

THE GLOW STONE

a novel by **Ellen Dreyer**


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FORMATION

I died once.

It happened exactly one year ago, when I was fifteen, on Memorial Day weekend, 2004.

Now, like then, I descend the cellar stairs, into the darkness that contrasts so strongly with the sunlit kitchen. Now, like then, the moist, cool air given off by the foundation stones creeps up my legs as if I am entering another climate. On the last step I hesitate before I land on the cold concrete floor.

A few of Mom's dishrags hang like flags from the clothesline strung the length of the cellar. My eyes follow the rope to its end and dart back and forth, first left to my father's workbench, then right to the red door. I exhale, suddenly aware that I've been holding my breath.

Okay, I admit it. I'm relieved. Somehow I wasn't certain the door would still be there, that it hadn't vanished. So much of what happened back then was all jumbled up

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with images that existed only in the dark of my mind. But my desk, my rocks, are a solid reminder that the events really did happen—and that, if I wish, I can go back to where it all started.

The thought makes me shudder and almost sends me running back up the stairs into the sunlight. I resist the urge to flee this solitude, this darkness.

Through the door, in the old cellar garage that nobody used, was my refuge: the one place I could be alone, away from the still, brittle air in the rest of the house, away from the weather of Mom's moods. There I could breathe and feel the fullness of myself, and not be afraid. There I kept the collection of rocks I'd been gathering for years.

"Here," Bradford had said as he pushed the shoebox into my hands. "Take it."

Though he was only sixteen then, my uncle stood tall: six foot three, lanky as a weed bending over me.

"What?" I whispered, knowing even as I opened the lid. I gaped at the three rows of specimens, neatly lined up on their cotton batting.

"See this one, Phoebe?" he said. "It's calcite, a carbonate. Commonly known as dogtooth spar. It's got eight sides—just like your age. Did you know calcites make up four percent of the weight of the earth's crust?" I shook my head.

Carefully, Bradford lifted the translucent green specimen, revealing a sliver of cardboard with the name written on it, and placed it in my hand.

"It really does look like a dog's tooth," I told him.

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Suddenly, Bradford grabbed the gift back and nicked it with his thumbnail, leaving a white mark on one of the surfaces. "Did you think this rock was too hard to scratch?" he asked.

I looked up into his gray-green eyes. They glistened like the mineral in his hand, radiating fire. At other times, they could be so dark and still.

My surprise must have been visible on my face, because my uncle laughed. "Don't worry," he said, rubbing the scratch off with a corner of his T-shirt. "Some rocks are softer than they seem. You need to test them, to see."

That was the beginning.



Now I stop and face the door. Shivers play along my arms as I place my hand on the brass knob. I jiggle it just enough to see that it will open, that I could go in if I wanted.

Do I want to?

My treasure, my rocks. Cold, indifferent, beautiful.

A shelter. A tomb.

Maybe it is pointless to relive the pain. Maybe it is better to let sleeping rocks lie.

CONGLOMERATE

May, 2005

Walking around the basement slowly, past the silent appliances, I let the cool dim atmosphere work on me, as if it could transform the mix of memories into something solid and smooth.

I mine the dark for bright bits of truth.

After Bradford died, everything was confused. A cloud had settled over everything: a constant cloud that didn't budge, that didn't let anything within it move, either. It would have taken something extreme to blow it away.

Even before then, though, there had been clouds.

I was about twelve when I first started hanging out in the old garage. One snowy, bone-cold Sunday afternoon, Mom and I had been arguing about something, and my own room didn't feel like a far enough haven. The old garage came to mind as a hiding place. No one ever went down there.

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I remember my heart racing as I turned the knob, the cold blast of air as I pushed the door away and shone my flashlight into the still, dim cavern. Shivering, I stumbled down three steps, onto the dirt floor. What if there were a bogeyman behind the stack of lumber on that far wall, a gremlin in the cluster of old bikes? I swept my flashlight across the wall to my right and the large, barnlike doors rattling in the wind. A thin layer of snow had blown in beneath them.

Then I saw the desk.

It stood off to the side, protected from the elements. It was enormous: one of those old roll-top desks with many small, narrow drawers and compartments above its wide writing surface and bigger drawers, four on each side, below. I poked around in the cubbies first, finding old dried-up pens, scraps of paper with notes in faded ink, and larger, folded-up paper squares marked Topographic Maps. There were funny things, too—a kazoo, a pair of fake glasses with a rubber nose attached, green plastic soldiers carrying bayonets.

I figured Mom had bought the desk at one of the estate sales she sometimes went to, and that she couldn't find a place to put it upstairs. Even so, it seemed strange to stumble upon it in the garage. It was as out of place there as an elephant.

Later that evening, much as I wanted to give Mom the silent treatment, I had to ask her about the desk.

"It's your Uncle Bradford's," she said. "He

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brought it down from Grandma and Grandpa's last week. It's a very old desk. I think he got it at an auction. He was keeping it in the cottage, but there isn't any space there anymore, since they took in renters."

I nodded. Out behind my grandparents' house upstate was a two-room cottage, with hearts carved into its shutters. Bradford liked it, and he often slept there. When we visited, sometimes he'd take a box of Bisquick from Grandma's pantry and fix us pancakes, which we ate sitting on a ratty, moldy couch. It wasn't much to look at; still, I envied him his private paradise back in the fir trees. After he'd moved to Pennsylvania to go to college, my grandparents had had the cottage fixed up to rent out. But as I tried to picture it all cleaned up, with strangers living in it, I felt a stinging hurt in my chest.

"Bradford was here?" I asked my mother.

She reached out, her fingers almost brushing my hair. "He had a lecture to go to in the city. He couldn't wait till you got home from school."

"Oh." My hurt softened to disappointment. Bradford was always heading into the city for some science lecture or conference.

"Actually," Mom went on casually, "he thought you might want to have it."

It took a full moment for me to realize what she was saying. "The desk? Me?"

Mom gave me one of her rare smiles. "Yes, silly-bean. Who else?"

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“But doesn’t he want it back? I mean, does he just want me to keep it for him a while?”

Mom shrugged. “He didn’t say he wanted it back.”

“Well, I’ll call to ask...and thank him.” I started up the stairs.

“What are you going to do with it?”

“Oh, I’ll figure something out,” I said, my head singing with joy.

She must have known what I was thinking. The gift of rocks that Bradford had given me four years earlier had multiplied into many shoe boxes full of rocks. Now he had supplied me with a perfect place to put my collection.

Gradually, over the next few days, I brought them down to the old garage. With the help of a book called *Rocks and Minerals*, I sorted and labeled them, then arranged them according to type in the desk drawers, which I’d lined with rolls of soft white cotton.

Sometimes I took the rocks out of their drawers and tested them. I scratched and scraped and examined them under a small microscope, and wrote my findings in a spiral notebook, the way Bradford had taught me. And sometimes I went down to the old garage and did nothing, just sat on the steps and thought, staring into the dark at the now-familiar shapes.

I imagined myself a geologist, going to the ends of the earth to bring back new specimens. I imagined the amazing rocks I would unearth—ones that museums

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would clamor for. I even dreamed of finding a spectacular stone that would inspire my mother to create a world-famous work of art. Back then, she was still painting a lot. It seemed as if her paints and brushes and easel and rags were as important to her as my rocks were to me.

Actually, Mom helped me expand my collection. Once in a while she took my sister Al and me to the Museum of Natural History in New York. I used my allowance to buy rocks in the gift shop. Mostly, though, I hung out in the Hall of Gems and Minerals, a dimly lit room with cases of sleek quartz crystals, bubblelike hematites, iridescent opals, and other wonders. My favorite was an amethyst geode as tall as I was and much wider: It had been cracked open, and within, it exploded in jewel-like purple crystal points. I stared inside a long time and marveled at how an object so rough and plain on the outside could contain such beauty.

Another thing about rocks—they don't break easily. When I held them, I wanted to be like them—strong and steady, weathered, but not broken.

I had never known anything like that, before or since.

I also collected rocks by digging in the backyard, scouting along stream banks in the park, or exploring any patch of ground I came across on family trips. Mom and Dad rarely said anything about my growing collection or about the many hours I spent

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in the old garage. Neither did my sister, except to tell me that if I didn't watch out I might turn into a blind mole rat from spending so much time in "that pit."

Bradford, though, was always curious about the rocks. From the moment I had called to thank him for the desk and told him what I would use it for, he had seemed pleased.

"I hoped that's what you would do," he had said. And he'd told me the desk was mine for keeps.

"For your next birthday, I'm going to find you an amazing piece."

"But you've already given me so much. Those rocks, now the desk..."

"No problem." I could see him on the other end of the phone line, waving me off. Then, the next February when I turned thirteen, he gave me a chunk of biotite gneiss, a flecked stone that changed colors depending on the light.

I loved that word, *gneiss*. You say it "nice." Gneiss...flint...quartzite...mica.

The names of my rocks sounded like magic, like music.

Feldspar...granite...amethyst...gypsum.

I would whisper their names aloud in the cool damp.

Back then, I had no notion that that same music would lure me into a place from which I almost didn't return.