

ADRIAN'S STONE

He said his name was Finch and he appeared to be a fixture in the non-descript Chicago hotel bar I found myself in. Finch could have been his first name or last. He never said, and I never asked. I'd simply come in to get out of the rain after failing to flag down a cab.

The only other patrons beside Finch and me were a young couple seated at a table next to the rain-lashed front window. They were drinking Mexican Coronas from the bottle and eating bar food – burgers and onion rings served on waxed paper in red plastic baskets. They seemed to be totally engrossed in each other and oblivious to us or our gloomy oak-paneled surroundings.

I was in town to attend a nephrology seminar, having gotten into O'Hare late on account of the weather. It had been clear when I left Detroit Metro, but the weather in the Midwest is always unpredictable, especially this time of year.

Finch could have been a tenured professor at Northwestern, but that would have been judging a book by its cover. He looked to be in his mid-seventies and wore a brown cable-knit vest sweater over a denim shirt and pleated woolen trousers in spite of it being late July. His parchment-like skin was mottled and jaundiced; a sure sign of liver

cirrhosis, and he smoked an unfiltered Camel cigarette. Since the overflowing at his elbow held six crushed butts and three cherry stems, I guessed the Manhattan he was working on wasn't his first.

I typically avoid strangers who foist themselves on others, so I warily accepted his beckoned invitation to join him. Maybe it was because of the watery blue eyes that seemed to be pleading for company – for someone willing to listen. Someone like me; who should have known better. I placed the briefcase carrying my research notes on the stool between Finch and myself as a barrier to discourage further encroachment and ordered a Diet Coke from the bartender. If he had a twin it would have been the actor George Raft.

“Quite the storm, huh mister?” Finch said after introducing himself. He didn't offer a hand, yet his tone was warm.

I took off my wet herringbone blazer with its leather-patched elbows and draped it over the barstool separating us. “Yeah,” I replied. “And where's a cab when you need one?”

He laughed and said, “Must be your first time in town.”

“No. I've been to Chicago dozens of times.”

“Salesman?”

“Nephrologist.”

“I'm a retired sanitation specialist. I'd say that puts us at opposite ends of the same business.”

“I suppose you could at that. However, my interests lay in the development of portable low cost dialysis machines.”

His sallow expression darkened. “Such a machine might have saved my mother’s life. She died while a blizzard raged outside her Michigan farmhouse. Snowbound, alone, and unable get out for days, she missed a twice-weekly dialysis procedure.”

I reached for my Diet Coke and took a sip while trying to wish away the storm. I didn’t want to hear what I guessed was coming next – a lengthy story of how the medical profession failed to save the life of someone whose time had finally come.

Finch took a last drag off his Camel before tamping it out among the other dead butts in the overflowing ashtray. “Your coming here today was no accident,” he said. “In fact, you might say I expected you.”

I felt a sudden chill that had nothing to do with the air conditioning blasting from an overhead vent. “Really? How so?”

Finch reached deep into a pants pocket and pulled out a stone no bigger than an infant’s clenched fist. Deep brown in color – almost black, it was encircled by a thin tracery of ochre, such as one might tie an irregularly shaped package. He nudged it towards me with a hopeful smile.

“What’s this?” I asked. “Some kind of game?”

Finch took a long swallow of his Manhattan and cleared his throat before speaking. “Look’s like an ordinary stone, doesn’t it?”

I nodded and turned to glance expectantly towards the young couple sitting beneath the windows fronting Michigan Avenue. Beyond them the storm raged with renewed intensity. There would be no getting away from Finch now.

He reached for the open pack of Camels at his elbow and shook one out. “Mind?” he asked, and held it aloft between nicotine-stained fingers as if seeking my approval.

“Actually yes, I do.”

He wordlessly returned the cigarette to the pack and set it aside before picking up the stone. He held it in his open palm for several long seconds before beginning the story that haunts me to this day.

“My late wife Elaine and I were living in Cleveland at the time,” he said in a voice made husky by cigarettes and alcohol. “This would have been ninety-eighty-seven, the year my mother passed during that blizzard I mentioned. She lived to be ninety-five, which is more than I can say for my chances.” Finch patted his diseased liver before going on. “Like me, she was a heavy smoker for most of her life. Late-stage lung cancer was diagnosed only months before her death, but by then her bladder and kidneys had been compromised. Unable to rid the blood of excess potassium...well, you know the outcome.”

I had seen many such cases. “All too well,” I replied with a sideways glance at the stone cradled in Finch’s palm.

“My father died ten years earlier,” he said as an afterthought. “A stroke. Mercifully, he was spared from witnessing Mother’s passing.”

“You say you’re from Cleveland,” I said without thinking of the consequences. “What brings you to Chicago?”

Finch lowered the stone to the bar’s slick mahogany surface and flexed his knobbed fingers as if to suggest it had become an unbearable burden. “After Elaine died I sold our place in Cleveland and moved in with an older widowed sister who had taken an apartment not far from here. Now she’s gone too.”

By now, Finch’s nearness was almost suffocating. “No living relatives, I take it?”

“None, save for a distant cousin somewhere in Topeka.”

“Is that when your story takes place, in Topeka?”

“No. The story takes place in Pentwater, Michigan where Elaine and our son Adrian attended my mother’s funeral. Adrian, a Marine first lieutenant, was granted a bereavement leave for the occasion. That was ten years ago. My parents once had a home near Pentwater, and that’s where Mother wanted to be buried, next to my father, his parents, and my father’s youngest brother.”

“I know Pentwater. Lovely place. My wife and I vacationed there once.”

“Are you from there originally?”

“No. I was born and raised in Traverse City. We live in Birmingham now. That’s north of Detroit.”

He closed his watery eyes and smiled. “Its small world after all, doctor. I was born and raised near Pentwater.”

“Pentwater on the lake,” I said. “Air-conditioned by nature and known for its beautiful and unspoiled sugar-sand beaches.”

“Correct. Elaine, Adrian and I were joined there by my sister, her husband, and my older half-brother from our father’s first marriage. He and his wife drove in from Escondido, California.”

“They didn’t fly?”

Finch shook his head. “A claustrophobe, she feared heights and wouldn’t travel long distances unless it was in the backseat of their Mercedes with a bottle of red wine for company and a Hill’s Brothers coffee can for relief.”

“She must have been a real treat to have known.”

Finch gave me an understanding nod before draining the last of his Manhattan. “She made my half-brother’s life a living hell for fifty-two years.”

“So, it was just the seven of you attending your mother’s funeral?”

“As a family, yes. A Presbyterian minister unknown to any of us but recommended by the funeral director had come to read her eulogy.” Finch waved a hand to attract the bartender. “Can I buy you a drink?” he asked. “Something stronger than a Diet Coke?”

“Thank you, but no.”

Finch took my refusal with a shrug and went on. “Mother had many friends. Of course everyone said how natural she looked. But after what she went through? Hardly.”

“This has all been very interesting,” I began, “but I really need to find a cab.”

“Please, wait,” he said. “I won’t take much more of your time.”

“Five more minutes,” I said, “assuming your story won’t take longer.”

Finch sat back with a satisfied smile as the bartender placed another Manhattan in front of him. After taking a sip to lubricate his tonsils, he began to relate his story.

“During Mother’s services we were told of the remarkable appearance, the day before, of countless stones that had washed up on a secluded stretch of beach just south of town. It was presumed to have been the result of a terrific thunder storm that toppled century-old trees and loosened shingles on homes ten miles inland. Waves exceeding ten feet in height crashed ashore that day, and casting up tens upon thousands of stones such as you see here on the beach where none had ever been seen before. ”

“Never?”

“No, at least not in recent memory. Anyway, with the stones uppermost in mind, we changed into the swimsuits we’d brought with us and gathered up enough towels for everyone, to include a king-sized bed sheet upon which we could spread out. Elaine even prepared a picnic lunch of ham sandwiches, potato salad and lemonade, which I spiked with good Russian vodka.”

I made a show of deliberately checking the time on my wristwatch. “Unless they’re germane to the story, can we please skip the details and get on with it?”

“Yes, of course. My apologies, doctor. Now, where was I?”

“I believe you were going to the beach.”

Finch smiled, as if recounting a distant memory. “Ah yes. So we loaded up our two cars and headed cross-town to the aforementioned beach. The sun was well up and hot as we walked down the sloping bluff to the water’s edge. From there we made our way south until finding them.”

“The stones?”

“Yes. Thousands upon thousands of them glisteningly wetly under the sun, and none bigger than the one you see here.”

“It must have been an amazing sight.”

“Like a Belgian cobblestone road after a night’s rain. Enchanted, we set about gathering up as many stones as we could carry. More, as it turned out. We began selecting and then discarding one for another, prettier one, until each towel was piled high with them. Like children, we began laughing at the sheer silliness of what we were doing, until realizing it was at least a mile back to where we’d parked the cars.”

“Logistics,” I said. “That and winter is what defeated Napoleon.”

“So I’ve heard,” Finch replied. “Now we had to choose only the very best stones to take home with us. My son Adrian picked this one. He said it was lucky, except it turned out to be anything but.”

Curious, I picked it up and rubbed my thumb over its smoothly-irregular surface, as if summoning a genie. “It looks perfectly ordinary to me.”

Finch gently pried the stone from my fingers and dipped it into his Manhattan like a strawberry into hot chocolate. “Look at it now,” he said, and held it up. Under the indirect bar lighting, the stone glowed with hidden color. Flecks of red and orange appeared where there’d previously been none. Its dull black surface had taken on depth, with a color like warm molasses. I was looking at a jewel.

Finch gave me a knowing smile. “We had just dumped the stones onto the bed sheet when a sudden flash of lightning stopped us dead in our tracks. Then the thunder came, louder than anything I’d ever heard.” He paused, as if to let the imagery sink in.

“Must have been similar to the storm that preceded it.”

“Exactly,” Finch replied agreeably. “No more than a minute later and it was upon us. By then we couldn’t see more than a hundred yards in any direction.”

“Did you have to leave the stones behind?”

Finch chuckled. “We’d come too far for that. Instead, we began pulling the sheet still heaped with stones back up the beach. Of course it was in shreds before we had taken a dozen steps. Being too stubborn or stupid to quit, we piled as many stones as we could onto the towels and dragged them over the wet sand back to where we’d parked. In our excitement we had neglected to take the picnic basket with us. Say doc, are you sure I can’t offer you a drink?”

At this point I was not only craving a drink, I was hungry too. “Considering my chances of finding a cab in this weather, a hamburger and a gin martini sound good.”

Finch waved the bartender over. “A gin martini for my friend here,” he said, “And make it a double.”

“Make it a Beefeater with a twist,” I said, and added, “Would it be possible to get a double cheeseburger with deli mustard and horseradish, no onions?”

“Comin’ right up,” the bartender said, and left to share my order with the kitchen while I finished what remained of the Diet Coke.

“So, where was I?” Finch repeated.

“You were lugging the stones...”

“Right you are. After unloading them into the trunks of our cars, I led the way back towards town. When we passed the cemetery where my mother had just been laid to rest, I slowed for no particular reason and turned in. Of course my poor half-brother had no choice but to follow. We parked opposite the family gravesite and waited an hour for the fast-moving storm to pass.”

I held up a hand as a signal for Finch to hold his narrative when the bartender appeared with my double martini. “Cheeseburger will be ready in a few,” he said, and turned to deliver two more Coronas to the hand-holding couple at the table in front.

“The minute the storm had roared inland,” Finch began, “we left our cars and headed straight for Mother’s unmarked grave. Of course there wouldn’t be a proper headstone for another several weeks, and it would match the others. The flowers we’d so carefully set out the day before had been shattered by the storm. Downed tree branches were everywhere, like broken bones. Anyone who’d seen us in our swimsuits and bare

feet would've thought we were crazy. Hell, maybe we were. Anyway, we had just finished clearing away the debris when Elaine suggested we use some of the stones to mark the family graves. We all agreed it was a great idea, so I arranged twelve stones in the shape of a heart where I guessed my mother's heart would be."

"That must have been a very touching moment," I said, and sat back when the bartender reappeared with a basketed cheeseburger and the fries that came with.

Finch wiped away a sudden tear and nodded. "We decided to return to the beach the next day, but this time with pails borrowed from the neighbors."

"So you were able to add more to your collection?"

Finch vigorously shook his head, as if denying a memory. "No sir. The stones were gone by then. That second storm I'm telling you about took 'em back, every damned one of them. We waded out as far as we could until we were crotch-deep in water, all the while hoping the stones might be waiting within an arms reach."

"And?"

"There was nothing there, doc. Nothing but crystal clear water and a pure sand bottom. It was like it never happened, like a mirage, a figment of the imagination."

I took a bite of my medium-rare no-onion cheeseburger and chewed thoroughly while trying to picture Finch's improbable-sounding story in my mind. "You must have been terribly disappointed."

"Disappointed hardly describes it. We left for Cleveland the next day, and when we got home we put our share of the remaining stones in flowerpots and along windowsills where the sun would catch them. Early the next day Adrian left for Camp Pendleton in California. From there he shipped out for the Gulf. He made captain while

he was in Kuwait, but he never came home. His commanding officer wrote to tell us that our son was killed by what they called ‘friendly fire’. He was only twenty-three. Among Adrian’s personal effects were a pair of silver captain’s bars, his dog tags, and this stone.”

I reached for my martini and took a deep throat-burning swallow. “Look, Finch,” I said. “Maybe I misjudged you. If so, please accept my apologies.”

Without asking if it was okay to smoke he shook a Camel from the half-empty pack at his elbow and lit it off a Zippo with the iconic Marine Globe and Anchor engraved into its chrome-plated case.

“It rained last night,” he said, changing the subject. “Nothing like this of course, but enough to wake me from a recurring dream in which Adrian keeps getting blown up over and over again. Knowing from experience that sleep would never come, I rolled out of bed and stumbled down the hallway to my sister’s old bedroom. I use it as a hobby room now. Stamps. I collect stamps. I was guided by a nightlight that had been Adrian’s every since he was a child. Funny that he should have been afraid of the dark but he was.”

I sensed what was coming. “Look, sir. If you don’t want to go on...”

With fresh tears glimmering in his rheumy blue eyes, Finch waved me away. “I ran my fingers over the brittle spines of so many books, non-fiction mostly, and stacks of those National Geographic magazines that seem to multiply while you sleep. Nestled between two of Adrian’s favorite nursery rhyme books was a scale model of the Porsche sports car he always wanted but will never own. I picked up the twenty-year perpetual calendar my father gave to me on my twelfth birthday. Its perpetuity ran out in nineteen

seventy one, yet it seems I cannot live without it. Next to it was the grim reminder of another time and place; a brass tag that carries a stamped legend in black enamel. Bureau of Indian Affairs. Wyoming Territory Corpse No. 132. My half-brother gave it to me for my fiftieth birthday. It's heartbreaking to think that some long-dead Shoshone or Arapahoe warrior went to his grave with that horrible thing tied to his toe."

No longer hungry, and with emotion choking back the words that would have seemed trite and banal had they come, I pushed aside my unfinished cheeseburger.

"You're not hungry?" he asked.

"Sorry, no. And please, go on with your story."

"I found the stone where I'd left it in the clay ashtray Adrian made for me when he was in second grade. It's crudely but lovingly made, and it also holds his silver captain's bars and dog tags. When I picked up the stone a subtle shift of cool air seemed to move through the room. I swear to you doc, I could not release it; this thing that once scoured a glacial lake bottom now seemed to radiate with a heat of its own. I'm no deep thinker, but to have let this stone go would have sent me spinning through time and space to the beginning; back to that sliver of time when I was the youngest human on the planet. I carried it back to bed with me and there, in that silent lonely room, with the stone held against the liver that's killing me, it seemed as if every atom in the cosmos was pressing down on me."

Finch's remarkable story left me drained. I scarcely noticed that the storm had moved off. I reached for my briefcase and still-damp patch jacket and stood to leave.

"Thank you," I said, and added, "For everything."

He reached for the stone and thrust it towards me. "Please," he said, "do an old man a favor, and take this with you."

"I couldn't. Not now."

"I insist."

"If you must," I said, "give it to that couple in front."

Fresh tears spilled from his eyes. "No doctor. They are too young for an old man's memories, especially now, when they are still creating their own. In time, the boy will remember drinking too many Mexican beers, and the girl will remember it rained."

"And if I don't?"

Finch placed the stone that remained slick with whiskey and sweet-vermouth into my hand and smiled. "In that case there'll be no one to remember, and it will become nothing more than an ordinary stone."

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Fifteen years have passed, but I still have the stone. It remains on my writing desk as a reminder of Finch and his dead Marine. But time is getting away from me too. A recent winter thunderstorm woke me from a fitful and dream-filled sleep that seemed to carry with it some unfinished portent. Next to me my wife shifted and turned in her sleep, her breathing soft and regular. Unable to sleep, I threw off the bedcovers and stumbled down the darkened hallway to my office.

I flicked on the desktop reading lamp to see arrayed family photographs that seemed to question my naked presence in the half-light. I picked up the stone where I keep it next to my computer and held it tight, as if to protect it from a sudden chill that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

Was it the rain I heard pattering on the Spanish tile roof overhead, or was it the gentle wash of Lake Michigan surf? It no longer mattered. What did matter was that I had to take the stone back to where Adrian found it. Sometime next summer I will wade crotch-deep into that crystal clear Lake Michigan water and throw the stone as far as my arthritic arm will allow. Naturally I expect to be drunk on gin martinis.

Someday another storm will heave those same ancient stones up from the lake bottom and return them to that remote crescent of beach. And somewhere among the countless tens of thousands of ordinary stones will be an extraordinary one. Adrian's.

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