

RAISING ROCKS

By K.M. Churchill

Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable.

Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus"

Outside, a dreadful silence: no barking dogs, no bleating sheep, not even the familiar caw of blackbirds roosting in pines at the edge of the remote Irish village. The sun was not yet above the headlands. I scanned the garden. Hedges, flowerpots, pale sky, picket fence. Already a strong sharp wind blowing off the bay, stinging my cheeks like the slap I deserved—*what kind of mother lets her toddler get out of the house on his own?* Even half asleep, my husband had been quicker than me. He was out of bed and out the door before I'd found my glasses, pulled on a wellies and thrown a cardigan over my flannel nightgown.

And, although I know I probably shouldn't have, for one long panicked minute I stood listening. It was a habit of mine, listening, probably the result of severe myopia; I usually heard things long before I saw them. So, rather than rushing off like his father to see if I could find my child before he got into trouble, instead—foolishly perhaps—I stopped to listen for him.

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When I was a girl I could tell, just by listening, who was where at any given moment. My father's step was light, spritely as he went about fixing things on weekends. On weekdays his polished shoes struck hard and quick across the floors and out the door. My mother moved softly, but heavily, as though she were carrying a great weight.

My older brothers, redheaded twins, were harder to hear. They moved as one. Tiptoeing down the hall, pushing open windows, popping out screens, climbing through, then dropping silently to the ground and scampering off. My younger sister was easier. When she wasn't asking questions no one could answer, she was outside, running, falling, skinning her knees, crying, and my mother always came running. If I could hear my sister, and I usually could, I knew my mother would not be far off. She was like that my mother; always there when you needed her even if you didn't know you would.

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But in the stillness of our West Cork garden in February, I could hear nothing; and the sound was deafening. I pushed up against it, leaning into its vastness and listened harder. This must be what people heard just before a catastrophic storm, I thought, the ominous roar of silence portending nothing and everything at once.

My husband's voice startled me. Over lichen slate rooftops I could hear him, sing-singing our son's name, Jo-shu-ah! The way you might call a child to dinner, using a tone laden with promises of good things to come. I listened for a reply—one heartbeat, two heartbeats, three... When there was none, I added my own harmony, Josh-u-ah!

I could have climbed up through the garden to check the grassy road running between pastures behind the house. Had I done that, I would have come down into the village closer to the

Rowing Club. But I didn't, I took the back stairs. Jumping down them two at a time until I reached the alleyway where the air was even colder, a hard cold that lurked in the ravines between old Irish houses. *Stone cold*, I thought and dove into it; in the dank shadows it seemed as though I were not in Ireland anymore but running down the corridor of a catacomb, all the way until I reached Main Street.

Jo-shu-ah!

Outside Casey's cheerful yellow pub, the benches, which usually held an old man or two, were empty. I could see my husband weaving in and out of parked cars. Searching for our son who was so small he could easily be overlooked behind one. I went in the opposite direction, toward Keelbeg Pier. Everything was still in the village but for the sound of our voices echoing off pastel houses and furrowed hillsides, calling our son's name in tandem.

Soon I could hear only my own voice, no longer ricocheting off the buildings but drifting out over the bay where the wind carried it away.

Jo-shu-ah!

Edging the seafront, a fieldstone wall, about thigh-high, bordered the walking path. All along top of it, sharp stones had been embedded at spiky angles. A brackish reek blew off the bay; the tide was out—*thank God*—though that meant the drop beyond the wall would be twenty feet or more to the slick seabed below. I felt certain he could not have clambered over it, but I took a deep breath and leaned over the parapet to look anyway.

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My eyesight has never been good. There are fading pictures of me, not much older than Joshua, wearing little round glasses that wrapped around my ears. It seems to me that it was because I had such poor eyesight that I realized there could be more than one version of reality: there were the sharp, crisp forms that other people saw and recognized, then there were the soft edged shades of things that I could see; things that were not truly themselves until I had touched, listened to, or leaned in so closely to look at them that all my senses engaged at once.

My babies too I would encounter this way. Knowing Joshua first by the sound of his cry, by the feel of his unfathomably soft skin, by his warm, musky scent. My fingers searched every inch of him: his smooth, taunt belly; his delicate moon shell ears; his surprisingly strong fingers. I read somewhere that to *really* touch someone is to love them. I believe that. Later, when I leaned in close to gaze deep into his dark blue eyes, I'd wonder if we each saw the same thing – someone with soft shifting edges, both known and unknowable.

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Far below me, the seabed was vacant. But for a couple small brown crabs scuttling over Sea Whistle and Bladderwrack. I breathed in the mineral smell of the inlet with relief and panic – *where is he?* My heart pounded against my ribs, as though railing against the injustice of its imprisonment, as though trying to break free. *How could I have slept through the sound of him opening the door?* Up ahead, the road to the pier curled out of sight. Out on the bay, a halyard on a moored boat clanged against its mast, like a church bell tolling. Ding. Ding. Ding.

Josh-u-ah!

Then, on the air came the comforting scent of turf fires. People were awake! I saw pale smoke drifting from cottages along the road to the pier. What would the locals make of it, I

wondered (and hated myself for it), were they to peak out from behind their net curtains and see me, in my long flannel nightgown and Aran sweater, shouting and rushing along the path to the sea?

The salt wind whipped uncombed hair into my face and pressed my nightgown against my legs, making it difficult to run up the slow hill toward the pier. I tried to stay calm, to contain my growing dismay, but the farther from the village I went the harder this was to do.

I recalled a story my mother told me about how she'd been traveling with my father on a business trip in Arizona, while my grandmother looked after us kids at home. One night, deep in the desert, she had a dream about my sister being lost. She woke and telephoned home. My sister *had* been missing but my Grandmother found her, safe and sound. My mother had been 2,000 miles across the country when she'd sensed that something had happened. I'd been asleep in the next room and I'd sensed nothing.

Josh-u-ah!

The whine of a boat engine cut the morning in half but it was barely a speck on the horizon. I resisted the urge to wave my arms over my head yelling, "Help! Help!" *He's all right, he's all right...* I repeated it over and over to myself, like a prayer, hoping to banish the hideous thing that was building a nest at the base of my skull, whispering with foul breath in my ears. *You're too late, the voice said, something has probably already happened to him and no hope, no prayer will undo it.*

Josh-u-ah!

His name became a shrill squawk leaving my mouth, I tossed it up into the wind as though the name itself— Hebrew meaning “God protects”— might take the shape of a sharp-eyed bird circling high overhead and, spying my little boy, swoop down with a flutter of soft strong wings to carry him back to me.

Once, when the wind shifted and blew up from behind, I thought I heard my husband calling to me, a faraway cadence. I looked back, hoping to catch a glimpse of him carrying our son safely in his arms. But I saw nothing. *You call yourself a mother*, the voice sneered, *he'll be dead before you find him and it will be All.Your.Fault*. Something in my chest compressed, it hurt. I bent over to catch my breath. When the pain passed, I stood back up and looked harder.

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No one said it, but everyone knew it was true; I was wholly unsuited to motherhood. Awkward, short-tempered, impatient, I had no instinct for it. My folly became apparent only after my first son was born, a bright-eyed baby that would not sleep. I had not expected this. Soothe, feed, change, repeat. Motherhood was, I'd decided, the Sisyphean task I deserved; fair retribution for having had the hubris—against my better judgment—to have attempted it in the first place.

One dark morning hour, when my son would not be soothed, it dawned on me that even Sisyphus was allowed a respite, a brief moment, to revel in his accomplishment before his boulder rolled back down the mountain. Years passed, when a second baby followed the first, I began envying him.

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Josh-u-ah! I bellowed, letting the wind carry it over the village again. But nothing moved only thin stray clouds drifting overhead. Windows stayed shuttered, doors locked, blinds drawn. Then, on the doorstep of the Myross Rowing Club, I saw something I hadn't noticed before, a small blue bundle. It wriggled. Then looked up. I could just make out Joshua's pale round baby face peeking up from where it must have been resting on his pajama-clad knees. When he saw me looking at him, he tucked his head, folding himself into himself, as though he were hiding.

Time slowed. I was no longer in my body but floating somewhere above it, and from that height, I could see the intersection of the roads, the wide opening in the seawall behind the Rowing Club, the hidden driveway beside it. Without taking my eyes from my son, I was able to judge the distance between us. I saw where he might go and how I might head him off. I calculated how quickly I could reach him and how fast he could run. I saw all of this in a split second. Then I lifted my nightgown above my knees and ran, full tilt, back down the hill.

With each pounding step closer to my toddler—who sat, hugging his knees, probably believing that if he couldn't see me, I couldn't see him—my whole self hummed; vibrating like a bell after the clear ringing fades and the sound is taken up by flowers singing. Finally, I had *instinctively* done something a good mother would do: I had found my missing child.

When I reached the clubhouse, Joshua was still tucked into the doorway. I swooped down to gather him up into my arms. But he did not want to come. No he did not. “Nooooooooo!” He screamed, squirming to get away. “Go to beach! To Beeeeeeeeeeeach!” He crossed his arms tight, glared at me and thrust a pudgy, pointing forefinger toward the stony shoreline. “BEACH!”

I smiled down at the angry toddler before me. *Of course, had I really thought it would be that easy?* Yes, yes I had. But it didn't matter because I'd done it! I'd reached the mountain top

and was standing there victorious—an absurd heroine in my rubber wellies, glasses askew, hands on hips, a bitter wind billowing up my nightgown. And I watched my little ball of fury roll right back down the mountain and accepted that it would always be so. Only this time, like Sisyphus himself, I paused to survey the vast underworld of motherhood from on high; enjoying the fruits of my labor—if only for a moment—and that was enough. My son was safe and I began my slow descent back down the mountain of motherhood with my heart full of joy; all was well. I would begin again.

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