

The rock

There was a rock in T.'s living room. Big, pointed, wide. It had appeared just like that, overnight, in the place previously occupied by a cat-hair-covered carpet.

T. tried to come to terms with it. He would have succeeded, too, if it weren't for a small remote part of him which could not convince itself, despite the evidence, that a rock could have suddenly materialised in his exceptionally normal living room, far from nature and the sea.

When he first saw it upon coming home from work, he almost paid no attention to it. But, dinnertime approaching, he was forced to walk through the living room to get to the kitchen, and then he had no choice but to acknowledge it – there was a rock in his house, placed there who knows how, obstructing his path and emanating a vague smell of salt water.

He thought that maybe he should call someone. He certainly wouldn't be able to remove the rock all by himself, especially since it seemed, upon closer inspection, to be slippery. There were tiny droplets of water scattered all over its surface, and T. had no desire whatsoever to come into contact with them.

But who to call? The plumber? A moving company? The police? This last idea was tempting. Come to think of it, though, the police would have no choice but to, in turn, call someone to remove the huge intruder. He bit his lip, restless, and pressed himself against the wall in order to circumvent the rock and reach the kitchen. A full belly makes thinking easier, he decided.

Dinner, however, did not help him at all. He regretted having bought smoked salmon, because the smell did nothing but remind him of the sea and of salt water and of the undeniable distance separating all of these things from his own small inland town. Yet would it have made any difference – he mused – if his had been a fishing village? After all, sea rocks did not wake up one day and decide to take root in someone's house. Right?

In the end, he decided his safest bet would be to knock on his neighbour's door. He was an elderly man he'd had very little contact with up to now, and whom, the general consensus was, was a bit 'out of it'. Come to think of it, that was probably the reason why T. had decided not to venture into neighbourly acquaintance beforehand, but in this particular instance, he didn't know where else to turn.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but there's a rock in my living room", he said when the old man cautiously opened the front door, after T. had rung the doorbell no less than three times.

"What?" spat the man in response.

"There's a – I have a bit of a problem. Is there any chance you could come up to my apartment and take a look? It'll only take a moment."

It took more than a moment, actually. The old man was not easily persuaded. He muttered that he was already wearing his nightgown, that he was in his slippers and that people no longer had a shred of respect for the elderly. But in the end, scowling and grumbling, he let himself be led upstairs and followed T. to his living room, dragging his feet.

"See?" said T., pointing. "It's been there since this afternoon. I don't know how it got there."

The old man squinted. "It *is* quite bad."

T. wrinkled his forehead. The rock was certainly annoying, but he wouldn't have defined it as 'bad'. The more he looked at it, actually, the more it appeared almost elegant to him. Stately.

"So, what did you want from me?" asked the old man curtly, rousing him from his musings.

"Well, I wanted to know if..." truth be told, he didn't really know. He shrugged. "You know nothing about it?" he asked at last.

"About your ugly couch? No."

"But I don't mean the couch! I'm talking about the rock."

The old man looked at him as if *he* were the fool out of the two of them. Then, without saying a word, he turned and with surprising rapidity retraced his steps through the apartment to the front door.

“Goodbye!” he shouted in not too kind a tone and slammed the door. T. stood for a moment stunned and staring in the direction in which the old man had disappeared. Perhaps the shock of seeing what looked like a miniature seaside cliff had been too much for him, he told himself. He turned around.

It was still there, realer than ever, with some seaweed clinging to its sides. Hesitantly, T. reached out and touched it. It was cold and damp. He withdrew his hand quickly.

“I have to go to bed,” he muttered to himself. “I need to get some sleep.”

The next day, the surprise he felt upon entering the living room was no less sharp than that which he’d felt the day before, if not more. In the daylight, the rock seemed even more out of place. It was a proper natural portent – not one of those small, innocent rocks you barely notice, no, this was the Romantic’s rock, fit to tower above a sea of fog and sustain the wandering-weary boots of a lonely traveller. T. touched it again. It was even wetter than the day before, it seemed. He hoped it wouldn’t stain the carpet that lay underneath. Repeating the same, strange action as the day before, he flattened himself against the wall and shuffled towards the kitchen. He drank two cups of coffee and dusted the table. It was Saturday today, and in the absence of work, he had to find a way to keep himself busy and keep his mind off his peculiar guest. All of a sudden, he thought he felt something damp brush against his ankle, and he jumped. He looked all over the place, but saw nothing unusual: no flying fish, no stray seaweed.

“How strange”, he murmured. “How very, very strange.”

Stranger still was the drizzle that began to fall from the ceiling at around noon. T. was about to blame it on broken pipes when he realised, with a jolt, that the drops were falling only in the living room, and instead of flooding the whole apartment they were creating a kind of small vortex around the rock.

“This is the last straw”, he said to himself. He called the police.

The man who answered the phone had difficulty understanding the situation.

“My ceiling is leaking,” said T.

“Call a plumber,” replied the man phlegmatically. “This is the police.”

“No, you don’t understand”, T. hastened to say. “I’m not calling about that. It’s just that the rain is creating a kind of... a kind of sea in my living room.”

“I repeat, sir, call a plumber.”

“But I’m telling you, my house is not flooded. It’s a real sea. There’s seaweed, and currents, and a rock...”

The man hung up.

T. remained for a long time with the telephone receiver in his hand, safe in the kitchen from the swirl of water rising and falling, driven round and round by an invisible tide.

He called his neighbour on his phone but got no answer. He tried the plumber, but apparently, he had taken the weekend off. He tried the police again, but after a two-minute wait the voice that answered him was no more patient than the previous one. So he tried to call his lawyer, his accountant, and a couple of other numbers he found in the yellow pages. The matter didn’t seem to pertain to anyone.

“An unknown object in the living room? Call the police.”

“They’re not answering? Try the fire department. They’re better suited for this kind of thing.”

So he called the fire department and waited, wringing his hands, for the sirens to signal their arrival. A new problem arose when his doorbell rang. He couldn’t answer the door, stuck as he was in the kitchen, and he hesitated to wade through the living room. Its water was now the height of his waist and looked stormy. On the fourth ring, he braced himself and took the plunge. The current seized him and knocked him against the rock a couple of times, giving him a few scratches, but he finally made it across and opened the front door breathlessly.

A big man made a move to enter, and T. stepped aside.

“Which way?” asked the man. T. pointed to the living room, although with all the noise the water was making the fireman could have easily guessed. The latter advanced with great strides and stopped short of the expanse of water that stopped at the living room’s threshold, as if held back from flowing

beyond by an invisible wall. "What was the reason for your call?" he asked in an even, booming voice.

T.'s knees almost gave out.

"Well, it— it was..." he stammered. "There's a — I mean, it's not like you see this every day!"

"See what?" huffed the policeman.

"W—well the rock of course!" blurted T.

"The rock?"

"Yes, and the sea!"

"Sir, I see not rock here. And no 'sea', as you say."

"But touch it!" burst out T. "Feel it! There's water!"

The firefighter did not even try to reach out with his hand. He turned to T. and fixed him with a perturbed stare. "Is this some kind of joke?"

T. didn't answer. The water had by now almost reached the ceiling, completely barring the access to the kitchen. He stood staring at it wide eyed and shaky.

"Excuse me", he blurted out suddenly and almost involuntarily — "would you do me a favour? Could you check the kitchen, please?"

The man gave him a sidelong glance but curtly nodded. Before T. had time to think about what he'd done, the man crossed the threshold of the living room and was immediately engulfed by the waves. His eyes widened with astonishment before he was swept away by the current. T. made an inarticulate sound. The poor fellow would drown, and it was his fault. Gathering his courage, he took a deep breath and dove headlong into the room.

The water was freezing cold and surprisingly dark. Getting his bearings was difficult, but he managed to catch sight of the imposing, pointed side of the rock and pushed his feet against it to direct himself to the window. Dizzy with adrenaline, he grabbed hold of its handle and forced it open with all his might. Water leapt out, and with a tremendous roar an enormous waterfall took shape from his apartment to the street below. T. was so relieved by its rapid escape that he barely noticed the body of the firefighter sliding out of the window, down towards the street. He grasped furiously at the man's shoes, trying to stop his fall, but to no avail, they slipped out of his reach and the body slid downwards. T. went to grasp the windowsill and look below, but he lost his nerve at the last moment and closed his eyes instead, slamming the window shut behind him.

The next day, quite a crowd had gathered at T.'s house. Dr M. declared it must have been a psychotic episode. Neighbours had heard T. screaming frantically all night; some said he was singing some kind of old fisherman's song, others argued they heard him crying.

"He must have taken off in the morning," the doctor declared. "Maybe he'll come back. Maybe he won't. Either way, this will make quite the story."

T. watched them all from the top of his rock. It had taken him a good hour and plenty of hard-headedness to climb it, but once he had, the waters all around had seemed to calm down, as if stilled by an invisible hand. By now, only an occasional wave would knock a few things off the furniture, which floated around his living room together with all of the strangers.

"We can put together a search party, but I don't know if that'll help", said a policeman, drifting on his back towards a lamp.

"He was really out of it, I tell you," the old man was telling the doctor as they bobbed towards the kitchen.

If they keep it up, they'll crash onto dry land, thought T.. But he said nothing. He had realised by then that they could no longer hear him; in fact, they didn't even know he was there. No one seemed to look at the rock. Not even a glance upwards, towards the spot where he had settled with his legs crossed and his arms folded on his chest to observe the events below.

After a few hours, the house became deserted again. The guests had left, sailing towards the safety of the door. No one had thought of climbing on the rock so as not to get their shoes wet, though.

Their loss, thought T.

He let his feet dangle until they brushed against the water. He sat staring at them as his rock rose higher and higher, and the ocean around him grew ever larger.