

4,167 words

## ORDINARY ROCKS

“What grown man stuffs his pockets with rocks?!” Jackie, the fiery Filipina controller of the auditing department, hovered over Stuart and verbally bludgeoned him as he fumbled to collect his errant stones from the conference room floor. “Maybe if they were precious gems like diamonds or emeralds, I’d understand your attachment, Stuart, but these are ordinary rocks!”

Jackie retrieved a plum sized chunk of gypsum desert rose that had just slipped again through the hole in Stu’s pants pocket and slammed it on the table, shattering the delicate rosettes. Ignoring the derisive laughter of his fellow auditors and Jackie’s lingering tirade, Stu lovingly scraped the debris in his palm. Jackie threw up her hands in disgust.

“Meeting over!”

The staff spilled out the door but not before Eric, the young smart aleck who shared Stu’s cubicle, deliberately kicked a polished piece of blue lace agate away from Stu’s pudgy fingers and under Jackie’s menacing shoe.

“Come back here, Blue!” Stu nearly upended his supervisor as he plowed his bovine body against her legs and rescued his most prized possession – a nearly translucent stone with blue and white swirls that resembled clouds scudding across the sky.

“Stuart!” Jackie screamed. But Stu didn’t heed her anger as he kissed the stone.

“I’m so sorry...”

Mistaking the apology for her, Jackie instantly softened.

“Stuart, if you weren’t so good with numbers, I wouldn’t tolerate your antics, not for a millisecond,” Jackie sizzled. “I knew you were strange when I first interviewed you with your mother waiting outside my office. She looked worried. I should’ve been worried.”

Stu let Jackie’s rant slough off his back like soft rain and waited for another storm to subside. Instead he heard the controller softly close the door, sigh and get down on her knees to help him corral his treasures.

“I’m sorry, Stuart. I know these rocks are like your family now that your mother’s gone, but they’re not living, you’re not living....”

Stu wouldn’t argue his existence was debatable but Isis, the modern day witch who owned the Mystic Rock Shop, insisted the dozens of polished rocks she had sold him over the past few months were alive, just like plants and animals, and had positive energy to impart.

“They’ll help you be happy and fulfilled,” Isis smiled as she lit white sage and wreathed each rock purchase in sweet smoke then whispered a magic chant. “All you have to do is give my children a good home and pay attention.”

And Stu complied. At home he built a tray with small open compartments that he padded with cotton balls and meticulously labeled with all the folk qualities Isis said the rocks had been endowed with.

The blue lace agate is said to be a calming, uplifting stone that promotes love, healing and power and aids fertility. The desert rose rock Jackie smashed, ironically, is reputed to quiet the mind and bring flexibility to one's nature. Some stones attract wealth, offer protection, spur creative thinking, energize the body, clear the mind and other wondrous qualities that Stu never could tap.

Not that he didn't try. He never left the rocks alone, ferrying them in his bulging pockets like a waddling walrus. He massaged each stone in his palm twice a day, bathed them in the sun and fresh air, blew his worries and aspirations onto them in the hopes they would magically transform his life while he slept, and talked to them. But they never responded, not even Blue....

"Maybe you don't speak their language. That's why they try to escape," Eric ladled more insults onto Stu as he Scotch taped his torn pants pocket lining and carefully pushed each rock into the safe haven after taking careful inventory. His favorite rock – the luminous blue lace agate, he clutched in his hand hoping to draw its calming energy. He felt nothing.

"Could've been worse," Eric persisted.

"I doubt it," Stu muttered.

"Could've been me...." Eric feigned commiseration.

Stu turned off his computer, straightened the papers on his desk three times and pushed in his chair.

“I could say something, Eric, but I won’t,” Stu volleyed back then hustled home before his nemesis could call his bluff. “The truth is Stuart Greenberg had nothing to say. His tongue was as cold as the dozens of stones that bulged in his pocket and weighed down his body and his spirit.

Stu wasn’t sure what beckoned him to enter the Mystic Rock Shop in the first place. It could’ve been the friendly gnomes guarding the door – Stu collected troll dolls as a boy, one of a series of odd collections. Inside, he admired the orderly displays of polished stones and healing crystals, each neatly categorized. Interspersed with the trays were display cases of rock-studded jewelry and shelves neatly stocked with incense and New Age books and accoutrements including books on spells, altars, ceremonial daggers, oils and herbs used by Wiccans, modern day witches whose central deity is a mother goddess. The small store offered aura imaging and tarot card readings. Soft music wafted in the ether. A contented calico cat lazed on the window sill. Yet, none of this mattered to Stu. This isn’t what drew him back like a lodestone time and again.

“I think I love her,” Stu glanced askance at Isis, beaming about her store, a moonstone necklace capturing the magic in her sloe eyes. Isis exuded a calm that belied her years, which Stu reckoned to be 34, six years younger than him and half his size. Svelte yet strong, she embraced Stu’s idiosyncrasies. She didn’t mind that he had to touch every rock three times or that his darting eyes couldn’t maintain eye contact or his brazen uncensored questions.

“Are you a witch, Isis?” Stu asked immediately after they exchanged names.

Isis teased Stu with her eyes and smiled.

“You mean like the Wicked Witch of the West or the witch who eats kids in *Hansel and Gretel*? Do I fly around on a broomstick when I’m not sweeping the floor?”

“Brooms are no good for cleaning carpets. That’s what Clara, my mom’s friend who looks after me, says,” Stu stammered an odd reply. Isis stifled a laugh and gently lifted Stu’s chin so he would look at her face.

“You’re safe with me, Stu. We’re already friends. And, yes, I am a witch but it’s a myth that witches are evil, a lie conjured up by people who don’t understand those who are different...”

Stu nodded in silent communion, now mesmerized by Isis’ eyes and mellifluous voice.

“...I believe in harnessing nature for good and letting the higher spirit work through me so that I can help people. Along with my children...”

“Children?” Stu surveyed the room for telltale signs like photos or crayon drawings like those in Jackie’s office. Isis divined his thoughts.

“The rocks.”

“Do you want real children?” Stu let a loaded question explode in the witch’s face. She winced but didn’t melt away.

“If Spirit wills it, yes, my partner and I would like children someday, Stu. But, if not, well...” Isis waved her hands embracing the rocks in her energy field. I have my children here to keep me company and guide my newfound friends.”

So far, the stones had only guided Stu to trouble like an elephant lumbering over to a poisoned watering hole. The ridicule heaped on him by Eric paled in comparison to the abuse he took from Clara, the elderly Polish lady with a heart of tin who promised Stu's mother on her deathbed she'd keep an eye peeled on her son. Turned out to be a disapproving eye.

"That witch cast a spell on you...pooh!" Clara blessed herself with an invisible cross then spit on the floor near where Stu lay on his back with various flat stones strategically positioned on his groin, stomach, chest and forehead.

"I'm aligning my chakras," Stu said simply.

"Your mother's rolling over in her grave," Clara wheezed and wagged her grey mane. "You have rocks in your head, you big oaf. You've led a sheltered, selfish life. I can say that now that she's gone."

Stu ignored the jibes and let his rheumy eyes seek the heavens...

Staring up at the ceiling of the Hollywood and Vine subway station, audibly counting the hundreds of movie film reels pinned up there while bobbing obliviously through a crowd on the platform, Stu felt a tug on his revelry.

"Hey, Rich Man! Gimme some change so I can pay my fare!" an aggressive panhandler grabbed Stu's worn belt and got dragged a few feet before Stu acknowledged the extra load.

"You deaf, Man?! I said gimme a fuggin' quarter," a middle aged Black man sporting a Lakers cap and a three-day-old beard jerked Stu's loose belt.

Stu preferred avoiding a confrontation, however, his ability to outmaneuver even a drunk was limited even in the best of circumstances and lugging the rocks around didn't add alacrity to his thick steps. He fished in his one intact pocket for a coin but caught only rocks that made a suicide rush for the tracks. Stu smothered them with his girth. The beggar gave him space then, wary of the security cameras, helped Stu retrieve his charges.

"You some kinda rock hound?" the man handed Stu a sample of hematite, a smooth metallic silver-grey iron ore stone. "This one looks like a silver bullet, only rounder and fatter."

"It's called hematite," Stu handed it back to him. "The ancient Egyptians used hematite to calm hysteria," Stu regurgitated Isis' words by rote. "Go ahead, rub it between your fingers."

Intrigued, the bum rubbed the stone then pivoted on his heel and pretended to chuck it at the tunnel wall. He opened his palm and inspected the hematite.

"What you call this?"

"Hematite."

The leathery hand closed again and embraced the stone. The bum let out a sigh that jogged behind a retreating train before giving up.

“When I was a kid, I had an uncle once gave me a piece of cardboard that had all these precious stones glued to it. Really tiny shit, I’m sure wasn’t worth squat, but I felt like I owned the world,” the panhandler mused and steered his open palm and the stone back to Stu.

“Hematite’s not a gem stone. They use it to make steel,” Stu gently closed the panhandler’s hand. “Keep it. It’s worth more than a quarter.”

The man’s eyes brightened.

“I’d rather have a quarter.” The stranger watched for a reaction from Stu. Nothing. “Naw, I like the rock, whatever you call it,” the panhandler flashed a broken smile.

“Hematite.” Stu shrugged and turned toward the escalator.

“Thank you, Man. I enjoyed talking to you. People don’t usually spend the time.”

Stu mustered a smile.

“I enjoyed talking to you, too.”

He probably couldn’t quantify it, but Stu felt measurably lighter as he surfaced on the street and made his way to his spare apartment only to encounter another interruption.

“Weirdo! Buffalo Butt! You stink and so does your mother! No one likes you, so why doncha move?!”

Stu felt peppered with insults dredged from his boyhood but the attacks weren’t directed at him. He peered around the corner and four young bullies scattered leaving a chubby kid sobbing over his broken skateboard.



“Are you hurt, Kid?” Stu offered a weak hand but the kid hefted himself to his feet.

“I ain’t crying,” he smudged his face. But Stu was crying...inside.

“I know.”

“I didn’t cry either when they picked on me, but you’re better off than me because I got something that will help protect you.”

Stu rummaged in his pocket and produced a gnarly piece of turquoise.

“Did that rock fall off your ring, Mister?” the boy curiously inspected the turquoise. “My mom bought a turquoise ring in a Native American goods store only the guy who sold it to her was Korean. My mom didn’t care. She thinks turquoise is cool.”

“Everyone likes how turquoise looks,” Stu stated matter-of-factly, but I carry a piece for protection. Native Americans believe turquoise is sacred; it blesses and protects those who have it on them. Maybe you can drill a hole in it and put it on a string around your neck or carry it in your pocket like I do”

The boy nodded somberly and tried to hand the blue stone back to Stu but he backed away.

“It’s yours,” Stu remarked laconically.

“But don’t you need protection, Mister?”

Stu reflected about how the turquoise hadn't shielded him from Eric's mischief or prevented him from snapping the quad muscles in both legs running for the bus but then again he hadn't been harassed by bullies for decades.

"You need it more, Kid."

The boy let a tear slip then tried to wrap his short arms around Stu's ample waist. A frisson of surprise jolted Stu. He dropped a calm hand on the boy's shoulder and sensed his own feet rise slightly. It felt good to help people, he thought to himself. It felt good to feel human....

"Ask me how I'm doing about two minutes to 8 tonight when they announce the winner of the Super Lotto jackpot," Liz the waitress winked as she slid the usual meal – diet Coke with two and a half squirts of chocolate from the shake machine, macaroni and cheese and two slices of garlic bread and ranch dressing on the side -- in front of Stu's lone place at the counter.

Stu forced a smile. He knew statistically Liz had a better chance of being hit twice by lightning than winning the jackpot.

"This may be the last meal I serve you, Stu. I'll be out of here so fast you'll think a balloon popped," Liz popped her brown cheeks. "It's my time; I'm due."

Stu furrowed his sweaty brow and reflected on Liz' prospects.

“I wish you luck and more.” Stu dipped in his pocket for a walnut sized piece of golden colored quartz and laid it in Liz’ palm.

“Citrine, the lucky merchant’s stone. It’ll attract wealth provided you guard against being greedy.”

Liz fondled the stone and looked askance at her customer.

“You’re not going to stiff me on my tip?”

Stu blushed crimson and shook his head.

“No, it’s a gift. Might not work tonight but it’ll draw luck...just hold it in your hand for 20 minutes twice a day and think to yourself...I’m a lucky person just for being on this earth...that’s what Isis says to do....”

“Isis,” the waitress teased the syllables with her tongue. “That’s a cool name.”

“She’s a witch.”

Liz jerked her face as if slapped and dumped the rock on the counter where it bounced into Stu’s macaroni. He plucked it out and carefully cleaned it with his shirt much to Liz’ chagrin.

“Isis is a good witch. She owns the Mystic Rock Shop on Cleary Street. Isis is friendly to me...” Stu averted Liz’ eyes and mumbled. “...like you.”

Liz bit her lip and motioned for the rock. It lit up her dark eyes.

“Don’t tell me I been serving a wizard these past two years? I never would have suspected...”

The jovial waitress’ humor whizzed over Stu’s head like the jet stream.

“I’m not a wizard. I just like rocks. Actually, I’m not even sure I like them that much. But I like Isis. This I know for certain.”

Liz leaned closer.

“Is she your girlfriend?”

Stu sighed and fingered his blue lace agate. On his mind’s slate, he almost jotted down his wish, the wish Isis assured him had been invested in this special blue stone.

“Make it count for something you sincerely desire, and Spirit will deliver,” Isis doubly blessed her stone child as she cradled the blue lace agate in Stu’s palm, wrapping his flesh in her sensuous hand. Stu savored the delicious memory for a moment then sighed.

“She’s attached...no kids...but I think she’d like some....she has a cat, Mark Antony, but he’s always sleeping so Isis talks to rocks all day. She used to talk to this one...the citrine...Isis says it’s lucky.”

Liz slipped the rock into her blue uniform dress pocket and grinned.

“Guess it brought her luck by drawing you into her store.”

“Again and again,” Stu mused. Liz tenderly patted Stu’s arm.

“Tell you what, Stu...I win the lotto...I’ll buy you the rock store...and I’ll have someone serve you macaroni and cheese there everyday...no charge...”

“Okay,” Stu said dully.

Liz smiled and floated away. Stu watched her for a moment feeling a bit light-headed himself...

“I’m glad your mother is dead,” Clara drew a cross on her chest. “She should never see this...”

Wheezing from another bout of asthma, Clara had just stumbled unannounced into Stu’s studio apartment and discovered him decked out only in his boxer shorts spinning his arms and humming like a human turbine. In his right hand he clutched black kyanite, the “earth stone,” and in his left hand, a piece of Chinese writing stone, a limestone matrix with andalusite crystals.

“I’m trying to achieve balance,” Stu spoke defiantly. He let his flabby arms flap to his side as the steep swells in his stomach slowly subsided.

“Holy, Jesus,” Clara shook her head and shielded her eyes. “Put your pants on! You’re gross!”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” Stu’s mother often soothed him. “And don’t worry about not fitting in, my darling. Your brain is wired differently than others. Think of yourself as a foreign exchange student. You’re exotic,” she’d laugh but Stu never joined her. Stu never laughed. But this time the joke was on Clara, still struggling to catch her breath.

Stu fished in his shrinking pants pocket and caught a piece of amber, fossilized resin from an ancient forest. Clara’s eyes widened.

“Is that amber?”

“From the Baltic Sea region in your native Poland,” Stu handed her the yellow-brown stone, prized for jewelry. “For you, Clara. It can help cure your asthma. Hold it against your chest.” Stu awkwardly leaned toward the elderly matron’s ample bosom but abruptly pulled back when he detected arsenic in her eyes and plopped the stone in Clara’s apron pocket. Clara stifled another insult, retrieved the gift and suddenly smiled.

“This is the first gift you ever gave me, Stuart. You never even thanked me for looking after you.” Clara squinted to see flecks of petrified bugs frozen in the amber. “It would look nice in a necklace. Thank you.”

“You think my mother would be proud, Clara?” Stu, feeling grounded, threw Clara off balance.

Clara bit her tongue again.

“Maybe today, Stuart, though you are still freaky. And when are you are you going on a diet? You promised...”

One promise Stu faithfully kept the next day on the anniversary of his mother’s death. Rocks jiggling in his pockets, Stu girded himself for the greatest mitzvah the living could do for the departed, one they could never do for themselves, a good deed Jews perform at every funeral. He dipped in his pocket for a handful of orphan stones and laid them gingerly to partially cover his mother’s flat grave marker. Stu hovered above her name and her inscribed legacy -- Beloved Mother -- while absently rubbing the blue lace agate.

“If I could wish you back to life, Mom, I would, but I don’t think God permits it. Sorry.... Amen.”

Stu lingered for a few silent moments, swaying on the balls of his feet as a delicate cold breeze caressed his neck. He rummaged in his pockets to take mental inventory of his stones. Not many left. And a dozen more he left behind, scattering them on the graves of uncles and cousins and the neglected plot of a man who shared his surname. Could he have been the father Stu never knew? Stu shrugged and moseyed on foot to the bus stop outside the tired iron gates.

As he was wont to do after visiting his mother’s grave, Stu boarded a lumbering bus to the ocean boardwalk to indulge one of his mother’s favorite pastimes, lazing at the beach. Sitting across from a student stressing over his open geometry book, coring a half eaten pencil into his tattooed cheek, Stu produced an elestial “all seeing” smoky quartz stone and slid it across the scribbled page of the student’s textbook.

“Elestial changes confusion to clarity,” Stu intoned. The distracted student glanced up with bewilderment but Stu had already bounced off the bus.

Accompanying his frail mother on past excursions, Stu barely acknowledged the oddball characters cavorting on the boardwalk though his mother reveled in the antics of the chainsaw jugglers, contortionists, steel drum players, sculptors, masseuse, puppeteers, singers, barkers hawking everything from sunglasses to one’s name etched on a grain of rice. He preferred instead to count the endless waves slathering the shore.

Above all, Stu steered clear of the gypsy fortune tellers but today found himself drawn like a lodestone to one with a table laden with a large violet amethyst, jade and assorted crystals ringing a Tarot card deck. Another opportunity beckoned.

“Tell your fortune, Prince Charming? Only fifteen bucks,” the young gypsy in a tie-dyed skirt and matching bandana winked at Stu.

Stu settled his heavy frame on the folding chair across from the fortune teller and presented a jagged sliver of larimar, a rare form of pectolite found only in the Dominican Republic.

“This stone cost me fifty but I suspect it cut a hole in my pocket, so I’ll exchange it for my fortune,” Stu bartered with the gypsy. She inspected the stone with a discerning eye.

“It’s blue like the ocean. I sense it’s also sacred. Cost you fifty bucks, huh? Okay, gimme your hand and I’ll reveal your fortune.”

Stu abruptly hid his hand and struggled to his feet.

“I already know my fortune. I know what I have to do. But you can keep the larimar...”

Now only one rock remained in Stu’s pocket, the blue lace agate, the stone invested with a wish. Stu had never made a wish, not even when he blew out the candles on his birthday cake. He didn’t believe wishes came true, but he fervently wished this one would.....



“I have only one rock left, Isis. I gave all the others away to good homes. I want you to have this one.”

Stu deposited his prized blue lace agate on the counter. Isis gingerly picked it up and rubbed it between her thumb and index finger.

“You haven’t made a wish,” she divined.

“I’m ready to make it now,” Stu sighed, grateful that in the store only Mark Antony the cat bore fleeting witness until his 13th nap of the day summoned him. Isis stroked Stu’s hand.

“You don’t have to speak, Stu. S’okay.”

Stu blushed and slipped his hand into his empty pocket. He studied his scuffed shoes, mentally calculating their age and how many weeks of useful wear remained.

“I’ve been thinking that someday you’ll need help taking care of all your children in the store...”

Stu shrugged self-consciously then tore his eyes from the floor and lifted them to face Isis.

“I apologize in advance for being blunt. I can’t help it.”

Isis smiled.

“I know. It’s your nature.”

“I appreciate all your prayers that I be happy and fulfilled, Isis. And I wish the same for you, I really do.” Stu started stammering then composed himself. “I like this store. I tried to see myself here with you but it didn’t pencil out. I’m no good with rocks. It’s not just that I’m shy. I don’t know how to talk to them, hold them, harness their energy as you say....”

Stu paused for a beat. He almost wished he had a piece of hematite to calm himself and polish his words but he didn’t want to blow his wish so he just blurted out what he had to say.

“Isis, maybe if you had a baby he or she someday would know what to do here. You told me agate helps with fertility. Maybe with my wish, it’ll do the trick....”

Isis dabbed a tear that slid down her cheek and touched Stu’s forehead while pocketing the special blue lace agate. Embarrassed, Stu peered around the store and, instinctively, started to count Isis’ stone children until his vision snagged on a crystal shard. He jerked his watery gaze away and pulled a tiny rainbow from its essence that grew until it engulfed Isis and him and filled Stu with unutterable joy and contentment so much so that Stu laughed. For the first time. And at that moment he could’ve sworn that he heard excited chatter emanate from some of the ordinary rocks in the window case and saw at least one or two of them move if only a fraction. How extraordinary.

**THE END**

