Jurassic Ape

Mr Fotheringhay always kept his most impressive item until last, and so it was this time, as he pulled out of his reinforced metal suitcase a larger flattish, grey rock struggling with the weight and breathing heavily, as he placed it on the bench for my inspection. I had been having these meetings with Fotheringhay for the last twelve years, maybe every six months or so, and so he had aged imperceptibly to me, at least twenty years my senior so always seeming old, now a sturdy man with grey locks and a trim white beard, who I would place in his early sixties.

“Late Cretaceous.” He stated, traces of a gentle West Country lilt to his voice, which was deep and had a certain gravitas, and he had a look of confidence I had seen many times before. I nodded and examined with a magnifying glass the image traced in the rock, bone become one with the imprisoning stone. Mr Fotheringhay bequeathed these fossils, wanting only the attribution – *kindly donated by J Fotheringhay* by the exhibit. I’m not sure what he did with the great majority that I rejected, sold them on eBay maybe, or keeping them in some vast collection of his own. I started visibly as I looked at the fossil and felt my heart racing such that I felt sick and a little dizzy and had to close my eyes. I looked again, with my naked eye this time and it was unmistakeable. I breathed hard, and then looked sharply at Fotheringhay, stood by my side looking down at the fossil with his pale blue eyes.

“It has an opposable thumb.” I stated simply. I had been presented with a rather good fossil of the hand of a dinosaur, about the size of a child’s hand, with three fingers and a thumb present, and the creature’s wrist, to which the digits were attached. It was some kind of foraging omnivore, quick across the ground - plenty of these guys around in the Late Cretaceous, but a fossil this well preserved would have made the Bristol Museum’s natural history collection anyway. However, this… Fotheringhay looked at me and blinked a couple of times in incomprehension, and then registered the import of the information., and looked hard from me to the fossil. “See.” I spoke the word accusingly and traced out the curvature of the five centimetres or so of thumb bone to its entry into the wrist fragment.

What did I know about Fotheringhay? A rather pedantic man – he liked calling me Dr Ross, and my calling him Mr Fotheringhay, never offering me a first name as most would – not mercenary in his motives, a man patient enough to spend many hours chipping out fossils in pristine condition without much if anything by way of financial recompense. Beyond that nothing. He was normally a brisk, energetic man, with a good deal of external confidence, but now he looked at me with an expression of bewilderment, as a child might look pleadingly to an adult when it has got out of its depth. I knew then that this was no hoax.

“Did you dig this up yourself Mr Fotheringhay?” I asked sternly, looking him in the eye, but then unable to resist picking up the magnifying glass and looking hard at the stone, familiar from the countless samples of the Jurassic Coast I have been presented with, or dug up myself, the bones outlined clearly within the stone (thank goodness Fotheringhay didn’t attempt to liberate them himself), the paw now a hand, narrower than an apes, but belonging to no dinosaur discovered to date. He assured me that he had.

“Do you know where you dug it up – the exact location?”

“Yes, I keep a record of everything.” We were silent for a few moments, assimilating what had happened, and I considering what to do next.

“This will generate a lot of publicity Mr Fotheringhay, are you prepared for that? I’m not sure that I am.” It is not, after all, why one becomes a palaeontologist.

“How was your day?” I asked. My husband was cooking pasta with an anchovy sauce, a midweek favourite. I was sat at the kitchen table drinking a first glass of white wine and the kids were doing their homework. He is not a palaeontologist, but an actuary, and so never really talks about his work. He shrugged, tasting the sauce with a teaspoon.

“So, so. Not as wild as some of the days in the actuarial world thank goodness.” He grinned briefly at his own joke, but continued to focus on the food, adding some ingredient or other, and his face fell to its usual neutral expression, which some confuse with mild surprise. “How was yours?”

“It was quite wild, in its own way.”

“Oh? How so?” He glanced my way at the unexpected response, but the lure of the cooking food was too great and he returned his attention to this, ladling a small amount of the pasta water into the sauce, then fiercely grating parmesan from a large block we buy from the local deli.

“Mr Fotheringhay brought in the fossil of a dinosaur hand which had an opposable thumb.” I now had his attention.

“What…the… fuck.” He mouthed the last word, and stared at me, his mouth literally agape, his whole, jowly face expressing astonishment. He then swivelled round, grabbed the large pan the pasta was cooking in, hurried to the sink and poured the contents into the waiting colander, a cloud of steam billowing up, then turned to me again. “It has to be a hoax.”

“I know, but I can’t see how it can be. The fossil is embedded in a rock – it takes millions of years to achieve that. Anyway, Mr Fotheringhay doesn’t seem the sort to do a hoax. I don’t think he has the imagination.”

“People can surprise you. Do you really call him Mr Fotheringhay by the way? Is the museum a Victorian time-warp?” He focused again on the food, for a moment. “Are you sure it’s an opposable thumb – it hasn’t just got twisted in some way in the process of fossilisation?”

“It needs confirming, but it’s pretty clear.” He brought the drained linguine over and added half of it to our sauce and the rest to some shop bought pizza sauce for the kids. “I’ve dropped an email to Ruth at the uni to arrange for X-Rays tomorrow.”

“What are the implications?” Graham wondered. Being a foodie, he savoured each mouthful of the pasta in a mannered way of which I’m sure he was unconscious and which I now find irritating, as though exploring some additional nuance each time. The kids were eating with us and listening to the conversation without interest, keen to finish quickly and leave the table back to their own worlds.

“I don’t know, the dinosaurs started to manipulate their environment and create a dino-civilisation which was cruelly obliterated by the giant meteor.”

“Wait… what’s this?” Judy, our twelve-year-old looked at me with an interest my conversation rarely invoked. I briefly explained, and she and her younger brother declared it awesome and fired various questions, all of which confirmed to me how much the academic world would hate this discovery. “So could they have built cities, and everything.” Judy asked.

“No, I’m sure we’d have found some signs of that by now.”

“Maybe we have and it’s been suppressed.” She said, confirming my fears.

“We should find out a bit more about this mysterious Mr Fotheringhay.” Graham had finished his food, and grabbed the iPad. It didn’t take long to find the man - I confirmed his identity from a photo on his website - and for Graham’s face to go serious. “Oh dear…”

“What is it?” I was well into my third glass of wine.

“He’s a Wiccan.”

“What? you’re joking.”

“Some kind of high priest. His website has a lot of detail about the ley-lines he has been dousing recently.”

“Oh my god.”

“He doesn’t seem to be on Twitter. His Facebook page is private – would you like me to send a friend connection from ours.”

“No, I’m going to get plenty of opportunity to get to know him over the next few weeks. Can I just rebury the bloody thing and hope someone else digs it up.”

“No!” Both my kids cried simultaneously. “You’re going to be famous….”

Ruth, who was Head of the Palaeontology faculty at Bristol University was a wiry woman in her late fifties, not quite a friend but someone I would have a coffee and a laugh with when our paths crossed. She let out a shriek when she first saw the fossil, then said it had to be a fake, then agreed that that didn’t seem possible. We agreed that before we remotely went public with this, we needed to do various X-Ray examinations, and then organise an extensive dig in the area Fotheringhay had found the fossil. I would lead the dig and she would lend me three post-grads to join in.

The X-Ray results didn't give us any reason to believe that this might be a hoax, and that weekend, feeling a bit like an old fossil myself, I drove three graduates, grumbling about their hangovers, and chatting about people I didn't know, and bars I didn't go to, down to meet Fotheringhay to begin the dig.

"Morning Dr Ross." He said, zipped up in a puffer jacket against the cold early April air. We were stood in a car park surrounded by meadows and low hedges, with the sea visible in the middle distance.

"Call me Jane, please. We can't be that formal for a whole dig." He looked slightly disappointed, and the J turned out to be for Joseph. I introduced the grads and then he led the way to where he had dug up the fossil – a broad pebble beach, full of rockpools and thick seaweed, oyster catchers flapping away at our approach to the far end. The tide crashed in then noisily sucked back the pebbles. It was deserted and Fotheringhay led us to the spot at the back of the beach, where he had been excavating. The flint showed the signs of some pecking from, presumably, Fotheringhay's pick, and there was a great swathe of it, rising to around head height from the beach, and then thinly grown over by grasses and weeds a meter or so back from the shore.

The graduates didn't know the specifics of what he had found, and we all began the meticulous and comfortingly familiar process of digging, our little picks chinking continuously and arrhythmically. I would look up periodically towards the sea, always different – now with an expanse of shimmering light, now all coloured a blue deeper than that of the azure sky it reflected, again a hazy grey. Some days the winds blew and the waves chopped and flecked with foam, and we felt the spray on our hands and faces even at the back of the beach, sometimes heavy rain blew in causing us to head back to the cars to rest until it blew over, other times the sun was strong enough to make us take our fleeces off and wonder whether we needed suntan lotion.

At break time we soon split into two groups – the grads being one and Joseph and I the other - and we two started to get to know each other. He liked the process of the dig, and the wonder of when a fossil was unearthed after so many aeons, the feel of the stone and earth on his hands, the patience and trust in the process and, although an educated man, had little interest in the theory and technicalities of palaeontology. He spoke slowly, and had the air of a pedant, but there was a gentleness that revealed itself sometimes when he smiled or laughed, which made him suddenly likeable, as though the debris of time had been brushed away to reveal a glimpse of his soul, still the same after all these years of whatever life had thrown his way. He had been brought up a Wiccan – his father was the high druid, a fact of which he seemed to be proud – and answered my sceptical questions without resentment, his reply being essentially always the same, that it felt right to him.

After two weeks I needed a day back at the office. We had dug up various fossils, none of which in any way justified the expenditure of two weeks of our time. I was going through emails when my office phone rang, an unusual circumstance, and Jean our receptionist put the call through.

A woman's voice spoke to me, sounding as though she was maybe in her late twenties, with an estuary accent: "Is that Dr Ross?"

"Yes."

"Hello Dr Ross, I'm Emma Corby. We haven't met, I'm a reporter for the Daily Star." The shock of this registered nearly as high as the moment I had looked at the fossil, although in this case I felt an urge to throw-up.

"Why on earth are you phoning me?" I had the presence of mind to say.

"I have some photos and X-Rays of the amazing fossil in your possession – a dinosaur with a hand like an ape." She said the last with an upward inflection, as though it might be a question, and she paused for my reaction. My mind seemed to freeze and the simple phrase, *no comment,* escaped it, and so I remained silent and she continued. "We would love to have an interview with you, and can make it financially attractive, or a donation to a favourite charity if you prefer." My mind kicked in at last.

"There's no comment." I said firmly.

"Joseph Fotheringhay confirmed that he did make the find…"

"Well, as I say, no comment. Goodbye Ms Corby." And I hung up, and angrily took my phone out of my pocket to call Fotheringhay, to see that it was on silent and I had four missed calls from him. I hit redial and he answered at once.

"I just had a call from the press." He began.

"Same." I replied grimly. "The Daily Star, no less. I was hoping it would be Nature magazine we broke this with, but you have to start somewhere." I added drily.

"Someone must have leaked it – for money I assume, given the journal. They hinted at offering me some."

"Same."

"I said no of course." He sounded out of his depth and looking for reassurance from me, as though as a palaeontologist I must deal with the press all of the time.

"Good. What did you tell them, they indicated you had confirmed the find." I tried not to sound to accusing, but he seemed to feel put on the spot.

"Well… not sure. Nothing much – I think I confirmed I'd found the fossil, but that I had given it to yourself."

"Look, no harm done."

"What should we do?" He asked, anxiously.

"I have no idea."

I called Ruth, and she apologised and said the leak must have come at her end – grads or technicians maybe – and had the very sensible idea that when the story was published, we arrange an interview with the Times. That way we could simply tell the truth - that we were examining the fossil, and would be looking to publish our findings in due course.

Later, sat alone with a cup of tea, I couldn't resist it and took the fossil out and placed it on my desk, looking at it in thoughtless wonder, trying to get some felt sense of the creature, of its essence. It was at this point that the door opened, from the floor of the museum, a door marked private, and a pretty young woman came in.

"Sorry to intrude," said the familiar voice, the tone somehow expressing both her regret and the necessity of her actions. "I'm Emma."

"Just get out." I said angrily looking up. And then, on her phone, she took the picture which was on the front page of the following day's paper.

The published story, titled Jurassic Ape (irritating given that it was late Cretaceous, but by no means the most irritating thing about the story), caused a storm of activity on social media apparently. I didn't follow any of it, but my mobile was called every few minutes from numbers I didn't recognise, and my work and home emails were swamped. It was clear I couldn't go to the museum, which was a public place, so I drove to the university and holed out in Ruth's office, from where we contacted the Times, planned what we would say, and then conducted the interview on Zoom with the science correspondent, a sensible man who asked sensible questions. This, we felt, should give us both some professional cover, which was a relief. Earlier though I had called Joseph, who had a couple of dozen reporters camped outside his house, including television cameras, being horrendously intrusive. He sounded at his wits end and I could only apologise and feel terrible. I had got a sense of what he had gone through, running the gauntlet as I walked out to my car that morning, head down, cameras flashing, driving off at a sensible speed followed by a fleet of cars, but through the day had been cloistered by the university security.

Ruth and I stayed in her office, having a takeaway sent up, peering out of the window occasionally to confirm that the press were still camped there (my husband worked from home that day and said they had all disappeared not long after I left and he had dropped the kids off at school as normal), and couldn't resist reading the online press, which speculation ranged from whether the dinosaur would have used primitive stone tools (absurd of course, most monkeys haven't achieved this after millions of years), to claims of civilisations buried under the ice of the Antarctic. Once the Times had published our interview online, a satisfactory piece, which we read with some relief, the reporters dispersed and we both wandered down and headed home to see what tomorrow might bring.

And it brought mayhem.

I always wake up just before my alarm goes off and so felt disorientated when woken up by a persistent ringing, and it took me a few moments before I realised that it was the doorbell. I looked at my mobile and saw that it was 6:14. I assumed it must be journalists and wasn't going to answer, but then heard my husband open the door and a woman's voice asking for me.

"She's in bed, what's this about officer?" My husband sounded bewildered.

"We need Dr Ross to come down to the station." The woman's voice said, and I suddenly felt fully awake, anxious and mystified. And soon I was in the back of the police car on my way to help the police with their inquiries, into what remained a mystery, and not one I managed to guess at as I stared out onto the palely awakening Bristol streets, feeling too numb with shock to speak to the officers.

At the police station, my attendance having been registered, I was led into a windowless, and generally featureless room where two plain-clothed officers, a male inspector and a female sergeant, interrogated me. They wouldn't explain why I was there, asking me various questions as to the origins of the fossil, how long I had known Fotheringhay, where abouts the fossil had been kept, before it became apparent that the museum had been broken into and the fossil stolen. I presume they noted my obvious and unfeigned distress on hearing this. They of course wanted to know where I had been last night, who would have known where the fossil was kept, why security was not much tighter and so on. They mused that all of this would be very lucrative with the press, and seemed unimpressed that I hadn't taken any money for the Times interview, suggesting that I was playing a long game. Very convenient that the fossil had now disappeared, as it couldn't be proved to be a fake.

"Listen," I interrupted in the end. "All of this is a nightmare for me – I like my privacy, I have no interest in being famous, I don't need the money, and any credibility I might have in the academic world is now completely shot. Plus, I would have no idea how to organise a break in."

We had a break after a couple of hours, and I was given a cup of milky tea, and then was told that I was free to leave, and asked to report anything I could think of that may be of relevance. On my way out I saw Mr Fotheringhay being brought in, he catching my eye, but at the other end of the office area, and so I couldn't speak to him, but hoped my expression conveyed my deepest sympathies.

No-one at the museum had thought to put the fossil in the safe, to which I didn't have access, and so it sat in a protective metal box, on a shelf in my office. Apparently armed men broke into the museum that night, and forced the security guard to take them to the fossil. The police, I think, believed that the security guard had probably taken a bribe, but couldn't prove it and the fossil hasn't yet reappeared – it will be the prize possession of some wealthy private collector.

The press's interest in the story was rekindled for a couple of weeks, with Joseph featuring prominently as a crank, pictures of him in Wiccan robes making both tabloids and broadsheets. The Star and the Times were broadly supportive, in their very different ways, but

pretty much everyone else viciously attacked us and suggested the whole thing was a hoax. Ruth and I, and I presume Joseph, were approached repeatedly with financial inducements to tell our side of the story and we always refused.

A major dig was organised at the site where Fotheringhay had found the fossil, and turned up nothing. Academics lost interest, unable to verify the find, and it acquired the status of the yeti or Loch Ness monster, with all of this appealing to the most extreme of conspiracy theorists.

After a couple of weeks, I went to visit Joseph, knocking on his door, and unsurprised to see the hardening of his eyes and tensing of his features when he opened it and saw me.

“Good morning, Dr Ross, to what do I owe the honour?”

“Morning Joseph, I came to apologise for everything.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he invited me in and we chatted about our experience of what had happened. We drank tea, and he said in the end.

“I don’t blame you for any of this Jane.” His face had lightened, and when he said it, it was like it was a revelation to him.

“Shit happens.” I said, and he laughed, a hearty belly laugh that suited him.

“Keep bringing me the fossils.” I said, my cup of tea finished.

“Yes,” he nodded and smiled. “I will do.”