

A Heart Shaped Rock

“Is it dry, or is it moist?” I asked her; “use your finger.”

“It’s moist,” Chelsea declared, digit black with dirt, sure of herself, even at five.

She’d had to become independent, fast. She and her mother were sleeping in their car when I offered an unused upstairs and separate bath. They’d been recommended by friends as deserving, and frankly, I could use the money and companionship, too--someone to try my recipes on in my rural, sparsely populated, valley-with-stream community.

Although I was not attracted to Mom. She was young and pretty in her own way, with long black hair, and an athletic body, but I was quite busy in life, and thought, more than once: “Life is going so well, the only thing that can fuck things up, is a beautiful woman.”

I was told she’d been abused by some young, dead-beat dad but that didn’t surprise me: babys having babies is God’s plan.

And I’ve become convinced over the years we’ll *never learn* from our mistakes, even taking into account the study of *history*, because to grow up you have to rebel against all that is known for the sake of *your own* knowledge, and acknowledge the possibility only *you* can change the world (although long-past ‘grownup’ now, I can still remember that feeling).

“Then it doesn’t need water, and more plants are killed by too much, than not enough.”

(I said this with some guile, as I still lost plants over-watering, victims of an unconsciousness I usually attribute to being *too busy with more important* things.)

Chelsea seemed to like this, looking back at me *without* guile, as if I’d given her a gift, and it’d always be *our secret*. She was at an age she sopped up knowledge like a sponge.

We soon finished, after a foray into the garden to pluck fresh veges, and her mom returned, from a quick trip down to a much-appreciated local pantry, open 363 faithfully ‘till eight.

And I now went about my days socializing much of the time with two women, one not yet grown, a relationship I hope belied my own quite achey loneliness. And I’d long ago decided that if I ever had a child (although by then it was too late for me) I’d want a girl, because I couldn’t bear a boy turning out like me.

So, it was probably a bit like being a grandparent, I guess, because after all the goofing around with this spunky, petite, giggling, almost-past innocent, I got to give her back, and didn’t have to feed or care for her when she was sick, or answer her incessant questions, or deal with her piques, although I liked the feeling of being near her, as I felt younger, too.

I have memories of *another* little girl, a “grandchild” I no longer saw, falling asleep with her head on my leg sitting on a leather couch watching “Star Wars” for the ten thousandth’s time, and occasionally regretted not having my own children, even in these most-desperate times.

There were also moments when I thought she must love me, too, when she was angry at Mom, maybe missing Dad, and she would jump onto my lap in front of her; although I was careful to be demure, and gently place the wriggling miscreant next to me back on the couch, because her mother and I both know what men can do and have.

Soon before she left, I gave her a rock I had found, shaped exactly like a heart, digging in the garden.

I told her it was the most special thing I owned, and God made it so I could give it to her, so no matter if we became separated in the future, she would remember me.

Because she was also at an age when bestowing a simple stone, perfectly shaped by nature was insurmountable (and didn't cost me anything), and I remember she kept it on a night stand next to their bed. She took it with her, I'm sure, as it was gone when they left.

Since her Mom found a job and moved on, like I knew would happen, owing me money (which I knew would happen), I feel I'll never see her again, or know who she is if I do.

But her crayon self-portrait is still on my fridge, and will stay.

And the heart-shaped rock, no doubt long ago fallen and broken and swept up, will have deserted her by now, like rocks sometimes will.

Though I imagine walking into *her* living room will be to traverse *her* pantry, a green cavern, stout ferns and bright blooms caressing, as you pass by into her sunny, oxygen-rich, inner sanctum.

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