THE STONE

Joseph Sale

BUT CHRIST, it was a fucking big toad. It squatted in the sere gorse sprouting from the clifftop like the last few desperate remnants of hair on a balding man's pate. The toad's flesh was shiny and multicoloured, as though it'd been baptised in petrol. The benevolent look on its face didn't quite detract from how slimy it was.

The toad was maybe just larger than a football, freakishly big. Cassandra couldn't take her eyes off it, but she was also a good deal repulsed. Mark stood behind her with shameless cowardice, so goggle-eyed it was comic.

"Do you think it's radioactive?" he whispered, as though worried the toad might hear and take offence. "I'm getting distinct Godzilla vibes."

"Well, it's almost certainly poisonous. I wouldn't touch it for a million quid."

The toad let out a deep-throated croak. It sounded vaguely like approval. That done, it hopped away from them in a lumbering motion, moving deeper into the gorse.

"What the hell is it doing here?" Mark asked.

Cassandra was wondering the same thing. The cliffs overlooking Bournemouth beach were certainly a place of natural beauty: the dense briar formed a tangled forest for tiny mammals to scurry through, and even one or two goats. Below them golden sand met waves redolent of the Mediterranean on a good day: turquoise greens and blues, crystalline sapphire, and occasionally deep emerald. The horizon was a vagueness where sky and sea seemed to meet and become one. But, for all this, it wasn't the place one expected to find a toad. They weren't saltwater creatures. And the cliffs were miles from the nearest pond or lake.

"It's left something," Cassandra said.

There was a gleaming object where the toad had previously sat.

"Probably a shit, dear."

"No, no, it's glowing . . . "

"Radioactive shit?"

Cassandra gave him a "shut up" look and he obliged. She stepped off the clifftop path and waded through nettles and sharp branches to reach the spot where the toad had been sitting.

Nestled in the bright gorse and tricksy thorns was what looked like a lump of meteorite.

Its surface was rough, knobbly and greenish, a little like the toad itself. The rock, for that's what it surely had to be, was perhaps the size of a beer can. There was a hole in either end.

The longer she looked, the more she saw. There were faint green veins coursing through the rock. If she squinted, the whole object seemed to emit a charged light, similar to the colours that smeared across the eyelid when she shut her eyes.

The cliffs were pale sandstone, and the quarries near Dorset were limestone; this certainly could not have come from around Bournemouth. It closely resembled an onyx gemstone, but the more she thought about it, the more she believed her original hypothesis was likely the most accurate: this was a meteor, and a fucking big one.

Without thinking, she reached out and grabbed it.

"Cassandra!"

The stone was shockingly cold to the touch, which she had not expected. As she wrapped her fingers around it, the luminous colours shone through the flesh of her hand.

"You're nuts," Mark said, faintly.

She rounded on him.

"This could be worth something." She had no intention of selling it, however.

"I thought you said you wouldn't touch it for a million quid?"

"That was the toad."

She traipsed back to him through the undergrowth, a little guiltily, pocketing the stone or meteor or whatever it was in her coat.

Mark put his arm around her, a conciliatory gesture, and the two walked on, continuing their usual route.

They took a zig-zagging path at Portman's Ravine down to the beach. They strolled along, smiling at dog walkers. Eventually, both caved and bought an ice cream: Mark a Magnum, and Cassandra a 99 Flake (they both moaned about how they were no longer 99p—the greatest marketing scam of the century). As the sun began to set behind the cliffs, lengthening the shadows over the water, they decided to call it a day. They bid farewell to the sea, which sighed in response, the sound of its tide soporific and melancholy. Yes, they had to go now or they'd end up kipping on the beach. Time was forever running out on these perfect moments.

They took the path back up Portman's Ravine and along the cliffs to

their car. They lived on the other side of the city, and it would only be a fifteen-minute drive home. Unfortunately, a lot could happen in fifteen minutes; worlds could fall and cultures could change.

They took this walk so regularly, and everything was so familiar—barring the toad and its stone—that Mark did not twig to the other car which had pulled out of the lot just after him. He didn't mark the three young men with resolute insanity on their faces. He didn't realise he was being tailed. Cassandra saw even less. She was inspecting the meteor in her hands, turning it over and feeling its ridges and seams—it was like reading braille. Its most defining feature was the circular hole that bore through its full width.

The big question she was now trying to answer was why did it have the hole? The rational answer was water-erosion, but the meteor was surely too big to have a perfect cylinder eroded through it lengthways. No. Someone had made the hole, which meant this wasn't a random hunk of rock that'd fallen from the sky, but a tool or instrument of some kind.

"I think aliens made this, Mark," she said, though not without humour.

Mark gave her a nervous sideways glance.

"Then should we be taking it home?"

"You worried about getting anal probed?"

"Always, Cass. Always."

"If anything bad happens, we'll go back there and throw it into the sea."

She knew she was lying even as she spoke, but she wasn't sure why the meteor had become so important to her. Maybe it was simply because it was the first time anything otherworldly or out of the ordinary had happened in her life. She worked in a marketing firm as a graphic designer, and had steadily climbed the ranks to team-lead. She'd married Mark pretty young. He was every bit the eligible candidate, an accountant with solid income and good prospects. Now they had started a mortgage on their first house, they were talking about children every other day. Her life was unfolding according to society's edicts with almost textbook orthodoxy.

And somewhere deep down it rankled.

The reason she had become a graphic designer was not because she wanted to have a stable job or work in marketing. It was only supposed to be a temporary thing on her path to becoming a digital fantasy artist. As a kid, the insane, psychedelic covers of *Make Your Myth* books by John Grant had blown her mind. That's what she'd wanted to do: make images that transported the viewer to other worlds.

But somehow, mundane life had snared her. She was in its hold, and it didn't want to let her go. Her only tie to her past self, a self in love—nay, worshipful—of the fantastic, was Mark's nerdiness. She was so grateful for him in that moment she could have cried.

"You okay?" he said.

Damn him for being so sensitive.

"Yeah," she replied. "Weird, but this has got me thinking about a whole bunch of things."

Mark nodded, as if this were perfectly reasonable.

They pulled into the driveway and Cassandra experienced something like relief as she put away the stone again.

"Netflix and chill?" he asked, putting a gentle, warm hand on her thigh.

He knew just how to cheer her up.

As Cassandra turned to the door, she sensed something was wrong. She could hear voices nearby, down the street.

"Just fuckin' waste 'em."

Her blood ran cold and suddenly the car—a metal protective shell—seemed the safest place to be; she withdrew her hand from the door-handle. This was a folly. She was no safer in than out. In fact, she was trapped.

"What the—?" Mark began.

Two young men appeared at his side of the car, and one in front of Cassandra. The chill that'd ran through her now became more of a paralysing venom. Her breaths squeezed out and in through clenched teeth. Her heart pounded.

There was a glint in the night, something metal.

A gun.

"Fuckin' do 'em, Aidy!"

The gunshot, followed by shattering glass, was the loudest sound she had ever heard. Once. Twice. She turned and saw Mark foaming at the mouth, blood soaking his shirt and splashed across the wheel, two bullet holes in his chest.

"Do 'em both!"

She didn't have time to scream as the third shot sent pain exploding through her belly. She uttered a kind of gargling sound as she attempted to shriek and blood filled her mouth.

"Go! Go!" one of the men urged.

They fled like shades into the night. Just before she heard a car door opening, one of them said, "You're in, Aidy. You've earned your stripes, mate."

An engine roared, and the car sped away without headlights.

She tried to wail, to scream. She touched her stomach, where the grisly puncture wound leaked crimson all over her jeans and the faux-leather seat. The pain was unbelievable, but the fear was greater; she was going to die, and Mark, Mark . . . No, he couldn't be dead.

She reached over, hands smeared and ghastly. She felt at his neck for a pulse. He did not stir at her touch. He was frighteningly still, like a crash test dummy.

"Mark . . . "

She called to him, but there was no response. Tears burned her eyes. What she felt now was a deeper pain than the bullet wound. That was a local pain, a pinprick of intensity that made her want to vomit; the grief, on the other hand, enveloped all of her like a dark, merciless sea.

Mark had no pulse. There was no life in Mark's still-open and glassy eyes. A bullet had gone through his heart.

Cassandra sobbed. She screamed at the senseless cruelty of it.

Through her maelstrom of pain, a quiet voice spoke.

Get it together. You have to do something.

Yes, call an ambulance. She'd read somewhere you could live for a long time with a stomach wound. She could yet survive . . .

A darker voice answered the first.

But what's the point in that?

Everything she had lived for lay dead next to her. And those men . . . she shook with agonising rage. What she wouldn't do to get them. Kill them, even. Her whole life she had been a gentle soul, but now some terror had been awoken in her that longed for vengeance of the most despicable and bloody kind.

But what could she tell the police? She'd seen no license plate, not even the make of the car. If she was honest with herself, she could not even recall the men's faces, it'd happened so fast, and they had been hooded and masked.

The tears came anew, each one like extracting a bullet.

She searched her coat pocket for a tissue with the absurd notion of stymying the flow of blood. Her fingers found the stone. She took it out and regarded it. In the midst of her suffering the object only seemed to hold greater fascination. She thought she could see green flames licking from its surface, but perhaps that was just blood loss. Her bloodied hands left it wetted. It shone dire and true in this, her darkest night.

Suddenly, she knew what she had to attempt. Maybe it would be the last thing she ever did, but it was now the only path available to her. Her life had taken a strange deviation from the comfort of the norm, and now she had to answer in kind.

With Herculean effort, she forced open the car door. She staggered out into the freezing night air. Lurching like a zombie, she made her way around the car over to Mark's side. She pulled open the door.

She bit her lip, drew in a deep, painful breath. She undid Mark's seatbelt and pulled. He was tougher to shift than she thought, but eventually he tumbled out of the driver's seat and into their driveway, an ignorable heap.

"I'm sorry, my love."

The pain in her belly was an ocean current, inescapable and dragging

her down; she had undoubtedly torn something as she wrenched Mark out of the car.

Lifting one leg into the car was a challenge. She had to hold onto the hand-straps above the door and slide herself into the vehicle like an old woman. The seat was wet with Mark's blood and her own. She pulled the door shut. She was in. A miracle.

She lay the stone on her lap.

It was only a fifteen-minute drive. She had just enough strength.

The sky was black and almost starless as she pulled into the small parking lot abutting the cliffs. The only exception was the Dog Star, Sirius, which shone like a ghastly beacon, guiding Cassandra to what she knew would be her grave.

She staggered out of the car and slammed the door shut; it reverberated in the dead silence with the ominous rumble of a toad's croak.

Silent? How ridiculous to think it. The gush and hiss of the sea below was a constant sound, an inescapable roil.

Her life was out of control, and so now the only thing left to do was submit. How often had she and Mark come to the coast to walk? It had been their Sunday morning service, their worship. How fitting her pilgrimage ended here, as foretold by the star-toad.

She stumbled across the road, over a grassy knoll, and towards the uprising of briar that marked the cliff's perilous edge. Anyone watching from one of the million-pound houses overlooking the bluffs would have thought she was blind drunk. They might have even mistaken the dark stone clutched tightly in her hands as a bottle.

Through the sharp tangles—for what did she care about a few cuts now?—until she reached the very end. Below her, around two-hundred feet, sand reached out to touch a void. The black waters rolled in like an army. The Dog-Star was twinned in the waters with its counterpart above, glaring down from the heavens in judgement.

Sea air whipped her face, filled her lungs. One step and it would all be over. The gulls would pick her clean.

But one more thing she must do first.

She drew up the bloodied stone—which was no stone but a horn—and blew. The sound it made was not of this Earth, a cosmic wailing that seemed at once like the sonorous speech of cetaceans in the deepest abyss, and the sharp keening of birds of the high arctic.

A wind struck the clifftops, nearly destabilising Cassandra, but she dropped to all fours, planting her hands, a posture of obeisance. The wind

carried with it not just the tang of saltwater, but something else, a smell of sweet voids.

As she breathed raggedly through the pain, it took her a moment to realise what had occurred.

The sea had stopped.

The tide was halted, as though Time had been arrested. The waters were as glacial and motionless as a windless lake, stretching to black infinity. Yet the wind was now picking up force, battering the cliffs with potent gusts. There was some kind of red mist in the wind.

Not mist, *sand.*

Sand soaked in . . . blood?

She knew, though not sure how, that this was not sand from the beach below, but from some other realm more strange than any she could imagine; more strange than the covers of her beloved *Make Your Myth* stories. A laugh came to her then as the wind blasted with shocking power, sweeping gorse and weed flat in humility. Cassandra shielded her face with bloodied hands against the grit blowing in from another universe. Before her eyes, her hands were changing . . .

Below, the sea was stirring again. Not with the tide, but with forms. Black and hunched, pelagic and eyeless, they rose from the dark sea in ranks as numberless as the banished stars. After them came greater shapes, living cities hobbling on crustaceous legs; hidden continents returning from the deep to wage undying war. She had summoned them. For vengeance. But more than that, for *change.*

Beyond these titans was something greater by far, a secret glimpsed only by the few: at the place where she had always fantasised sea and sky met, there *was* a meeting point, a black line that seemed like a stitch, uniting every element, every force, and every dimension both seen and unseen. That stitch seemed to grow as she focused on it, no longer minute, but towering above comprehension.

The black line looked like a toad's vertical pupil. She tried to laugh again at the comparison, but this time her throat failed. A guttural croak caused her to look around. They were here, a host of toads, all of them as grotesquely large as the one she had found earlier that day, a lifetime ago. There were tens—no, hundreds—and all of them stared with single-minded concentration upon the black sigil at the end of all reality, growing larger as its armies marched up the shores. The myriad yellow eyes were each imprinted with a Tower of their own.

Cassandra tried to speak, but she could not. Her pain was gone. She was no longer Cassandra. Her flesh shone with oily luminescence. Her webbed feet were firm and unshaking. She, too, was a star-toad, one of the thousands now gathered in the cliffs.

Witness to the end of Time.