

Moonstone

At the last second before opening the door I flipped the blinds to glance outside. It was a good thing I did, because my visitor was my daughter, Jill. She was always getting after me to check before opening up, now that the divorce was final and Olen was gone.

“Do you have a death wish?” she’d scold. “Who knows *who* could be out there.”

But it was only Jill rushing in with an armful of daffodils, not my favorites, if you want to know the truth, those silly bonnets. “They’re so...yellow,” I said as I accepted the bunch, pretending to inhale the delightful aroma, and she took it as a compliment or a good sign or whatever she was looking for. “What’s the occasion?”

“Just charity.” She shrugged. “Outside the bank they were selling them for something, I think cancer.”

“I thought by charity you meant me.” I followed Jill into my kitchen. “Don’t get me wrong, though. I need charity.”

“No, no. Cancer.”

The dishes from my breakfast were still in the sink, the Cheerios bloating with milk, but the counters weren’t that bad and I’d swept the floor recently. Jill opened the cabinet above the stove. “I don’t have time, really. I have a meeting. Where’s that vase Dad gave you?”

“I smashed it on the back porch.”

“Funny, Mom.” Hardly a hesitation. “No, really.”

“Behind that beer stein.”

I put the flowers in the vase and Jill ran the water. The vase was too tall for the

stems. The little heads bobbed, barely kept from drowning.

My good girl Jill, with her thick earnest ankles and bewildered streaked hair and her boyfriend with the important-sounding cough, delivered after every meal like a proclamation.

“You’ve brightened my day.” I gave her a hug as we headed back to the door.

“You just caught me. I was about to take my morning walk.”

“You’re still taking those walks. That’s good. Mark wants to buy a treadmill.”

“Life *is* a treadmill.”

“Oh, Mom.” She sighed. “You vary your route, don’t you?”

“Yes. I have routes all over the place.”

She turned as she stepped outside. “You don’t go alone on the mesa?”

“No.” This was mostly true. I didn’t particularly like it out there. I didn’t like the vertigo of the open space, but the main problem was the illegal dumping, the worn abandoned tires and dented paint cans and gaping refrigerators strewn amongst the sagebrush like so many unpleasant reminders of failed domesticity. And the skulking, pale coyotes, even if they kept their distance.

That day I decided on my usual walk, variations be damned, straight down Sundt Road to the highway, approximately one mile, then back. I walked along the curb, avoiding bits of glass and litter, ducking under the low-hanging branches of rain-deprived trees, until I reached the parking lot for the soccer fields, where a school bus idled until it was time to get the kids. Just as I approached, the bus doors hissed open and the driver descended. He was a big guy and I always thought of TV’s Jackie Gleason whenever I

saw him, which was fairly often. We seemed to be on the same morning schedule. He lit a cigarette and nodded as I passed. I nodded back. A row of crows watched from the chain link fence, then lifted to resettle and hunch around a puddle left by sprinklers.

On my way back, the bus was gone and elementary schoolchildren were gathering at the corner of Moonstone and Sundt across the street. One of the boys was tossing a pink backpack high in the air, while a girl pranced about, shrieking, trying to get it back. I reached a row of three dying ash trees when I heard the distinct rattle of a stone as it landed behind me and caromed against one of the tree trunks. I kept walking even as I felt a surge of fury. They were making a big mistake, throwing rocks at me. But maybe I was wrong, paranoid, and they weren't throwing at me. A boy's voice came clearly, then, "She didn't even *notice*."

But I had noticed. For some reason it stuck with me all day at work. Of course I'd probably done the right thing, ignored them, kept going, kids will be kids. Rise above it. But still. How did they know I wasn't someone unstable, someone insane? At the very suburban least I should have stopped and glared at them.

To offset my mood I told the receptionist, Marion, about Jill's flowers. Marion and I had tried to be friends, but there was something forced about it and we had never quite succeeded. Olen had never liked her.

"Flowers!" Marion glanced up, but kept typing. "And my daughter won't even speak to me!" she confided, with a laugh that seemed too carefree for her words.

In the break room I continued to brood. It was my week to clean the microwave. You wouldn't think a bunch of accountants would be such slobs, but they were. As I

scrubbed at some encrusted red splatters I wondered what had transformed me so entirely that I had become a target for rock-throwers. What was it about me? My clothes? My age? Had the defeat of my divorce somehow become visible? Olen had not treated me well for years and even though on one level I knew it, I still felt weirdly empty without him, my other half. What was it with those kids? Perhaps it was nothing personal. Simply because I was there I offered a challenge, like Mount Everest. But don't victims somehow ask for it?

Olen was only a few inches taller than I. And to think in my youth I'd told my sister I would never marry anyone short! To say I didn't understand the power of attraction is an understatement. He was intense, impatient, thick-waisted, with wiry brown frizz for hair and a mouth off a Greek statue (molded curved lips with just the slightest blunting). I loved his mouth. Today I took down the picture of him in the living room and tried to decide if I could put him in a box and bury him and be done with him. Olen left a sizzle like a bite of something too spicy. He was too quick, liked to move close, touched too often, then backed off as if bored or angry. I was always watching his shifting expressions to try and gauge how to act. He hated when he caught me looking, what he called my subservient cringe. During our marriage I'd often felt mentally bovine in comparison to him, lumbering along a step behind him, digesting his bright personality with all my slow, rumbling stomachs.

On that last night, we were supposed to go to a play downtown. I'd been absurdly happy; we hadn't done anything together in so long and he'd arranged the evening out. He was sitting in the living room reading the paper. No shoes, feet up on the coffee table,

that confident casualness. “Isn’t it time to go?” I finally asked, and he said, to someone invisible near the ceiling, “She thinks I’m going to the play with her.” He explained to me that I would be going alone and that when I got back, he would be gone. He was moving out, the usual, he’d found someone else. He handed me the ticket. Numbly, I went to the performance (it never occurred to me not to go) and made half a row of spectators stand as I pushed myself through to my seat. Excuse me, excuse me. Pardon. Sorry. A litany. *My* litany. I sat next to strangers with my weird tears welling up—weird because they leaked steadily but my face wasn’t contorting, I didn’t feel my heart twisting, my breathing was even. I simply dripped, as if I’d been punctured. I watched the actors act without registering the plot. *Except for that, Mrs. Lincoln, did you enjoy the play?*

Scenarios presented themselves during darkest night as I lay defiantly on the hump between the two troughs of the former marital bed. What if the children threw more stones? I would have to avoid that section of my walk near the soccer fields. I would have to walk at a different time of day. But I felt a deep stubbornness. Why should I change? Leaving the house for my walk was my sign of hope, or if not hope, perseverance. I would walk every day and every day they could throw their stones. “Oh, what, divorced? Oh, I guess I am!” I would learn to laugh carelessly, like Marion. At first without Olen I had cried so much I’d developed a chronic sinus infection and Jill had forced me to see a doctor. I sat on the paper-covered examination table while the doctor placed his hands on either side of my face and gently pressed his thumbs against my cheekbones. A man’s hands framing my face, as if in a romance novel. If you haven’t been touched in a while, it’s alarming how thirsty you get for it. “You may be developing allergies,” the doctor

said. “I can always tell plugged sinuses by those dark half circles under the eyes.” (So much for romance.) He went on to give me an impromptu lecture about how a face is a membrane, a face is a structure with openings that allow the world to enter, we engage the world through our five senses, through our very pores, how systems designed to protect us from the world’s intrusions such as the flowing of tears and the production of mucus sometimes backfire as our bodies turn upon themselves. “Well, I wish my membrane weren’t so permeable,” I’d said in what I think of as my tart voice, the one for indicating I’m growing old with pep, with vim, vigor and vinegar. The doctor laughed, I remember, probably surprised I knew the word permeable. He gave me antibiotics and the infection cleared up, but still it seemed my vision remained blurry, that perhaps my glasses prescription had changed. The next doctor was a young woman who blew puffs like little lover’s gasps into my eyes as she checked for glaucoma, then dropped bitter fluid to expand my pupil into a window. I saw the red-lightning afterimages of capillaries and flashes like the beams of the headlights that endlessly circled the walls of my bedroom each night, but my prescription had not changed. I decided to get new sunglasses anyway, for the many travels I would now be making as a Free Woman, and this time it had been yet another man offering his services, the same optometrist I’d seen in this job for years, hunched at his desk graced with a mirror on a pedestal, as if he were incurably vain, the tall racks of glasses like so many revolving skyscrapers behind him, his penthouse office with a view. He had developed a small paunch over the years, it endeared him to me, how his shirt twisted and puckered as it dipped behind the belt, so wonderful that he wasn’t perfect. What could I hope for, being so imperfect myself? I was free to have affairs; maybe he was The One. I could do anything I wanted. He helped

me select and size the frames and once again, there I was face to face with another man asking me this time to look straight at him. A man seeking sincerity, with his hand lifting my chin. I looked steadily through my empty frames, through his frames, to his eyes.

Blue. Blue. Blue.

We were playing doubles, another of Jill's strategies to cheer me up. She wouldn't hear a word against her father, but still attended to my "recovery." My tennis partner, Marion from work, was the worst player I'd ever seen, hitting into the net or into outer space, but most often missing the ball entirely. Jill's boyfriend Mark was probably the best of us, and Jill and I were tied, approximately. The couple in the next court began giving us annoyed, then venomous looks due to our many errant shots. After about twenty minutes of farce I suggested we stop apologizing for every missed hit, forget serving, and try volleying. We lasted the full hour, somehow, and when I wasn't paying attention Jill arranged it that Marion would drive me home. I had to fight off the sense that Jill, too, was abandoning me.

In addition to being a deplorable tennis player Marion was also a fearsome driver, I soon discovered. It was something spatial, a defect in depth perception, perhaps.

"Some kid threw a rock at me the other day," I said to her, as she turned up my street. "There at that corner. Cute little kids. They were waiting for the bus."

"They threw rocks? That's terrible. What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"I would have given them a piece of my mind."

"Maybe I'll go stand each day at the bus stop with them. Not say a word. Just

freak them out in my silent way. I could offer them candy. Never take candy from strangers. Or maybe I'll befriend them somehow—Dr. Jane Goodall and her primates, always respectful of their wild propensities.”

Marion said uncertainly, “You could talk to the bus driver.”

“Now, there’s an idea.” I pictured Jackie Gleason in his bus uniform, shaking a fat fist at his wife. No help there.

As Marion lurched to a stop on my driveway, I wondered at my motives. What was I trying to do to poor Marion? It was as if Olen and his sarcasm had entered me and I'd unloaded it on her. “Sorry.” I reached for the door handle. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Christina,” Marion said. I looked at her. “Chris, we’re friends, right?” I had to nod. “I think you should talk to someone.”

I thought I *was* talking to someone, but apparently not. “About rocks?”

The corner of her mouth ticked down. To her credit, she was looking a little fed up. To her credit, I could be difficult, as I'd been told often enough. I bet Jill had put her up to this. “About everything,” she said, meaning the one thing, the only: Olen.

Being around Olen had been a lot like playing golf, I decided, all that intermittent reinforcement was irresistible. I supposed this was what worked with gamblers, too, enticed by the rare win or the memory of winning they blundered on. I wasn't much of a risk-taker, though, except maybe for today. Jill would not approve of my wandering.

I followed the path up the arroyo, skirting tumbleweeds until I reached an old dirt track, its parallel lines nearly overcome with dry desert grasses that whipped in the breeze. I was aiming for the high point, a rocky outcropping in this lunar landscape that

gave a view of the entire west mesa, including the streets of the neighborhood below and the mountain to the east. I had Olen's picture with me and intended to discard it somewhere up there, where it would eventually weather and fade behind its framed glass, until it could no longer affect me or anything I thought or did.

The track ended and the slope got steeper. A plastic grocery bag rustled and snapped in the wind, caught on some sagebrush. I climbed out of one gulley and slid in sand down the next. Something yellow and matted lay at the bottom, in shadow. A sheepskin, I thought, until I realized it was a split cushion, perhaps part of a couch or futon, with blackened coils curling through the bulging stuffing. In a sudden gust it gathered itself and seemed to lift and move toward me and I shrank into my skin, a feeling of naked exposure at the back of my neck that was pure animal, hunted animal, like a rabbit under the shadow of a hawk. I froze entirely, couldn't move, not even to breathe. Bluish light flashed off the framed picture in my hand; the photo had slid halfway out the bottom, cutting Olen's face in half. Then I dropped it and scrambled out of there. On the way back down the arroyo I kept turning to look over my shoulder. The air was full of dust. I couldn't shake the certainty that something was after me.

No walls could keep me safe. Even so I closed and locked all the windows, including the upstairs, shut the blinds and sat on the edge of the bed in the stifling half-light. I watched my hands trembling on my lap. Jill was right; the world was a treacherous place and Olen was gone and I was alone. It was as if I hadn't fully assembled these facts into a whole structure until now, and now it hung hollow and ramshackle before me: the rest of my life.

It took an entire weekend of lecturing myself before I could get up the nerve to leave the house. On Monday morning before work I laced my shoes and took the usual route, along Sundt. On the way down, I passed the idling bus with its whiff of diesel, on the way back, I passed the children clustered at Moonstone. A blond-haired boy glanced at me. I kept going. I was beyond them, almost out of range, when I heard the slap of shoes on pavement. My heart clenched. The stone hit me on the calf and fell at my feet. I picked it up and turned. One of the taller boys, a skinny one wearing a dark baseball cap on backwards, darted back, merging with the others. I knew this could not go on. This could not be. Slowly, I walked toward the children. Their backpacks lay on the ground in a crooked line, saving places for boarding the bus, while the kids themselves hung back, milling like feral cats. I stepped over the line, stopped and held out my palm to show them the evidence. After a moment, a few of the curious ones edged closer. I'd forgotten that trait of young children, how whenever they see an object they almost automatically have to touch it, too, how small their hands are, the whisper of fingertips.

I considered the rock in my hand, as if it might reveal the answer to questions of dignity and loss. It was an ordinary rock, not much to look at, dull gray, one side chipped and pocked with scars and the other dusted with the white chalky marks of impact. Who was I to call this rock, forged out of ancient geological forces, ordinary? "Maybe I'll start a rock collection," I said, as the bus lumbered toward us and the kids dove for their packs. "My new hobby." I wondered what Jill would think when she discovered her bright flowers cast aside for a vase full of stones.

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