

## The Rock

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I was once the owner of a peculiar rock. I found it in a pit outside my grandparent's house, which was by the sea, in an obscure village in the Mainland. My mother brought me there every summer. I used to get excited because of the train— living on it for three days sounded like something out of a storybook. And the motorcycle too, which had been modified to haul a large seat like a modernised rickshaw; and it went too fast. But it was also the only way to travel from the urban part of the province to its outlier. Its danger I realised only later when I lost my interest in the train ride, whose dullness and discomfort became apparent as I began to sense a contrast to that in Hong Kong. Their magic was lost. I had thrown a few futile tantrums since then, when I still could.

I was eight when the rock that I dug up was the size of my face. It was in an afternoon when the blazing sun was directly above my head, but I didn't find it excruciating— it didn't occur to me then that we were so fragile, that my tanned skin was a sign of damage and a warning. I kept shovelling, hoping to get to the bottom of the beach, although the soft sand, carried by the wind, would drift back into the hole secretly, bit by bit, eventually concealing its history like sea wave erasing our footprints. I thought I hit the bottom when my plastic spade made a sharp noise and sent shivers to my body. But as I was clearing the debris, I felt a tremble, then I pulled up the biggest rock I had ever seen in my life.

It had three blunt and uneven horns (after one broke off when I was dragging it up). They stuck up from a long and bulky body, which was rugged and had sharp edges. Its entirety was stratified in numerous tilted layers, maroon alternating with pale grey, while sparse white spots were scattered like paint. I thought the shape of it resembled a large hand with broken fingers; and the idea enchanted me. I imagined it to be one that was chopped off from a mysterious sea creature by gallant pirates.

I placed the rock on the beach, where I laid on my side and held my head with my palm. I stared at it and rolled around, covering my skin with hot grit while making up its history: the monster stood 10 feet tall, had a sallow octopus for its head and a sturdy masculine body adorned with iridescent pearls. Its tentacles had never rested, swaying like they were different living entities enslaved on the rubbery face and stretching at its command. I was the leader of the crew who tricked the monster onto the shore with fishes we caught from the other side of the world and had never been seen before in the eastern sea. And it was I, who had slashed its wrist and put a sword in its heart. But before it was defeated, a bounty was put on the beast's head because it captured a woman on the coast. She happened to be my mother.

Why it had to be my mother I had no idea back then— the idea came naturally to me. Maybe it was the listlessness in her eyes that I took as a plea for rescue. I remembered one night, just like every other night, when she crouched to dry my body with a towel after a shower, I saw her messy hair and

languid eyes. She looked like a miserable housewife who was bestowed a tragic fate, like the tortured women I always saw on TV shows. Then I was haunted by guilt— I thought I was the one who had given her a hard time

“Are you sad?”

I asked softly with bravery, my lips gave a little shiver. Of course, she was confused, but before she could ask me why, I reached out and combed with my fingers the frizzy strands that were draping loosely on her forehead and then I put them back in place.

“In the end, on a stranded island that was endlessly smacked by vigorous waves from all directions, I unravelled the knot that was tied around my mother’s chest and thighs against a tall rock. And she was saved.” At least it was how I imagined it to be.

I would have forgotten about the rock had my mother not mentioned it last summer when we visited the beach house again.

“Where did you put the rock?” she asked, sitting hunched on a bench under the tree. I was beside her, holding her hand and looking at the incessant ripples of the ocean.

“What rock?” I turned and looked at her wrinkled face.

“The one you dug up out there. You’d just showed it to me!” She pointed to the sand.

“Right,” I figured finally, “it was in the house.”

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I was used to living on a timeline different from my mother’s— the doctor had said that Alzheimer’s patients could experience temporal and spatial distortions, often unpredictable. The day we were in his office, when he spelt out the syndromes and stages of the disease, I recalled what I learnt in my Physics class before about time dilation— “special relativity,” the teacher said, “when an astronaut was cruising in a very fast spaceship, his five minutes to us, on earth, could be an hour.” We had different frames of reference: the doctor and I, perhaps my mother and any other people in the room too.

She did not have a lot to say when we were leaving the clinic— it was nobody’s fault. It was a mere misfortune, I had to convince myself.

“I’ll go to the market,” she started.

“Do you want me to be with you?”

“No,” she headed the other way after giving the curt reply.

Left alone, I wandered on the unfamiliar streets. Slowly and unwillingly, the thoughts about my mother overcame me — her past and future, everything would fade into mist and nothing could stop it. My heart sunk into the cold ocean. I tried to recollect every little piece of history that she told me— I wanted to store them somewhere, make backups and pass them to my sons or daughters in the future, and then the children’s children.

I was walking down some stairs into a quiet alley that housed some stalls when I was struck by a particular memory that had been lingering for a long time but did not take any shape. She was recounting her days as a waitress before she met my father, and I was eleven or twelve, lying comfortably on her lap and almost dozing off after a soccer day.

“I was like, look how I got it, look how I do this,” she said, “but it isn’t like that now.” “Everything has changed since you were born.” She followed with a chuckle.

I didn’t remember the expression on her face when she said it, but her tone stirred in me an emotion that I could not confirm. She must enjoy handling the heat in her old restaurant— I had even heard her say sometime before that she “felt like a God in the old days.” But then I crashed into her life like a comet — did she welcome the change? I asked myself that so many times. An irrational fear seized my spirit every time I contemplated the question.

I walked with a greater pace past some unknown apartment complex when I felt a clutch on my shoulder. It was a security guard.

I was lost but I found my way back.

She could be lost, too, I thought, but she wasn’t, not until some months later after we went back to the office again when the doctor prescribed more pills.

“It progressed a bit faster than we predicted,” he kept his eyes fixed on the report, “you’d better pay more attention to her.”

“Thank you,” I said to the nurses at the counter when my phone received a message: “I have to get a dress from the tailor.” I turned around and saw no one. “Don’t wait for me,” she added.

The clock at home ticked with a cracking noise like it would break at any moment. It was pointing to 9 when I found myself sitting on the sofa in complete darkness. There was a pang in my abdomen and I realised I had not had my dinner. I stood up and hurried to call her.

“Hey,” I spoke to the void between the beep sound.

“Mom,” I said again when I noted that she had picked up, “where are you?”

“Coming home,” she hesitated and uttered with care.

“Are you sure?” I asked. Silence ensued.

When I met her at the park downstairs, she was leaning on the trunk of an old tree.

“Are you OK?” I asked, but she gave no response. Not because of her illness, I supposed, but a paralyse induced by yet another great change in life. When we went upstairs, I felt that the lock on the door was barely holding.

I decided last summer to take my mother back to the small village where she grew up and where she brought me back during every summer holiday in my primary school’s years. It had been about a year

after she couldn't find the way home for the first time— I had hoped it would help stimulate her brain and slow down the process, as the doctor advised.

She was reluctant at first, as she was too used to our place in Hong Kong that we had settled in for so many years and it was the only place she was still familiar with— everything was so cramped that she had no problem memorising the places of things.

I had to assure her that we were going to her childhood home and would come back in a week, but she was overcome by doubts, at the station or in the cart; she had conjectured that it was all a plot against her.

“You'll never get me,” she muttered to a passenger as we were squirming our way to the suite. She had grown suspicious of people's intents, even mine. But the train was just like what it used to be: worn out and filled with the odour of sweat and dirty carpets, piercing the peace of two nights before arriving at daybreak.

At home, she had developed a curious habit of waking up at 3 am and letting out a wail almost every day, thinking she was being carried away in a coffin, as she would tell me sometimes afterwards. It did stop on the train, though, either because its rocking motion pacified her, or that she had not been able to sleep at all. The first night I got too tired of the nuisance of traveling and slept without checking.

The other night I found myself awake in the room, pondering my decision to bring my mother on the train. I reckoned the necessity to persist was stronger than before, as it could preserve her spirit for a while longer.

Preserve her spirit, I thought, or was it detention, or imprisonment? I questioned my own intent, remembering the distant gaze that she cast to me from time to time – I had never considered for whom I was doing it for, or for whom she was living for. The futility of things came back to me in a timely manner to serve me a disheartening blow — there would not be a better ending even after all, I thought.

I moved to the other side of the bed and clung to the wooden bannister for a view of the lower decker where my mother was sleeping at. It was dark, but I saw her absence. An ache penetrated my nerve like an instinct, it travelled all over my body and inside my gut.

I climbed down the stairs and grabbed a coat, pushed open the metal doors and stopped at the corridor. To the left and right I paced, but paralysed at last. I looked at the wide windows, outside of which the ghostly willows passed at faint speed. Then I heard the noise of a crowd from my left. I followed, knowing my mother must be there.

At the end of the path, I saw my mother standing on the edge of the carriage. She took a deep breath and howled until her lung was drained out of air, and then repeated it again and again, all while the rainwater splattered all over her pale face and the hollering wind contested with her. No one was trying to stop her; they knew she could not be.

“Pull her back in!” The operator finally came out and commanded. Then the exit was closed again. It was my mother who opened the emergency gate. I stared with astonishment but not a hint of embarrassment — she did it all with grace just like a Goddess, just like how it was before, when she was a waitress in a night shift; and when she was rearing her only child.

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That summer, after we arrived at the beach house with two bags of clothes, I took my mother’s hand and led her to the beach.

I took a few steps on the sand where I found the rock, the scream of my mother still lingered in my head. Quickly the wave swept away my footprints but I continued my tread without much thought. I thought of her past again, but this time without the will to retain them—

The day I bought the rock home, I said I had slain a monster to save her.

“Look, it was the hand that I chopped off from the creature!” I prided myself on my courage.

“It’s a rock, isn’t it?” she asked.

“It’s a hand!” I insisted.

“Well, doesn’t it look more like a heart?” She meant the biological one, whose shape I only knew when I grew older, and whose meaning I only understood now. It took just as much love as strength to be a hero.