

RELEASING THE ROCK

The rock had always bothered me because it was stolen. Whenever I mentioned it, Tom would laugh, emphatic it wasn't.

'It's just a rock, you daft woman. Plenty to spare.'

He took the rock from its home, where it had lived with other rocks since forever. Year in year out, silent and steady, washed and polished by the weather.

The rock came from the bank of a burn leading off a tributary of the Ayr. I liked to imagine it was a chunk off one of the rocking stones. Crashed and tumbled onto the bank after some fearsome storm. Silver-grey, marbled by a few pale sinewy veins, with smooth, rounded edges on one side and two weather-honed peaks on the other. When the sun scorched down on that stone surface, it lit up like a blue flame, despite its cold heart. It was the size of my biggest Le Creuset cooking pot. I'd discovered the burn having meandered into one of those lost domains of Scottish wild land. Where unruly grasses meet tumbledown hedgerows and ancient trees preside, while burns rush on by. I was looking for a place with no dogs for Mac to terrorise. Like the flick of a switch, he'd pounce, pinning down his opponent with a low, grimacing growl. I'd prise him off with profuse apologies to the other dog's owner. After someone threatened to report me for having a mad dog, I began looking for remote places.

A week after he'd been fired, Tom insisted on coming with me. I couldn't very well say no. Even if that burn had become my alone space, my thinking place with Mac and the less boisterous Corky. My shy, goofy, blonde retriever who'd woof at Mac, the border collie, chasing other dogs. Egging him on from beside my wellies. That was the day we came home with the rock. Tom had shoogled it out of its earthy bowl then dragged it over to the car.

'Just what we need beside the fishpond,' he said.

Except we didn't. The fishpond was stacked with rocks we'd bought from Sinclair Stones years ago. When I protested it was wrong to disrupt nature's equilibrium, he snapped at me. Told me environmental malarkey was the over-reaction of a bunch of lefties and women without much to do all day.

Tom never held me back from painting and writing. Although it suited him to have me occupied as it meant he didn't have to talk to me. Not that he could have stopped me doing my painting and writing. Or could he? I know of women who say of men, 'he stopped me from doing this or that'. Control, that's what Tom lost the day he was fired. Control. His rock was in the office. Not at home with me and the dogs, the children. Unlike me, he hadn't noticed we'd become strangers even if, despite our indifferences, we were still bound together. No longer rocks, we'd become boulders around each other's necks. I did feel sorry for him losing his job as he was only fifty-six. I know it was a shock. Instead of getting a partnership at the large firm of accountants he'd worked for in Glasgow (I won't name them), they fired him and two others. Gave them decent payoffs but Tom had worked hard for them for thirty years. To me, a banking crisis is not a good enough reason to fire your

best top line. Of the other two, one celebrated by leaving his wife and her younger lover, to move in his with his boyfriend. I think he got custody of the cats. The other one upped sticks with his wife and moved to New Zealand, to join their only daughter and grandchildren. They made positive life-changing decisions. Not Tom.

Tom became a very angry man, but not a violent one. Tom wasn't like that. He was a disappointed man who didn't have the pragmatism to reinvent himself post-firing. He took it all so personally. Just couldn't take the punch on the chin and roll with it. In the end it killed him. Disappointment steeped in alcohol became his terminal illness.

Two years later, I was looking out of the kitchen window, thinking, had he dropped something in the compost? His face seemed so close. Until it dawned on me he wasn't moving. Mac, Corky and I raced down the garden but I knew. You do, don't you? No one sticks their face in the compost for a sniff. We skidded to a halt and just stood there, staring at him all slumped. I heaved him over on his back, climbing into the compost in my purple moccasins that Tom hated.

'Purple, for God's sake. Act your age.'

I'd left the room that day, ignoring him shouting to 'come back here'. He never followed me. Sozzled at eleven in the morning, he'd be comatose in the armchair by early afternoon. I'd go up to the attic and write my novel or paint postcards. On Thursday afternoons I helped at the disabled adults daycentre, taking the dogs. Mac and Corky were very popular. Of course, the dog-wrestler was always charm personified. Corky would position himself in the kitchen waiting for the tea break. At the rustling sound of biscuits being opened, his ears stood to attention, like triangles of Mackay's shortbread.

Tom's face was decorated with blobs of brown like kisses on a chocolate cake. Having hauled him out of the muck, I went back indoors to dial nine-nine-nine. After they'd taken him away, I called each of the children to tell them their father had died. It was just after I'd turned Tom over, that I glanced up and my eyes fell upon the rock – across the other side of the garden, wedged into the rockery around the fishpond. Corky got all the fish so we decided not to buy anymore. From time to time I'd hoick out a drowned mouse. Two years that rock had been there. From the day Tom had insisted accompanying me to the burn with the dogs. The only time. Never came with me again. Post-firing he'd become even more of an alien and nothing as likeable as ET either. As I looked over at the rock I decided. You are going home and, to my shame, I wanted to laugh with joy.

Two weeks later, I lugged and rolled that rock through the back gate to the open car boot. Huffed, and puffed, straining on every muscle south of my neck. At the count of three, I heaved it into the boot. The dogs jumped in next to it, surprised to find themselves sharing their car space with a lifeless rock. Even if it did smell familiar. At the burn I backed the car up as far as I could and let Mac and Corky out. With another huff, puff and a heave-ho, I bounced the rock out of the car letting it land with a thud on the ground. I noticed it took with it a few flakes of red car paint. Made me smile. Tom would have gone crackers. At last I'd brought the rock home. I was giving it back to the burn and, as I shoved and shoogled it in between two others, I wondered for a moment. Was that burn gurgling, thank you?

One year on and it's spring again. Mac's gone too. Hared off to the endless field in the sky. My lovable rogue, Mac, the border collie cross. Crossed with what though? I often wondered but it must have been something very, very fast. Mac was like a whippet with an outboard motor. Broke my heart that did, losing him. I sobbed for days. Couldn't work out how I was going to ever feel safe again without my boy Mac. Collecting his ashes from the pet crematorium two weeks later, with Corky spread like a lord across the boot, I remembered I still hadn't collected Tom's. Despite several reminders on voicemail.

Returning the rock the previous spring had been a letting go that gave me my release. My personal spring of liberation, renewal and hope. Now I can admit to what I don't miss and reflect on what I do. Push away the little stabs of guilt. Remember summer holidays in France when the children were small. Smile about mad Mac. Corky and I went to the burn yesterday and I stood on the bank about a metre away from the rock. I swear that rock looked content. Back home, nestled amongst its rock family, in its wet, earthy bowl. Silver-grey and marbled sinews now peppered with moss. Saffron daffodils waved to the rock's serenity as I turned my face up to the watery sun. Before we left I scattered Mac's ashes on the bank and the breeze sprinkled a few onto the chuntering burn. Corky cocked his leg against the rock like a farewell salute.