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an excerpt of

Four Kinds of Forgetting

THE day Skolly has his stroke, he's out with Connor and Marian gathering rock. The trio has gotten out of the truck to look at a boulder. "It's too big, Connor," Marian says.

"Yeah, but look at it," Connor says.

"It's too big."

"Think how it would look in your wall," Connor insists. "Just let me feel it with the bar." He goes back to the truck, retrieves the digging bar, returns, stabs it under a lip of the big rock, and pries. Like a giant tortoise awakening, the lifting boulder pulls away from the hem of sod surrounding it.

"I'll be damned," Skolly says. This is the first time he's gone out with them to get rock.

"But it'll take forever," Marian says.

"Picture it at the corner," Connor says, "with a beret of firecracker phlox."

Skolly watches on, imagines her imagining as she makes a humming sound, lifts her eyebrows. She's wearing a red blouse, the color of her flower. *Mimulus lewisii*—the red monkey flower—lives along fast tumbling water.

Averaging the conflict of their hand signals, Connor backs the flatbed up to the boulder. They unload the ropes and planks, then gather a small pile of melon-sized rocks. Connor uses one for a fulcrum and levers the boulder up. On her knees, Marian pushes another rock beneath. Following her lead, Skolly squats on the other side of the bar and pushes a rock under from there. Working thus, they angle one end of the boulder up, then slide two of the planks beneath and prop their other ends on the truck bed. Marian threads the ropes over and under the boulder and ties the ends to the bumper.

"This one's going to break the planks," she says.

“Naw.” Connor slips the ropes through the stake pockets on either side of the truck bed, takes up the slack on one side, and hands an end to Skolly. Skolly’s got fifteen years on them. Marian pulls the other rope tight and waits while Connor plunges the bar in under the lowermost edge of the stone and levers forward. The rock edges up one plank. Marian takes in the slack. “One more,” he says. He eases off and the rock holds. He sets the bar again and gets another couple of inches of movement up the plank. Marian cinches the rope and then watches as Connor repeats the process on Skolly’s side.

Skolly keeps the rope tight, but the plank on his side is bowing badly. “She’s right,” he says. “I don’t think it’ll take the weight.”

Connor inspects it. In his midforties, he is a paradox of movement—wiry with an aura of certain strength yet feminine in the delicacy of his movement, his hands lifted slightly. He says, “Let’s try another bump.”

“See how Connor listens,” she says. Her black bangs flutter in the breeze. Skolly watches her.

“It’s either that or give up,” Connor says.

“So break the plank.”

Connor sets the bar and levers. The plank buckles with a sound like rifle fire. The boulder flips off, rests on an edge. “Damn,” he says.

Marian, pursing her lips, shoots a victory glance at Skolly.

“Damn,” Connor says again.

Marian drops the rope, hoists herself up to sit on the edge of the flatbed. Connor won’t look at her lording it over him.

“Why don’t you take Marge out?” Marian had asked Skolly when he called that morning. Friend Marge works at the fish hatchery. “Bring her along today.”

“Quit trying to mate me. You can’t drive four in a pickup anyway.” Francine, his wife of twenty-nine years, has been gone now for fourteen months. Seventeen have passed since her diagnosis.

Connor tilts his head, as if catching the boulder in the right perspective will tell him what to do. “Should’ve put the jack under that plank. Why didn’t you tell me to do that, Skolly?” Connor picks up the broken board.

They turn at the sound of an approaching truck. Connor kicks the ropes off the gravel lane. A loaded logging truck rounds the corner above, slows to pull around them but then stops alongside, brakes hissing and squealing.

The driver leans out his window. “Trouble?”

“No,” Connor says. “We were just trying to collect this rock.”

The man's brows pinch. Skolly can read his perplexity. Connor is gathering the rope, his long hands and fingers trailing flourished wakes; there's the womanly tilt his head always seems to take, the way his hip tilts.

"It's for a wall," Marian says. "A kind of rock-garden wall in my yard."

The man's eyes snag on her. "That's a lotta rock." He says the word *raw-ock* with a diphthong slur of contempt. Skolly knows the look: the man is wondering what she's doing in the company of a middle-aged Peter Pan like Connor and an old gaffer. *My yard*—that's what the driver picked up on.

"What're you going to do?" Skolly asks her.

Connor wends around the back of the truck, strips the other rope out of the stake pocket and begins coiling it. "Pat it on the head and drive away," she says. The rock is pocked and belted with grooves, striped and splotched with pincushion clumps of virescent moss on a surface of gouged, obdurate black.

"I can put that in for you," the truck driver says to Marian.

Connor lays the rope on the truck bed. In tandem, the three of them consider the self-loader folded over the cab and the front end of the logs. "That would be nice," she says.

The driver sets his brake, opens the door of the still idling truck, and climbs to the top of the cab, where he seats himself before a panel of levers. Accompanied by a sudden squeal, the goose-necked jaws unfold and dip directly to the boulder. The forceps nudge the rock level and then, mouthing it gently, lift it like an egg. When the boulder clunks down on the flatbed, the truck creaks and rolls. In moments, the driver has repackaged his steel mantis and dismounted to the ground. He joins the trio to examine the rock.

"So where do I go to see this in your yard?" he asks Marian. She gives him directions without looking at him.

The truck departs, its roar fading below in the canyon.

Skolly turns to get into the cab, but that's when the earth banks, the horizon upends. He finds himself on his back, Marian bent over him. Then it's all piece-meal: in the jouncing truck, the clunk of the boulder rocking in the bed, a wheelchair banging across a threshold at the emergency room, the white-sheeted bed in a white-sheeted room, a square of whitened sky in the window. Complicated flashbacks, intact as continental fragments, drift by in purview. . . .