

*Painted Rocks*

I first met Jeffrey on my way back from Charles Lake beach on the trail that connects the lake to Shubie Park parking lot in Dartmouth. Meeting him changed the way I thought about life, and our short existence, forever. Although I never understood why he chose me.

He showed up pushing an empty wheelbarrow and dressed in what looked like a mini-farmer costume from the last century. Despite his apparent 5 or 6 years, he didn't look lost or scared.

"Hi, what's your name? What are you doing here alone? Where are your parents?", I asked looking around for an adult, but soon imagined that he had left the campground that was just a few minutes from the trail. "Do your parents know you're here?", I said.

"I'm Jeffrey. I'm looking for rocks to put in my wheelbarrow", said the boy, limiting himself to answer.

"Do you have rocks? Do you know how to paint them? Could you help me?", He asked very seriously and with a sense of urgency in his voice.

Then I remembered Mrs. Smith, an elderly lady I met two months ago in the lobby of the building that my parents and I moved recently. She looked at me steadily with her big green eyes.

"Do you paint rocks? Would you like to learn? I can teach you how to paint them," she said.

I was alone and I was a little intimidated by the lady. I apologized that I was too busy with schoolwork and didn't have time to learn. However, I could tell from her look that she was mad at my apology. I met her a second time a few weeks later. She didn't greet me, but looked at me seriously. I thought she was still mad at my refusals.

"Can you paint a rock for me? ", Jeffrey asked again.

"Oh, okay. I'm going to help you," I said, hesitating a little bit. I didn't know how I was going to do that, but I couldn't say no to Jeffrey, he was almost begging for those rocks.

"Jeffrey, why do you need them for? ", I couldn't help asking.

"They are for my grandma, obviously! " He replied as if that was clearly the dumbest question of all time. But then, he continued. "I want her to be happy again", he spoke in an anguish voice, a little too much for such a small child, which, somehow, made my heart feel warm, a strange feeling I've never had before. At that moment, my mother shouted my name from somewhere along the trail.

"Look, I have to go now. Go back to your parents, okay? Tomorrow I'll come to your camp and look for you. I'll bring the painted rocks. Promise."

He flashed a huge smile that affected me. Without another word, he made his way through the trees towards the campground tents.

On my way back home, I thought about how could I keep my promise until the next day. I had some rocks at home that I picked them up when I went to the beach with my parents. I could try to paint them, but I didn't have paint or brushes at home. So I thought the solution would be to face Ms. Smith and ask for her help. I'd have that courage, I don't know how, from Jeffrey's smile.

I remembered what Ms. Smith had said, when I first met her, that she lived on the fifth floor, but I had no idea which of the 2 penthouse units she lived in. So I went down to the lobby with the intention of looking up her name on the intercom panel beside the front door. To my surprise, when I opened the building's door, she was there, standing in the lobby, looking out at the street through the glass door, as if she was waiting for something... or someone. I took a deep breath, took a step forward and spoke all at once, otherwise, I would lose my courage.

"Hi, Ms. Smith, I would like to give a special friend some painted rocks. I was wondering if you could help me".

She gave me a hard look and I thought she was going to refuse. Instead, she just asked.

"Do you have them?"

Realizing that she was talking about the rocks, I replied. "Yes, they are in my apartment."

"I'll wait for you here. I need to get my stuff."

I hurried upstairs and came back minutes later with the three rocks I kept with me. To my surprise, Ms. Smith was already back, sitting on one of the lobby chairs. On the little table in front of her, she had a basket of paints, pens and paint brushes. I had taken the elevator up and she had stayed there. How she got to the fifth floor and back before me was a mystery. But, I didn't ask any questions. I thought she had the paints stored somewhere in the laundry room or another room in the building.

Quickly, she used one of the pens to sketch, in simple strokes, a landscape. It was a street, which looked steep, some tulips in front of the houses and a building to the left. She told me to paint it.

On the other rock, she sketched a lake, a small beach, and a surrounding vegetation.

The third stone looked like a small mountain, a tree on top, a picnic bench and something that looked like a box or a rectangular wood embedded in the ground. It was a sad landscape. This one, she painted it herself while I was finishing the second landscape. She only used black, gray and green for the picnic bench. To me it looked like a sad painting for a gift. However, I was happy with her help and I just thanked her. Ms. Smith looked pleased and even excited. Although, she grabbed her stuff and walked out the lobby without saying a word.

The next morning, as I left the house with my mother for summer camp at Shubie Park, I noticed that Ms. Smith had drawn our street on one of the rocks. The steep climb, the flower beds now without the tulips, the houses and our building. I was wondering if the other landscapes were from a specific place too.

When I was back at Shubie Park, I went straight towards the access trail to the camping. I was super excited to hand the stones to Jeffrey and see a smile on his face. Before I could enter the campsite, already on the empty beach of Charles Lake, I saw that tiny figure coming towards me pushing his wheelbarrow and dressed in the same clothes as yesterday.

"You brought the painted rocks!", he said looking at them in my hand with the typical enchanted look of a child.

"A friend helped me. I hope you like it!"

Jeffrey stood there for a long time looking at those painted landscapes with an expression I couldn't identify. Then he picked up the stones like a hen in a barn. He mumbled what I believe it was a "thank you," put the rocks in his wheelbarrow, turned around and headed back towards the campground.

I stood there for a moment, looking towards the water of the lake and thinking about how such a small child could take an adult's reactions so seriously. He must love his grandmother very much.

Suddenly, I noticed that the view of the lake from where I was, was very familiar. Although lakes in Nova Scotia are very common and all very similar, that scene felt very special to me. The outline of the lake, the vegetation around it, a small strip of sand, some rocks and even a curved tree, projecting towards the lake. This was also one of the landscapes portrayed on one of the rocks by Ms. Smith. With a chill down my spine, I wondered how far these coincidences would go.

That late afternoon, on my way home, I wanted to thank Ms. Smith for her help with the painting. I went up to the fifth floor and decided to hit one of the two units on the level. I also wanted to tell her about Jeffrey and was curious about the choice of the landscapes. After the first unsuccessful attempt, the friendly Mr. Thomas answered the door.

"Please, I look for Ms. Smith. Does she live in this unit?", I asked.

"Ms. Smith? Oh no", said the old man with his low and calm voice. "There's no one here with that name. I'm very sorry dear. I won't be able to help you."

I was already getting ready to leave after thanking him when he called me back.

"Wait a minute, which Ms. Smith are you looking for? Ms. Anna Smith?"

"I don't know, she didn't tell me her first name. Do you know her? She is tall, blonde with very large green eyes. I met her a few times in the lobby and wanted to thank her for teaching me how to paint rocks. She told me she lived on the fifth floor, unless I heard that one wrong."

"Did you find her yesterday?", Mr. Thomas asked looking very confused and surprised. "Although she has these characteristics, Ms. Anna

Smith who used to live here cannot be the same one you found. Ms. Anna Smith moved out of this apartment about 10 years ago. She owned the property and lived in this unit. I don't know her whereabouts after she sold the apartment. For her time and age, she may have passed away."

"Oh, it must not be the same person, then..." I replied, trying to understand what was happening.

"There was a sad story, you know dear," he continued talking almost to himself. "Some old residents knows better than I do. She lost a grandson that drowned in a lake near here. The family was on a camping trip and the kid got into the lake without them noticing. It looked like he was looking for rocks in the water. They say that they found his wheelbarrow at the edge of the lake with some rocks in it, and that he had some in his pockets too. Well, that was over 30 years ago. I don't know how much of this is true and I don't want to scare you with these sad stories", said Mr. Thomas, sensing my shock.

I was startled indeed.

"The fact is that Ms. Smith lived secluded in this apartment until her daughter managed to get her out of here unwillingly. They say she was a very sad and bad-tempered woman. That's what they say, I didn't know her at all", Finished Mr. Thomas.

That night, it took me a while to fall asleep because I was too impressed by the whole story. The following Saturday morning, I walked to the Alderney Landing Library. I needed to return a book I had just read. It was my last week of Summer and I needed to sort some things out. I walked down Rose St. towards Dahlia St. I made my way to Park Ave with the intention of taking a shortcut through the cemetery, as everyone else does to shorten their path and then follow Ochterloney St. towards the Dartmouth Library.

I entered Christ Church Cemetery through the opening on the right side of the large iron gate that is always closed. I walked the small hill along the paved path that cut through the entire cemetery towards Dundas St. Already on the top of the little hill, I could see under a tree, a little green picnic table, one of those very common in parks and public areas. As I got closer, that scene seemed more and more familiar. Next to the table, a tombstone. – the rectangular stone embedded in the floor in Ms. Smith's

drawing. - I thought with a chill running down my spine. As I slowly approached, I saw, beside the tomb, a carved bronze statue of a child wearing overalls and pushing a wheelbarrow. Inside his cart, there were three rocks. The rocks I had painted.

As I was approaching the gravestone, it was as if the world suddenly darkened around me. Engraved on the headstone, in sad but sutil letters, two names could be read, those who freezed my soul.

*Anna Smith (1927-2012)*

*Jeffrey Smith (1979 - 1984).*

*Grandma and Grandson*

*Rest In Peace*