

Lost In The Mail

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The intercom buzzer sounded like a cardiac defibrillator giving a jump-start to a dying man. I sprang from my chair, not even pausing to save the article I was working on, threw back the dead-bolt, and hurried into the corridor. My apartment was next to the stairwell, so I swung through the fire door and bounded down the three flights to the lobby, through the inner glass door, and into the building's entry chamber.

The Pope was digging through his bag. Of course, he wasn't really the Pope -- he probably wasn't even Catholic -- but he bore a definite resemblance to John Paul II. The underarms of his pale blue Canada Post shirt were soaked and he was wearing those dark uniform shorts that made him look like an English schoolboy. We exchanged greetings; he spoke in an obscure European accent.

A hole in the panel above the mailboxes puckered like an infected wound. John Paul inserted a brass key into it. The panel flopped forward the way a pull-down bed does, giving him access to a row of little cubicles. He began stuffing the day's round of junk mail into these -- a bed of fertilizer for the first-class goodies. He left my mailbox empty, though, and instead dealt out a full set of leaflets and sale flyers onto the counter that jutted from the wall.

For most people the real mail amounted to one or two pieces, but I got a lot more than that -- including a copy of the Ryerson Rambler, the alumni magazine from Ryerson Polytechnic University. When he was finished, the Pope scooped up my pile and handed it to me. As usual, it was too much to fit comfortably into the box. "Thanks," I said, and headed back into the lobby.

I'd promised myself that I'd always take the stairs up to the third floor -- one of these days I'd lose that spare tire -- but, well, the elevator was right there, its door invitingly open . . .

Back in my apartment I sat in the angle of my L-shaped couch with my feet, as always, swung up on the right-hand section. The mail contained the usual round of press releases, several bills, and the Ryerson Rambler. The cover showed an alumnus dressed in African tribal gear. According to the caption on the contents page, some relative of his had abdicated as chief of a tribe in Ghana and he was off

to take his place. Amazing how people's lives can change completely overnight.

I was surprised to find a second magazine stuck to the back of the Rambler. University of Toronto Alumni Magazine, it said. Down in the lower-right corner of its blue-and-white cover were three strips of adhesive partially covered with a frayed paper residue. Its address label must have torn off and the glue had stuck onto the back of my magazine.

Intriguing: I'd been accepted by U of T after high school, but had decided to go to Ryerson instead. If I'd stayed with U of T, I'd be a paleontologist today, sifting through the remains of ancient life. Instead, I'm a freelance journalist specializing in the petrochemical industry, a contributing editor of Canadian Plastics, an entirely competent writer, and the only life I sift through is my own.

I began thumbing through the magazine. Here, in thirty-two glossy pages, was my past that could have been but wasn't: graduation ceremonies at Convocation Hall, an article about the 115th year of the campus paper, The Varsity; a calendar of events at Hart House . . .

If I'd gone to U of T instead of Ryerson, the photos might have stirred nostalgic laughter and tears within me. Instead they lay there, halftone shadows, emotionless. Fossils of somebody else's life.

I continued leafing through the magazine until I came to the final pages. There, under the heading "Alumni Reports," were photos of graduates and blurbs on their careers and personal triumphs. I was surprised to find a paleo grad -- it was such a small program -- but at the bottom of page 30 there was an entry about a man named Zalmon Bernstein. The picture was hokey: Bernstein, a toothy grin splitting his features, holding up a geologist's pick. He'd finished his Ph.D. in 1983, it said, the same year I would have likely finished mine had I gone there. Doubtless we would have known each other; we might even have been friends.

I read his blurb two or three times. Married. Now living in Drumheller, Alberta. Research Associate with the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology. Working summers on the continuing excavations in Dinosaur Provincial Park.

He'd done all right for himself. I felt a twinge of sadness, and put the magazine aside. The other mail was nothing urgent, so I ambled back to my computer and continued poking at my article on polystyrene purification.

The next day, John Paul greeted me with his usual "'Morning, Mr. Coin." As always, I felt at a disadvantage since I didn't know his name. When he'd begun this route two years ago, I'd wanted to ask what it was. I fancied it would be a mysterious, foreign-sounding thing ending in a vowel. But I'd missed my opportunity and now it was much too late. Anyway, he knows far more about me than I could ever hope to know about him. Because my bank insists on spelling out my name in full, he knows that my middle initial -- which I use in my byline -- stands for Horton (yuck). He knows what credit cards I have. He knows I'm a journalist, assuming he'd recognize a press kit when he saw one. He knows I read Playboy and Canadian Geographic and Ellery Queen's

Mystery Magazine. He even knows who my doctor is. He could write my biography, all based on the things of mine he carries around in his heavy blue sack.

As usual, he was placing my mail in a separate pile. He topped it off with a thin white-and-orange book sealed in a polyethylene bag. I gathered my booty, wished him good day, and headed back. The elevator was only on two, so I called it down. I did that occasionally. If it was on three, I hardly ever waited for it and if it was on the top floor, well, once in a blue moon I might use it.

Someday I'm going to lose that spare tire.

As I rode up, I glanced at the white-and-orange book. It was a scholarly journal. My step-uncle, a university professor, had hundreds of such publications making neat rows of identical spines on the shelves of his musty den. This one looked interesting, though, at least to me: The Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology.

For some reason I swung my feet up to the left instead of the right on my L-couch. The Journal's table of contents was printed on its cover. I recognized some of the words in the titles from my old interest in dinosaurs. Ornithischian. Hadrosaurs. Cretaceous.

I glanced at the piece of tractor-feed paper that had been slipped into the mailing bag: my name and address, all right. Who would have sent me such a thing? My birthday was rolling around -- the big four-oh -- so maybe somebody had got me a subscription as a semi-gag gift. The poly bag stretched as I yanked at it. Having written 750,000 words about plastics in my career, you'd think I'd be able to open those things easily.

Subscription rates were printed inside the journal's front cover. Eighty-five American dollars a year! I didn't have many friends and none of them would shell out that much on a gift for me, even if it was meant as a joke.

I closed the book and looked at the table of contents again. Dry stuff. Say, there's an article by that U of T guy, Zalmon Bernstein: A New Specimen of *Lambeosaurus lambei* from the Badlands of Alberta, Canada. I continued down the list of titles. Correlations Between Crest Size and Shape of the Pre-Orbital Fenestra in Hadrosaurs. "Pre-orbital fenestra." What a great-sounding phrase. All those lovely Latin and Greek polysyllables. Here's another one --

I stopped dead. Scrobiculated Fontanelle Margins in Pachyrhinosaur and Other Centrosaurinae from the Chihuahuan Desert of Mexico, by J. H. Coin.

By me.

My head swam for a moment. I was used to seeing my byline in print. It's just that I usually remembered writing whatever it was attached to, that's all.

It must be somebody with the same name, of course. Hell, Coin wasn't that unusual. Besides, this guy was down in Mexico. I turned to the indicated page. There was the article, the writer's name, and his institutional affiliation: Research Associate, Department of Vertebrate Paleontology, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada.

It came back in a deluge of memory. The ROM had undertaken a dig in Mexico a few summers ago. A local newspaper, The Toronto Sun, had sponsored it. I remembered it as much because of my dormant interest in dinosaurs as because it seemed so out-of-character for the tabloid Sun -- best known for its bikini-clad Sunshine Girls -- to foot the bill for a scientific expedition.

I was disoriented for several seconds. What was going on? Why did I even have a copy of this publication? Then it hit me. Of course. All so simple, really. There must be someone at the ROM with the same initials and last name as me. He (or she, maybe) had written this article. The Journal had somehow lost his address, so they'd looked him up in the phone book to send a contributor's copy. They'd gotten the wrong J. H. Coin, that's all.

I decided I'd better return the guy's Journal to him. Besides, this other Coin would probably get a kick out of the story of how his copy had ended up with me. I know I would.

I phoned the Royal Ontario Museum and spoke to a receptionist who had a pleasant Jamaican accent. "Hello," I said. "J. H. Coin, please."

"Can you tell me which department?" she asked.

He can't have made a big name for himself if the receptionist didn't know where he worked. "Paleontology."

"Vert or invert?"

For a second I didn't understand the question. "Oh -- vertebrate."

"I'll put you through to the departmental assistant." I often had to contact presidents of petrochemical firms for quotes, so I knew that how difficult it was to get hold of someone could be a sign of how important he or she was. But this shunting struck me as different. It wasn't that J. H. Coin had to be shielded from annoying calls. Rather, it was more like he was a fossil, lost in layers of sediment.

"Vert paleo," said a woman's voice.

"Hello. J. H. Coin, please."

There was a pause, as though the departmental assistant was momentarily confused. "Ah, just a second."

At first I thought that she, too, hadn't heard of J. H. Coin, but when the next person came on I knew that wasn't it. The voice seemed slightly alien to me: deeper, less resonant, more nasal than my own -- at least than my own sounds to me. "Hello," he said, politely, but sounding somewhat surprised at being called at work. "Jacob Coin speaking."

Jacob and Coin. Sure, some names go together automatically, like John and Smith, or Tom and Sawyer or, if you believe the Colombian Coffee Growers' commercials, Juan and Valdez. But Jacob and Coin weren't a natural pair. I was named after my mother's father. Not some literary allusion, not some easy assonance, just a random line of circumstances.

I wanted to ask this Jacob Coin what his "H" stood for. I wanted to ask him what his mother's maiden name was. I wanted to know his birth date, his social insurance number, whether his left leg gave him trouble when it was about to rain, whether he was allergic to cheese, if he had managed to keep his weight under control. But I didn't have to. I already knew the answers.

I hung up the phone. I hated doing it only because I know how much I hate it when that happens to me -- how much he must hate it, too.

I heeded John Paul's buzz again on Friday. This time, though, I didn't wait for him to assemble my pile of mail. Instead, I snapped up each envelope as he placed it on the counter. The first three really were for me: a check from one of my publishers, a birthday card from my insurance agent, and my cable-TV bill. But the fourth was bogus: a gray envelope addressed to J. H. Coin, Ph.D. The return address was Royal Ontario Museum Staff Association.

"Wait a minute," I said.

The Pontiff was busy dealing out lives into the little mailboxes. "Hmm?"

"This one isn't for me."

"Oh, sorry." He reached out to take it. For a moment I thought about keeping it, holding on to that piece of what might have been, but, no, I let him have it.

He looked at it, then frowned. "You're J. H. Coin, ain't you?"

"Well, yes."

"Then it is for you." He proffered the envelope, but now that I'd let it go I couldn't bring myself to take it back.

"No. I mean, I'm not that J. H. Coin." The Pope said nothing. He just stood there holding the letter out towards me. I shook my head. "I don't have a Ph.D."

"Take that up with whoever wrote you," he said. "I worry about apartment numbers and postal codes, not diplomas."

"But I don't want it. It's not mine. I don't work at the Museum."

John Paul let out a heavy sigh. "Mr. Coin, it's addressed correctly. It's got sufficient postage. I have to deliver it to you."

"Can't you send it back?"

"I've been doing you a big favor all this time, calling you down instead of stuffing your things into that little box. Don't make me sorry that I've been nice to you." He looked me straight in the eye. "Take the letter."

"But yesterday you brought me The Journal of Vertebrate

Paleontology. And the day before, the University of Toronto Alumni Magazine. None of those things were meant for me."

"Who's to say what's meant for any of us, Mr. Coin? All I know is I've got to deliver the mail. It's my job."

He went back to his bag. The next thing he pulled out happened to be for me, too. Sort of. Instead of placing it on the counter, he tried to hand it to me directly. It was a letter hand-addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Jake Coin.

I shook my head again, more in wonder than negation this time. "There is no Mrs. Coin."

"You have to take it," he said.

It was tempting, in a way. But no, she wasn't my wife. She wasn't part of my world. I didn't move.

He shrugged and put the envelope in the empty cubicle that had my apartment number on it.

I didn't want this other Coin's life forced upon me. "Take that out of there," I said.

John Paul continued distributing mail, ignoring me the way he might ignore a stranger who tried to strike up a conversation on the subway. I grabbed his arms and attempted to swing him around. The old guy was a lot stronger than he looked -- thanks, I guess, to hauling that great sack of letters around. He pushed me away easily and I fell backward against the vestibule's inner glass door. For a horrible instant I thought the pane was going to break and come tumbling down on me, but it held solid. The Pontiff had wheeled around and was now aiming a tiny aerosol can of Mace at me.

"Don't ever try that again," he said in his mysterious European voice, not shouting, really, but with a firmness that made the words sound loud.

"Just tell me what's going on," I said. "Please."

We held our eye contact for a moment. His expression wasn't the indignation of a man who has suffered an unprovoked attack. Rather, it was more like the quiet turmoil of a father who's had to spank his child. "I'm sorry," he said.

Damn the man's infinite patience. I was angry and I wanted him to be angry, too. "Look," I said at last, "you keep bringing me the wrong mail." I hated the quaver my voice had taken on. "I -- I don't want to have to report you to your supervisor."

The threat seemed stupid and my words hung in the air between us. John Paul stared at me, his face waxing reflective. Finally, he laughed and shook his head. He hefted his bag, as if to gauge how much mail he had left to deliver. Then he glanced at his watch. "All right," he said at last. "After all, I don't want to get in trouble with the boss." He laughed again -- not hard, really, but there were tears at the corners of his eyes.

I slowly brought myself to my feet, wiping dirt off the bum of my

cutoffs. "Well?"

"You're out of place, Mr. Coin," he said, slowly. "You don't belong here."

That's the story of my life, I thought. But I said, "What do you mean?"

"You think you can just up and say you're going to be a journalist?" He put the can of mace back in his bag.

"I didn't just up and say it. I worked hard to get my degree."

"That's not what I meant. You were supposed to be a --" he paused, then pronounced his next word carefully -- "paleontologist."

"What do you mean, `supposed to be'?"

"You can't just do whatever you want in this life. You've got to play the hand that's dealt to you. You think I wanted to be a letter carrier? It's just the way it worked out for me. You don't get any choice." His voice sounded far away and sad. "Still, it ain't so bad for me. I get to do this extra stuff as a sideline -- putting people like you back on the right course."

"The right course?" The old guy was insane. I should run, get away, hide.

"When did you decide to become a journalist instead of a . . . paleontologist?"

"I don't remember for sure," I said. "Sometime during my last year in high school. I got bored; didn't want to spend the rest of my life being a student."

"That was a big decision," he said. "I'd think you'd remember it more clearly." The Pope smiled. "It was April 22nd, 1973, at 10:27 in the evening. That's when the universe split. You ripped up your acceptance letter from U of T --"

"The universe did what?"

"It split, became two universes. That happens once in a while. See, they used to think that every time somebody made a decision, instead of things going one way or the other, they went both ways. The universe splitting a million times a second, each one going on forever along its separate path."

I didn't understand what he was talking about. "Parallel universes?" I said, the phrase coming to me out of dimly remembered Star Trek reruns. "I guess that's possible . . ."

"It's hogwash, man. Couldn't happen that way. Ain't enough matter to constantly be spinning off new universes at that rate. Any fool can see that. No, most of the times the decisions iron themselves out within a few minutes or days -- everything is exactly the same as if the decision had never been taken. The two universes join up, matter is conserved, the structure is sound, and I get to knock off early."

Although he sounded cavalier, he didn't look it. Of course, maybe

he was always like this. After all, in the twenty-odd months that I'd known the Pope we'd never exchanged more than a dozen words at a time. "So?" I said at last.

"So, every now and then there's a kind of cosmic hiccup. The universes get so out of joint that they just keep moving farther apart. Can't have that. It weakens the fabric of existence, so they tell me. We've got to get things back on course."

"What are you talking about?"

"You ever hear of Ronald Reagan?"

"No. Wait -- you mean the actor? Guy who did a bunch of pictures with a chimp?"

"That's him. There was a hiccup almost forty years ago. He got it into his head to be a politician, don't you know. I won't even tell you how high up he made it in the American government -- you'd never believe me. It took an army of posties to get the world back on track after that one."

"So you're saying I'm supposed to be a paleontologist, not a plastics writer."

"Uh huh."

"Why?"

"That's just the way it was meant to be, that's all."

My head was spinning. None of this made sense. "But I don't want to be a paleontologist. I'm happy as a journalist." That wasn't really true, and I had a feeling John Paul knew it wasn't, but he let it pass.

"I'm sorry," he said for the second time.

This was craziness. But he sounded so serious, so much like he really believed it himself, that it made me nervous. "But other people get to choose their lives," I said at last.

"No," he said, looking very old. "No, they don't. They think they choose them, but they don't."

"So -- so I'm supposed to do some great thing as a paleontologist? Something that makes a difference in the scheme of things?" That wouldn't be so bad, I thought. To make a difference, to count, maybe to be remembered after I'm dead.

"Perhaps," said the Pope, but I knew in an instant that he was lying.

"Well, it's too late for me to go back to school now, anyway," I said, folding my arms across my chest. "I mean, I'd practically be ready to retire by the time I could get a Ph.D. in paleontology."

"You've got a Ph.D. Don't ask me what your thesis was on, though. I can't pronounce most of the words in its title."

"No. I've got a Bachelor of Applied Arts from the School of

Journalism, Ryerson Polytechnic University." I hadn't said that with such pride in years.

"Yes. That, too." He glanced at his watch again. "For the time being."

I didn't believe a word of it but I decided to humor the old man. "Well, how's this change supposed to take place?"

"The two universes are mingling even now. We're just suturing up the rift between them. When the posties have everything in place, they'll automatically rejoin into one universe."

"How long until that happens?"

"Soon. Today, maybe, if I finish my route on time."

"And I don't get a say in any of this?"

"No. I'm sorry." He sounded like he really meant it. "None of us gets a say. Now, excuse me, but I really must get on with my work." And with that, the Bishop of Rome scurried out the glass door.

Lubomir Dudek, member of the Toronto Local of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, came to the last house on his route, a large side-split with a two-car garage. He didn't want to finish, didn't want to drop off a copy of the Jesuit journal *Compass* for a man who was now, because of that fateful day in 1973, one of Toronto's better-known podiatrists instead of a Father in the Society of Jesus. Lubo envied the foot doctor, just as he envied Jacob Coin, writer-about-to-turn-fossil-hunter. They went on from this point, with new vistas ahead of them. Their alternative lives beat the hell out of his own.

Lubo had known that the two realities would have to be reconciled. He, too, had made a fateful decision two decades ago, back when he was a press operator in a printing plant, a time when his own hiccups had drowned out those of the universe. He'd been pissed to the gills, celebrating -- for the life of him he couldn't remember what. Wisely, or so it had seemed at the time, he had decided to call a cab instead of driving home from the Jolly Miller. It should have been the right choice, he thought sadly, but we play the hand that we're dealt.

For a long time he had wondered why he had been selected to be one of those helping to set things right. He'd tried to convince himself that it was because he was an honest man (which he was), a good man (which was also true), a man with a sense of duty (that, too). He'd waited patiently for his own letter carrier to bring him some exotic mail: a copy of a trade magazine from some new profession, maybe, or a dues notice from some union he didn't belong to, or even a dividend check from a stock he didn't own. But nothing of the kind came and finally Lubo was forced to consciously face what he supposed he had really known all along. His one brief moment of free will had let him live when he should have not. In the reunited universe, Jacob Coin would have his thunder lizards, the podiatrist would have his brethren, but Lubo would have only rest.

He came to the end of the driveway and lifted the lid of the foot

doctor's mailbox, its black metal painfully hot in the summer sun. Slowly, sadly, he dropped in the sale flyers, bills, and letters. He hesitated for a moment before depositing the copy of Compass, then, with a concern not usually lavished on the mails, he gingerly inserted the slim magazine, taking care not to dog-ear its glossy white pages.

THE END