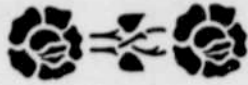


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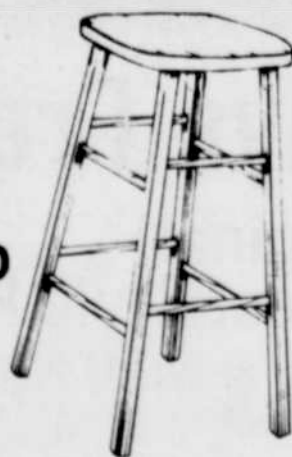
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Georgia

It is Georgia's other loves, art and literature, that hold the most allure for me, and the generous and eager manner in which Georgia shares the gathering of a lifetime.

B Y L E E L Y N C H

The Oregon coast is something that I, a native Easterner, could not have imagined. Maine was my idea of wet and wild. Oregon is a giant unending Maine. I'll never forget the day Girlfriend walked me along the beach for the first time.

We were alone — not just on a small patch of sand, with overpopulated beach blankets sur-

T H E



AMAZON TRAIL

rounding us and small humans upending solid pail-shapes. No, we were utterly alone except for a very occasional dogwalker. I had not thought this kind of solitude on a shore possible in the twentieth century. We walked and walked along the water. Waves which the stormiest day on the East Coast could not produce rose under the sun like a sprinting Niagara Falls, broke, and flung themselves at us.

Girlfriend seemed to be heading in the direction of enormous towering rocks. Not the piles of boulders to be found on the New England coast, but huge single rocks caressed, pounded and shaped by the surf. Closer and closer we got to the amazing prehistoric souvenirs.

And then I saw what Girlfriend had really brought me for. There were holes in these rocks. No, not holes: archways, doors, stand-up caves! The magnificence of nature's work was staggering and miraculous to me.

Afterwards, and yes, it was like after love-making, we returned to Georgia's. Her cavern is a small home pitched atop a grassy, gorse-thick cliff from which she could watch the two of us cavort and explore. She encourages her guests to walk the beach she scans by eye from her sedentary aerie. She claims vicarious pleasure from watching those of us under age 80 who can't seem to get enough of the pretty stones and shells, bleached wood and flotsam strewn in the vast natural toy department of the beach.

Georgia already has the pick of the briny crop inside her home — almost a user-friendly gallery. Bowls of jaspers collected and polished when this was her hobby with Jeannie, her late companion. Round blue glass balls that once served to buoy nets. A plethora of favored ocean booty. No matter how often I visit, there are always more surprises.

This treasure trove would be enough to draw me back month after month. I suspect, though, that it is Georgia's other loves, art and literature, that hold the most allure for me, and the generous and eager manner in which Georgia shares the gathering of a lifetime.

You see, I've never known anyone like Georgia before. The whole world predicted tragedy for me and my ilk by age 80: we could only be alone, spurned, twisted, bitter, wasted. As a matter of fact, those words fit the youth and middle age predicted for us, too. Now that I have family — generations of peers — I see before my eyes my bright future in the guise of Georgia.

She was born in Maxwell, Iowa, in 1907 — on Guy Fawkes Day, as she is wont to add. She graduated from Rockwell College in 1930 and four years later met Jeannie, who had earned an MA from Northwestern. They spent half of 1937 in Europe. Then they lived in Montana for about twenty years, where they earned their living as teachers and proprietors of a little bookshop. Georgia taught modern European history to Air Corps cadets during World War II; Jeannie taught military English to the Army engineers. Jeannie always wrote poetry and was published in some of the finest magazines. Posthumously, Georgia published a volume of Jeannie's verse.

It was in the 1950s that the two lifelong companions came to Bandon, Oregon, for a vacation. By 1958 they'd built their cliff home — and a tiny restaurant where, while Georgia took care of the customers, Jeannie turned out kettles of barbecue sauce for chicken. She also was famous for her ham-on-a-bun sandwiches. The editor (Georgia had accepted a job at Oregon State University Press) and the English teacher settled into a life of which most married couples only dream.

Meanwhile, they were amassing collections of books and prints. I have only to mention Utrillo, say, or Bernard Buffet, or the artist-of-Georgia's-eye, Georgia O'Keefe, to send Georgia, in her wheelchair, on an intensive treasure hunt. She returns with a lapful of art books, or prints, or articles whose subjects range from the Impressionists to Frank Stella.

She gives her memories like gifts, too. One time she told Girlfriend about attending a Chicago performance of Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts* and seeing Gertrude and Alice in the audience.

Another time, on learning of my passion for art depicting New York City, she trotted out a postcard of the city, written to Jeannie by poet and anthropologist Oscar Williams. I was flabbergasted. Williams was *only* the editor of all the first poetry books I ever owned and pored over. Georgia's casual possession of such an artifact made literary history seem almost down home, something close to my life and about people like me.

Then there is her connection with Doris Lee, a friend from the Chicago days who made a reputation as a primitive artist. The Chicago Art Institute sells holiday cards using one of her paintings, and I recently saw a print at the Portland Art Museum in Oregon.

Each visit ends after Girlfriend and I wend our way back up from the sand, our pockets full of rocks. We spread our stockpiles before Georgia: a bit of a rock hound, an expert. She then identifies each rock and its potential. For years she machine polished these little sculptures of the sea and sold them at her Sea Shop Restaurant. In our parting ritual, Georgia will lift and inspect each stony offering, categorize and grade the lot.

"Ah!" she'll say. "This is a good one. It's hard. And look at these lines," she'll add, pointing out streaks of red or gold or patterns. She can spot petrified wood at a glance. I never even knew that one could find such a thing on the beach. My favorite, a gift from Georgia, is a tweedy little stone with a close-set wavy grain in brown-gray and off-white, shaped by the years, polished by Georgia.

On the other hand, when I pick up a clunker, as I often do, she dismisses it with disdain. "That's just a rock. A nice rock, but a rock."

This seems very much in character for a connoisseur of twentieth-century culture, my chairside arbiter, a woman living a rich cultural life who is still drawing artists and writers to her salon by the sea.