

ROBERT LAKE

ROCK OF AGES

ESAU TROTS ROUND THE CORNER OF THE CHICKEN RUN. His sisters are whispering. Freeze!

“Esau, honey, let’s visit the rock.”

Oh, oh, Maggie called him honey. Better hide. Norm Ellis, who farms on the second concession, claims he can’t tell the identical twins apart, but Esau can: Mary’s fingers are gentler when she tickles him. Maggie brags that Daddy was away in Germany killing that bad man, Hitler, when Esau was born. That makes Esau a bastard, whatever that is.

“But, Daddy, Esau always knows which one of us it is, especially in the dark,” the sisters protest, when he claims Esau, like his Grandpa, is a born bullshitter.

Six decades later the chubby nurse, monitoring three leads attached to Esau’s chest, draws the curtains across the glass sidewalls of his cubicle. An oxygen mask dangles from the headboard and an intravenous line leads from a bag to his left arm. Time’s got a rocket launcher up its ass, he feebly chuckles, remembering Mommy’s constant complaint that Mary and Maggie’s pranks will land them in honey or jail.

“Both,” Grandpa always replied.

“My bride should see that rock preening by the urine bag,” thinks Esau, wondering what blew through the beleaguered mind of his wife of forty years as cancer nibbled her ovaries. Did he succeed in hiding the revulsion the blotches and liver spots on her hand in his provoked? Did he fetch her consolation?

“You were never a comforting man,” charges the rock, floating ponderously above Esau. One evening, as Esau dozed at her bedside, Nellie croaked that Gandhi—the one in that movie that starred that Ben Kingsley—called death our compassionate friend.

“My compassionate friend’s damn tardy,” Esau complains to the rock.

“Contrition might summon him,” snipes the rock.

“My memories are not lies,” Esau bellows.

“Did you call?” asks the nurse.

“Sentimental whoppers,” insists the rock.

Grandpa boasts that when his grandfather came to Canaan County from Nova Scotia, enough rocks were strewn among the trees he felled to build the Great Wall of China, whatever that is, to the blue moon—Esau knows what that is, but wonders if there are any little walls of China—and back. Grandpa must be fibbing. That rock’s not big enough to tell the time from its shadow even in the dark. Even Grandpa fibs!

Maggie and Mary hoist Esau aboard, he peers down, trembles, and his sisters hoot when he pops down, running his hand along the jagged white crack that almost splits the rock in two. That’s white gold, the twins whisper, which stingy Grandpa is hoarding for a rainy day, if the Depression comes back.

Wouldn’t an umbrella be better?

“Get me down,” Esau weeps.

“We’ll teach you a song,” says Maggie.

“I got Grandpa’s belt for your last song.”

“We’ll lift you down the instant you learn our hymn,” promises Mary.

Finally, Esau gets it right. One more time but louder, orders Maggie, and Esau shouts: “*Rock of ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.*” He hesitates. The next line seems dangerous. “*So I don’t have to go to stupid church.*”

“You devils are blaspheming,” roars Grandpa.

“We thought you were ploughing the back forty,” says Maggie, mocking Grandpa’s favourite expression.

Esau’s sisters better buy him a cornerib of chocolate to pay for this. They knew Grandpa was in Bessie’s stall, nowhere near the back forty.

The rock morphs to a cornerib, provoking Esau to yell fuck off, who needs a smart-ass rock in intensive care? The nurses never see the rock. A busybody told Esau that cursing nurses is inappropriate. There’s no point in explaining he was cursing the rock. I’m finished if they decide I’m crazy, Esau fears.

“You’re a goner no matter what and you never sang Rock of Ages on me,” says the rock. “And the twins didn’t teach you that line about stupid church.”

“Did so,” counters Esau.

“Pardon?” asks Gloria, the Caribbean nurse, the only one with a head on her shoulders, Mommy would have said.

“Your bigoted Grandpa caught you singing that in the barn. He was looking at women’s underwear in the Eaton’s catalogue he hid in Bessie’s manger,” says the rock.

The twins did so teach me that song, thinks Esau, and Grandpa never masturbated.

“Sure, sure,” answers the rock. “Grandpa and Esau never did anything bad. The twins provoked them.”

Asshole rock.

Miss Leary says the boulders strewn across Canaan County have sat there for eons, writing a date on the blackboard. A retreating glacier, leeching cold and strength, deposited them. The Rock of Ages isn’t stuffed with gold, just a worthless obstacle because Grandpa’s team of four can’t budge it.

“Farm’s are lonely and nose-y,” Mommy tells Esau daily after Grandpa dies and Daddy moves back, claiming that in town people have private phones. No busybodies listen on party lines. Reverend Rowan will visit Saturday to chat about the rumours that Mary and Maggie have been seen in parked cars.

“My father would spin in his grave,” Mommy protests.

“So what?” groan the sisters.

“Look Rebecca, I can’t buy machinery to make furniture without a mortgage. It’s that simple,” shouts Daddy.

“It’s my farm,” Mommy screeches.

“And you’ll do as you’re told,” Daddy threatens.

“Nobody wants bogus antique couches,” she replies, as she flinches.

Daddy sneers, “City idiots do. The big smoke’s sweeping like a tidal wave toward Canaan. Land’s appreciating; I’ll make a million.”

“Mary and Maggie will end up millionaires when I’m rotting in my grave.”

“Sounds fair,” quips Maggie.

“Not the grave part, Mommy. Just the million,” says Mary.

“Don’t worry, Esau, we’ll cut you in. Vets don’t make that much,” says Maggie.

“Vet?”

“I guess I should have told you, Daddy. I’ve applied to Guelph,” says Esau, who knows Maggie has snitched because he refused to buy her condoms in town. He tried once. Never again.

“Daddy, Esau’s got to be better at yanking a foetus out of a sweaty cow than sanding furniture,” argues Mary.

Real estate was my calling, Esau confides to the floating rock, which today appears as the twins’ collie, run over by the truck picking up Norm Ellis’ milk cans. Addled dog had it coming, Daddy said, as he dug a grave.

“There was too much farm boy in me,” Esau says, recalling how vets became pet doctors as suburbs gorged on farmland.

“What?” asks the nurse.

“I polish my shoes every morning, but they still feel like there’s a bit of muck on them,” Esau said to suburbanites, seeking property. They loved his name. “You’re descended from pioneers,” enthused one client, whose cosmetic surgeon kept perennially thirty-five.

Except for her scrawny neck, real wrinkled, the floating rock reminds Esau and trumpets, “You never could deliver a calf and Nellie sold twice the real estate you did.”

“You bugger,” says Esau, hoping the nurse didn’t hear. Bloody rock is senile. Esau took his bride into his agency only so Nellie could escape her childless home. Rocks don’t know squat.

Esau pumps Norm’s chest, finding it odd that his first patient is human, not a cow in labour.

“I bought a table from your sisters last week,” Nellie says at Norm’s funeral. Esau wonders how a plain woman can be so sexy. Her smile? Nope, everybody’s got a smile of one sort or another. Before she died, Mommy warned that a bookish wisp is useless on a farm.

“Mary suggested my name would look good chiselled on the Rock of Ages,” Nellie grins.

Mary can leap into a cow pie. Maggie too. Mommy’s will is still stuck in Esau’s craw. The sisters received the flourishing furniture business; Esau was left only Rock of Ages Farm, where every one of the farm’s owners, all Esau’s ancestors, their wives and children’s names are chiselled into the rock.

“That’s why they never divorce. Too hard sanding off the wife’s name,” Norm, who might have survived if his tractor hadn’t pitched him nose down in a puddle left by the worst spring flooding in decades, perennially joked.

“The city sandbagged us,” Esau tells the floating rock, which today mimics guests, some friends, most clients, tucking into the huge buffet laid out to celebrate Esau and Nellie’s thirtieth anniversary. “Remember when everybody had nicknames: Rocket Richard, the Brown Bomber, Whitey Ford, Lefty Gomez. Suburbanites hate nicknames.”

“They don’t even shorten their names,” the rock mutters disdainfully. “Remember that little girl? She wasn’t Connie, she was Constanza. You liked little girls too much.”

“No!”

“Quiet down,” the nasty nurse suggests.

“To your credit you strayed just once,” says the rock.

“I was just helping her change,” asserts Esau.

“Norm Junior’s defence was clever,” says the rock.

“It’s disgusting when a community leader needs a big mouth lawyer,” shouts Esau.

“Hush,” orders the nurse.

Why should Esau hush? Reeve Norman Ellis Junior, demoted to alderman when the provincial government forced Canaan County to amalgamate, was always sniffing Nellie and that bloody rock better not say “upon invitation.” He wanted Nellie to run for the legislature.

“Who’s there?” Esau says. “What time?”

“Pull on your pants,” Nellie orders the night of their wedding.

Befuddled, he grabs blankets and follows her across the stubble to the rock. He undresses her and, as she mounts him, laughs.

“You find me funny?” asks Nellie.

“No. No. Grandpa always said we had enough rocks to build a stone wall to the blue moon.”

“A stone fireplace would make a lovely wedding present,” she whispers, and he promises to start one when he recovers from his wedding night.

The rock insists on morphing into the futon of Amelia Yu, “a tiny Chinese doll” exclaim clients about Esau’s agency’s top saleswoman.

“Nellie sold more. You pole-axed her, she was that gored,” the rock accuses. Esau claims the affair lasted only three months; Nellie forgave him immediately, there was no mention of divorce. She agreed to forget politics, he’d be home more.

“Amelia fucked you for a year, literally and figuratively. Good thing Nellie kept the books. She ordered you to sandblast her name off me,” the rock replies.

Esau can’t remember what the rock just said. Who but Mary would marry in her seventies for the first time?

“Gene deserved an easier death,” Esau says.

The rock, not disapprovingly, claims the sisters sped Mary’s husband to his Maker by holding a cleaning bag over his head.

“No way. They turned Catholics,” Esau says.

“Must have been the first time they scandalized themselves more than their neighbours,” chuckles the rock.

“They never were whores,” roars Esau.

“Fair enough. They never charged.”

“I built Nellie her fine stone fireplace.”

“Too bad it never drew properly.”

Prick rock. Winds always swirled ferociously on that hill. Not even Grandpa managed to build a fireplace that didn’t belch.

Esau’s finally chisels Nellie’s name on the rock on their third anniversary, the first she’s not recovering from a miscarriage.

“Maybe I’ll try real estate,” he says.

“People trust you, God knows why. And, going to work for the twins won’t work now that Maggie’s married her foreman.”

“Nellie, talk to them.”

Esau’s bowling team jokes that Maggie’s husband can’t tell the twins apart. No need: both welcome him to their beds.

“Leave them be,” Nellie says.

The rock hunches behind the urine bag to avoid hearing what Esau mumbles. None of the names of Nellie’s babies are chiselled on the rock. Two miscarriages, the next stillborn, and Nellie found Isaac’s cherished body cold in a crib a month before his first birthday, screamed Esau should do something, do something, for god’s sake do something for a change, oh, Lord, my baby’s dead, and after the funeral agreed to sell the farm.

“Too bad the last time you made love by me it wasn’t a blue moon,” sighs the rock.

“Cynics always got a sentimental streak,” observes Esau.

“I won’t chisel no damn names on it, neither,” Bob Dean volunteers, accepting a gentleman’s agreement not to bulldoze the rock.

“It’s offensive,” says Nellie, angry when the twins snitch that Bob’s nursery workers tell customers that NELLIE had to be chiselled twice because lightning struck the rock, creating the white crack. Bob’s suburban customers are nomads, impressed by a rock that reeks of roots.

“I made you chisel my name again; you took a day to sand it off; tell Bob to stop bullshitting,” Nellie fumes, but Esau doesn’t. His clients, many single women, divorced or having decided to skip the formality of a husband altogether, have confidence in a man, whose name is chiselled below those of his ancestors, giving him substantiality in an increasingly insubstantial world.

“Why aren’t your children’s names on the rock?” they ask. Esau directs their attention to basements and kitchens and mortgages, wondering how they manage soaring interest rates. The last one he arranged was 17 per cent with only a one-year term.

You okay?” the new nurse, filling out the chart at the end of Esau’s bed, whispers. Maybe she’s shouting. Esau no longer can tell.

“I wonder if she’d find making love by a rock under a blazing sun cute or silly or disgusting,” Esau asks the rock.

“This one’s too professional,” replies the rock. “She’d just recommend a sun tan lotion to protect you and Amelia against ultra violet rays.

That rock’s got a good sense of humour for a rock, thinks Esau, resenting the rock’s reminder that after the trial Nellie ran the agency. Suburban moms find a man charged with sexual molestation repugnant, even if found not guilty.

“My integrity reversed that,” Esau contends.

“No, time and boredom,” says the rock.

The only time Esau visits, Gene Mobley apologizes for his daughter’s behaviour. When Gene bought Dean Nurseries, he’d agreed nothing would be chiselled on the rock, plump in the middle of the riding ring his daughter, Jessica, built near her horse stables. Jessica and her lover violated Gene’s promise.

“Doubly wrong,” mutters Gene. “She and her girlfriend aren’t married and I own the farm, not Jessica. Anyway, sell it. They’ve broken up. Jessica’s taking off for England, ‘too too’ ashamed of her jailbird Dad. Hell, all I did was fiddle my taxes.”

“Forget it,” says Esau, calculating the commission on 150 acres in the middle of what Nellie calls darkest suburbia. Nellie didn’t t much like Jessica’s lover, too dainty a woman even for gentrified farming, but harboured no doubts about Jessica, who ran a real stable, put in hard hours and kept the farm from being paved over.

“And Jessica pays her Mexican stable hands decent wages, which you can’t say about the pittance those suburban women bestow on their Filipino nannies,” Nellie says. She knows without his saying so that her resentment of women with children to hand over to nannies is unfair. He knows without her saying so that men who like little girls have high recidivism rates.

Esau relates the valour of Nellie’s death. After a while, the rock says, “I wish I could have been there to help.” Esau assures the rock it did what it could. “Up until near the end, I drove her most days to the hill so she could see you.”

“Your gallantry surprised everybody. Your grandfather spoiled you,” says the rock.

“He strapped me!” Esau shouts.

“One licking a month and thirty days of pampering.”

“Was I really a bastard? I mean ... was Daddy on leave?”

“I don’t know if you’re your father’s son or not,” snaps the rock.

You do so, thinks Esau. Sooner or later snoops ferret out everything.

The billboard announces that Yorkshire Properties will build 140 stores and a world-class aquarium.

“Well, that’s the end of the rock of ages,’ Esau says, surprised he doesn’t care. He hasn’t cared about much since Nellie died. When he rang Amelia, she laughed he was too ancient and too stingy to start up again.

“Corporations aren’t gentlemen,” YP’s lawyer replies, when Esau mentions the agreement not to disturb the rock.

Esau tells the floating rock he thought PRP would be the end of it.

“Float like a butterfly, squat like a mountain,” replies the rock.

“You’re an arrogant SOB,” charges Esau.

“Pioneer Rock Plaza! What a jackass name for a temple to consumer greed.”

I should have tried dentistry, Esau thinks, as he contemplates the gorgeous smiles and inviting bums of the junior-high cheerleaders at the official opening of Pioneer Rock Plaza. YP’s CEO, Jake Cosgrove, invites Esau to accompany him to the centre of the vast courtyard, where purple curtains dangle from the dome. The crowd applauds as Esau pulls a velvet cord. The curtains float to the atrium’s dome.

“My Japanese architect convinced me to make your rock the centre of the Jake Cosgrove Courtyard. Had to change the name. Marketing says Rock of Ages might offend those of different faiths,” Jake says.

“Must have been quite a job moving it here,” says Esau, slightly wet from the spray of fountains that spout so artistically that the cheerleaders have no difficulty squealing on cue. The names are all there: Esau, Nellie, the twins, Mommy, Daddy, Grandpa, and their ancestors.

“Where’d Jessica’s name go?” he asks Jake.

“Who?”

One of Jake’s flunkys quickly draws Esau away, explaining YP removed Jessica’s name because she wasn’t a pioneer. “Tradition’s so very special to everyone at Yorkshire Properties,” she smiles confidentially.

“Gay names up there might generate more controversy than me singing Rock of Ages right here and now, eh,” Esau says amiably, and turns to shake Gene Mobley’s tanned veined hand. Esau scans the stores ringing Jake Cosgrove Courtyard. Holt Renfrew! That must be about where he first saw Nellie, climbing over the stone fence with Norm Junior. Naw, there’s no way of telling.

“They should put that damn boulder out of its misery,” he mutters.

“You wouldn’t be such a cranky geezer, if you’d just move into a smaller place near us,” says Mary.

“Being cheek by jowl near two sisters who are the scandal of their gated community would cheer me up?” he gibes to comfort them. His sisters no longer possess the stamina to scandalize their neighbours. What did Nellie say? Oh, yeah, new converts are holier than the Pope. The twins love watching Papal visits on their big-screen TV. That TV’s so great, Maggie claims she’s not marrying again: being widowed thrice is enough for any woman.

“If we ever need a man around the house again, it’s time Mary went looking.”

“At first being photographed all the time was exciting,” the rock replies. “But in the end people come and go, wilderness becomes farms, and farms become Pioneer Rock Plazas. Means nothing to us rocks.”

Obviously, thinks Esau, rocks aren’t people, nothing moves them, and wishes he could stop breathing.

No! It’s not obvious. It’s not obvious at all. Glaciers move rocks! Esau realizes why he wakes eagerly to experience a few moments of alertness daily. It’s not the same rock! What was Nellie always saying? Or is it in one of her books. You can’t step into the same river twice. Course you can, I do it every day, Esau told her. No, Nellie said. Water constantly flows, the river’s always changing.

“I never pressed my face into the same creek to watch the minnows,” says Esau to the rock, who cautions Esau should leave philosophy for his betters. “You’re not the same rock. You’re always changing like the river, even though we can’t see it. You won’t even be the same rock in a minute.”

“Of course, I’m the same. Gouges, erosion and the names chiselled into me are merely superficial nicks.”

“You changed every time I ran my hand along your white crack. You liked that. Jessica taught you to be more tolerant. Becoming Pioneer Rock hardened you.”

“Fiddlesticks,” replies the rock, Nellie’s expression. “You’re the same being as the boy that visited me every day.”

“No, that Esau hasn’t existed for decades. But, I was—I mean him, the boy Esau, he was a nice little boy, wasn’t he?” asks Esau plaintively.

“None better,” replies the rock. Grandpa fibbed; so do rocks, Esau realizes.

“We couldn’t bear remaining the same,” Esau mumbles.

“I’ll concede you touched Amelia’s little girl only once,” says the rock.

“Amelia took revenge for Nellie firing her,” Esau counters.

“Yes, but you were guilty.” “No!”

“Yes. But just once, just once, mind you. Not many can claim holding their reins that tight.”

Well, I can’t keep talking sense into a rock forever, thinks Esau, and ceases gasping eternally.