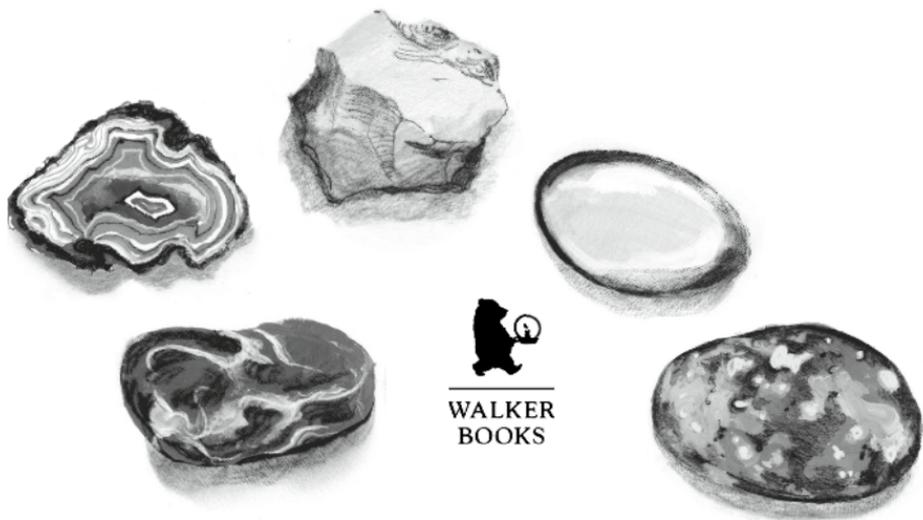


# THE LAST PEBBLE

ALEX HORNE



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*For grandchildren  
and their grandparents*







# CHAPTER 1

*When* I found him, he was just sat on the beach as if everything was normal. If I'd have known he'd travelled thousands of miles to be there and was about to throw my life into turmoil, I almost certainly would have left him alone. But that's not what happened.

*This* is what happened.

It was on a Monday, after school, when Mum was visiting Nana in the care home. She does this every Monday and I come too, because Mum lets me go down to the beach with Grandpa and I love the beach. I don't build sandcastles, because I don't like sandcastles any more and because there is no sand there anyway, just stones.

So the beach is where I go to search, collect and

detect, always wearing shoes. Every object you find tells a story, tells you something about the past or something that has happened. I'm looking for wheels or pearls or pots or skulls. I find stones mainly, but also sticks, bones, shells, bottles. So many plastic bottles. They're not good ones. They never have messages in them.

If I see any rubbish, I try to put it in a bin. But I can't pick up all the litter. That'd take up both of my hours. So when I've done ten minutes of litter picking, it's my time.

I should say that my name is Trader. I'm an almost-eleven-year-old boy, a stone whisperer and beachcomber, just like my grandpa.

I should also explain that beachcombing has nothing to do with combs. (In fact, I don't think anyone really needs any sort of comb. Other animals don't worry about their hair looking messy.) To beachcomb you simply need to keep a look out for anything unusual on the beach.

The beach is Grandpa's hunting ground too, and he taught me everything I know. I want to be just like him. People don't realize that Bognor Regis is a wild land and

he is in charge of it. “You’ll follow in my footsteps, boy,” Grandpa says, even though I’m only five foot tall. (I’ve grown one inch taller every season for the past two years. But I always have to look up to Grandpa. He takes giant steps. He strides.)

He’s lived alone for about two years now. When I was nearly nine, Nana had a serious-sounding operation and was taken straight to the care home from the hospital. She’s been there ever since. It’s the best place for her, I’ve been told many times, but I’m not so sure.

So that Monday, after school, I said my usual hello to Nana at the beginning of the visit, then scarpered. Mum says I don’t have to stay there for the full two hours because I’m “both trustworthy and annoying”. She trusts I won’t stray from the beach, talk to too many strangers or be late, and she knows Grandpa will keep an eye out for me. So it’s hello at the beginning, goodbye at the end and that’s enough for everyone.

I ran down the street, skipped over the crossing and bounded onto the beach. There was no sign of Grandpa, so I started looking for things. I’m normally a scavenging

maestro. But that Monday, there was nothing. Just the standard shingle jostling under my feet. A few gulls strutted angrily past me. There really wasn't much going on.

Out at sea, a couple of trawlers edged towards each other, while on the beach, two dog walkers shouted at their animals, encouraging them in or out of the water. And up near the seawall I saw Mary. She's obsessed with stones like me, but with a different motive. Mary is a stone stacker. She's good at it and she gets a lot of practice. She's a grown-up, so no one makes her do things like go to school or wash under her armpits. Most days she gets to spend at least a couple of hours here. I called good morning to her and Mary nodded at me, but she didn't reply. She's the silent type.

Someone shouted my name from the seawall. "Trader!" It was Grandpa. "What have you got?" he barked.

"Nothing yet," I shouted back, turning round to see him striding towards me.

Grandpa loves the beach as much as me. He prefers it late at night or first thing in the morning, when it's

just the sea and the shingle. “The waves versus the rocks. Liquid versus solid,” he says. And there, to pick up the pieces, to rescue the survivors, is my grandpa. As the sun rises, he sees what’s been thrown up from the fight the night before.

I’d be there with him more if I could. If I didn’t have to go to school. I learn more from him than I ever do in class, and Grandpa is never mean. Even though he’s a bit older than me, he talks to me like we’re the same age. In fact, he doesn’t talk to me that much at all because he’s so caught up in the comings and goings of the beach, but that suits me just fine.

As well as beachcombing, he’s taught me how to skim stones. My record is twenty bounces, although it did get quite hard to count after the first ten so I might have rounded the total up.

Mum has always said that Grandpa is my rock. She says that’s how people describe someone they can depend on. But it’s close to being a reality with Grandpa. He’s so solid, so reliable, so old and often so silent. In the past few months, he has started to fall asleep in the afternoons, sitting in his chair or even standing up at

his work bench, and then he really does look like one of those Easter Island statues.

“Strange swirl around noon, Trader,” he said as he caught up with me. Nana said he’d been here since dawn this particular Monday, like he usually is, slowly striding across the land and peering down like a giant.

“That’s good, isn’t it, Grandpa?”

“Maybe. Could be some good stuff up towards Felpham, where the breakers roll in.” This was about as chatty as Grandpa ever got.

Most of the kids at school spend their free time trawling the internet. I trawl the beaches. It’s the same, in that none of us know what exactly we are searching for. But it’s different because I might find some genuine treasure. That’s what has kept me going and kept Grandpa going for a lifetime.

All my favourite memories involve finding things with Grandpa on the beach. Once I came across two metal arrows and some cogs. When I asked Grandpa what they were, he said, “Hands.” I thought he’d gone mad. It turned out they were parts from a Victorian clock. Over the next few months Grandpa managed to

bring the clock back to life in his shed, piecing it together like a 3D jigsaw until it ticked away all by itself again. It was like magic.

When I find things like that, I can't believe other people aren't down there searching too. It's free! And new things wash up every day! The most amazing stories are waiting to be told.

Grandpa never gets too excited outwardly, in fact he very rarely smiles, but I can always tell when he's pleased. His eyes flicker. He moves a little quicker. I have to jog to keep up with him.

Another time we found an ostrich egg. "Don't ask me how that got there, Trader," Grandpa said. "Come on, let's get it home and logged."

Everything has to be logged. Grandpa is a meticulous logger. He writes detailed accounts of everything he's ever found. EVERYTHING. Not just his finds either, but anything he's ever done, anything he's ever seen, even anything he's ever eaten. I don't know when he started writing these things down, but he definitely can't stop now. It's what he does. And it isn't scrawled, joined-up writing either, just his clear, patient Grandpa font,

explaining concisely where he's been, when he was there and what precisely happened:

*22nd April 2021: Bognor Beach, due south of Crazy Golf. Ostrich egg found by Trader, 11.15 am, preserved in display case. Then home for biscuits (Rich Tea).*

I want handwriting like Grandpa's. He only has four fingers on his right hand because he accidentally chopped his middle finger off with a knife when he was younger than me, but this means he takes even greater care over his writing. The bigger boys at school found out that my grandad has a lower-than-average number of fingers. Some tried to tease me about it and a few were freaked out, but I was only proud. Apparently, when I was four, I told my reception teacher that I wanted four fingers when I grew up.

After forty minutes of scanning the beach that Monday, I'd gone stone-blind. They all looked the same and I was exhausted. There was nothing unusual. As my grandfather edged further ahead, I slowed down. As he

shrank in the distance, I sank to the ground. As I leaned back on the shingle, looking up at the clouds, I could no longer hear him. There was a lot of not much happening in Bognor.

I shut my eyes for one second. And that was enough.

As soon as I opened them, I spotted him next to me. He'd appeared as if by magic and for some reason I was there too. Maybe it was Grandpa's training, maybe it was luck, maybe it was just meant to be, but I knew at once he was special. And I know most people would call a stone an *it*, not a *he*, but this one was as alive as a stone could be. Moving slowly, I suppose in case I scared him and he ran away, I gently plucked him from the beach.

He nestled in my palm. My pebble. I smiled and gasped and closed my fingers. That was the moment everything changed.