

The Perfect Stone.

We always played down by the river. It was part of the summer, part of being eleven years old and of living in the country. There were five of us that year to begin with; My best friend Jane wasn't allowed to come with us anymore, not since Nicola had pushed her in by the bridge. Not *off* the bridge, that might have been a whole different story, but it was bad enough; it was deep by the bridge, really deep. We all knew that, and we'd stared in a delicious mixture of fright and excitement as Jane went under and came up spluttering and coughing. It felt like she had been down there for ages, although she had actually surfaced immediately. Anyway, we were invincible in those days, we *knew* nothing could really happen to her. She was just Jane after all.

Her dad didn't see it that way though, and stopped her from coming out with us. I missed her, I'd known her for much longer than I'd known Nicola and we were in the church choir together, something Nicola wouldn't get involved in.

The river was very wide and perfectly flat just down from the bridge, shallow too. We could send some of the best stones streaking across the glassy surface with the barest tweak of a wrist, and sometimes they went all the way to the other side, bouncing high into the grassy bank. Of course then there would be a shrieking, splashy race across the river to see who could recover that stone first, since it was obviously a champion.

We were always on the lookout for the perfect skimmer, it had even capitalised itself in our imaginations, becoming The Stone. All merely superb ones aside, there was the ultimate one out there, we all knew it. It was hard to find decent stones, but if you were lucky you'd find a good flat one, not too big to hold in the palm of your hand and spin with the right amount of force. I was pretty good, for a girl, and once

Mark clapped me on the back after a really good one. I remember thinking then that I was in love with him.

So me, Nicola, Mark, Nicola's brother Simon and his friend Daniel, spent the long summer days down by the river bettering our best throws and arguing over who had got the most 'bounces'.

Then Steven came.

He just appeared one day, a tall, skinny boy of about twelve or thirteen, standing on the bridge and staring down into the dark water there as if hypnotised. Simon was closest so he yelled up to him,

"Hey, why don'tcha come down here?" The boy looked away from the water as if it was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. He seemed to pull his eyes away and bring them around to focus on Simon with enormous difficulty. After a moment he shrugged.

"Kay," he said diffidently. He left the bridge and scrambled down the loose-earthed slope alongside the road until he was standing a short distance from us, his hands shoved into his jeans pockets as if he didn't quite know what to do with them.

I stared at him with the frank appraisal that I was so soon to lose to a less natural politeness. Up close he looked closer to fifteen, and I realised he'd only appeared younger because of his slight build and messed up hair. He turned his gaze on me, and for the first time I felt myself blushing and looking away. If I'd had a crush on Mark before, it was blown away in a split second the moment those green eyes fixed on my tatty clothes and grubby face.

"What's your name?" Simon asked, always the forward one.

"Steven."

"Steven what?"

“Harvey.”

“I’m Simon.” He introduced us all in turn, then turned to more important matters.

“Can you skim stones?”

“Yeah.”

And that was how we met Steven Harvey in the summer of 1977.

Most days after that I found myself going down to the river earlier and earlier, and worse, trying not to get too dirty before Steven turned up. I put up with my elder brother’s teasing with quiet dignity; I told him if he didn’t shut up I’d paint a moustache on his poster of Daisy from

the Dukes Of Hazzard. It didn’t work, and of course the luscious Daisy remained unsullied – I was in healthy awe of my brother. Besides, Starsky and Hutch were in grave danger should I be silly enough to mess with Ms Duke.

On the days Steven didn’t come out I went home early, feeling cheated. I could tell that Mark was annoyed I’d transferred my affections so quickly...he didn’t congratulate me on my throwing anymore, didn’t even suggest we team up together when it came to doubles games.

I didn’t care.

To begin with, Steven spent a lot of time down there with us, then he stopped coming. After a few days had passed I started to wonder if he was ever coming back, and tried not to show my disappointment. I even tried to regain my innocent interest in Mark, but it just wasn’t the same, he lacked the new boy’s mystery although Nicola

and I privately agreed that Mark was much better looking.

Steven came back on the Saturday morning, four days since the last time. Again, he stood on the bridge for a while before starting down the slope, and when he reached us he wordlessly crouched down, hunting for skimmers as always. I waited 'til the others had moved away having received no explanation, or even a greeting beyond a twitch of his head in their direction, then squatted down next to him, raking my hand through the stones.

“Thought you weren’t coming back,” I said lightly. He didn’t answer, and I looked sideways at him under my too-long fringe. He was staring at the ground, his face turned slightly away, and it was then that I noticed the bruise on his forehead.

“What’dya do, fall down?” I asked. He nodded.

“Yeah, stupid eh?”

I shrugged.

“Not really, I’m always doing it.” Standing up again I spun a stone out over the river and watched with satisfaction as it leaped high and then settled into a rhythm of small bounces before sinking without a trace. When I turned back to Steven he was staring fixedly at the place where the stone had disappeared. I waved my hand in front of his eyes until he blinked and grinned. His face became beautiful when he smiled, and I felt my child’s heart loosen with happiness that I’d caused it this time.

The Summer passed; hazy, endless days... they seemed to last twice as long back then.

“Hey, look at this one!” Steven shouted. “This could be The Stone!”

We all crowded round to pass our judgement on the latest find; Steven seemed to have

taken the job of finding The Stone to a new level of obsession, and although it was funny, it was interesting too. We considered his find carefully, as befitted experts.

“Too sharp on this edge...” Mark pointed to the flattened edge that spoiled the shape.

“It’s close.” Steven insisted, then he said hesitantly,

”You know, maybe there’s no such thing as perfect.”

Something in his voice made me look at him quickly, but his expression gave nothing away. Still, I was sure there had been a certain wisftfulness in his tone, as if he’d been thinking of something else when he’d spoken.

“Of course there is, I found one once. It skimmed right out of sight down there.” Daniel said, pointing down the river, “you just have to keep looking.”

Steven looked at him thoughtfully, after surrendering his stone to Mark’s close scrutiny.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he agreed at last, hope flickering in his expression once more, “there *has* to be one, otherwise why do we spend so long looking?”

“Some people never find one but when you do, you *have* to throw it right otherwise it’s just a waste,” Daniel told him.

I had the strangest feeling then, that The Stone was a symbol of something bigger, something we, as children, couldn’t have explained but understood on some level nevertheless. I opened my mouth to say something, then Mark tossed Steven’s stone aside and waded into the water, picking out a bit of dead branch and throwing it as far upstream as he could. All thoughts of symbols flew from my mind as we picked up whatever stones we could find and began to pelt the log as it floated past, whooping loudly whenever we scored a hit.

Gradually over the weeks, I started to notice a change in Steven. Since the day he’d

appeared I had confidently expected some kind of transformation from gaunt stranger into tanned, robust boy...“The Secret Garden” was one of my favourite books at the time. But this change wasn’t a good one. Instead he grew paler, his voice quieter, his mood darker and more impenetrable.

But it wasn’t always like that. Despite the times I grew irritated by his moods, all it would take was a glance or a smile in my direction and my crush would be reborn. On days like this, his good days, we would be able to persuade him to come swimming with us, and if we noticed fading bruises here and there on his pale skin we never said anything. Kids fell over all the time, it was what we did. Especially living in the country with countless trees to conquer and bumpy fields to race cross on our way home.

Towards the end of the holidays our own visits to the river became sporadic, as we began to make visits into town to purchase school equipment and uniforms. I was due to begin secondary school that September, and Nicola would be going to a different one. It was almost as though we were subconsciously easing out of our friendship to lessen the wrench; without Jane around on a daily basis we’d grown closer, found common ground in Starsky and Hutch, and agreed to always be friends. But I think we both knew even then that it wouldn’t work out that way. You just had to think about how quickly we had already disregarded my former best friend...and it was the same with all of us that year – a thinner comradeship seemed to colour our days now.

It was early evening and I was the only one left at the river. Nicola and Simon hadn’t been there all day, they’d been dragged off to go back-to-school shopping, and Daniel, Mark and Steven had all left around half an hour before. I sat staring out over the river, watching the sunlight skipping lightly over the gently ripping water. There was perfect peace here although it wasn’t silent by any means...the water gurgled

over the stones and the breeze lifted the long grasses as the day lost some of its heat. Flies still buzzed around my head and now and again a grasshopper added its own heavy percussion to the sound. I began to feel sleepy and decided it was time I headed home. I knew what would be for tea; it was a Thursday and my Mum always went shopping on the weekly bus. That meant there would be sausages and bacon, probably some of her magical mashed potato and some kind of doughnuts for afterwards...I loved Thursdays.

Scrambling to my feet with an anticipatory smile already tugging at my mouth, I suddenly had the uncomfortable, prickly feeling of being watched. I stopped and looked around. I wasn't scared at that point, we never were back then. It wasn't like it is now, where every shadow was a potential threat, or maybe it was just that the awareness wasn't there. It never occurred to me that there could be danger here, it had been exactly the same when Jane went in by the bridge, the thrill of watching it had far outweighed any fear that something bad could actually happen.

So no, I wasn't really frightened, but after a moment when no-one appeared, I began to feel a little edgy. My footsteps quickened as I headed once more for the slope by the bridge, and when I got to the top and had my feet on the firm tarmac once more I let out my unconsciously pent up breath in an explosive sigh. Doughnuts once more dancing in my imagination I headed off up the road, already starting to forget the way my scalp had tightened and my breathing had stopped...it was easy to convince myself I'd imagined the whole thing.

Then I heard loose earth rattling back down the slope. Someone was climbing up. Such a familiar sound, but vaguely worrying since there had been no-one left down by the river. So I was right, I *had* been watched...

Already halfway around the bend in the lane I steeled myself and turned back to see

Steven pulling himself up onto the road. Surprise stole the realisation that he clearly wanted to be alone.

“Hi!” I yelled. He looked up jerkily, startled.

“Oh, um, hi,” he replied. I walked the short distance back to where he stood.

“I thought you’d gone home.” I said.

“Came back, thought I’d left my watch here.”

Why was he lying? He’d obviously been laying low, waiting for us all to leave.

I looked more closely at him and saw his eyes were puffy. “You been crying?”

“No!”

“Oh, okay then. Well, um...See ya.”

“Yeah, bye.”

I hesitated. “You wanna walk up the hill with me?” I asked suddenly.

He started to nod, then shook his head. “Nah, I’ll just sit here for a bit, I don’t have to be home for hours yet.”

“Nor do I. Mind if I sit here too?”

He shrugged. “If you like.”

We sat by the side of the road and I idly picked up loose pieces of grit and tossed them down the slope, watching them bounce in the loose earth. He said nothing and I waited for a while before finally saying out loud what I had suspected all along.

“You don’t want to go home, do you?”

He didn’t answer for a long time, but I waited again. At last he shook his head. I almost missed it because I’d seen a big piece of grit and was reaching across to pick it up, but the movement caught the corner of my eye and when I looked at him he was staring defiantly at me, as if daring me to scoff. Of course I didn’t, and he looked away again quickly. I was glad; I think he was getting ready to cry again and I didn’t

know if I could handle that.

“So. Is it your Dad?” I asked.

“Yeah.” His voice cracked a bit, even on that one word.

“He beat you up?”

“Sometimes. It happens at school too, but it’s mostly him.”

“Why?”

He turned to me again, his eyes suddenly burning with an emotion I had no name for. He shoved backwards and up, his mouth working, searching for words.

“I...don’t...*know!*” He yelled at last, standing there in the deserted road with his hands clenched by his sides tight enough to turn the dirt-grimed knuckles white.

He kicked out at the walled sides of the bridge and then set off down towards the river again. I didn’t know if he wanted me to follow him or not, but I was going to anyway, even if he told me to go away.

He didn’t.

He didn’t talk to me either though, and for a while we just threw stones into the river. I wondered what it was like to live in a home where meanness and bullying were part of everyday life. I tried to imagine not wanting to go home and couldn’t do it; my brothers drove me mad most of the time, my Dad was strict and my Mum, although an angel, just didn’t *get* what it was like to be eleven...but I knew that when I got home later tonight there would be smiles, warmth and noise, and that any arguments would be largely good-natured. One glance at Steven put a picture in my head of a dark house and a man sitting in an armchair with a surly expression and a can of beer. There was no female figure in my picture, and the whole image was grey and silent. I shivered.

“When will you go home?” I asked, the thoughts of my own home making me want

to rush there right now and reassure myself that I was me and not Steven.

“Dunno. You can go if you want, you don’t have to stay just because I am.”

“Well...”

“Go on, you go home. I’ll probably go too, in a minute.”

“Walk up the hill with me?” I asked again. He shook his head and I stood up and brushed dirt off the seat of my jeans.

“You sure you don’t want to talk?”

“No. I’m going to stay here and look for The Stone for a bit.”

“You still think there’s a perfect skimmer?” I asked. He stared at me for a long moment, then away over the river with its dusty blanket of hovering flies.

“No. I just think that it’s different for everyone. Depends how you throw it.”

For a minute I struggled to find a hidden meaning in what he was saying, then decided he was just talking about stones after all.

“Well I’ll see you around then,” I said, and left.

When I got home, my Mum was annoyed because I was late, Dad was out in the garden getting in the last of the veggies and my youngest brother was messing about with my 45’s. There were lights on all over the house as the daylight faded, and my older brother was playing tapes in his room. Too loud as usual, *and* the music was rubbish.

I went upstairs to wash my hands and yelled at Jonathan to mind my David Essex records, or I’d kill him. From the bathroom I heard my Dad come in and tell Anthony to turn his music down, and a moment later James Last blared from the front room music centre.

I smiled.

Then my smile faded as I wondered what Steven had gone home to. Maybe he

would be okay tonight; he'd said it was only sometimes, and there must be days when his home was like mine? I'm sure thinking the worst made the best happen, I've always believed that. If you say it out loud, it won't come true.

None of us saw Steven again. We heard he'd moved away, not very far, but far enough to make it too far to come to play with us. Our last days down by the river came and went and, my crush forgotten, our lives became swallowed up once more in the day to day business of school and preparations for Hallowe'en and Bonfire Night. Youth club reasserted itself as the place to go once the weather turned wet. The church choir claimed more of my time too, now that autumn was here, and Jane and I embraced our friendship again as Nicola went deeper into her own life. I told Jane about Steven and sometimes, when she could sneak away, we went down to the river to see if he'd show up, but not often. Life went on, Christmas was good.

The local papers on New Year's Day 1978 carried the story with huge headlines;

"Bullying Blamed For Teenager's Death."

"Bridge Suicide Boy Named."

"Parents Deny Abuse..."

As my parents discussed it in shocked "would-you-have-guessed-it" tones in our warm, brightly lit and love-filled kitchen, I felt my breakfast turn to tasteless sludge in my mouth. My inner eye showed me images of him staring into the water where the stones had disappeared so easily. How often had he thought about it?

Poor Steven.

Clear green eyes that told you nothing. A smile that lit your soul and was gone forever.

He hadn't found The Stone, but he'd found one that fitted his hand, and he'd thrown it the only way he knew how.

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