

Pebble

I wanted a rock in my front yard. A large, monolithic hunk of earth. A boulder to make my neighbors believe my lifestyle, as expressed by the look of my residence, reflected a sense of spirituality. I wanted to believe as well.

I had never concerned myself with the universe, its energy, or my connection to it before. It was only in the months after my 76th birthday, three years after Martha died, that I began to feel curious, or at least feel that I should be more curious and had missed out on something by not being so all these years. It felt like nap time was coming to an end and I had not yet started to dream. I had barely even closed my eyes.

I am not sure why I needed my neighbors to know my spiritual quest had begun, but I did. It was like I was announcing myself to the world, starting with my neighborhood. I was making a declaration, something about the importance of searching for the meaning of life before you die.

I watched a lot of television then, even though the screen had gotten blurry on me. I used to watch shows about American history: the wars, politics, and popular culture that made up my life and the life of my parents. But recently most of the shows on my station were about aliens or the second coming, and I had started complaining about it so my son, David, began to drop off DVDs he ordered online for me to watch. Each weekend he would come by to pick them up and leave me with a stack of new ones, along with groceries for the week. Part of me wished he had a grandchild to bring with him, but mostly because that's what Martha would have wanted to see. Another part of me was glad that Martha wasn't missing anything.

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Once he brought over a documentary about the ancient pagan monuments of the British Isles. Most of the footage was taken from above, out the side of a helicopter or airplane. Huge grassy mounds and circles of stone pillars, heavy fragments of earth moved to faraway places to sit alone in the fog. The experts on the documentary didn't seem to know very much. Everything was conjecture. Theories about how the monuments were built, who built them, what was their original purpose, what had they been used for after people forgot why they were originally built. The rocks and piles of dirt were as mysterious as life itself.

I decided to erect a monument of my own, in the front yard. The plan had a number of things going for it. I hoped I would learn something from the experience, something about what those ancient people were looking for. I also saw it as a chance to leave my mark on the neighborhood in a lasting way. I imagined the neighborhood children crawling on my monolith. I imagined people telling stories about it after I was gone and the house had resold. I imagined the boulder glowing under the streetlight on a summer night, a young couple walking by maybe, feeling quiet inspiration. Plus I could think of no better way to announce to the world my new interest in life; the new me.

I sat David down when he came to visit. He doesn't usually spend too much time sitting down. I asked him to walk out into the woods with me and bring back a big rock for the house. He told me it was the last thing I, or the property, needed.

It turns out it is difficult to just go out and get a rock at my age, even if I still drove a car and I hadn't driven since a year before Martha died, on account of my glaucoma. The rock needs to be ordered from a landscaping company who then comes in a truck to place it in the yard. The rocks are also much more expensive than I realized. It

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was hard to gauge their size from the photographs in the catalog. I suspected they were too small. I considered buying a number of them, and stacking them, but I didn't. The deal felt wrong, inauthentic. There was something about buying my monolith with a credit card, then having it delivered by one of the same companies that brought my neighbors their boxwoods and rhododendrons that did not feel earnestly spiritual to me. I would procure the monument myself.

Obtaining a piece of the earth by hand would be difficult. I called my only friend, Buzz, the only other person who still drove over to visit me. We had been on a duckpin bowling team together when we were both still working and our families lived at home. Buzz was a couple years older than me, but he could still walk pretty well even though he used a cane. He had been a big man when he was young and would have been valuable on a project like this. He and his granddaughter - whose name I forget - came over to visit me on the morning of my birthday. I had forgotten my birthday, but Buzz was a good enough friend to remind me. Later, my son came over and we had a cocktail.

I called Buzz at the retirement village where he lives. I told him it was important. He said he would come over without even asking what I was talking about. Buzz was always that kind of friend, but I suspect he also needed to get out of his room.

Buzz pulled his Lincoln into my driveway. There was a piece of red licorice hanging from his lip, like a worm hanging from a beak. He had a tic that made it look like he was winking at things. I went outside to meet him.

I had only once visited Buzz's retirement village, with Martha and David, about ten years earlier. The village was an enormous place, like a university, complete with dormitories, libraries, cafeterias, gift shops, gyms, game rooms, and a hospital wing. As

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we pulled up in the parking lot, I saw a group of women in scooters reading magazines next to each other in the sun. Several men were standing across the way, launching a remote control sailboat into a small pond. There was a group of bored children milling about one of the entrances, kicking flowers. I felt special watching this scene, like someone carrying a deep secret. We were looking for a room ourselves then, but Martha and I decided against it. The yard was important to Martha, as was being part of a neighborhood, even if it was only a quiet part. Whatever was important to Martha was also important to me.

“I packed for the weekend,” Buzz said, like he was making a vital declaration. “So, what is this final adventure?” he asked as I helped him into the house. “Wildness, I hope. We’ve got to kill ourselves somehow before it’s time to meet God, right?”

Increasingly I found us making jokes about God as we got old, or at least talking about Him in our own quiet way. I wondered how many times in my life I had thought about God without realizing it.

I went into more detail about the idea of the monument. I even fixed us each a scotch and showed him the DVD, which I had held onto without telling my son. I’m not sure how much it mattered to him though. He took no convincing at all. I could have asked him to help build a rocket to Jupiter and he would have been interested in lending a hand.

It was getting later in the day and the sun was growing heavy. We agreed it would be best to get started early in the morning. Until then, the best course of action would be to have another drink and listen to old records. “I don’t know if my bones need to rest,” he said. “But it feels like my muscles could use a coma.”

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We went in the kitchen and I made drinks. After a while, I just sat the bottle on the table between us. The light outside the windows grew dim and then the lights inside my kitchen seemed to dim too, although I don't remember turning the switch, until we sat in a warm orange glow, listening to pops and scratches sizzle against the sound of Cole Porter on the record player.

“Do you believe in an afterlife?” I asked at one point.

“Yep,” Buzz said. He was sucking on a candy that he took out and placed on a tissue each time he took a sip of his scotch. “We're living it and we don't even notice.”

“I guess when we notice is when we get stuck with the task of trying and failing to make the most of it,” I said. I watched a bit of light on the top of my glass dance like it was a candle.

“The afterlife is short,” he said.

“Shorter than the life maybe,” I agreed and we touched glasses.

It felt late when I helped Buzz back into the living room and pulled out the sofa bed for him. He had fallen asleep at the table. It seemed that I had fallen asleep at some point too.

The next morning, we woke up feeling poisoned. I came downstairs and sat on the edge of the fold-out sofa, next to Buzz's feet. We both yawned for a while and watched shadows flicker on the ceiling. We spent a lot of time in the bathroom. Eventually, I heated up toaster pastries and we had them with our juice. Buzz gave me one of his pain pills. I wasn't sure if it was a good idea to take it, but my head throbbed; it felt like someone was inflating a balloon just inside my face and it was pressing my brain against

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my skull. “The proper medicines are critical on an expedition such as this,” Buzz assured me. He shook the pill bottle in his hand like a maraca.

The truth is we only had to go a couple of blocks. They were not even blocks, in the traditional sense, because there were no cross streets. I lived just up the road from the back entrance to Lake Roland and the woods surrounding it, inside Robert E. Lee Park, on the northern edge of the city. The lane that led down to the park was mostly very large houses up hilled driveways or behind gates; my house was across the Lake Avenue, at the top of the lane, one of the smallest in the area. The car was only for carrying our monolith. We could have easily walked to the park. At least it always used to be easy. I hadn't been in a long time.

We packed the back seat of the Lincoln with supplies. We packed work gloves, a rope, bungee cords, two shovels, a dolly, and an open-sided canvas bag used for transporting firewood, which I thought might end up coming in handy. We also brought a canteen full of water. It was hard enough getting the dolly upstairs from the basement, I didn't know how we were going to move a boulder out of the woods on top of it, but neither of us said anything. We wrangled the dolly out into the trunk with purpose.

Buzz drove the three blocks slowly. Driving was more of an effort than he would have liked to admit. We parked the car at the bottom of the street, on the side of the road near the trailhead. There was a scratched up sign that said, “NO PARKING.” The letters came off blurry to my eyes, like red cracks in a smear of white paint.

“That wasn't here the last time I was,” I said.

“Then we shan't abide,” said Buzz. “Grandfather clause.”

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We got our stuff out of the car and laid it on the ground. Buzz had trouble exiting the car by himself. I worried whether he would be okay to even make it down the trail to search for a rock in the first place. I wanted my monolith though. And he seemed willing to struggle for it. Besides, Buzz looked all right. He was a trooper. He would tell you.

It was a Thursday morning and the trail into the back of the park was empty except for squirrels. I figured there were probably some folks at the dog park, but that was on the far side of the lake and we weren't planning to walk down toward the parking area and the bridge that crosses over the dam. We were headed in the other direction, along a circuit of small dirt trails; vaguely toward a small cave David once showed me when he was a boy. I suggested we bring shovels, gloves and rope but leave the dolly in the car while we scouted out an excavation site. Then we would come back for it.

Buzz took a slight lead at first. We were practically next each other, with me just a little behind on the left. I could have reached out and touched his shoulder. A few times I almost did. Hiking like that made it easier on my eyes to follow the path and also placed me in a good position to reach to forward and catch Buzz if his legs gave out. We were positioned to best help each other. Neither of us mentioned these things of course. We just moved into the green shadow of the trees that way, without saying anything. By the time we got off the main trail and onto a smaller one, which was only about eighty yards in, Buzz was already talking about death.

“All I am saying is how do I know if being dead is a something I should think of as negative, if I won't even be alive to experience it? Death could be great.” The cool light of the woods played tricks on me. The shadows made Buzz's bald head look wreathed in laurel. He went on. “For me, I mean. I assume it will be difficult for the

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grandkids. But of course I love them and I don't want that so I guess it will be bad for me in a way too, awful really, except I will be dead so, again, I won't know the difference..."

"It's complicated," I said. "Death is a mess." I thought Martha would have agreed.

In the woods around us were slabs of grey rock the size of cars and trucks, jutting from the dead leaves on the ground like bones through skin. We passed by them quietly without stopping. In my mind I was still trying to separate what was a piece of the earth, something that could be removed, from what was the earth itself. Beyond that, I was looking for a rock that conveyed something special to me and might also be special to my neighbors. I thought I would know it when I saw it.

The pill Buzz had given me made my stomach feel woozy and my skin itch. It was like I was being tickled with horsehair. I asked Buzz about it but he said he was used to the feeling and didn't notice it anymore. "I'm used to most things these days," he said. "Numb. Like a snowflake falling among snowflakes."

I was getting very thirsty. We paused so I could drink from the canteen. When Buzz handed it to me, it was already half empty. I shook it and gave him a look.

"What?" he said. "We dehydrated ourselves in a hard way last night. I was thirsty. And it felt so cold in my hand," he said. "I didn't want to let that chill go to waste."

I shrugged and took a long sip of water. Maybe he's right, I thought. What good is cold water if we don't drink it? I left some in the bottom of the canteen, but not much.

The cave was slightly off the trail, about ten yards down toward the water over roots and low brush. I was feeling pretty lightheaded.

Buzz had considerable trouble getting down to the cave. I just kind of floated.

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The cave was just a small hole in the earth, a pocket, only a couple yards deep and low so you had bend over to get inside. You could see the back of the cave from the entrance. It was like a walk-in closet.

Recently the city granted the park to the county as part of a long-term lease and in addition to building the dog park on the other side of the lake, the county had made a number of other improvements to the park. It had all been in the papers. One of the improvements was a general clean up and apparently that included the cave. The place was spotless. The graffiti had even been removed or faded and smeared into a blur of color on the rock. The floor was covered in leaves, not filters. Buzz sat down on a rock outside and made noises like a bear. He was out of breath.

David had taken me there once, years ago, a few years after Martha had first gotten sick. The area around the cave was filthy then. Full of empty bottles and wrappers and cans. Tiny bones and packets of hot sauce. Cigarette butts like pine needles.

David said he used to sneak down there with his buddies as a teenager to drink beers and smoke, pass around booze he had stolen from our liquor cabinet, which was always pretty well-stocked back in those days. Martha had been a tippler. As had I. David's smile looked so natural when he showed me the cave, provoked by nostalgia, like he had enjoyed being young. I never forgot about it. I liked to imagine our son as a happy kid.

The new cleanliness broke my heart. I think I was feeling overly emotional. The effects of last night had not quite worn off yet and Buzz's pain medication was getting to me. I guess I wanted to hope that maybe some of the trash was still David's from back then, when he was a teenager and Martha was alive and none of us were lonely, even if

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we didn't know all the time. I imagined empty bottles Martha and I had purchased together, possibly for a special occasion. None of it was there anymore. All the trash was gone.

“Nice hole,” Buzz said when his breathing slowed. “This could be your monument right here. Might be hard to get it back to the house though.”

I peered into the cave to get a better look. I hadn't gone inside when I was with David, on account of all the garbage. I stood politely near the water and listened to his stories.

My eyes landed on the slab right away. The sunlight was hitting the wall directly and the piece of rock sat in a halo of glowing light that danced with dust particles like fairies. It was a long thin deposit of mineral about the length of a man that had cracked away from the wall of the cave. I imagined we could pry it off with our shovels. I could picture it standing in front of my house like a knife blade emerging from the lawn. I would smooth down the edges so the neighborhood children could climb it. I would watch the light hit it in the late afternoon and cast long shadows across my little plot of land.

Buzz poked his head inside the cave and nodded a few times, like he was making calculations. I knew he wasn't. “A cinch,” he said and we started back to get the dolly.

The hill back up to the trail was difficult, but we made it.

We walked back to the car using the same formation as before. I thought about Martha. I wondered if she would be proud of me but I knew she would think I was ridiculous, out here digging up stone. Still, that comforted me. I would have liked to make her laugh.

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We never got the dolly. Buzz had trouble breathing halfway back to the car and finally collapsed in front of the NO PARKING sign. As I watched him fall, I thought I could feel death on my skin, fluttering about us like black moths.

I tried to give him water, but the canteen was close to empty. I knelt and put my hands under his armpits and lifted him up, so he was sitting down in front me. I was whispering something in his ear but I don't know what.

He told me he was still alive.

He wanted to go to the hospital. He was already trying to stand up and get in the passenger side door.

I tried to call the ambulance but he told me to drive. He said we would get there faster.

"If I don't crash into a house first," I said.

"We'll risk it," Buzz said. "Damn your eyes."

The road came at me quickly. It was like a big grey wall that filled my vision. The red lights were like eyes. I drove right under them. I kept wiping the windshield like it was fogged up even though it wasn't. The sound of car horns bounced right off us.

Buzz was calmer than me. He was still breathing heavy but he had enough sense to roll down his window and push his head out a little bit. "Wild adventure," he said when we were getting close. I could tell he wanted me to think he meant it, even if it was joke. "We'll have to go back for that rock."

The emergency room at GMBC is up a very steep hill. I drove fast up it. I could feel my tires gripping the road. I would have normally taken him to St. Joe's because

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Buzz is Catholic and the hospitals are equidistant from the park, but there are more turns and stoplights on the way to St. Joe's. GBMC felt within my reach.

I bumped into the curb and jumped from the car screaming. Several people in hospital pajamas came out and carefully took Buzz from the car to a stretcher where they placed a clear mask over his face. Then we were in the lobby. Somebody put me in a wheelchair but I got out and sat in a normal seat.

David met me at the hospital. We had coffee in the cafeteria, while we were waiting to visit Buzz. A nurse had already told us he was only exhausted. She scolded me for taking him out into the woods, but she did it in a patronizing way. Then she looked at my son as if to say, "You keep an eye on him." David smiled and nodded.

While we drank coffee, David spoke to a woman and her daughter who were sitting nearby. I created little whirlpools in my coffee with a straw. The woman and her daughter were visiting her mother, who was upstairs dying. She didn't say her mother was dying but it was obvious. We are all dying but you can usually tell when someone is dying fast. A hospital cafeteria is like an airport bar, I thought, only we are all going to the same place.

When we got to his room, Buzz already had a balloon tied to his bed. He said it was from one of the nurses. He tried to wink at us but it came out all wrong. Instead he just sort of scrunched up his face. David told Buzz he should consider not driving anymore.

"I think I am going to quit hiking first," Buzz said.

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At home, David followed me into the bedroom and looked for a DVD to put on. The one about the pagan monuments of the British Isles was already in the player. He turned that on. He kissed me on the forehead and sat in the chair by the bed. I fell asleep flying over empty green moorland spotted with towering rocks and bulbous mounds that popped up like goose eggs on a child's forehead.

The next morning, he came back with a hollow plastic rock. He was smiling, like he was very proud of himself for buying it, so I smiled back. The rock was about knee high and flat on top. It looked like decoration for a miniature golf course. There was nothing at all spiritual about it. In fact, it was embarrassing. It looked like the kind of decoration a silly old man might have in his yard, but I told David it was perfect and watched out the window as he installed it near where the driveway met the road. I thanked him several times afterwards as we stood back and looked at his work. I am not sure how much any of it meant to him, but it meant a lot to me. I didn't like the lawn ornament, but I enjoyed watching him put it into the earth for his father.

When David left that afternoon, I went outside to visit my boulder. The sun was already growing low in the sky. There were children playing in the yard next door. I stood out by the street and looked at it. It was hard to even notice. Nothing about it looked real. It looked like something someone had used to cover up a utility box or sprinkler plug. Still, I felt like my spiritual quest had begun. I went back inside and got a piece of paper and a thick roll of packing tape.

I wrote a note and taped it to the front of the grey plastic object. I wrapped the tape around the rock many times to protect the note from rain. It looked a bit like a cocoon in my yard at the end.

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“MEANT TO BE VIEWED AS A VERY LARGE ROCK,” the note said, under the bubbles and folds of clear tape that held it in place.

And from then on, I think it was.