

The Coming of the Rock

You might say Barnbury was a sad, mean little man. He would throw rocks to local dogs instead of sticks or tennis balls, have the sprinklers fixed to start right when the mailman was due, and keep his rosebushes extra thorny. He lived in a nondescript town outside of a slightly less nondescript city. He had lost his daughter in a carousel accident when she was four and a half. After that his wife had left him and left town. She blamed grief, and, considering, no one blamed her. Although the carousel manufacturer had compensated him handsomely to avoid scandal, the money never felt good to him. But he had no job so he used it to get by. People tried not to hold his ways against him. Still, he had a strong constitution. He kept on. You might even call him bullheaded.

What little personage Barnbury thought he did have wasn't going to be backhandedly criticized by some narrator. So he took over the 'I' that was missing from the story.

Next I do my best to avoid any more crazy thoughts and turn to something entirely daily and dull. I write a grocery list:

- milk
- brandy

I went to the store yesterday and have very little I need. Nothing, in fact, though from experience I know I can always use more milk and brandy. After I get back from the store, I hear a grating crash in the front yard. I hear glass, too, as the windows pop.

Margaret won't be happy. Margaret is the cat and she very much dislikes grating. As for glass, she's okay looking through it, but she won't be fond of itsy pieces on the floor, on account of her paws, I imagine.

I step through my door, it now doing a very poor job of being a door, which makes me sad for a moment considering I have always admired its dutifulness.

Then I see a rock halfway out of my lawn. It is neither daily nor dull. And you, like myself at this moment, might think this another alien happening and already be bored. Well as a look ahead, the rock is not from outer space, not from the sky at all, but from the Earth, birthed by the pressure of its innards, a strange phenomena some of you farmers will be familiar with when rocks suddenly appear in your fields. I'd never experienced it myself but I am told it is perfectly natural. Usually the appearances are discreet, coming in the lonely hours of the night, but the Rock in My Yard, as I will come to call it, has arrived with great fanfare.

So I do what anyone would do. I build a box around it, charging the neighborhood kids for a look through a cup I stick into the side of the box.

Soon I put up a sign. Come see the Rock in my Yard. Like Nothing You've Ever Seen Before in small letters above and As Special As The One We're On below. I really have to restrain myself to avoid puns, and in the end I can't completely, but I go with a tame one. Puns have been one of my greatest consolations. Puns and ice cream sandwiches.

Once I posted on the Grief Support: Learning To Live Without message board and shared my measures, thinking they might console some **other** mope, when

fish&quips1066 called puns ghastly and said ice cream sandwiches cause diabetes. I never went back, even to check if the post was taken down and fish&quips1066 banned, considering it violated the community rules.

I make my sign, black marker on white poster board attached to two wooden closet rods, elegantly simple.

It seems to work. I'm rolling. To meet demand, I jam in another 3 cups. They are different sizes—a pint, a sherry, and I guess what you'd call a table glass—along with Dad's old binoculars and a science kit microscope from when Evie was still around. I charge a quarter for cups, 50 cents for the binocs, and a dollar for the microscope, on account of the magnifying. It's not that you see more but you do see closer and that has to be worth something.

There is a steady flow of business and one Saturday there is even a line for five minutes. I'm proud. Not much happens in our little town. Any hubbub gets a draw, like when the Walters gave birth to Siamese twins (it turned out they were fraternal and had just gotten tangled in each other's shirts in their stroller) but I'm proud anyway.

Lots of kids come. Their parents take them, or, if they're old enough, they come alone, in groups and on wheels—bikes, scooters, skateboards. The skateboards usually mean the most trouble. Once sweet little Suzie Mendelson came by on rollerblades. She was still getting the hang of them evidently as she almost cracked her head on the corner of the box. She hadn't been wearing a helmet, either. I meant to have a word with her parents. I did instate a No Wheels While Viewing policy.

Today some skateboards roll up after school. One or two bikes. Scooters are out of style with the older set. The kids seem tall. Like me-tall.

I know some of them from the St Mark's Parish Pancake Feed where I volunteered as a Topping Specialist. Now they clearly recognize me, I assume by their sneers, remembering how I enforced the rules of two spoonfuls of topping per stack. The rules will bend no less here and if they haven't the dough, they may as well call me Hard Place. I told you I couldn't resist a pun, and now I think of this one and go to make a note for the name of a potential cafeteria addition out of my kitchen should I be able to secure the permits. I am licking my stub of a pencil when one of them bellows, "That how you suck cock, rock brains?"

"Hey!" I shout as I look up but they all stand looking at me sans incrimination. Not knowing who yelled, I think it unfair to turn the rest away. It becomes one of those many slights that is lived with.

The Walter kids are here, one clearly better off in looks than the other. It isn't that he has smoother hair or bluer eyes—though he does but the other isn't too far behind. It's his bone structure. He's nicely proportioned through the eyes, nose, and mouth, statuesque from brow to chin. He has the mandible of a winner, the cheekbones of a world beater. The other I would call droopy, and that's being polite.

Kate Macy, too. Kate Macy is a tomboy. She is wearing acid washed jeans and a baggy AC/DC t-shirt. Her mother Sherine claims to be related to the department store Macys, some distant cousin, but way back they ended up on the wrong side of a family dispute and never saw a penny for it. Everyone knows it's a lie, a

coincidence, and really they shop at Target because that's all they can afford. Her hair is in an obvious ponytail.

And Billy Matheson. Billy Matheson has a bad reputation. He slashed the tires of Marty Frieze's ice cream truck and ring-led a run on the freezer last summer. If his father Michael weren't landlord of practically all our little Main Street, Billy would have been expelled if not arrested.

There are others, have been many others before them to see the Rock in my Yard, but their appearance and character—rumored or confirmed—I don't feel like telling now. The four I've mentioned are suspect enough for the shout, though like so many shouts in the street the shouter will go nameless.

I want to teach them a lesson. Degrade them in some way. Something that they'll never forget. A gross out maybe. Put a picture of a possum giving birth under all the cups.

But I think of the educational opportunity of the Rock. This could be a watershed moment. One of them could grow up set on being a geologist after today. God knows those are important.

Not to mention my margins. If I want to realize the Hard Place Cafe, now clearly manifesting itself in my mind, I'll have to pay some people. I know how it works.

"Listen sports, that kind of language will not be tolerated." I channel stern and look it. "If you want to see the Rock, you've got to pay to play, no way around it. So, who's got the coin?"

They start off one-at-a-go. Though Billy Matheson is the de-facto leader, he hesitates so Kate Macy volunteers. When she looks up at the group in a kind of awe like you get when you see your first lion at the zoo, Billy jumps to go next to the same result. The rest hurriedly join in. They are talking excitedly among themselves with a sparkle in their eyes as they leave, probably to knock over porta-johns or throw eggs off the overpass.

I think how it would be a slam dunk peddling ice cream sandwiches to these punks. Marty doesn't bring the truck around here anymore.

Even though these monstrous suckers are nothing like her, they remind me of Evie. She would be about this age, and I wonder what she would be like. Sweet as I'd like to think, though there's no way of knowing. Despite what every parenting guide and tipsy book club mom might tell you, bad seeds exist. No amount of grace and faith can exorcise the monstrous. Maybe time can, and if so, hope and patience are your remedies. If they don't pan out you still gotta love 'em. Call it a sick culture and try to sleep at night. But look at me, I'm not one to give parenting advice.

Mr. Schmidt comes by the next day. Mr. Schmidt is a schoolteacher, 7th grade I think. A real gentle type, though he is tall and fit and wears a beard. He also wears kindly clothes, sweaters and khakis and plaid shirts. He goes by Mr. Schmidt even to other adults. Not part of his shtick so much as his therapy. He was in the war in one of the deserts, I forget which now. It fucked him up good. But he got fixed by a hypnotism therapy specialist. This quack has an office in the city, the Wonderful Dr. Wheeler, and the school board saw that as cure enough to handle kids.

Mr. Schmidt's great with them I've heard. Still, it's rumored he has some triggers. Can't watch certain YouTube videos, especially bangy ones. Can't be around too much traffic. Can't go to the beach, or even a park with a sandbox. His name is another of the triggers. Janice Tilly, an occasional bed partner of his, told me his CO used to scream it all the time, right before he was about to blow some camel herder's raghead off. Kill, Greg, kill.

"It goes so far as similar sounds. I try to avoid 'gee-arr's' around him," Janice told me, "and I never bring up eggs since the diner incident." I decided it better not to ask.

It seems strange for a CO to use the first name instead of the last. I've always thought that authoritative figures, you know drill sergeants, football coaches, judges, the lovable psychos of our society, always went for the last name. But Janice told me Mr. Schmidt's CO valued the trust that the affirmation of first names inspired. I bet he'd heard it on *The Modern Man's Method for Connecting and Transmitting*, a CD self-help series you order by phone on late night TV.

"Heya Barnburby, what do you have here? It's got the kids all worked up. Today in line in the cafeteria they tugged Jeffy Clinton's rattail until every last dime fell out of his pocket," he says. I make a mental note to instate a strict No Violence policy.

"Have a look for yourself. It'll only cost you a quarter." After some rummaging Mr. Schmidt hunches over the box.

I decide to try the Modern Man's Method. "So what do you think, Greg?"

Mr. Schmidt turns up at me with a killer's look and is about to end me I'm sure when he sees one of the Sisters driving past on her way back to St Marks' from the 7/11. She has a Slurpee and is happy out, beating the wheel in time to the radio with her free hand.

The next day, the paper says it was the habit that did it, and that the cherry flavor of the Slurpee greatly exaggerated the grisliness of the scene. Upon arrest, Mr. Schmidt rended his heart, saying, "I'm so so dang terribly sorry. I don't know what came over me. This wasn't supposed to happen."

Thanks to some careful evasion and palm greasing—I give Sylvia Loretto, the editor at the paper, and her family \$50 and Rock-viewing privileges for life—my operation avoids implication in this fandango.

Later, I run a diagnostic and ask myself, How Is Your State Of Being? That's from the Modern Man's again.

My state of being feels equal parts amplified and depleted. The Rock in my Yard brings tons of kids around. So I am thinking a lot about Evie and Evaline and the family we had. I wonder how Evaline is. She has cut all communication. Too painful, she said in her goodbye note—a post-it next to the phone.

I don't blame her for leaving. I was a no-good reminder of grief as much as this town, as much as pudding cups and crayons. Grief incarnate it seemed the world had become. At times it still does, but it's better now. The Rock is either complicit or perfectly guilt-free. I take it as the latter, a beautiful, distracting blessing. It's not like there had been a shortage of tragedy before Its coming.

As I finish up, I get a timely visit from Father Helling, the pastor at St. Mark's. He looks cheerily somber in that way that only people assured of their salvation can. He has a red, bearish face and his thin hair is hopefully dragged across his growing forehead. His collar is tight around his neck. He always walks with his hands behind his back, as he does now.

He has publicly pronounced his name, if not somewhat unbecoming, as very unlucky, but he cannot change his calling nor the lot he was called from. An old dirt lot in the wrong part of town, he often jokes. He or his parents have European origin, more recent than the rest of us. There has been mention of the war, which or where it isn't clear. He never allows for too deep of prodding which has led to some nasty rumors. Not to stoop and throw muck but I've heard the phrase 'Nazi Pedophilia.' Really, as far as I can tell, he is a kind man.

He came and talked to me after the accident, and again after Evaline left. The second time I told him how I'd been feeling about the world.

"Come on," he said, "Was Jesus's love grief incarnate?"

"His life might have been." I said. "At least He'd had a childhood, though."

"We must always trust in the Lord." He took my fingers in his hand and gave them a reassuring shake, reminding me that if there was anything I needed, etc., and then left.

Now he takes a hand from behind his back and waves. We exchange greetings, and then he says he has something to talk to me about.

"Certainly, Father, anything."

"Come on," he says. "What is this stone thing?"

I give him a briefing and invite him to look *gratis*, but he declines, instead interested in how I am doing. I go on about the Rock. "It's more than bacon bringer. It's something to pour my spirit into."

He tells me to pour my spirit into the cup of Christ, that the Rock brings bad tidings. "Come on. Look at what happened to Sister Marie."

I say that was the result of these modern holy wars.

"Those weren't wars of God but of greed." He sounds vehement, desperate.

"Anything can be holy for the right price," I say. Then I think to ask him to bless the Rock to attract the religious crowd, but I refrain.

"Think of Jesus in the temple. Do not go down the wrong path."

"Are you suggesting a bout of rage?" I crack.

He bristles. He looks ready to break into one himself but then calmly says, "Roll the stone away from the tomb. Let in the light of the risen Lord. Come on." And leaves.

I am adamant to continue with the Rock in My Yard. I want it to be the country's greatest roadside attraction. I want it to become so big a highway is built beside my house. I want it to become the pride of the town, the slogan of the state. "Home of the Rock." I figure they will omit 'in my Yard' though who knows. I figure it all possible if the hype mushrooms and the right eyes are pulled to it, the right planners paid.

I've never felt so ambitious. But I am tired lately. Inoperably tired, though I carry on with steady doses of Adderall that the kids have been giving me as payment. I've stopped eating, save for the odd ice-cream sandwich, though I do get

cravings. I curb them with ice cubes. I keep a cooler close at hand and knock a cube around my mouth and against my teeth until it melts. But I have had stranger desires. At times I want to bend down in my yard and eat the dirt. Or to go to the hardware store, buy a paint scraper, scrape the paint (white) off my fence into chips, and eat the chips like Doritos. I figure it's from the long hours.

I go to Dr. Giles. He has old cigarette ads on the walls that say things like Give Your Throat a Vacation, Smoke a *Fresh* Cigarette and More Doctors Smoke Camels. He conducts famously short appointments, a quick look and listen in the noggin holes but none of the awkward testicle presentation. He bypasses that part with a final "all good?"

Today when he asks I say no, and he begins to motion for me to drop my undies when I say I've been very tired lately.

"Sluggish?" I nod.

"Lethargic?" Again I nod.

"Dizzy?"

"Yes, but that could be from future prospects."

"How about apathetic, or," he dances around the word for a moment, "depressed?"

I tell him quite the opposite. "I've been about brimming over with enthusiasm, but it's like my body can't service it, like it's failing me."

"Now we won't have that. Have you tried smoking a Camel?"

I shake my head grimly and think about Greg.

“Just kidding,” precedes the backslap, “only this is nothing to joke about.”

Then he orders some blood work.

I’m back in a week and it turns out I have Iron Deficiency Anemia. It’s serious but treatable. I barely listen as Dr. Giles runs me through the plan of attack.

“Start with supplements and dietary tweaks. Up the lean-red meat, salmon, and dried fruits. If that doesn’t work we’ll get you on Iron Therapy, administered intravenously. After that, you’ll be Iron Man in no time.”

I follow his advice but nothing changes, so he orders the iron IV. I’m sick for a day or two—“all that metal can go to the head,” he’d warned—but then I begin to feel better.

However, when I go for my follow up appointment a month later, I feel like I’m back where I started. The blood work confirms it. Doctor Giles has no explanation. He is baffled. He says I should be healthy. He asks me if anything has changed in my life recently. I say no. He says, “Think, really think about it.” I shrug. I don’t tell him about the Rock in my Yard.

I remember that when I put in the binoculars and microscope, I felt the faintest tug. Of course I have spent a lot of time around It. And what I might not have told you is if business is slow, I look at It myself. For long empty hours I am out in the yard, not looking at the grass or street or the neighbor’s houses but the Rock. It has become a compulsion. When it is busy all day, I creep out at night to look at It. Afterwards I sleep much better.

I run some tests. I get a paperclip from my desk and it sticks. I try a penny from my wallet. It falls to the ground. I get the Papa John's magnet off the fridge and it resists.

Margaret has been steering clear of the Rock, which surprised me because she normally she loves boxes. She just sits looking through what had been the window and bristles from time to time whenever the It extends its presence towards her. Cats have a knack for this kind of thing.

I do another diagnostic, this one, What Is Your Relation To The World In Its Current State? I think how, like a robo-vampire, the Rock has sucked all the iron from my blood. I think how garlic probably won't have any curative effect, and how I won't realize my ambitions. But most importantly, I think how when we face uncertainty in our lives, even about the smallest issues, it throws us into turmoil because they point towards the greatest uncertainty—death. To put it another way, we find comfort in even the smallest of certainties, the routine of work and lunch and arrival home, of Christmas pajamas and flowers in Spring. And the Rock since Its arrival has been my comfort. So I'll go where It may take me.

I make the preparations and die, garlic coming out of my ears. The substantial sum I have garnered from my operation goes to a women's shelter. The Rock in my Yard passes into the hands of the state who make it a children's memorial, though they limit viewing to one day a year. The 12th of June. Evie's birthday.

And what does It look like you must want to know?