

One More Stone

by Dorothy Rice

I was 14 when we moved to Mill Valley, across the bay from San Francisco. This was in 1968, one year post-Summer of Love. The family consisted of my parents, two sisters, and Nigel, a gawky, adolescent German Shepherd my college-age brother had left at the house and never come back for. Nigel hadn't mastered lifting his leg to pee—he never really would—and, when faced with a leash, he froze like a balky donkey. But he had a generous smile, wide toasted corn flake paws and a kinked tail, perpetually bent at a jaunty right angle. We blamed the dog's behavioral quirks on the psychedelic drugs my brother said he'd been fed as a puppy.

As kids, we'd only had fish, turtles and parakeets. My parents groused about Nigel at first, lots, Dad with the most vehemence, which may have had more to do with resentment at my brother than anything the dog ever did. But Nigel stayed, and in a household where the golden rules were that children were best seen and not heard and if we didn't have something nice to say, we shouldn't say anything, Nigel became sounding board, pillow, footrest and refuge. I slipped him illicit treats from the kitchen, scratched the spots he couldn't reach, let him lie on the couch and whispered poetry into his pointy ears, comforted by the solemn depths of his liquid, brown eyes.

In return, I assumed Nigel would love me best. But it didn't work out that way. His allegiance was to my taciturn, grudging father. The dog followed Dad like a furry shadow. When he left for work, Nigel waited for his return, coming back to life when the Dodge van crunched into the driveway at day's end.

Dad was an art teacher in the San Francisco public schools. The rush hour commute across the Golden Gate meant he wasn't home a lot and even when he was, my father kept to his workroom beneath the house. With a sniff—so we'd know it bugged her—Mom would say he preferred his own company to ours. I suspected she was right. But at least my Dad was productive. I believed there wasn't anything he couldn't create or fix.

After the move, it was months before I had any friends at the new high school. I spent lunch hours alone, on the sloped front lawn with a sketchpad on my canted knees, head bent in concentration, the breeze lifting my unruly hair—always more frizz than curl. I wasn't lonely. I was an artist in the throes of creativity. At least that's the impression I hoped I gave as I strained to catch the conversations of the chattering clumps of kids who passed me by.

After school, before my parents got home from work, I would sneak downstairs to study the sketches on Dad's desk, the finished paintings propped against the wall, whatever work-in-

progress rested on the easel. I breathed in wood dust, paint and thinner, ran my fingers over the brushes and tubes of color, careful not to disturb the ordered clutter of his private world.

Like the dog, I waited for the sounds of Dad's return.

"Come on then," he would say, after he'd changed out of his work clothes and into a paint splattered t-shirt and slacks. And Nigel would race after him, collar jangling, out the front door and down the steep side of the house to the backyard for the requisite game of fetch-the-rock.

Nigel was a rock hound. We'd tried to interest him in balls or sticks. But he would ignore them and lay rocks at our feet, some of them boulders so large he struggled to drag them across the yard, whining and pawing at the earth, until one of us relented and tossed him a stone. In time, we accepted it as another of his idiosyncrasies.

In my bedroom under the peaked A-frame roof, I sat at the drafting desk Dad had rescued from a school dumpster and refurbished for me. The smell of ground beef sizzling on the stove wafted up the stairs. One ear cocked to my open window, I put the finishing touches on a sketch I'd begun at lunch, a girl with a halo of wild Medusa hair, like mine only better, wilder. I added two crescents to the slender chest, squiggly circles for nipples. It was good, I thought, good enough to show my father.

His voice carried through the open window.

"Here you go, boy," he said. I pictured him picking up a rock, rolling it in his hand. "Just a few more stones. I've got work to do."

That was my cue. I tore my bare-breasted girl from the pad, thundered down the carpeted stairs and out the front door, the crisp white page fluttering at my side.

Our backyard consisted of a rectangular stretch of rocky, unplanted dirt that ran the length of the redwood house. Beyond that, the bushy hillside plummeted to a narrow road at the edge of our property. As I rounded the corner, Nigel came tearing up the hill and onto the rise, a plum-sized rock clamped in his jaw.

"Bring it here then, you great simpleton," Dad said. "Come on."

With the tip of his tail pointed towards the sky, Nigel trotted back to Dad, gums and tongue pink and dirt-flecked, the rock a jaw-breaker jutting from one side of his mouth. My father wrestled with him for the stone and tossed it again, aiming for the hillside, but Nigel leapt and in a feat of canine acrobatics, intercepted the speeding projectile mid-flight. Dad and I flinched in unison as it clinked against Nigel's teeth.

"Ye gads," my father said. "Don't swallow it."

My father reached for another rock from the loose pyramid at his feet and tossed it with an easy flick of his wrist. Nigel dropped the stone in his mouth and tore off after the new one, churning up dirt with his great cloddish paws. He plunged down the steep hillside and

disappeared.

Hands at his waist, Dad straightened, stretching out his back. He gazed out over Tamalpais Valley, the opposite side speckled with houses peeking through the trees, a blanket of downy white mist unfurling over the tops of the hills. My father would have been close to fifty then—younger than I am now. He was still lean and muscled, with wavy black hair, long enough over his ears and collar that my friends thought he was cool, for a dad.

“A million-dollar view, isn’t it?” he said.

“Worth the price of admission,” I said.

“The life of Riley,” he said, with a wry chuckle.

My father was a font of stock phrases and truisms. Perhaps because he spoke so little, coming from him, these old chestnuts had the ring of profundity.

I still clutched my drawing, half hidden behind my back.

“What’s that you’ve got there?” he said.

I handed him my drawing.

Dad held my sketch at arm’s length, his expression inscrutable, eyes narrowed, the slightest upward turn at the corners of his mouth. Nigel reappeared, chuffing like a laboring engine.

“It’s nothing. Just a silly doodle from school,” I said, with a shrug.

“Mind if I keep it? To share with my students.”

Cheeks flushed with pride, I studied the ground at my feet.

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Several years later, when I was away at college, Mom left my father for a gregarious work colleague with a toothy grin. Then it was just Dad, my younger sister, and Nigel, in the Mill Valley house. The dog began to lose weight. He stopped chasing stones. The vet diagnosed stomach cancer. We speculated it was all the rocks in his gut.

“Poor, foolish creature,” Dad said. “I tried to tell him.”

He buried Nigel on the hill behind our house and planted a fruit tree to mark the grave.

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Dad died five years ago, at 92. Going through his belongings, my sisters and I emptied one of his closets, filled to bursting with paintings and half-finished canvasses.

At the back of the closet was a dusty portfolio, its cardboard covers warped from standing on edge so many years. We laid it flat on the carpet and removed the contents piece by piece, careful not to tear or smudge the delicate beige paper he'd used for sketches, the crinkly sheets of heavier white.

"This is different," my older sister said, squinting at a dappled water color, a riot of pastel wildflowers.

"It's mine," I said, reaching for it. "From my impressionistic phase. I can't believe he kept it." I made a face, mouth pulled down at the corners, chin crumpled like a bulldog's.

"You look just like Dad when you do that," my younger sister said.

Though it had been nearly 50 years, I remembered laboring over that piece in my bedroom at the top of the stairs, swirling a brush in a muddied tray of colors, hoping for a good one, good enough to take downstairs to my father, good enough to interrupt his Nigel time. Holding that watercolor in my hands, I was transported back to the rugged landing behind our house, the damp nip of evening in the air, Nigel thrashing his tail, every ounce of him intent on the dusty rock in my father's hand.