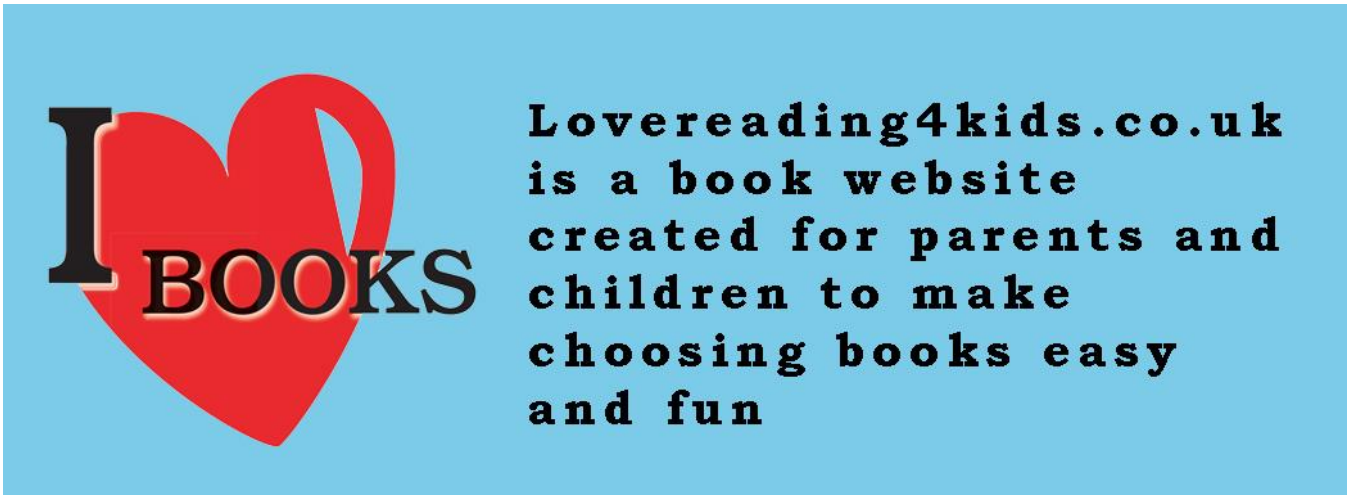


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Maybe a Fox

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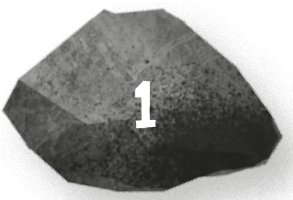
SHOULD THE FOX COME AGAIN TO MY CABIN IN THE SNOW

Then, the winter will have fallen all in white
and the hill will be rising to the north,
the night also rising and leaving,
dawn light just coming in, the fire out.

Down the hill running will come that flame
among the dancing skeletons of the ash trees.
I will leave the door open for him.

Patricia Fargnoli





From under her covers, Jules Sherman listened for her sister, Sylvie, to walk out of their room. As soon as she did, Jules slipped out of bed and slammed the door behind her. She was still angry. Who did Sylvie think she was? The day before, Sylvie had once again left her at the bottom of the front porch steps and run into the woods, disappeared, her wavy red-brown hair swishing down her back, ignoring Jules's pleas to wait up, for once just *wait up*.

Sylvie was *always* doing that. Taking off. So fast. Time after time, leaving Jules standing there. Alone.

Jules's cheeks flushed with a bright blaze of anger. Here she was standing alone again, this time in the echo of the slammed bedroom door. The morning was still early. A grey dimness came in through their window, aided only by a thin beam from the hallway that slipped in under the door.

Even in the shallow light Jules could still see Sylvie's favourite T-shirt, along with the sweater and jeans Sylvie planned to wear that day, all laid out on her sister's bed. Jules hesitated, then grabbed the T-shirt, went straight to the windowsill and, in one swift motion, swept all her rocks into it, using it as a kind of basket. Ha! Sylvie would hate that. Her precious, precious T-shirt.

It was thin and soft and smelled like cotton and coconut shampoo and Sylvie. Jules took a deep breath. Sylvie loved coconut shampoo. In fact, she loved anything that smelled like coconut – coconut ice cream, coconut candy, coconut

candles, including the one Sam had given her for Christmas. Sylvie said coconut was her "signature scent".

Jules wondered what her own signature scent was. One thing for sure, it wasn't coconut.

She dumped the rocks onto her bed and then did the same thing with the rocks from her bookcase, the rocks on top of her dresser and the rocks from the wooden box her dad had made her for Christmas. The rocks spilled across the mountains and valleys of her sheets and blanket. She tossed her pillow aside and scooped the rocks into the empty space left by the missing pillow.

Jules pulled the tiny hand lens that she wore on a lanyard around her neck out from under her pyjama top. Her dad had only recently given it to her. The lens was about the size of a quarter, and a bright LED light shone out from it.

"Every rock hound should have one," Dad had told her.

The lens magnified everything by ten times. When Jules held it against the surface of the rocks, she could see the striations where the different elements had folded into one another, or the smooth, shiny edges where the rock had been either chiselled by a pick or broken apart by some bigger force, maybe a glacier, as if the rock had been rubbed smooth by thousands of tonnes of sliding ice.

Not for the first time, her small LED light felt like a miniature sun, shining down on her own constellation of rock planets. Her bed was the galaxy, the Sherman Galaxy, bounded only by sheets and a warm fleece blanket.

Now she could begin to sort the rocks. First into the three categories: igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic. Then by size within each category. Then into vertical rows, horizontal rows and circles. As she sorted and arranged, she felt herself growing calmer. She whispered their

names aloud as she worked: "*Marble. Slate. Schist. Quartzite. Sandstone. Flint. Dolomite.*"

There was a fourth category of rocks too, one that didn't have a scientific name. Wish rocks. Rocks for the river. These were rocks that she didn't display. Instead she kept them in an old striped sock that had once belonged to Dad. It was tucked in the back of hers and Sylvie's closet, next to their shoes and boots.

Most of the wish rocks she had found herself, either by spotting them along the trail or, lately, with the help of her special pick hammer, an Estwing E13P. It had taken her for ever to save enough to buy the hammer, and even then it had to be specially ordered by Mrs Bowen at the Hobbston Hardware Store in town. Not only that, but Dad wouldn't let her buy it without also buying a pair of safety goggles.

"You want to be safe, don't you, Jules?" Sylvie had asked her. Of course she did, and besides,

no true rock hound would be caught chipping away at rocks without a pair of safety goggles. Jules knew that. But it was hard to wait until she had enough money for both the hammer and the goggles. And then Sylvie did something surprising – she let Jules borrow the additional ten dollars so she wouldn't have to wait any longer to order the hammer. Sylvie was always doing stuff like that.

Remembering the goggles made Jules feel a little less angry with Sylvie. But not completely. She was still sick of being left behind. She snapped the beam of light off and tucked the lens back under her pyjama top.

She concentrated on her rocks, the ones spread before her in neat rows on her bed, and reached for one of her very favourites from the entire collection. Her fingers first hesitated over the small chunk of dark green-black marble. Then she remembered that Sylvie had brought that

one back for her from a school field trip to the Danby marble quarry. Marble, slate and granite were the official state rocks of Vermont, where they lived. Jules loved that piece of marble, its cool smoothness. She loved to press it against her cheek.

But not this morning. She wouldn't choose the marble today. Not when she was angry at Sylvie. Instead she chose the piece of blue-grey slate that she herself had found at the edge of the Whippoorwill River, the river that ran along the edge of their property. She pressed her fingertips against its sharp edge. This would be a good skipping rock. Not that she would ever dream of sending it away across the water, never to be seen again. There were rocks for the river and rocks for the Sherman Galaxy. This one was a keeper, a blue-grey slate planet.

"Knock-knock!"

Sylvie, outside the door. She never knocked

with her hand, just her voice. Who did that? Right now Sylvie's voice-knock bugged Jules as much as being left in the dust.

"Go away."

"I can't. This is my room too, remember? And I have to get dressed."

Oops. The T-shirt! Sylvie's precious Flo-Jo T-shirt. Flo-Jo was Sylvie's hero, Florence Griffith-Joyner. She held the record for the fastest women's hundred-metre sprint in history, and Jules knew that Sylvie dreamed of beating that record. She also knew that was one of the reasons that Sylvie was always running. But knowing it didn't make it any easier. Sometimes Jules felt like the only side she ever saw of Sylvie was her back, growing smaller and smaller as she shot down the track or the trail or wherever else she ran. Jules smoothed out the T-shirt as best she could and returned it to its spot on Sylvie's bed. Sylvie always made her bed and laid out her clothes the second she got

up. Unlike Jules, whose bed was always a mess. Especially messy when she did a major sorting of rocks. Like now.

"Knock-knock," came Sylvie's voice again. "Come on, Jules, let me in."

"There's no lock," Jules called. "Duh."

There had never been a lock on their door. Even though she was upset, Jules still had to admire that Sylvie hadn't just barged right in the way she, Jules, might have done. The doorknob turned and there was Sylvie, tall and skinny in her pyjamas. She got straight to the point.

"Why are you mad?"

"I'm not," Jules lied.

Sylvie just pointed at the rocks laid out on Jules's bed, a sure sign that Jules was trying to calm herself down.

"Come on. Tell me. I'm your one and only sister."

"Stop."

"What? I am, aren't I? Unless you've got a secret other sister somewhere?"

Sylvie sat down on Jules's bed, careful not to disturb the rocks. Then she sidled her pointer finger bit by bit, like a snake, through the rumpled blankets toward Jules. She had been doing that ever since they were tiny, and it always made Jules laugh. Jules looked away so she wouldn't start to soften.

Sylvie abandoned the finger-snake and instead picked up the one piece of obsidian in Jules's collection. She hefted the small polished oval in her hand.

"I remember when Mom gave you this," she said. "It was your fourth birthday. You were already crazy about rocks." She rolled her eyes in a what-a-weird-little-kid-you-were kind of way. "Seriously, what four-year-old kid is a rock fiend?"

That was it! Jules snatched the obsidian from

Sylvie's hand. Once again, Sylvie had invoked Mom. Obsidian was caused by volcanoes, an eruption of steam and gas so furious that it melted the earth itself into this hard, shiny object. Right then, Jules felt hard and shiny.

"You and Dad," she said. "You're like a secret club."

"What are you talking about?"

"When the two of you get going about Mom. How do you think it makes me feel?"

Sylvie looked puzzled. Jules kept going. "It's like you remember everything about her!" Jules rubbed her thumb along the smooth surface of the obsidian. "But me? I hardly remember anything. All I see when I try to picture her is her hair, which is exactly like … like…"

She stopped talking and carefully placed the obsidian back on her bed, back into the vertical category of igneous rocks.

"Mine," Sylvie finished the sentence. "The

same colour as mine. Is that what you were going to say?"

Jules nodded. Yes. That was what she was going to say.

What she wasn't going to say: that no matter how hard she tried, her memories of their mom grew smaller and smaller, each one folding in on itself, so that not even her 10x magnifier could see them.