

selling rocks

I was five. So was my friend Nurit. It was the mid '90s and we lived in Dorchester, which might have been a rough neighborhood in Massachusetts at the time, or that might just have been how the media portrayed it to me later. I moved pretty shortly after this event so I couldn't tell you for sure. Our moms both worked, and had other young adult roommates, and childcare was kind of shuffled around apologetically between all the members of the cult we were in. Nurit and I were often alone and bored, eating sticks of butter from the fridge, looking up the answers to petty debates we would get into or care instructions for hermit crabs from the encyclopedias in the big bedroom. Having the majority of one's net worth tied up in books was a very Northeast thing — even the unhoused and hungry pushed around shopping carts of classics to read themselves to sleep on sidewalks with — and that set of twelve encyclopedias all nicely bound sitting unceremoniously on the floor of our shabby rented hovel must have cost a fortune. It was probably gifted to us or inherited from some old dead or disconnected rich relative, some ghost, some vestige of our historical privilege, which was invisible to me for most of my life but undeniably there, old and heavy and smelling like judgmental dusty leather. Recently I've begun to open my eyes to its unnerving power and appreciate all the ways in which it has shaped my life, but that doesn't really have anything to do with this story. This one is about Nurit and me and the rocks.

We used to sit in Nurit's backyard when we painted them, until that time when the neighbor kid concussed me with a big old stone to the head. He hit them with a baseball bat for sport. His dad would toss them up and he would slug them over the tall fence that shielded us from each others' view and separated our yards. Lil Babe Ruth beamed me good once, I remember it clearly, and the particular uniqueness of that pain is etched too singularly into my brain for me to ever doubt that it happened. One moment I was mixing the green and red paints into a lumpy diarrheal mess on a paper plate and the next I was face down, blacked out on the plastic folding table. I lifted my head in a confusion because it was morphing, deforming into the shape of a big round boob, with a bright pink bump like a nipple poking out of my forehead. Muddy chunks of brownish paint clung to my hair and neither my ears nor eyes seemed to be able to process anything without doubling it and vibrating it violently in my senses. Nurit cried to her big brother, who started yelling something tough over the fence until Joe DiMaggio Jr.'s dad bellowed back, baritone and terrifying, that we kids had better all shut up or he was going to give us something to yell about. We moved operations up onto Nurit's roof pretty quickly after that, as soon as I regained the ability to walk straight.

Age established the pecking order in our neighborhood, with the five to eleven year olds constituting the majority of the fray of people still finding their place in the world. At fourteen, Nurit's brother was unfortunately a bit too far beyond us all to be much of a help; he could no longer easily involve himself in our issues at the distance he was from our realities. I realize now that he was probably just busy thinking about girls, nervously or angrily, and certainly entirely erroneously, but I can only assert this now because I never met him again or asked him about it

later, because he's been frozen at fourteen in my reality-determining memories and meanwhile I've grown, so now he seems small and completely understandable in context. That being said, at the time that this was all happening my head only came up to his waist, and his un-discussable affairs, as aloof and difficult to make out as his affectedly bored teenage face, seemed mysterious and weighty, so we tried to walk softly past his ever-closed room door for the most part and give him the respect and privacy his stature as a twice-our-height giant commanded. He recognized our efforts and approved of them, with the self-absorbed belief that his matters *were* important and we *should* leave him alone. Still, he retained a bit of those heroic ideals all older siblings feel erupting from within them when they first stand over the crib of their newborn playmate, and he felt a certain importance about being in charge when the adults were out, so we knew that if we ever needed to consult him about a power struggle with the other kids, he would take us seriously and come to our aid if he had to. We never expected him to argue with an adult for us, though.

Instead, he carried the plastic folding table up the infinite stairs and set us up on the roof with fresh red plastic solo cups of water to clean our paintbrushes in and some ice cubes in a Ziploc bag for my forehead, and then went back downstairs to sit in his room. Nurit's apartment was ancient and decaying in a way that made it almost lovely, overgrown with ivy that poked through crumbling bricks, six stories tall so that through the rusty brown guardrails we had a good view up and down the street, and only two small apartments per floor across so that we could run from one side of the roof to the other in a few seconds. It was a hot and humid day in mid-July, and despite the dizzying view and the surprising nearness of bird sounds, it was cozy and intimate up there. The ringing in my ears clearing, I felt smugly protected, out of the menacing range of the

budding sociopath-athlete on the ground below. Buoyed by this rare sense of security and a strange inspiration bestowed by the noontime sun, which reflected golden-bright off of the transparent plastic cup that held my brush cleaning water, which was rapidly darkening, dirtying, and clouding as I cycled through colors with enthusiasm, I experienced for the first time while painting those rocks the manic sense of purpose which has since become the driving force of my life, as an artist and fabricator of reality. In front of my still-head-injury-addled eyes I saw my rocks come to life as though my imagination and uncoordinated brush strokes were creating them anew, Godlike. My rocks were coated with the colors of truth, then decorated with genius. I experimented with polka dots, then stripes. I painted five rocks in a row pure gold. I was convinced they were inestimable treasures.

“Nurit,” I screamed at the top of my lungs, banging my fist suddenly on the table with so much impact that the plastic reverberated and a freshly painted rock bounced off and marked the ground gold, “We should sell these!!!”

I screamed often. I was a loud kid, which was probably why the older boys didn’t like me. Nurit must have enjoyed being harassed and bossed around, as she was always willing to hang out and entertain my harebrained schemes. I think they excited her—either that, or she was pragmatic enough to lie herself into enjoying my company, seeing as I was the only other five-year-old around. Nobody likes to be alone, and we all have to take what love we can get. She used to be the best type of friend: quiet, obedient, and efficient at calculating and carrying out all of the practical legwork while I exhausted my explosive energy running around, having insane visions,

and yelling loudly. It's a shame that we never talked again after I moved away and began attending the real schools in society. We exchanged some e-mails in middle school, but she had been completely swallowed up by the cult by then, and wanted me to feel the same way; she kept responding to my awkward small-talky attempts at reconnection with zealous proselytization about the good work she was doing to save the world. Actually at that time I was just beginning to break with all that, although I wasn't sure how to come out about it yet. She was jarringly assertive at twelve years old, in purple 14pt comic sans text, and it made me feel tragic, how she had nothing in common with the mousey assistant I used to use and love. I uncomfortably stopped replying to her e-mails. Maybe I nurtured a secret dream of pulling the wool from her eyes and saving her; maybe I fantasized about visiting her at that poorly-run indoctrination boarding school and sitting her down for a tea and talking until she believed in the same universe as me; maybe I just idly considered sending her some articles online, but I never harnessed the courage to actualize any of it. A religious cult is kind of scary to face down, scarier than that looming pot-bellied monster neighbor father of a monster neighbor child who we glimpsed occasionally as children through the windows facing the sidewalks out front, cracking open a beer or yelling violently about some perceived sleight the universe enacted against him personally, smacking the top of his TV set as though it could feel pain. I've never really liked facing down things bigger than me, despite my blustery bravado, so I gave up on Nurit early in my teenage career and instead tended to my own conceptual foundations, the agonizingly careful reconsideration and rebuilding of all certainty and faith (seeing double and unbalanced). But this story isn't about anything to do with that, either. This one is about the unreality of memory and all the fantastic inventions we may accidentally believe when we're stupid and small.

Somehow we'd convinced ourselves that we were going to be rich. We carried the plastic folding table downstairs together, Nurit on the lower level, struggling to hold back most of the weight with her tiny frame while I did the non-taxing work of guiding it around corners. My head still hurt, I justified. On the second floor landing I accidentally dropped the table on her foot, but I said sorry. We stopped by her apartment to get paper and sharpies and tape, tiptoeing when we passed in front of her older brother's room, argued over the spelling of "SALE", and set everything up on the sidewalk out front before the paint had even dried on our last batch of rocks.

The scooter boys descended swift and unheralded like eagles upon idiot rodents, hapless and out in the open. We hadn't seen them out in the streets from the rooftop, and naively assumed they must not be around today; but probably they had only been drawn indoors momentarily by the new street-fighter video game Kyle got for his birthday. They must have smelled our nascent ambitions as we emerged from Nurit's front door, dripping with hope and emotional vulnerability, the way a shark scents blood, from whatever living room or den or garage or cave they had been roosting in, and all taken off at the same time, throwing their PlayStation controllers destructively to the side so they clattered off of the floors and walls and batteries burst out of them and they burst out of the already-busted screen doors and ran out to the front yard where scooters were strewn around on the dead grass, whooping and hollering and kicking off from the driveways into the middle of the street, cars just a hilarious joke to them, dust devils whirling up in their wake. They were between ten and twelve years old, the six of them, all with

terrifyingly messy hair and shirts covered in mud and soda stains, and they were discovering a newfound power in their sudden ascent to the top of the juvenile food chain, in their unchecked growth spurts, and in the delicious fear they were now able to inspire in everyone: their screaming little cousins, their dismayed English teachers, the nervous drivers who slowed to crawls and sweat at the way they tacked and veered in the streets with abandon, and especially... babies like us. No sooner had we laid out the rocks in pretty display patterns ("Make sure the row is STRAIGHT! That's not STRAIGHT!") I berated Nurit at the top of my lungs, running anxiously around the table in tight, bug-eyed circles to make sure our stones looked attractive from any vantage point) than did they round the corner of our block at full speed, making such a racket that my head snapped around on my neck in an instant recognition of danger. Kyle almost fell off of his scooter trying to keep up with the other boys on the tight turn, swayed dangerously far over to the curb side, tripped over a hedge, lost his footing and flailed at his scooter which first flew away from his body, then swung around and whacked him hard in the shins. He jerked his head around wildly while clambering back on top of it to make sure no-one had seen what just happened. I didn't drop my dumbfounded gaze fast enough, and when he locked eyes with me and recognized that I had witnessed his shame I saw a wild fear flare up in his eyes, shocking in its instantly recognizable animal humanity and vulnerability, and then like a chemical cloud condensing into matter with a bang the look transformed into an even more terrifyingly recognizable frenzied urge to destroy me for what I knew. I should have run; I must have imagined running, then, because I saw myself clearly in my head, high-tailing it out of there and leaving Nurit behind to clear the table, yelling at her to get the sign too, we were out of paper. But I couldn't have actually run, because I also remember seeing the scooter boys land in a

blood-thirsty circle around us, scooters snapping shut like deadly Japanese folding fans as they kicked at the auto-folding locks with their disturbingly-large adolescent feet. I remember seeing their irreverent talons sinking into our meticulously arranged displays, jumbling up all our colour- and size- sorted rocks into one messy scramble, grabbing at them, throwing them to each other, holding them up and inspecting our paint jobs, mocking everything, the dirt under Kyle's fingernails unbearably offensive when superimposed over the pretty painted surface of my favorite gold jewel as he tapped jestingly on it to flake off the paint.

“You're selling ROCKS?” the scooter boys hooted, grabbing at our sharpied sign and tearing it off the table, where it had been taped by the corners, leaving sweaty splotches where their greasy sin-ridden fingertips touched it and ripping the edges so that it ended up reading “FOR SAL” anyway, like Nurit had wanted it to be spelled all along. She was too good to gloat though—she was busy trying to find a way out of the scooter enclosure they had trapped us in. She was a real gem. “Why would anybody want to buy ROCKS?”

Kyle closed his fist around my gold rock and for a terrifying second I thought he was going to bean me in the head with a rock, too. I didn't think I'd be able to survive a second concussion. But he just cackled and tossed it out into the middle of the street with a flick of his wrist, as though he were trying to skip it on a pond.

“Hey, that was my favorite rock!!” I screamed at him as a passing car drove over it immediately, indifferently re-doing its paint job to a greasy tire black, so that it disappeared into the asphalt

like I had never been a God creating Truth or Beauty at all, it was all just a mirage. I felt hot tears spring into my eyes and I tried to rush him, but he jabbed outwards with his folded-up scooter and pushed me backwards onto my butt. “That was my faaaave-wit woooooock!” he mocked me. “It’s just a rock, you little dumbass! Nobody likes rocks! Nobody wants them!” He tried to advance towards me but staggered – his shin must have been smarting something awful – and decided against it. As if to compensate for his inability to bully me physically, he doubled down on the verbal venom. “Nobody is going to buy your weird-looking rocks! You paint like a gorilla! You think this looks good? It looks like a horse butt! It looks like a weird fungus!!” He was livid, I thought I saw spit gather in the folds of his mouth, he was wildly waving one of my polka-dotted rocks around like a maraca while he screamed. “This is worthless! This is trash! This is the dumbest, ugliest, biggest waste of time and energy that I have ever seen in my entire fuc – AAAAAIYYEeeE!!!”

Nurit had clambered over a poorly attended scooter, gotten up behind Kyle, and bitten him in the calf. His shriek sounded like a baby girl, and all of the other scooter boys toppled with laughter when they heard it. Kyle was felled as well, lying on his side, grabbing his leg. Nurit grabbed my hand and yanked me. “Inside !”

“The rocks, Nurit!” I cried in desperation, while the guys screamed with laughter and slapped at their stomachs and elbows and the ground and wiped tears from their eyes. “The rocks!”

“Inside!” Nurit repeated, firmer. These were the only sort of situations where she ever really displayed any kind of self-confidence; heat of the moment decision-making, high-stakes and high-pressure scenarios. She almost tugged my arm out of my socket, forcefully yanked me away from the table where all of my treasure lay scattered and senseless under the ravaging, merciless summer sun, and shoved me towards her front door, running behind me. We made it inside before Kyle managed to stand back up, and slammed it shut, hastily locking all of the deadbolts. I really don’t know where I’ll ever find another friend like Nurit. She got on all fours so I could stand on her shoulders to peer out some glass paneling on the front door. Kyle was yelling at the other boys, who were all hooting and hollering at him now, completely uninterested in the rocks now that we were no longer around. In a final sullen eruption of emotion, Kyle flipped the plastic table over and I let out a bereaved shriek as half of the rocks flew irrevocably into a nearby gutter. My face was wet and sticky with tears and snot. I couldn’t stop screaming. Nurit just set her jaw toughly and grunted out an exhalation of pained air under my weight.

“Now what on Earth” said Nurit’s big brother.



He had obviously heard the commotion through the loose glass door panes and the paper-thin drywall, and had hurried to come down and enforce order upon us savages, but he had had to put his pants on first, and the majority of the action was over by the time he had stuffed his feet

hurriedly into his creepily dented Adidas massage-sandals, kicking the welcome mat over in his clumsy rush to get downstairs. The scooter boys had cleared out.

“Ooooooren!” Nurit cried, turning as he crashed noisily downstairs and bucking me off her back callously as if she had suddenly forgotten who I was. A sharp pain cracked through my beleaguered head as I was thrown to the ground. Nurit stood up, without even caring what she had done to me, and ran over to her brother, buried her face in his jeans and let loose her own waterworks. She only ever broke down like this in front of Oren, and honestly to see it always kind of disgusted or sobered me, dried me up, made me suddenly repulsed by my own garish histrionics. It always made me wonder if that was what I looked like. What I admired most about Nurit was her practically involuntary obstinate collectedness, her refusal to betray herself to her own passions or to anyone else’s. I hated when she deviated from that role. I needed it from her. I sniffed snot loudly back into my nose and smeared my face with the back of my fist. Nurit’s brother was pushing her away from him, as if overwhelmed by a bad scent. “Don’t be a baby, Nurit,” he said uncomfortably. He looked to his left and to his right, at the peepholes set in the doors on either side of the first floor landing. I followed his gaze and caught a white eyeball swiveling behind #1R, a thin little oval of an iris magnified creepily by the poorly-manufactured lens, meeting my bloodshot gaze and quickly winking out of sight. “Stop crying, Chrissakes. You look like a nutjob. The neighbors are looking. What happened?” Even though I had had the same thought about how hideous it was to witness Nurit blubber disgustingly and go on like that, I didn’t feel any camaraderie with him when he expressed that to her. I hated him for not coming sooner. I hated him for not saving my rocks. “What happened?” He insisted.

“The scooty boys...” Nurit sniffed, blinked a few tears rapidly out of her moist eyes, steadied herself with a breath, and continued in a quieter and stronger voice. “The scooty boys came and we had the rocks and they moved the rocks and we had them all in a straighter line too and then the scooty boys called the rocks ugly and said we was stupid. They said that... no one would wanna buy a rocks.” As she reported this last horrific heresy we had suffered at the hands of those brutes, a glint of crazy defiance flashed in her eyes, and she looked as if she might spit. I recognized it with a surge of pride; it was a steel-willed refusal to accept this attack on her beliefs, and I knew then that *my* Nurit had come back. I loved that girl, and everything about the way she acted, wholly and purely back then. I guess I still do, although my feelings towards her or my memory of her are a little more complicated now, because mixed in with the swell of undying admiration is a nauseous undercurrent of recognition of how that noble and unswerving loyalty to a vision ultimately destroyed her; how in the end all it led her to was another run-down rental unit like the rest of them with roommates and a GED that took her half of a humiliating decade to complete and strangely wide hips after her third child. It should have led her to politics, to palaces, to prominent seats in strategy rooms or riding out to war at the right hand sides of Kings, that verve. It should have led her to Heaven. But oh the Good don’t know a Lie when it happens. “Make a rock sale,” she mumbled in closing to her big brother.

“Y – you guys were selling those rocks?” Oren said, and made a weird sound like a cough, covered his nose with his hand.

“YEAH,” I interrupted loudly. I didn’t really appreciate feeling left out of their conversation, even if I wasn’t feeling that way for any rational reason that I can find in retrospect. “We made the prettiest best rocks and now we are gonna be RICH!” I thought maybe if I shouted loudly enough God would hear me and would get scared and would do whatever I wanted. I wanted to be rich. I wanted my own scooter, and a Gameboy too. Nurit’s big brother made strange faces for a few seconds, like he was fighting a sneeze, and turned away from us for a few seconds longer, breathing in a weird way. Then he turned back around. He grabbed Nurit’s shoulder and lowered himself down onto one knee so he could look the two of us in the eyes more easily. He had a fiery gaze now too, and I softened towards him. He wasn’t entirely unlike Nurit.

“Ok, listen up.” I locked eyes with him raptly, like he was a renowned general about to lead us into war. I wanted to hear what he had to say. He was fourteen after all, and not even the scooter boys could bully him. “Those boys are a bunch of jerks and idiots. They drink too much soda and they get hyper and then they ride around trying to steal everybody else’s fun because they are too boring and stupid to make any of their own. You know what I say?” We both stared at him, spellbound, not knowing, needing to know what he said.

“Fuck ’em.”

I felt a delicious shocking thrill at these words. I knew they were wrong, that they were bad words, but something about the way Nurit’s older brother said them was entirely different and new than how I’d ever heard them before: screamed through bedroom walls that could not have

convinced any truly conscious adult of their sound-blocking ability, but were somehow serviceable as a shield for their morals anyway, or yelped out in sudden outbursts when the eggs would drop while exiting the grocery parking lot and shatter, the outburst quickly stanching with two stressed white fists clenched against the mouth. No, no, nothing like that. These were not words of pain or hurting, but words of pride and dominance. I was electrified. I almost jumped straight into the air. I wanted to run up and down the five flights of stairs in Nurit's building and laugh crazy with my fists clenched, but I did not; I had the strange new self-aware sensation that that would be too much like a baby to do; it may have been the first time I ever sensed myself maturing in the space of a single moment.

"Yeah, fuck 'em," he hit the ground with a fist and cracked up. "What kind of lifeless nerds bully little girls anyway? Don't worry, Kyle's gonna be missing his balls by the end of the weekend." We didn't fully understand but we felt roused and cheered by his attitude. It was so rare these days that Nurit's big brother ever actually looked at us or talked to us, that it probably wouldn't have mattered what he said. It almost felt like the entire ordeal with the rocks and the cruel boys was worth it just for this, this rush of warm intimacy and support. Oren knocked our heads together affectionately. I yelped out with pain because it bumped the bump on my head from the rock and Oren said, oh, sorry, real quickly. I didn't care at all though. I didn't care what those stupid scooter boys thought either.

"Listen girls." Oren seemed to be possessed by the moment, caught up in this sudden swell of grandiosity that had begun like a freak accident but was now starting to suit him unnervingly

well. He was getting carried away with his impassioned encouragement for us, as if our obviously brightening moods were somehow fooling him into believing he was actually doing something worthwhile, like saving a life or changing a racist's mind or something, instead of convincing two gullible babies that their dumb painted rocks meant anything to the world. He was developing a faraway look in his eyes as though some bizarre narrative of his own life was unfurling on important-looking parchment paper before him, a narrative that that probably only made sense to someone living off of the peculiar diet of science fiction novels and anime series that he sated himself with in his antisocial isolation. "I don't want to hear any more of this nonsense crying about people not wanting to buy your rocks, you hear me? I mean, you guys painted some amazing god damn rocks today and anyone with half a brain is going to see that." My heart was thumping with pride. I felt like it was going to explode. "You guys just aren't on a street where anyone is walking by. You have to go to the big corner, get some foot traffic, get some pedestrians. You can't just stand around waiting for life to come to you! You have to go to the mountain!" I yearned to know what the word pedestrian meant with every fiber of my being, but I could not bring myself to disappoint him by asking. I hadn't known there was a mountain around Dorchester. I was overcome by a fierce need to be reunited with my remaining rocks.

"And..." Oren faltered. He seemed to have lost something in a sudden self-conscious second of surprise. The look in his eyes snapped back into the present moment, the parchment paper of his heroic ambitions snapped shut in a quick loss against gravity and habit. We being young sensed this and Nurit and I reached out and clasped each other's hands. Oren shuffled in his Adidas slippers as he lifted himself from his kneel.

“Well, that’s it,” he said gruffly, jamming his hands in his pockets and walking away.

That was the Oren we were used to, and Nurit and I were oddly relieved by how he returned by disappearing. We looked at each other, and back then our communication was truly wordless.

She knew how I wanted, no, *needed* to see my rocks. That sort of relationship is irreplaceable, I mean it. I hope if you ever have someone like that in your life, you will hold on to that person for as long as your fingers have strength in them. We squeezed hands for a moment and then broke apart, swiveled around, and unbolted the ground floor door. We let ourselves out.

The street was wide and barren. The scooter boys had long since cleared out, and all that remained was the upended plastic folding table and its previously-displayed paraphernalia, the scattered rocks, the ripped “FOR SAL” sign, the uncapped sharpie, and the four red plastic solo cups we had carried the rocks down with, rolling around in the wind in random and chaotic ways on their two uneven extremities. The sky had clouded over. Dark birds circled far overhead, making noises we could not possibly understand. We were too young.

Nurit and I set to work grimly. We were no longer buoyed by the noontime naiveté that had begun this all. We were moved by something fiercer now, something closer to the primal fire that burned in our barely-sentient hearts. I don’t know what to call it. Passion? Determination? Ambition? Revenge? We collected what rocks we still could, brushed them free of dirty blemishes, and deposited them lovingly into the red plastic solo cups. They were, after all, our

sweet creations, and perhaps all the sweeter for having survived when our other babies did not. I had a moment for the rocks forever lost to the gutter. We gathered the plastic folding table, the sharpie but not its cap (would everything go the way the cap did, eventually, into some sad Dorchester gutter, out of reach never to be possessed or perhaps even remembered again...?), the two halves of the ripped sheet of A4 paper, and we brought it all indoors and up to Nurit's apartment on the third floor. Oren was watching some show about transforming battling robots at oppressively loud volumes, so we deposited everything in the entryway, feeling the whole home impenetrable. Although it had taken us four red solo cups to bring the rocks down from the roof, there were only enough rocks left after the battle with the scooter boys to fill two. We left the other two solo cups in the foyer with the rest of the things, empty.

The peculiar calm of the street as we walked down to the intersection, gray clouds parting and drifting away again as if they had never come in the first place, was filled with neglect, empty apartments, ground floor windows crammed side by side, offering views onto little boys and girls lying on their stomachs, with their faces inches away from the TV sets. Nurit and I, the lone heroes of the present age, the only two children in the world who were outside then and there and for all I know, ever, went to the crossroads to meet our fortunes.

We got to the main street and were stopped by a rushing river of cars, zooming by at well over the 45mph speed limit. We turned left and walked parallel to them, each of us bearing a red solo cup like a peace offering, two small children walking beside a hurtling barrage of 2-ton killing machines. The sun was back in full force. It must have been late afternoon and we were

completely exposed. Sweat began dripping down the back of my neck. The street stretched ahead of us interminably into the distance, disappearing, it seemed, only where the horizon disappeared. At that point I thought I could make something out: not thing: person: a dark smudge of mystery on the horizon line, growing larger and larger.

A customer.

I must have said these words aloud, because Nurit snapped to attention, at the ready to assist in any way possible with my mission – no, *her* mission – to sell rocks.

“Nurit,” I said breathlessly, watching the smudge advance towards us, “Let’s do this.”

“OK,” Nurit said, and waited for further instruction.

The smudge was resolving itself into an adult (good, less likely to make fun of us) female (even better). I raised my hand up and the humanoid smudge raised its arm-like smudge up in response.

I was overcome with certainty. “*Nurit,*” I hissed again, insistently, “*that lady wants rocks!!*”

Saying this sentence out loud galvanized me into action. “I’ll go,” I said, and took off at a run.

Nurit never broke her stride, just continued in her steady measured pace. I flew.

I was running down the street to the lady and she was walking towards me and I felt like she was walking a little faster now, ever since seeing me. I felt like she knew that I had created something

beautiful. She knew that I had been injured, that I had been hit in the head with a giant fast-flying rock and that I was unwell. That I needed her help. She knew that I had something for her, something she would love to have, something she would pay to have, and she was just as happy as I was that this was all about to happen – I was running I was sure of it I

I arrived at her out of breath, and she was out of breath too, because she had also started running. This was it. I'd never been so sure of anything in my life. She had been running towards me, and she was smiling and laughing, I was gesturing wildly at my red solo cup while I ran, pointing at it, pointing at her, leaping up and down, and she was waving both of her arms about her head, jumping too, and letting out big peals of laughter that clanged and reverberated all the way down the infinite street, until I stopped up short just above her kneecaps, panting, dry heaving, almost weeping, or at least my eyes were tearing up from the effort of running, and I shoved the cup towards her, hiccoughed up something that tasted tangible in the back of my throat, retched, and said,

“Would you like to buy –”

And she was already saying, “Yes, yes! Yes, little one, calm now!” laughing, and wiping tears out of her own eyes, as she pried her wallet out of her fanny pack “—some rocks?”

She paused at that.

“Rocks?”

“Yeah we – well look, we painted them,” I gasped, swallowing the bile in my throat. I plunged my hand into the cup and fished around, snagged some rocks at random, proffered them to her.

“All colors.”

“Oh sweetheart,” she whooped, “Oh sweetheart.” She slapped her thighs and bigger tears popped into her eyes. “Oh no, sweetheart. I thought you were giving out lemonade. I don’t have any money for rocks.”

The rocks dropped from my outstretched hand in shock. She registered my poor response and considerately swallowed her laughter. She wiped her eyes one more time with the back of her hand. “Oh no, sweetheart, I’m sorry,” she said, “don’t cry.” I wasn’t crying. “Don’t cry honey. Those are some really beautiful rocks. Here, let me see.” I was still standing stick-straight in front of her, my arm still extended, proffering nothing, proffering nothing to nothing. I couldn’t move yet. She bent over and picked up the rocks for me. “These are so beautiful, really. I just don’t have any money left, you know? I don’t have anything sweetie. I wish I did. I was running to you just now because I was so thirsty in this summer heat – I’ve been walking home because I can’t even afford to spend so much as for the bus – I have to feed my boys – and it’s hot, beauty, it’s hot – oh – I thought a drink sounded nice – just once – I work hard – I deserve it – but I don’t have any money to spare on rocks, sweetie, not even a nickel – I’m sorry about that –”

I'll never be sure of anything again. I'll tell you that. It's bizarre now, even, to think back on it. Painful, almost. Even as I sit here in my jeweled tomb, the one I gave my soul for, insulated by plush rugs of fur, thick oak doors, silver candelabras and the solitary silences of self-sufficiency, I can't so much as bear to think of it. I turn the rock over in my manicured hand, admiring it almost as much as the baby soft skin of years of fastidious moisturizing maneuvering it, and run the pad of my finger over its worn gold texture. It still flakes into a fine dust on my mahogany desk top.

Because at that my moment my reality broke. When that woman dropped my hand, still frozen forever frozen in time in that desperate reach, clasped it against her bosom in repentance and then dropped it and hurried away, I realized nothing was ever real, and was ashamed to have ever thought otherwise. My rocks would never be of any value. They weren't beautiful, or worth millions, especially not in a place like Dorchester where nobody had any money. They were just some dumb things us babies had painted ugly muddy brown and imagined into being real. See the difference between babies and grownups is that babies still believe in their imagination. You know they've done studies on this sort of stuff? You make a kid imagine a thing, and later they'll think it's a real memory. That's why kids are so afraid of monsters under the bed and other adult inventions. They really have a memory of seeing it after an adult describes it to them. They have no way of telling the difference between stories and memories apart. But this story isn't about that. I told you already. This story is about the rocks.

Everyone would rather hear about the cult. I know, I know. They told me. But I just don't know what to say about that. The head of a great dead animal is hanging on the wall across from me, its glassy eyes flickering almost as if with life in the candlelight. I only write now by candlelight. I only exist now by candlelight. I only exist in absolute comfort. I can't really speak about the entire foundations of my belief dropping away from underneath me and leaving all of my rocks scattered in the gutter. As I turn this strange memento over in my head, I'm not even sure that ever happened.