grades, and threw itself on the beach. The effect was like five hundred strongmen hitting the same stump at the same time with ten-pound sledgehammers. The sea thundered. The ground shook.

The beach consisted of huge boulders as big as a man's head, rounded and oveled by centuries of rolling in the surf. The rocks rolled forward as the waves surged up the beach; they rolled backward as the waves receded; they ground against each other; they bounced along like gigantic marbles. The rote—the sound of the ocean working the shore—was horrific.



So there we were, walking along our winter beach, George and I, Sylvia off in the distance running after the sea birds. George, inspired by the beach stones, was declaiming on geology. I was lost in my own thoughts, following a line that branched off the main into... where?... I'm not sure I can say. Something about the setting, the violence of the sea on the land, the slant of the light, the barrenness of the ledges, had turned me inward. I could register a discrete word here and there from George, but I didn't have the foggiest notion what he was saying.

"Strata"... "Devonian"... "Glaciated"... "Schist"... "Fracture zone"...
"Sedimentary"... "Fossil"...

"Fossil?" I said, wallowing up from the depths. "Did you say something about a fossil?"

"Three or four years ago," George said, "Right here on this spot."

Now, I don't know much about geology, but I do know that fossils are generally found in soft, sedimentary formations, and that pieces of rock from such formations wouldn't last fifteen minutes on a beach such as this. All those rolling granite boulders would grind them up in no time at all.

"Impossible," I said.

"Maybe so," George said, "but it happened."

"Well then," I said, "I've always wanted to find a fossil. If you found one here, so can I."

And that's when George said, "Pete, don't kid yourself. You don't find fossils. Fossils find you."

And that's when I reached down and picked up a long, thin piece of stone. It was of the sedimentary type. It had broken away from another stone, and the flattish seam of the break was studded with scores of tiny shell fossils, somewhat like miniature scallops.

I can't begin to describe the feeling of triumph, of power, of blessedness that that first fossil gave me. If I could have done a standing back flip, I would have. I showed the prize to George.



George turned the rock over and over in his hands, feeling it, studying it. He seemed perplexed.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"I've seen this stone before," he said quietly.

"What?"

"This is the fossil I found a few years ago."

"You mean you found it and put it back?"

"No, I found it and took it home."

"Then how did it get back here?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's in both places."

We called for Sylvia and ran back along the way we came. The beach, the berm, the field, the woods, the dirt road, the truck, George's place, the front door, the hall, the living room, the windowsill. There on the windowsill was George's fossil. It was a long, thin piece of stone. It was of the sedimentary type. It had broken away from another stone, and the flattish seam of the break was studded with scores of tiny shell fossils, somewhat like miniature scallops. I aligned my fossil, face down, with George's, face up. They fit together exactly.

A sedimentary stone had survived for centuries on a beach that was anathema to it. It had broken in half along a seam. One person had found half. Three or four years later, another person, a best friend in the presence of the first, had found the other half. I won't bore you with an accounting of the odds.

I am sitting in a room in a house on the coast of Maine, about fifteen miles as the crow flies from our winter beach on Vinalhaven. In the distance I can see a similar beach, and islands, and rocks, and ledges, and the ocean surging among them. On the table in front of me are our fossil-bearing stones, George's and mine.

As I said, George is no longer with us. Before he left we were talking about old times, about some of the wondrous things we had seen over the years.

"Do you still have the fossil?" I said.

"Of course," he said.

"Good," I said, but I wanted to say more. I wanted to ask him if I could have his fossil. I didn't want to see it simply disappear because those left behind might not know what it really meant. But I couldn't ask, and, I expect, he couldn't offer. To do so would be to admit that our island-walking days were over.

George died of cancer a few days later. At his funeral, on a wild, stormy day on the island, I asked his wife if she had seen the fossil. No, she hadn't. I asked his daughter. No, she hadn't. His son. No.

One day, a couple of years later, there was a knock on my door. It was George's wife. She came in and sat down, and we drank coffee and talked for awhile.

"I was going through George's things," she said, "and I found something you might be interested in." She pulled the fossil from her bag. "Show me how they fit together."

So I did. Like a glove.

"Keep them together," she said. "They belong that way."

I have been studying the stones off and on for a couple of days now. One side of mine is the outside of the original stone before it broke and is therefore smooth. The other side, the seam side, is jagged with fossilized shells. One side of George's, the matching side with mine, is jagged with fossils. What I have never noticed before, or what I have noticed and have never registered, is that the other side of George's stone is also jagged with fossils. My stone had split off from George's, and George's had split off from another.

Somewhere on our winter beach, or somewhere on someone's windowsill or someone's mantelpiece or someone's kitchen table, lies a piece of stone that fits together with ours as cleanly as the elements of the most expensive Swiss watch.

I won't bore you with an accounting of the odds. But I will suggest that, given everything that has come to pass already, the odds that this is true, as great as they may be, are with us.