

Grandpa and the Petrified Oysters

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WHENEVER I VISITED MY GRANDPARENTS, I always knew where to check for Granddad. As a means of escaping household routine, he maintained a remote kingdom, a long shed deep in the interior of the backyard where he often worked, creating stories or updating family genealogy. Here in what had once been a combination of hutches for chickens, bins of feed, drawers for different kinds of plant seeds, and an office with a roll top desk for coordinating the bills and other affairs of the household, Grandpa did the bulk of his writing. Here he stored back issues of *Look*, *Life*, *National Geographic*, *Time*, and the *Utah Deseret News*; here also were samples of rocks and ore he had collected during his prospecting days in the Utah, Nevada, and Montana wastelands.

Among these samples, housed in a scientific-looking Erlenmeyer flask, were six oddly shaped rocks which Grandpa mysteriously referred to as his petrified oysters. These, he pointed out to me, had been collected in the desert and proved that the area had once been covered by an ocean. Whole states had been covered by water.

"Millions of years ago," Grandpa would say—he'd kicked back from his writing desk—"pressure under the earth thrust great mountain ranges like the Sierra-Nevadas way up into the sky. At the same time other parts of the land were lowered, and water rushed in to cover much of what is now Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas. Geologists call this ancient ocean the Sundance Sea, and in its waters swam some of the strangest creatures that ever lived. It wasn't too deep, but it pushed inland for hundreds of miles. Lots of primitive life was lost when those rampaging waters first rushed onto the land."

Charmed by the notion of catastrophic death and destruction, I asked if those oysters had really lived in that ghost sea. "How'd you find 'em? Was anything else dead mixed in with them?"

"They came from the Barbara Ann Mine," he said. Grandpa's friend

George Pulley had staked a claim in the '30s in an area where he'd found some medium grade ore. He'd named the tunnel he dug after his oldest daughter, and he asked Grandfather to "look over" the digs and give his opinion as to whether or not it had been mined out. Down in that tunnel, Grandpa extracted the ancient shells and placed them in a flask.

While the samples were a source of wonder for me, they represented one of the two great areas of friction between my grandparents. Grandma refused to believe that any part of "Mormon territory" had ever been under water, maintaining steadfastly that the notion of fossils was somehow blasphemous. And any time Grandmother's ire was piqued by Grandpa's possession of these suspect and unwholesome objects, she always let the other foot drop squarely on what she considered his other great failing.

Grandpa drank. While to the larger world, moderate consumption of alcohol was hardly a crime, to my grandmother the mere uncorking of a liquor bottle was a moral transgression on roughly the same level as the rape of the Sabine women. She'd never put together that Grandpa's drinking increased with the loss, one by one, of his long time friends, each of whose passing diminished the importance of his opinions on politics, sports, and other affairs of the world.

To maintain the peace, Grandfather tried to keep his drinking hidden. He'd stash a pint of Early Times, his favorite bourbon, in spaces behind books, hidden cavities among the endless bottles of ore specimens, or even in the narrow pocket beneath the cover of his Underwood. While these stashes were ingeniously conceived, Grandmother almost always discovered them, thrusting pint bottles under Grandpa's nose for what both knew would be an unsatisfactory explanation.

My father, who was almost as fond of Granddad as I was, not infrequently shared a secret libation and a chuckle or two with him. Dad's Methodist upbringing presented no conflict with this activity, and he frequently brought little "gifts" for Grandpa concealed in brown paper bags. I remember their staccato chatter punctuated with rowdy chuckles floating over the long summer nights from one secret rendezvous or another.

One evening, I had just finished a softball game with the Holcomb brothers and was aiming my dirty, balled up sweat shirt at my sister Beverly's head.

"Charlie!" My father had come looking for me. "Want to spend a weekend in the desert? We're leaving early tomorrow morning, so don't plan on reading all night. Your granddad's going and—I don't think you've met him—his buddy, Mr. Meyers. They'll be checking on an old borax mine near Search Light, Nevada. Might be fun. It'll be just the four of us."

This news played to mixed reviews in my mind. On the distaff side, I

loved to lie in the old poster bed in Grandma's guest room with its creamy yellow wall paper. I'd sandwich back issues of Grandpa's *True Wests* or *Smithsonians*, *Saturday Evening Post*, or *Scientific Americans* and read through the night, shutting my eyes only after the dawn birds began chirping and a pale light washed over the wall paper. I'd fall asleep listening to the gentle cacophony of Grandmother opening drawers, rattling coffee spoons, and humming softly to encourage a new brood of German roller canaries to begin singing.

If having to forgo the pleasure of a night with Grandpa's old magazines was difficult to take, the proposed outing had a distinct upside. First, with two others present, my dad would not work in a series of power hikes to "test my manhood." Also, I would escape for awhile the company of my three sisters, each of whom labored on separate quests to make my twelve-year-old life miserable. Most importantly, though, this trip afforded the constant companionship of Grandpa. And there was the possibility that I would finally get a glimpse of "The Thing."

The Thing was an entity obliquely hinted at by a series of "Burma Shave"-type signs. Signs like these strung the old highway to Nevada, always a series of six or seven signs placed twenty feet apart, offering advice—"Brush your teeth every day. Colgate keeps decay away," or confessions—"I always use Dial,"" the octopus said, 'because with eight armpits I'd rather be dead.'" Sometimes the signs offered promises.

Each summer as my family traveled to Yellowstone Park, the Grand Canyon, or Jackson Hole, we read these signs aloud in chorus. Most of the rhymes were fun. They broke up the tedious journey from California to Nevada. But signs featuring "The Thing" were mysterious with promise and threat.

"The Thing" was the mummy of a grotesquely deformed boy taken from his ancient resting place in the Valley of the Kings and brought, the ads assured, at great risk of life and limb to his new resting place in the middle of the California Desert. During all our summers of travel, we had never, despite my pleading, made the two mile detour off the main road to stop at the little concession that housed this treasure.

Every American kid is interested in ancient Egypt, not because of its contribution to Western civilization, but because the "land of the pharaohs" was where, we all believed, they buried hundreds of people alive in tombs with their dead rulers. Those who resisted were wrapped in linen, screaming and struggling, and placed inside the pyramids. This was the truth and nothing our seventh-grade teachers said could gainsay it.

Old television movies reinforced the texts of comic books with an eloquence that more factual Encyclopedia Britannica films could not match. I wondered how The Thing, the Egyptian boy, came to be buried alive. Was his deformity something that had killed him; or—and this was delicious—had his father, the pharaoh, become so enraged by his ap-

pearance that he had the boy murdered or buried alive in some dark corridor of the pyramid?

I knew I had only to see the boy mummy to know exactly what had happened thousands of years in the past. There would be some tell-tale sign on the creature that he had struggled with his bindings—or, unwrapped, something in the sad and ancient expression would communicate what had happened to him. I just had to see him. The only problem was persuading my father.

“Dad,” I inquired sleepily at the breakfast table where I sat between him and Grandpa at four A.M. on the morning of our trip. “Will we be going anywhere near The Thing this time? I’ve never gotten to see it, and I know Grandpa would want to write about it in his journal.”

“Depends on how hot it is and how time is running,” said my Dad. “It’ll probably be nothing but a doll or sheets soaked in plaster of Paris. We’ll try and go there this summer when there’s more time.”

“I might like to visit that little museum if there’s time,” interjected Grandpa. “These tourist places usually have rock samples on display. Sometimes something interesting turns up. You never know. Anyway, finish your cocoa, little Charlie. We need to get to Baker before the desert heats up too bad.”

I glanced at Dad, gauging his reaction to my blatant attempt at drawing Grandfather’s support. His demeanor, I noted with relief, remained calm as he perused the headlines of the *Los Angeles Examiner*. I then turned to Grandpa, taking hope from the grin he bestowed on me as he folded the sports section and stuffed it into the pocket of his plaid traveling coat. One of Grandma’s bright-eyed rollers awoke, drummed a perch with both sides of its beak, and chirped tentatively into the gray and somber dawn.

By the time we got to Long Beach and picked up Mr. Meyers, the grumbling of early morning traffic had already begun. As we proceeded north, Dad fumbled with the radio hoping to tune in an early sports report. I scanned the traffic, wishing we’d rub elbows with a Chevy Corvette. The two old prospectors chatted quietly in the back seat of our Buick Roadmaster, their faces shadowed like gangland conspirators.

In those days, leaving the great city of Los Angeles put one at once in the country. I was amazed at how quickly the huge but graceful buildings of the “City of Angels” disappeared, replaced by open fields and trees as our car rushed onward.

“Should have brought property in L.A. when I was selling potatoes to the Farmer’s Market,” remarked Grandpa ruefully. “Lots of money to be made in real estate then.”

Granddad had more than once come close to making really big money. He was one of those small investors who’d leased tracts on Long Beach’s Signal Hill, hoping there was oil beneath the otherwise un-

promising land. Along with other investors, he'd tried to get the large California oil companies to do exploratory drilling. These companies, he later claimed acerbically, simply waited for him and others to run out of money, then quietly bought up their leases. A year or two after Grandpa lost his claim, the Black Drake oil well gushed up under that area and, with the accompanying fire, lit the midnight sky for miles. "Made afternoon in the middle of the night," Grandpa exclaimed whenever he told the story.

The water pump's final gasp coincided with our arrival at Baker after the hot ride up old Interstate 40. A local Richfield service station truck towed us in, and the mechanic promised, after lengthy negotiations with my dad, to have the car ready by seven o'clock that evening.

After lingering awhile at a little restaurant, the men and I parted company, they sauntering into a little bar with an old wagon wheel propped up in front for decoration and I returning to the service station clutching a bottle of Nehi orange.

In the waiting room, which was kept surprisingly cool by a single fan that also held aloft the fluttering ribbon tied to it, I picked up a *Real Frontier* and began to leaf through it. Just two paragraphs into an article about mysterious deaths and disappearances in the Superstition Mountains of Arizona, I fell asleep. It was early evening when I felt a gentle pressure on my left shoulder. I blinked up at the three men who stood over me.

"Bring your flashlight?" inquired Grandpa. He knew I'd planned to coax my father into stopping the car somewhere in the desert night, so I could leap out and switch on the light, maybe catching a poisonous insect scuttling about on its sinister business. You never saw them in the daytime; only holes in the sand betrayed the places where they waited. Dad and Mr. Meyers were grinning, and I knew Grandpa had shared my scheme with them. I sheepishly followed the men out onto the street.

In the evening Baker was a city of tawdry beauty. Twilight shadows blended the sprawling urban ugliness with the surrounding desert. As darkness fell, the city was transformed. Electric signs blinked and sizzled, and buildings flashed with red, blue, green, and hot pink opulence. People, freshly showered and cheerful, sought places to eat or be entertained. Conversations jostled each other; laughter harmonized with scraps of music. An evening riot of fragile-winged and huge-eyed insects appeared and, their ephemeral and waxy beauty eclipsed by the city's gaudy light show, petulantly sacrificed themselves on neon altars.

"Like they're from another galaxy, huh, Grandpa," I suggested as we regarded an impossible creature orbiting a ghostly light over the service station, its angry buzzing just audible above a radio playing softly in the garage. "Wonder what their space ship looks like."

"Probably shaped like an Idaho potato with long legs and a T.V. an-

tenna for navigation," he suggested. "Do you think they'll start World War Three when they get tired of dueling the lights?"

"Yeah. Wonder when they'll make their move. All this time we've been building bombs, we should've been stocking insecticides."

"They're bugs," said my father quietly as if he were injecting a university professor's voice of reason into a serious discussion between Grandpa and me. "They don't communicate, and they don't plan ahead."

"Well, damn!" said Grandpa. "Guess the world'll survive after all if it's just the Russians we have to worry about."

I watched the city recede through the rear window. From a distance through the clear night air, it seemed set into the desert like a ring placed on an ancient finger. As if he'd read my thoughts, Grandpa looked up.

"Desert's been there forever. Hasn't changed since the pioneer days. Maybe you an' I should write a "Twilight Zone" about wagon trains coming around those low hills, as they actually did, but instead of just more desert, they'd find this town exactly as it is—at night with all the lights burning."

"Maybe you'd have a better story if your pioneers had to deal with this," Dad said. He indicated the right side of the road.

There framed by a twisted Joshua tree, was the first of a six sign spread informing travelers that "The Thing" and other fascinating relics of the desert waited nearby. The large cactus, full moon, and billions of stars, which the clear air made huge and proximate, seemed a bewitching collaboration ushering us into another dimension.

"We gotta see this, Dad!" I pleaded. "You know we'll never get another chance. Grandpa wants to see the museum as much as I do."

"Little Charlie's speaking once for me and twice for himself," chuckled Grandpa. "It's your dad's car." He was now addressing me. "The decision's got to be his."

"No, Lorin. This outing is really for you and Mr. Meyers. I've got two days off to chauffeur you guys around. You'll have to decide between you if we can fit it in."

Gravel popped under the Roadmaster's tires as we turned off the highway onto the little dark road. It hardly seemed a fitting approach to a world class relic, but I knew that wonders often lay behind unpromising exteriors. Troy itself was rediscovered beneath an ordinary looking mound.

About half a mile off the highway the little road curved sharply, and a low ranch-style building suddenly came into view, its frame outlined in colored string lights like those used at Christmas for decorating trees. In front of the house colored spots picked up smooth white pebbles that framed a small cactus garden. Behind all this five or six pickup trucks lounged at informal angles in an asphalt parking lot.

As Dad locked up our car, I looked for anything directing visitors to the attraction we'd come to see. A neat electric sign placed on the upper left side of the front window informed travelers that cocktails were sold inside; but what deserved to be featured in letters ten feet tall—that this building housed an entity, a mysterious presence whose life had ended under questionable circumstances three thousand years before—was not even remotely touted by the establishment. If the fabulous artifact were here, it was being carefully hidden.

Dad's voice brought me back to my companions.

"How 'bout a cold beer, Mr. Meyers? Lorin? Want a coke, Charlie?"

Though my mouth was dry with apprehension, it wasn't a soft drink I wanted. "No, thank you," I said and quietly followed my father into the dimly lighted building.

The wall opposite the door was filled with a rustic looking wooden bar standing in front of a large mirror. Arranged on the glass were wilderness photographs advertising Schlitz and Hamms beer. Five or six round tables stood in the foreground and a few chairs filled by the men whose trucks waited in the parking area. They turned to face us as we entered.

Embarrassed, I turned back toward the door. Just above it was mounted the head of a wildcat, small, but with trophy worthy teeth. I must have gasped slightly. One of the strangers chuckled. The sound was low and seemed derisive.

Grandpa and Mr. Meyers had moved around me and were taking seats at the little bar. Dad occupied the restroom. I stood alone clutching my blue Kansas City baseball cap.

"Excuse me, sir," I said to the man serving beer to my grandfather. "Is this where they keep The Thing? I didn't see it when I came. . ."

The whole room exploded. Laughter was punctuated by the sound of feet shuffling and glasses pounding on tables. One man's guffaws escalated into a staccato of coughing. Red faced, he left the room.

"See that hallway, son?" The proprietor gestured to a doorway on the right side of the room. Above it the word "museum" was stenciled in black Roman script. "We usually close up the exhibit at six o'clock; but, since you're the only one asking, I guess it's all right if you take a quick look. I won't charge you nothin', either."

More laughter from the tables. "Hope you get your money's worth, kid," someone said. "Don't let nothin' bite ya."

Passing under the sign, I proceeded down a long hallway walking as slowly as if I were a prisoner measuring the steps to my own execution. A shadow traveled ahead and above me along the yellow-white wall. I took courage from the fact that it looked bigger and bolder than I was or felt.

At its end, the passageway made a sharp right angle and opened into

a large exhibit room. Glass terrariums and cages of different shapes and sizes were mounted against the walls. At the center of the room was a raised platform on which rested what looked like a stone sarcophagus. This, I assumed, contained "The Thing."

I started touring the sides of the room, determined to put off what I'd really come to see until the very last. Disobeying a note on the first aquarium, I tapped the glass gently and watched what had appeared to be a dead scorpion sluggishly raise its stinging tail and one claw. Suddenly it pivoted, rushed into a mound of straw, and with a dry insect sound scuttled out of sight.

This second exhibit appeared empty, the floor spread with sand and a few cotton wisps of what looked like webbing. Rapping on the glass failed to bring a miniature monster from under the sand. Moving closer, I put my left cheek on the glass and glanced backward. Startled, I thrust backward.

It seemed the whole screen covering the top of this terrarium was filled with the hairy abdomen and extended legs of a huge black tarantula. I thought at first it was trying to muscle its way out of the cage, but it was feeding. A cricket lay pinned in the arachnid's mandibles, slowly waving a pair of dying antennae.

I abandoned the rows of containers of snakes, geckos, kangaroo rats, and a single huge Gila monster and approached the raised display in the center of the room slowly, giving my overworked imagination time to listen to what might lie there. I looked inside the coffin.

How long I stood staring into that stone coffin before I became aware of someone else standing by my side, I don't remember; it seemed a long time. I recall thrusting my blue cap back onto my head and turning away to conceal the disappointment and, even at that age, rage that must have been apparent on my face.

Softly Grandpa said, "It sure doesn't fool anybody, does it?" We both stared down at what appeared to be a coyote mangled while trying to cross the highway. Its jaw, which apparently had been broken by the impact was twisted and thrust up, the large canine teeth enhancing the horror by giving the animal a wicked and maniacal "grin." A rug embossed with pseudo-Egyptian hieroglyphs had been folded over the body. The whole effect was artless enough to suggest the proprietor had not intended to fool anybody, that the hoodwinked patron was supposed to be amused as if he and the owner had conspired in some kind of mutually beneficial joke.

Grandpa kneaded my neck with his left hand. "In a way all this fakery is not so bad," he said.

I wasn't in the mood. "I've waited so long to see this, Grandpa. Why are people so—" the word seemed somehow anemic—"dishonest? No wonder all those guys were laughing when I came in here."

"It might be hard to understand, Charlie, but those men weren't making fun of you. In a way you let them recall their own time of being young enough to be tricked. People get knocked around growing up and when they put up their guard, they get old. They question things that used to fill them with pleasure. Remember, Charlie, just looking forward to this little exhibit has kept you going for a long time. The museum's a disappointment now, but think back on all the fun you've had just dreaming about it. The men out there envy you that."

"So you think fooling people with a fake mummy's okay?"

"Well," Grandfather continued, "Think of all the talk this bogus Egyptian has stimulated in the thousands of cars passing by those signs. Most people don't believe there's a three-thousand-year-old murdered Egyptian way out here in the desert, but this dime store curator may just unwittingly inspire some young person, perhaps yourself, to dedicate his lifetime to studying the ancient Near East."

Just then, I didn't care about the Near East; nor, I confess, would it later exert much influence on my life. I felt that I had been cheated—worse that I was being held up to ridicule by people I didn't even know. I looked about for a back way out. There was none.

"Your dad and Jim Meyers must be about finished with their drinks. Put that sour expression in your back pocket. Don't let anybody think they got to you."

I raked my cap over my head. "Grandpa, would you look at stuff in here for about five minutes and then follow me out? I don't want it to look like I had to be coaxed out."

Grandpa's attention was already drawn to a little exhibit of rocks I'd passed up. If he'd heard me, he didn't let on. I turned and walked slowly back down the hall bracing myself for the coming reception.

Passing again under the museum sign, I noticed my father and Mr. Meyers studying a regional map Dad had picked up at a Chevron station. The other men, I noted with relief, were preoccupied and didn't seem to notice me. I moved across the room and stood behind my two traveling companions.

"Where's your granddad?" My father finally noticed me. "We've got to get moving. Ely is still a long way ahead."

"He's"—I looked toward the hallway—"He's here." Grandpa's brown felt hat had just made its appearance at the near end of the hall, the face it framed holding an expression of mild amusement.

Instead of joining us, Grandpa selected the one table in the little bar that was unoccupied. I shot him a questioning look, but he seemed not to notice. When he finally looked in our direction, he spoke in an unnaturally loud voice immediately drawing the attention of others in the room.

"Well, Charlie," he said brightly, "that exhibit was quite a good joke on us. Easy to get suckered when your guard's down. I'm happy that we,

at least, have the real goods. Come on over here and sit by your granddad a minute."

Dad and Mr. Meyer were already on their way out the front door, Dad throwing a "hurry up" glance at Grandpa. I felt self-conscious as I crossed the room to Grandfather's table, escorted by the stares of the other men. The conspiratorial tone in his voice had drawn the whole room's attention.

"Sit down, Charlie. I've got something to show you."

Grandpa placed his right hand on the lapel of his coat and ran it down the crease. The other hand reached across and into the garment. It extracted a glass container. This he set carefully, almost fussily, on the table in front of him. "Know what's in this jar?"

Of course I knew what the flask contained; he knew I knew it, too. I looked into his face for a clue, one of his conspiratorial winks or perhaps an ironic blue twinkle from the genie in his eye that might alert me to what he was about. Like the practiced Wednesday night card player he, in fact, was, Grandpa kept his facial expression as immutable as that of the Sphinx.

"Well, little Charlie, you see these rocks?" A small scraping noise as one or two of the men edged forward across the wooden floor. Idle conversations between the others subsided as Grandpa's hands cupped the top of the jar as if he were shielding it from the wind.

"Many millions of years ago, Charlie, what is now Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas were covered by an ocean. It was too salty at first to support life, but gradually as the waters moved down into southern Utah and east to Colorado, the salt content was reduced. Clams and other kinds of shellfish along with big seagoing lizards flourished near the southern shores. Even though lots of animals lived there, fossils from this particular body of water are pretty rare. Interesting, too, because they prove a lot of the west was once under water."

"You've told me this a million times, Grandpa," was on the tip of my tongue; but, before I could get a word out, he moved on.

"Some of these fossils, you know, also contain precious metals and point to rich deposits of gold or silver in the areas where they were found."

I perked up. This was a new twist on the old tale. Grandpa hadn't ever suggested to me that there was anything of real monetary value in his rock collection. I knew he'd sprinkled some powdered iron pyrites, fool's gold, on his fossil oysters to enhance them as conversation pieces, but the worth of this dust was next to nothing.

"Grandpa, you never said. . ."

"Just a sec', kid." The owner, who had been working behind the bar placed a dishtowel on the counter and moved through the little saloon doors. "Did you mean to. . . did you say there was gold or something on

those rocks?" He reached around Grandpa and picked up the flask. "Those lumps look like sun baked coyote droppings. Who do you think you're kidding?"

"Hold it up to the light," replied my grandfather calmly. "You get a little better perspective that way."

The man looked hard at the flask, then with the same sardonic expression back at Grandpa. He seemed to be wondering if following the old man's suggestion would make him appear foolish. Finally, slowly, he elevated the little jar toward the ceiling light.

Magic happened. As the proprietor passed the flask back and forth, the drab lumps began to glitter as light reflected off the gold dust Grandpa had sprinkled on them. A raindrop pattern of light spots spackled the table.

"You say these rocks are fossils?" The barman seemed to ignore the gold flecks as Grandpa nodded in affirmation.

"Brought 'em back from an old mine, the Barbara Ann. It's mostly played out now, but you never know."

"This gold—I mean those fossils—did you bring them here to sell? We buy unusual rocks—they don't have to be valuable—an' show 'em to the tourists. These fossils you got, the kids would get a real kick out of them."

"Hard to tell how valuable they are." Grandpa replaced the glass container inside his coat and carefully patted it down. "No, I hadn't planned to sell these rocks. I brought them along to show an old mining buddy in Ely. However, if you're interested. . ."

"Didn't say I was," the proprietor cut Grandpa off. "What I said was kids the age of your grandson here might look at 'em if I put them in the museum."

They'd certainly fit, I thought. The gold was as fake as his Egyptian mummy. About the authenticity of the oysters, I was unprepared to comment. Anyway, this man seemed more interested in the glitter.

"Tell you what." Grandpa folded his hands and stared at them for a moment. "I'm not interested in your money. What I'd like is for these fossils to be displayed over a plaque crediting my grandson and me with their discovery. I also want a note stipulating that when we come through here again, if the plaque isn't part of the exhibit, we reclaim the petrified oysters."

"Fine. Deal!" the new owner shook Grandpa's hand vigorously. "Well, young man,"—he turned his head in my direction—"I hope your name's not too long. Lettering on these things can be pretty. . ."

"And," Grandpa interrupted, "I'd like a couple rounds for us and for the rest of the gentlemen here to cement the deal."

Murmurs of affirmation and appreciation punctuated this last part of the bargain.

"Come on, Burt. Start pourin'," someone said. The proprietor hesi-

tated a moment like an actor gauging his audience. Then he moved behind the bar and began to pull bottles off the shelves.

"Better tell your dad and Mr. Meyers to come back in," said Grandpa, his face flushed with satisfaction. "We'll be delayed a little."

Years after Grandpa's death, I turned off the freeway and onto the old road we'd taken on that long ago summer trip. Weathering had chipped into its sides and pitted its surface, but the highway was still serviceable. Hot winds drove a posse of tumbleweeds across now faded lanes. Fortified by air conditioning, I watched a boiling sun create little lake mirages in the distance. I remembered waiting as Grandpa and Dad changed a tire for a lady stranded on the same little road. Peering through the Roadmaster's window at Grandpa as he tipped his hat and refused money from the grateful motorist, I studied his flannel shirt, carelessly untucked, as it flapped ceaselessly behind him in the wind.

I never found the little desert museum, and I don't know if the conditions of Grandpa's contract were ever carried out. I do recall how much the idea of a plaque with my name and his above our "ancient treasure" eased the disappointment of the mummy. Now, when I travel across Southwestern deserts, the present slips from my thoughts, and I imagine snake-necked elasmosaurs gliding over the dunes on tapered flippers while pan headed crocodiles search up and down a long dead shore. And sometimes, under sculpted heat clouds, I catch sight of the man who helped me navigate the shore of a primordial ocean.