

Five Hundred Dollars

Back around 1960 my family started spending long weekends up in Morro Bay, just north of San Luis Obispo. At the time there was a small downtown and a long row of shops and seafood restaurants along the foggy waterfront, with a couple of fishing piers with boats docked. You could catch sculpin and cabezon and perch off the pier and buy salt water taffy at the bait shop and doughnuts and coffee across the Embarcadero. There was an aquarium down the bay a quarter of a mile, with big rusting tanks floating with kelp and dripping water and with the mandatory octopus and moray eels and half a dozen varieties of coastal fish that always included a toothy sheepshead.

One Saturday evening I was wandering along the Embarcadero down near the aquarium. I must have been about twelve years old. I remember it was dusk and that it was rainy. There was an antiques shop down there, long since disappeared, that sold oriental oddities, very crowded with merchandise, very dark and attractive to a susceptible twelve year old. I stepped in out of the evening and right off the bat saw a pair of carved wooden temple dogs the size of St. Bernards, crouching in the typical pose,

with a half dozen temple puppies, I guess you'd call them, crawling on the parent dogs' backs. I can still picture them absolutely in my mind: dim yellow and red paint, chipped and faded over the long years, the startlingly vivid expressions on the carved faces, the massive solidity and antiquity of the things. I can also remember that the pair of them cost an even five hundred dollars.

This was back in the days when you could buy a lot on the ocean for five thousand, but even so, five hundred dollars was an easily imaginable sum, even to a twelve-year-old, and the world was suddenly full of exotic suggestion and possibility, as if a door had been opened. The dark shop full of antiques, the salt air and the rain and the lowering evening, it seems to me now, were emblematic of that moment when we plant the magic bean or put on the odd spectacles that we've bought from a dwarf in an alley or peer into the old mirror and see things moving behind us that aren't there when we turn around and look.

Of course I couldn't have foreseen it at the time, but this matter of five hundred dollars would become oddly significant over the years, and it plays in my mind now like an O. Henry story, the second chapter occurring some five years later when I had my first job at the old Collar and Leash Pet Store in Garden Grove. Half the store was devoted to aquaria, which I

maintained, ordering fish and aquatic plants with a certain degree of latitude. I was devoted at the time to aquatic oddities -- South American leaf fish and air-breathing African *Ctenopoma* and buffalo head cichlids and red-eyed puffers -- fish whose shape, coloration, and languid movements mimicked dead leaves or was somehow otherworldly or bizarre. The perfect aquarium, to my mind, was a dimly-lit, still-life collection of plants and driftwood and hovering fishes reminiscent of a leafy pool in a jungle river. The public's notion of an aquarium bore little resemblance to my own, and aside from routine maintenance, my particular favorite aquariums often went happily undisturbed for months or even years. (This difference between what the public wanted and what I wanted didn't end with aquaria, by the way.

Reviewers have suggested that my stories are sometimes "eccentric," and I understand entirely what they mean. Many of them bear an atmospheric resemblance to the sort of aquaria I used to keep, and in fact the stories strike me at this moment as being quite evidently aquarium-like, just as certain aquaria, with their wavering shadows and rising bubbles and rock caves and lurking fishes seem to suggest their own hidden mysteries.)

As for the five hundred dollars, its ghost reappeared to haunt me in the form of a bill of fare, loosely speaking, from a company called Gators of Miami, the Noah's ark of animal importers, which at the time would ship

virtually any animal in the world straight into Los Angeles in a wooden crate. The Collar and Leash didn't deal in exotic pets, but the Gators catalogue was something I studied with the avidity of a connoisseur. I remember sitting among the aquariums one Friday evening, alone in the shop, browsing through the catalogue, when my eye fell upon a list of available African mammals, and I saw, with a shock of momentary elation, that for five hundred dollars I could buy a hippopotamus. All I needed beyond that was a borrowed stake-bed truck to haul the beast home from the air freight terminal.

The world, I'll say again, was a different place back then. I was making about a dollar-fifty an hour at the time, and I no more had five hundred dollars in mad money at eighteen years old than at twelve. I went round and round with it in my mind, though, imagining the creature in the back garden of my parents' home in Anaheim, eating whatever hippos ate -- canned spinach, perhaps, and alfalfa. I could dig it a pool.

All of this sounds slightly cockeyed, looking back, but it still seems wonderful to me that there was a fleeting moment in my life when a hippopotamus was five hundred dollars and a phone call away. And in the years that followed, hippos loomed large in the southern California mythos. There was an article in the newspaper some time later involving an

enormous ghostly hippo that had appeared on a foggy residential street in Huntington Beach, disappearing moments later, and never, apparently, seen or heard from thereafter, the mystery unsolved to this day. And then of course there was the sad death of Bubbles the hippo from the wild animal park, who traveled over the hills into Laguna Canyon and occupied a weedy pond for a week until it was accidentally killed by the men sent out to rescue it. *Let it have the damned pond:* that was my idea of it, and I still feel that way. *Put a picket fence around it and let it be.* When visitors came to town you could have said to them, “There’s a hippo back in the canyon.” For a moment they’d think they heard you wrong, but then, slowly and certainly, something would change in them. Unless their souls were dead they’d be filled with a puzzled type of I’ll-be-damned curiosity. Proust tells us that the purpose of the artist is to “draw back the veil that leaves us indifferent before the universe.” A wild hippo in Laguna Canyon would do the trick. The condominiums they built in the years since are simply an eyesore.

I think it was in the summer of 1972 that I traveled up the coast with a friend of mine, camping here and there. (The early 70’s were strange times, and during the week I spent on the coast road there were cult murders in the Big Sur vicinity, and severed human heads were found perched on guard rail posts along the highway.) We camped on a beach near Monterey for a

couple of days, one of which we spent wandering around Cannery Row. I was looking for the ghosts of Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts, and although I didn't entirely find them, I found something nearly as good. Cannery Row wasn't yet the tourist attraction that it's become in more recent years, and the old canneries stood empty and boarded up, paint peeling, windows broken, the whole place "reclaimed by the weather," to borrow a phrase from Joan Didion.

There was a junk shop, though, still operating at the time among the abandoned canneries and still trading on the old romance. You could buy used fishing nets and glass floats and pieces of interesting nautical debris. I remember that there were South Seas imports and rugs smelling of damp wool and a thousand and one junk objects that didn't quite qualify as antiques but would have been exotically out of place, say, in a mere thrift store. In the back, on a wooden table, sat a wood-framed glass box, like an upended aquarium. Inside, "hermetically sealed," was the upper half of a mummy. It was mostly brown skeleton and empty eye sockets, but it still had leathery shreds of flesh and sparse hair. A faded sign claimed that it was a "Mayan Princess" and it was draped with a bit of silk and wore a pillbox hat sewn up out of carnival-colored cloth, meant, I suppose, to give it the air of royalty. The price tag was five hundred dollars, exactly.

I don't know how long I stood looking at it, but of course there was no chance of my buying it, as much as I might have liked to. This was a five dollar a day trip, and by the time we were into the last couple of days of it, we were reduced to eating canned baked beans flavored with broken open Pismo clams that we'd dug up out of the sand at low tide. I'd like to tell you that if I'd had the five hundred I would have fished it out of my wallet and taken the mummy home, but I'm not at all certain that's true. In any event, I didn't.

One last thing: a couple of years later I was up there again on the same mission -- killing time on the coast -- when I stopped into that same shop. It was half empty by then and was going out of business. The Mayan princess was still unsold, although the price had been reduced to two hundred and fifty dollars. They'd moved her into the window to attract passers by. Perhaps irrationally, to my mind the mummy had lost some of its luster now that it had been put on sale. It seemed to me to have become a cut-rate mummy, without the allure that it had once had, back when it was part of the larger, weather-decayed, misty and dilapidated picture that was Cannery Row in its dying years. If you go up there today you'll search in vain for the mummy.

All of that was over thirty years ago, and in the intervening decades I've never again been offered that kind of five hundred dollar opportunity. In a shop in San Pedro I found a whale's eyeball floating in a jar of formaldehyde, but the shopkeeper wouldn't sell it at any price. And now that I can afford five hundred bucks for a hippopotamus, the cost of such a creature has gone up considerably, and the city of Orange, where I live, has a statute against "barnyard animals" which I'm pretty sure they'd stretch to cover hippos.

But there's something about the three incidents that's still haunts me - - phantomwise, as Lewis Carrol put it -- and I've come to suspect that I was never meant to own these things at all, at least not in any physical sense. It's enough, perhaps, that they make up the stuff of my stories and my dreams, as if they've been paying me solid dividends all these years.

I've always been fond of quotations, of the wonderful things that the best writers can do with words. Some day I'm going to write my favorites out on slips of paper and put them into small jars, like the bug collection I assembled for tenth grade biology, each one labeled and categorized. One of my favorites is from Aristotle, who said, "What I tell you three times is true." That one's vast, like a cathedral, full of shadow and light. It has the ring of temptation in it, of Peter's denial of Christ, of the three time loser, of

going down for the third time, of the third time's the charm, of three strikes and three cheers and three coins in the fountain. Like ghosts and flying saucers and materializing hippos, the statement is a true thing in some odd and unobvious way, even though there's no evidence for it. You have to take it on faith.

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March 7, 2000