

Bring Me a Rock

Word Count 2800

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

The desert was vivid from the morning rain, everything in flower. The kind of day he lived for. Negotiating a gully, the hiker tripped and face-planted. Looking back he saw open, easy ground. As he retraced his steps, using his feet as minesweepers, he found the obstacle, and looked down. Nothing. He knelt to get closer.

The wind had picked up in the afternoon and had deposited a faint layer of fine dust. He put his hands on it. It felt like a rock. The thing was abrasive to the touch and was more or less spherical. He looked at the dust on his hands, then back at the stone. His handprints were hanging in the air.

He lifted the rock. It was much lighter than it looked. He dumped everything but water and threw the rock into his backpack.

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SUNDAY MORNING

He couldn't have had more than a couple of hours of sleep. He was up all night monitoring the rock. It was shrinking, now about the size of a baseball.

Checking his pill organizer in the bathroom cabinet he saw that all the right days were empty.

He tipped out today's handful of tablets and swallowed them with water from the faucet.

There was nobody he could call about the impossible stone. His doctor had explicitly told him to call "if anything happens." This was the kind of thing that got you hospitalized. Maybe he needed it. An episode? He hadn't had one in years. And never this weird.

You've got to call Dr. Robins.

I don't want to.

You have to.

He picked up his phone to find Dr. Robins in his contacts. He had to tap the buttons two or three times to get a reaction. The screen must have been greasy. He went to voicemail.

"Hey, Dr. Robins, sorry for calling at the weekend. We have an appointment next week, but I think I need help today. I think there's something wrong.

Ten minutes later the phone rang.

"So, what's going on?"

"I found a rock in the desert. It was strange."

"How so?"

"It's invisible."

"Where is the invisible rock now?"

"Here. It's shrinking."

“I’m gonna want you to come to the office.”

“Should I bring the rock?” Dr. Robins paused.

“Sure, bring the rock.”

“You going to lock me up, Dr. Robins?”

“I’m going to evaluate you and determine what’s best.”

“Sounds a lot like locking me up.”

“If you don’t get here in an hour, I’ll have you brought in. Now, have you taken anything that may affect your ability to drive?”

“No.”

“Have you thought about harming yourself?”

“No.”

“Have you thought about harming someone else?”

“No.”

“I’ll be there in an hour. Make sure you are.”

“I’m on my way.”

He put the rock in a sports bag and took it down to his car. It seemed even smaller. Less there.

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The buzzer sounded, and he let himself into the secure area. He found her office and knocked on the partially open door.

“Hey, come on in. Take a seat.” She indicated a sofa, then stepped out from behind her desk, sitting on a leather chair opposite him, with a tablet for notes. She clapped her hands together lightly to get started.

“So, tell me about this rock.”

“I don’t have to tell you. I have it in here.”

Dr. Robins watched carefully as he opened the bag, her hand on the panic button. He felt around in his bag for the rock. It had shrunk to the size of a nickel. He pulled it out of the bag, feeling it dissolve even as he held out his hand. The thing had completely disappeared. She stared at his open, empty hand.

“Do I have to ask the obvious?”

“It was in here. It’s been getting lighter and fainter all the time. It’s gone.”

“It’s gone? Let’s stay with this for a minute. Did you misplace it?”

“No, I had it, now it’s gone.”

“Just vanished.”

“Yes.”

She sighed. “You must have known how this would present, right?”

“Yes. But this time it’s different. No one’s out to get me. No voices in my head. I just found a rock. You did tell me to call if anything unusual happens. This strikes me as unusual.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. Because I think you’re having a break.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of what I was thinking. But I was lucid, That’s never happened before.”

“Have you been taking your meds? Tell me the truth.”

“Yes. Haven’t missed a dose in a year or more.”

“When you leave the office, what are you going to do?”

“Watch TV. Sleep.”

She tapped her screen with a stylus. “I’m gonna let you go home. On strict condition that you report to me here at 8am. If you don’t, you know I have to call the police.”

“Understood, Dr. Robins.”

###

SUNDAY NIGHT

The apartment door was sticky and needed a shoulder to persuade it. He closed the blinds and hit a switch. The hundred-inch movie screen whirled as it dropped from the ceiling. He took a wooden chair from the kitchen, perching the projector on the seat. It dropped in front of him. Grabbing a controller, he set up a first-person shooter. Bits of alien flew off as he changed weapons—clubbing, shooting, zapping, crushing, and ripping, hoping total sensory overload would stop him thinking about the rock. It didn't work.

Pausing the game, he went back to the fridge and got a soda. As he passed in front of the screen, something felt off. He moved back and forth in the beam. The shadow on the screen was fuzzy, and smaller than he was.

###

MONDAY MORNING

He hadn't slept at all. Taking a tape measure from the utility closet, he measured the visibility of his hands. Over the course of a few hours the fingers turned to nubs, like he'd run his hand through a buzz saw 20 years ago.

Looking in the mirror, he saw no definite edges. He was fuzzy, his silhouette petering out rather than stopping. His fingers had lost an inch. He tapped his table. They were still there. But he couldn't see them. When he looked up, he saw that his head wasn't just blurred, he was missing his ears. He felt them with invisible fingers. They were there, but gone.

Searching the closet he found a baseball cap and a pair of gloves. With the hat on and his chin down only his eyes were visible. He put sunglasses in his pocket just in case.

###

He got to the doctor's office just in time. The front desk had been instructed to buzz him straight through.

"What's with the get-up? Someone looking for you?"

"No. I'm not paranoid, Dr. Robins."

"Then why the Unabomber costume?"

"So people can't see me. Or can see me. I'm new to all this."

"So, an invisible rock, now the disguise? Tell me about the hat and gloves."

"I'm being erased."

She put down her tablet. "Put yourself in my position. What would you do right now?"

"I'd probably have me sedated and carted off in an ambulance."

"Doesn't have to be that dramatic. You're going to be okay."

"No, I'm not."

"I'd like to get you to the hospital. I want eyes on you for a couple of days."

"I won't be here in a couple of days."

"Yes, you will. We won't let anything happen to you."

“You can’t stop it.”

Dr. Robins went back behind her large hardwood desk and punched some numbers into her office phone.

“I’m just calling ahead, need to make sure there’s room.”

He heard a human voice pick up after the fifth ring.

“Good morning, Driskill Hospital?”

“Hi. This is Dr. Robins. I have a patient I’d like to place with you for evaluation.”

“Sure thing, Dr. Robins. What’s your healthcare provider code?”

“NR-88-76-A.”

“Please hold, I’ll check availability.”

He heard the hold muzak.

There was no choice. He took off his hat and gloves. Dr. Robins dropped the phone and took three fumbles to put it back in the cradle.

“Jesus Christ. What happened to...”

“I told you. The rock. Don’t get close to me. I don’t know if I’m contagious.”

She took the warning seriously.

“OK then, safety ground rules. You are not to touch anything that is alive. If possible, keep six feet of distance between you and other people.”

“I don’t believe I’ll be around many other people.”

“Then wherever possible, keep six feet from me.”

He didn’t take it personally.

“So. Where are the parts of you that have disappeared?”

“Nothing has disappeared yet. My ears, fingers—they’re still here. But the invisible parts feel funny.”

“How do you mean?”

“They’re almost numb. And they’re lighter.”

“In what way?”

“They don’t feel real. My head and hands feel like they’re fading to black. I can’t feel my feet, so I assume they’re the same.”

“What happens now?”

“I don’t know. If it’s anything like the rock, I’ll turn invisible, then start to not be here.”

“You’ll die?”

“I don’t know. But I won’t be here anymore.”

“You’ll become completely invisible?” Something flashed across Dr. Robins’ face.

“I assume so.”

“So, Are you thinking of harming yourself?”

“No.”

“Have you thought about harming anyone else?”

“No.” She looked up from the tablet.

“Would you like to?”

Outside there were normal sights and sounds. The light patter of rain on the windows.

Cars commuting or on school runs. Birds sang in the trees.

“Excuse me. Do I want to?”

“Yes. I’d like you to hurt someone. I’d like to erase them.”

“What? I mean... What?”

“You heard me.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because if you can’t help me, I might disappear too.”

He was confused, but it was hard to tell. His face had become blurry. Dr. Robins read him anyway.

“I was serious.”

“About whether I wanted to hurt anyone.”

“Would you?”

“Should I?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Who?”

“My husband.”

“He’s a bad guy?”

“More than you’d believe. If I ever leave, he says he’ll shoot the kids.”

“So, take the kids and go.”

“They’re ‘home schooled’ in the basement. They’ve been down there for over a year. I can hear them screaming for me. I’m on a short leash. If he didn’t need money I’d be locked up. He has a metal detector. He pats me down for weapons. He cooks all his own food. Locks me in a room to sleep.

She closed the cover of her tablet.

“So, would you like to hurt someone?”

###

MONDAY NIGHT

The plan was rushed, if it counted as a plan at all. The pair arrived around 300 feet from Dr. Robins’ house. He stayed in the back seat to keep some distance.

“You’re still partially visible. You need to hang back. Once you’ve faded enough, do your thing.”

He pulled back his hood, revealing his face. There wasn’t one. Dr. Robins drew back involuntarily.

“I’m sorry. It was a shock. You have no face.”

“Yeah, this must be a huge fucking shock for you. I recommend counseling.”

“How does it feel?”

“Like I’m becoming porous. If the trend continues, I just won’t be here anymore.”

“How are you going to get close enough?”

“Maybe I’m selling magazine subscriptions.”

“Which magazine? Disappearing Matter Monthly?”

“This isn’t the time to get snarky with your invisible partner-in-crime.”

Dr. Robins took a few deep breaths. “You’ll see me walk through the door. He’ll be waiting there, in the hallway. He’ll check me with his metal detector, then pat me down. I can’t bring in any medicines, or anything that might harm him. He won’t even allow me to use knives in the kitchen.”

“How do you eat?”

“I buy TV dinners online. He feeds himself and the kids using only ingredients he personally bought. He won’t take the slightest risk—won’t even share a coffee pot with me. He has a separate fridge with a lock.

“He’s that paranoid?”

“He’s not paranoid. I would kill him.”

“So once you go in and he’s checked you for weapons and pills, what then?”

“He has me in a suite upstairs, locked, with all the drapes closed at all times. He keeps the keys in his pocket all day, and in a safe at night. Can’t get a print of them.”

“What about your kids? They’re how old?”

“Seven and nine. I never see them. I mean never. He wants to own us. Just touching him will work, right?”

“Worked on me.”

Dr. Robins began drumming her fingers on the dash. “There’s a motion sensor and a floodlight. How much of you is, well, there?”

“You tell me.”

“Can’t see your head or neck. Take off your t-shirt.”

There was nothing.

“Jeans.”

He removed his jeans. Only his kneecaps were visible, and they were fading like evaporating pools of liquid.

“Dr. Robins., we may have less time than we thought.”

She turned into her driveway. She was met at the door and ushered inside. There had to be some time before he showed up. It would put Dr. Robins in immediate danger. But time was short now, caution abandoned.

I knock the door, guy opens it, I touch him. Wait a week. He disappears.

The deed itself was easy. But then the guy would have a week to touch Dr. Robins and the kids. Even if her husband didn’t touch them, he was pretty sure what the torturer’s final acts would be as he melted away. Standing at the front door, he looked around and saw a small fountain centered in an ornamental rock garden.

He picked a small, very visible red rock. He knocked the door. Nothing. He knocked again, using the rock this time, banging hard enough to take the paint off. Heavy footfalls headed toward the door, felt rather than heard. The man stopped, probably looking at security cameras. Guy wouldn't have seen anything. He was fast becoming a wisp. And his mind—it wasn't right. Periods of confusion were growing. He banged the door again.

The guy stepped out, scanning the yard. He probably saw the rock coming at him from nowhere—just didn't react because rocks don't come out of nowhere.

It smashed down on his head, and he dropped. Killing two birds with one stone, he touched him while looking for a pulse. Zero bpm. He saw the keychain bulging his pocket. Shouting as loud as possible with failing vocal chords, he heard Dr. Robins yell in reply. The keys weren't labeled, and it took three attempts to find a key that fit. With all the waning force he had, he gripped the key and turned it, his final corporeal act.

The door swung open and Dr. Robins rushed out. She located her invisible ally by his bloodstained hands.

“What did you do?” she asked the hands.

“I moved things along a little.”

“How?”

He couldn't answer, voice fading. He'd be gone in seconds. He was just a probability cloud. Dr. Robins reached out. He wasn't there.

###

THREE WEEKS LATER

Dr. Robins' dungeon home had been subject to a media frenzy. It was national news. Once they found that the psychiatrist had a missing patient, they were obliged to sweat her a little. No one wanted a prosecution. And her husband would never be found. The red rock dissolved inside a day. No body, no weapon, no crime. After an hour of interrogative fishing, Dr. Robins was released with no charge.

She stepped out of the police station. Free. The press lost interest. She'd be picking the kids up from school in a couple of hours. Then she'd cook dinner, have a glass of wine, watch TV. Sleep. Like a normal person.

He snorted derision.

You might sleep OK. Your snoring is a menace. You need a sleep study.

"You're living rent-free. Stop bitching."

You taking my meds? Because I've been off them a while now.

"I can't prescribe you invisible psychic medication."

I'll start pulling wires out in here.

"You can't touch anything."

I hate your kids.

“Me too.”

I sit in on every appointment you have. That's a HIPAA violation.

“You’re a causal violation.”

Stop punching down.

“I wish I could punch you.”

Can we have a pizza tonight?

“For your vicarious tasting pleasure?”

I have emotional needs you are not meeting.

“We’re having last night’s tofu curry.”

And she drove them home.