The Rock
By: Justin Sisko

It was the first night in a really long time that Dad didn’t sleep on the couch. I always thought Dad loved his TV shows so much that he just fell asleep while watching them, so it surprised me when he came with Mom to tuck me in tonight. They never did anything together anymore.

“You’d best try and get to sleep quick. Tomorrow will be a real long day and the morning will come fast,” Mom told me as she kissed my forehead. Dad smiled at me, but it wasn’t his normal smile. He seemed kind of sad. He came up to the bed and kneeled down on the floor.

“I love you so much, little guy. Get some rest.”

He got up and turned to Mom, who looked like she was about to start crying. I wasn’t sure why—I didn’t think me going to sleep was anything to be sad about. After they turned off my lights left my room, I heard their bedroom door close with a thud. I wondered if the rock had anything to do with this.

“Nah,” I thought, then rolled over and quickly fell asleep.

I felt like I was only sleeping for five minutes before my alarm clock started blaring. Mom had set it for three in the morning before tucking me in. That buzzing annoyed me so much that even though I didn’t want to move, I leapt out of bed to shut it off. I’d never been up at that hour before and everything in the house was silent. I went to my window and looked outside. The moon was big and bright. It made the palm trees in our backyard have huge, dark shadows that looked like giant spiders. A warm breeze rushed into my room. Everything outside was silent, too—guess it was too early for even the crickets and birds to be awake. For a
second I forgot why I was even up so early, but then I remembered: this was the day the doctor was going to take the rock out of Dad’s head.

I wanted to just get back in bed and curl up there for the rest of the day. I hated the doctor. Even though it wasn’t for me this time, I still didn’t want to go. Mom took me to lots of doctors over the past two years and it was fine until one of them told her something about me. I don’t know what it was, but ever since, Mom treated me differently. She treated Dad differently, too. After that day, they started fighting all the time and I had no idea why. Mom even had me put into a different class in school. Instead of regular third grade, it was full of weird kids that were nothing like me. I just didn’t understand. At least Dad didn’t treat me any different, though.

“At least it’s not about me again today,” I said out loud with a sigh. I thought about the rock in Dad’s head again and wondered how they would get it out.

I first found out about the rock a couple of months ago, back in May. I was upstairs in my room making houses with Legos when I heard the front door open and slam shut. I heard Mom and Dad come in, screaming at one another. It really scared me when they first started fighting, but I had gotten used to it now.

“Todd, don’t you dare say a darn word to him about this! It’s not like he would understand, anyway!”

“I can’t believe you, Annette, I really can’t! He needs to know! He’s our son and he’s not stupid.”

“Look. I will handle this. I’ll tell him very gently in a way that he’ll be able to understand. Just trust me for once this time, please.”
Their screaming just went in one ear and out the other. It happened so often now that I stopped paying attention. I kept playing with my Legos until a few minutes later, when I heard a knock on my door and Mom came in.

“Parker, Mommy needs to talk to you about something.”

“Oh no,” I thought, remembering the angel decoration I had accidentally knocked off the counter the week before, shattering it into smithereens.

“I’m sorry, Mom, I didn’t mean—”

“No, no honey, it was nothing you did,” she interrupted. “I need to talk to you about your father. I really don’t know how to tell you this.” She paused with a puzzled expression.

“Did something happen to Dad?”

“No, nothing happened to him,” Mom said as she started picking up toys I had left all over my room, putting them one by one on a shelf in my closet. “Well, well, okay just listen to me buddy, okay? Daddy and I went to the doctors a couple times and the doctor told us that daddy has a rock in his head, but it’s okay, because he said it’s benign. Oh wait, I mean—”

“What does ‘bee nine’ mean?” I asked.

“Oh, honey, you must not have heard me right. I said just fine! It will be just fine. He’s gonna get that rock out of there and everything will be okay. So I don’t want you worrying not one bit now, okay?”

Mom always used okay a lot and said things were going to be okay and talked fast when she was nervous about something. She seemed to tidy up a lot, too. And our house was always clean as a whistle anymore.

“Wait, Dad has a rock inside his head?! How did that get in there?” I asked. We had these big rocks along the edges of the pathway to our front door and I pictured one of those in
Dad’s head, but it just didn’t seem possible—they were so big. Maybe it was just a little rock, like the kind of rocks at Lake Sampala that Dad used when he taught me how to skip rocks on water.

“We don’t know, but it’s going to be okay, Parker. Now promise me you won’t worry about it, okay? Daddy didn’t even want me telling you but I felt you were old enough to know so I told him I would tell you and he said okay.”

“Oh, Mom,” I replied, confused. I didn’t know how anyone could get a rock in their head. And I hoped I didn’t have any in my head. But rocks are just rocks, I thought. They’re harmless.

And that was that—life went on normally and now finally today was the day Dad was getting the rock out.

Walking out of my room, the smell of Mom’s favorite pecan coffee filled my nose. I always wanted to try it, but Mom said coffee was a big people drink and told me I wouldn’t like it. I went downstairs and found Mom and Dad sitting across from one another at the table in the sunroom. They were completely silent until I came over to them.

“Good morning, Parker,” Dad said while giving me a pat on the head. He always did that every morning when he saw me and said my blond hair was like peach fuzz. “I hope you’re hungry, little guy. I’m taking y’all out for breakfast before we get on our way to Jacksonville this morning.”

Mom huffed, took a sip of her coffee, and looked away. I loved it when Dad took me out for breakfast. Mom would never come along, though—she thought going out to eat was an insult to her cooking and would always refuse. Still, Dad would take me out every once in a while, but
told me not to tell Mom whenever we’d go. I guess just this once Mom was willing to come along.

“I don’t know why you’re taking us out to breakfast, Todd. It’s not like you can eat anything this morning anyway because of the surgery,” Mom said to Dad, taking another sip of her coffee.

“Hush, Annette. This might be the last time for me to take Parker to—”

“No, you hush! How dare you say things like that right in front of Parker!”

Dad stood up, looked at Mom, and shook his head before walking back into the house.

“Why don’t you go upstairs and get dressed,” Mom told me. “But hustle, we have to get a move-on in a short while.”

“Yes, Mom,” I said, and went upstairs to brush my teeth and get out of my pajamas. By the time I came back downstairs, Mom and Dad were ready to go and we headed out to the garage. Mom had her car keys in her hand and was about to get in the driver’s seat. I started to head over but Dad grabbed my hand.

“Parker and I will meet you there,” Dad said to Mom, and he walked me over to his car. It was a cherry red convertible with only two seats. Dad came home with it a couple days after I found out about the rock. Mom and Dad had a real big fight that day but Mom eventually got over it. I always loved when Dad took me out for a ride in it.

“Todd you are not. Don’t you dare even think you’re—”

“Parker and I will meet you there, Annette,” Dad said again, with a stern look on his face. Mom shook her head and I couldn’t tell if she was more angry or sad. She got in her car and closed the door.
Dad picked me up, put me in his car, and buckled me up. He always left the top down in the garage. The only time he ever put it up was when it was raining. He started the engine and we left.

“None of our places in town are open this early, little guy, so we’ll have to go somewhere else,” Dad said. He started his car and the engine sounded like a lion’s roar. We pulled out of the garage and were on our way, Mom following behind us. I saw some green signs ahead and knew it was time to brace myself. Dad called this highway I-10. Every time we got to this spot in Dad’s car the ride turned into what I imagined a spaceship blasting off to be like. He made the right turn onto the highway.

“Three, two, one…blast-off!” I shouted and off we went. The wind was rushing against my whole body in the car. Dad was wearing a Florida Gators baseball cap that blew right off his head, showing his blond hair just like mine, except too long to be peach fuzz. We both started laughing.

“Aw, shucks! I was gonna give you that cap to wear later today!” Dad told me. Once we were finally able to stop laughing about the hat flying off, we talked about all kinds of good times we’d had together in the past and laughed even more as we coasted down the open road.

“How about that time I tried to make myself peanut butter and jelly and turned the kitchen into a big mess. Mom was so mad!”

“How about that time you pulled the garden hose through your window and tried to turn your bedroom into a swimming pool. Your mother was even angrier at that, but I sure thought it was creative!”

“Or what about when you took us to see the rocket launch at the space center! That was so much fun. Can we do that again, Dad? Please?”
“I sure hope so, little guy. I sure hope so.”

Dad got off the highway and we pulled into a parking lot.

“Denny’s it is!” Dad exclaimed once we arrived at the restaurant. This was probably the only place open at this hour of the morning, besides Waffle House, but Dad always said that wasn’t a good place for us folk. Mom pulled up in her car a few minutes later and we all got out and headed in. There were several people in the restaurant, including a large group of men with skull bandanas and thick mustaches shouting at one another in the corner.

“How are y’all doing this morning?” the hostess asked. She had curly red hair, a ring in her lip, and a cross tattooed on her arm. “Three? Smoking or non?”

“Can you actually put us in the non-asshole section, miss?” Dad said, nodding his head in the direction of that group of men. “I don’t want my family to have to deal with any hooligans this morning.” Dad was always really picky about where we sat when we went out to eat. He said if we were paying this much just for food that we’d best be treated like gold.

“Umm, well, I will see what I can do,” she said, stuttering her words.

We all sat down at the table and ordered some food shortly after. Dad didn’t get anything, though. Dad and I would always get the same thing whenever we went out to eat. He always said, like father like son. It was weird to get food without Dad getting any with me, but Dad said he couldn’t have any food this morning, doctor’s orders. Mom made small talk about the weather, about how we hadn’t been to the hospital in Jacksonville in a while, and about how we wanted to take one more trip to the beach this summer before school started for me. The waitress brought our eggs, toast, and grits to the table. Dad looked like he was zoning out during all of this.
“I can’t believe today is the day. This could be our last meal together,” Dad whispered, his eyes glazed over.

“Todd!” Mom shouted. “What did I tell you earlier? How dare you say things like that in front of Parker! Now Parker, just pretend you didn’t hear that.”

“Do not talk down to me that way, Annette! He’s our son and you know what? I think it’s time that Parker knows the truth!”

“No it’s not, Todd, you shut your gosh darn mouth right this instant!”

“We need to tell him!”

“No! You had best stop right now, Todd! I mean it! Don’t you even dare!” Mom shrieked.

“Stop!” I yelled. Mom and Dad both looked at me. Then Dad looked at Mom and banged his fist on the table, spilling her coffee everywhere. Mom stared down at the floor and started crying.

“We’re leaving,” Dad said as he got up from his chair and threw some cash on the table. “Come on, Parker. We’ll meet you back at home, Annette, and then head out to the hospital.”

Dad and I left the restaurant, got back into his car, and headed back to our house. I didn’t know what Mom and Dad were talking about at the restaurant, but Dad seemed really upset. He didn’t say much of anything during the car ride back until we got off the highway and were almost back at our house.

“Parker, I’ve gotta tell you something,” Dad said quietly. “You know how your mother told you I have a rock in my head? Well, it’s actually a—” he paused. We stopped at a stop sign on our street and Dad looked at me. I was so confused and had no idea what Dad was talking about or trying to tell me. I just stared right back at him, waiting for him to finish his sentence.
“I love you, Parker,” Dad said. “Always and forever, please remember that. And please always remember the good times we’ve had together. And please stay a good person no matter what. Don’t become like 95% of the human population, rotten to the gosh-darn core. And please—”

“Dad,” I interrupted. We were still stopped at that stop sign and he realized there was another car behind us, waiting for us to move. We went through the intersection and everything was silent for a moment, minus the wind rushing past us. Dad was talking like something really bad was about to happen. I didn’t know what, but he was starting to scare me.

“Sorry, Parker. I’m just getting a little worried and wanted to tell you all of that.”

“But why are you worried? Mom said everything would be okay.”

“I know, I know. But the, uh, rock has gotten a little bit bigger since May. And I just hope it’s not too big for the doctor to take out. But you know what, Parker? You and I, we can handle anything. Anything life throws at us. You hear me? I’m strong. And you’re even stronger since you’re my little guy. We’ve got this. Don’t you worry.”

I nodded. I really wasn’t sure what to say. Mom kept telling me that everything would be okay and I believed her. But hearing the fear in Dad’s voice suddenly made everything more real and made me start to worry. We pulled back into the garage and waited for Mom to come home. She pulled into the driveway and Dad and I got into her car. We headed off to Jacksonville, which was pretty far away. Mom put in her Kenny Chesney CD but Dad turned it off after just a few minutes and the rest of the car ride was in complete silence. I fell asleep in the backseat for most of the ride. Mom woke me up when we got to the hospital. She parked the car and we all headed in together, Mom and Dad each holding one of my hands.
Everything was a blur at this place. A lady with glasses told us where to go. We went into a waiting room that was so bright white it made me want to close my eyes. A tall man with dark skin in a white coat came in and talked to my Mom and Dad. I couldn’t understand what he was saying; he was using big words and sounded like he was from a different country. He left. Dad cried. I’d never seen Dad cry before. Mom cried, too, and then kissed Dad. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d seen Mom and Dad kiss. Dad told me again how much he loved me and that I was his strong little guy, always and forever. The man in the white coat came back. Dad hugged me and kissed my forehead. I still didn’t know what was going on, but I started crying, too.

“I love you, Dad.”

“It’s gonna be okay, Parker, don’t you worry now, okay?” Mom said as she took my hand and walked me out of the room.

Mom took me to another room where they had some magazines to look at, a television to watch, blocks to play with, and an aquarium. I tried to build a house with the blocks, but couldn’t focus.

“Mom, when will Dad be done?”

“I don’t know, honey. We have to be patient.”

I went over to the aquarium to look at the fish. There were two orange and white ones being chased by two bright blue ones. There was also a strange creature with big spikes sitting on the gravel at the bottom. I remembered how Dad would always take me to look at the fish in the pet shop at the mall.

“Mom, is Dad going to be okay?”
“Parker, don’t worry. He’s going to be okay. Why don’t you go play with those blocks some more, or maybe watch some television. Look, cartoons are on.”

Hours passed as I went back and forth between playing with blocks, looking at the fish, watching television, and asking Mom questions about Dad. Mom didn’t say much. At one point she took me to the cafeteria to get some lunch. She didn’t eat anything, but bought me a cheeseburger and an ice cream sandwich. We went back to the room and waited some more. After a while, the man in the white coat showed up again. He took Mom out of the room and into the hallway. I watched them out in the hallway through the windows. His lips were moving but I couldn’t hear anything. Mom put her hand over her mouth, shook her head, and started crying. She fell down to her knees, crying, putting both hands over her face. He just stood there. I ran out into the hallway and up to Mom, who put her arms around me.

“Mom, what happened? Is Dad okay? Please tell me Dad’s okay. Mom!” She was crying so hard she couldn’t talk. I knew it had to be something bad. I never thought a stupid rock could cause all of this.

When Mom finally stopped crying, she told me that there was an accident. She said the rock was a lot bigger than the doctors originally thought and that “complications” came up when they tried to take it out. I had no idea what complications meant, but Mom kept telling me that Dad was in a better place now and that things would be okay. I just knew that Dad wasn’t ever going to come back home when Mom and I left the hospital without him.

Everything from that moment happened so fast, too fast to even remember. A few days later, all I knew was that the rock had been removed, and apparently Mom and Dad were both right—it did get a lot bigger. It was even in a completely different shape than I expected. It was long, flat, rectangular, and had some words carved into it—Dad’s name and some years. A
warm rain was coming down as Mom and I stood in the cemetery, dressed in black, black
umbrellas up, looking down at the rock. We were both crying and Mom kept telling me that Dad
wouldn’t be gone forever.

“We’ll see Dad again some day. Don’t you worry, okay?”

She just wouldn’t tell me when.