

# Casting Stones

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if he should wait until the water almost reached his toes or wait until it was sucked back into a hollow wave, far away, but still, if he could throw that far he would have a greater surface to throw on. He stuck a hand in his pocket and the objects clacked within. Clickety-clack, like skeleton teeth and then a wave boomed . . . then the hiss over sand, the impending hiss; clickety-clack, boom, hiss, if, his bloodless hand clenched the smooth round moist stone, hot with friction. The stone is anger. No—the arm about to throw the stone is anger. No—the object receiving the action of the arm throwing the stone is anger. Ahhh . . . the face in the ocean, foam-born, mutil . . . mutated seaweed hair changed with the ebb, the face of the wave poised in the clickety-clack and boom, gone, then the hiss, slithering deception.

He gazed at the pier to the left. The half pier. He gazed at the half pier. It had been a whole. Not it was a half, less than half. How far it had penetrated the ocean before he could not remember. But now it sticks out here. Maybe it had always stuck out there. If he couldn't remember. Maybe it's still whole. Ahhh, but the cliff. It retreats. Part of the path had slid into the ravine. He had seen that. There was a definite boundary of space now empty which had been occupied, where there had been a contiguous black top path between the now jagged edges of the two black top paths sundered by the receding cliff. Ahhh, he thought, then I don't always deceive myself.

The bottom of his trousers were rolled even though he avoided the cold and dirty water. But just in case. Clickety-clack, he dropped the first stone back into his pocket. He felt through the lint and loose threads and chose another. The other didn't feel right. The weight and the way it sat between the crook of his two first fingers. It didn't feel right. It couldn't feel right. The feeling was good for a moment, but then it was gone, and he couldn't take any chances. Not when casting stones. He hefted the other one, round and smooth also, but a little flatter. Less weight. It would skip more, but he would have to keep it low. Under any drafts. He wouldn't throw it

directly into the water, but at an angle to obtain more surface area.

He slid a moist hand over the greasy bald spot on his head. Boom. Twenty years and not to know. All of a sudden and then hissssss . . . to have the feeling, and then gone.

An old man scuffled along the ridge of the sand, his metal detector swaying back and forth like a blind man's cane. His trousers were rolled up too. The bald man turned, hoping he would not be noticed. The old man stopped parallel to the bald man, between the cliff and the bald man who was between the ocean and the old man. Then it was the cliff, the old man, the bald man, and the ocean respectively from east to west, suspended in a mute line. The old man laid his metal contraption down and carefully slid down the bank to the fading line marking sea and sand.

"Cast a stone with me." The old man's voice rang hard and brittle. Demanding.

The bald man restrained the "what?" that automatically sprang to his tongue. Instead he waved a deprecatory hand. The old man stood adamant. "Goddammit, I saw you weighing the damn thing in your hand. Now cast one damn stone with me."

The bald man cowered as the old man's acumen stabbed him. He jerked his hand out of his pocket. Clickety-clack, like the sound they had made shooting marbles over the cold kitchen tiles. "I don't want to. Leave me alone," but his voice was hesitant. Indecisive.

"You can't go around casting stones by yourself. It's not right, especially at your age. People will think you're crazy." The old man circled the area scavenger like, stooping to inspect stones, discarding some and placing others in his pockets. A jogger approached along the edges of the strand, sweat pants and a white shirt. The bald man noticed that her breasts bounced erratically. Long young hair was blown back by the gentle ocean breeze. Her gait was strained and rhythmic, one foot placed precisely in front of the other, equally distanced. Premeditated. He watched as she passed by.

"Jail bait." The old man shuffled back, clickety-clack scrape went the stones in his hand and pocket. The bald man felt assaulted. Damn old man, he thought. Get out of my head, out of my sight. Don't want to see you, don't want to see . . . the old man tested a stone. It slapped into the face of a small wave, there was a sucking sound and nothing. The old man sat down reflectively on a mound of sand. "Need more wrist. Gotta get lower too." Pause. "The back doesn't bend like it used to, though, hell no." He heaved himself up with a groan

and ambled closer to the water for a better throw. The splayed foam flowed over his toes, just one good throw before . . . a wave broke which spread a smooth green and white-veined carpet; the old man, tensed and stooped, waited with his arm cocked back and his wrist curled, waiting for the moment when the moving water was at its apex, that point in time when it doesn't move forward or backward, when the line running unimpeded from past to future to beyond is held in abeyance. Then like a coiled snake his arm flicked out. There were two long skips and then three intervals of shorter skips before the stone vanished. The old man shouted, "Goddammit! Must have skipped ten times! Can you beat that boy? Eh?"

The bald man was perturbed by the old man's petulance. Grey bristles stood out as his flushed face wrinkled contemptuously. "Five times."

"Speak up boy."

"It only skipped five times. I was counting. I saw it."

"What skipped five times?"

"The damn stone. You know what I'm talking about."

The old man returned to his mound. "You're blind. You didn't see those five little skips at the end." But he gave a conciliatory grunt. "Go ahead, it's your turn." Imbued in his placid tone was a nuance of fatalism.

The bald man still grasped the smooth round stone in his hand. This one felt good. He thought it would do the trick, if he could only, boom . . . twenty years, he thought, till death did us part, the feeling there and gone, the face in the wave born of foam and fecundated by the great emasculation now boom. For what, for who did I linger and stretch it out so thinly? Why the masquerade? Was it because of that solitary vision of emptiness, deathly emptiness. Fear of being alone, until something better would come along . . .

The jogger returned after turning back at the pier. He stared again while his muscles rippled in expectation of the throw. He waited as the erratic bounce moved closer, he crouched, one eye on the water's fluctuations, one on the grey sweat pants and shirt, arm cocked back . . .

"Hold on boy." The old man waddled toward him, his eyebrows furrowed and his throat bringing up phlegm. "Let me have a look at that stone."

The bald man's face flushed again, but the stone was perched obsequiously on his moist palm. The old man snatched it and inspected it like it was a relic.

"Damn lake stone."

"What?"

"Throwing a damn lake stone. Look at it. You didn't find it here," he accused. "You can't use it."

"I never said I found it here. Now what the hell—"

"Use another stone."

It's futile thought the bald man. "Screw it. I don't want to play anymore." He suddenly remembered the jogger and scanned the crooked shoreline earnestly, but she was gone, damn it, gone she was.

The old man still held the stone, turning it over. "Where'd you get this from?"

The bald man squatted on the old man's mound of sand and placed his hands in his pockets, clickety-clack. His head was bowed reflectively. "The pond."

"The what?"

"The damn pond! I have—had a pond in the backyard, and a jacuzzi, and a piano, and three bathrooms. Now go away old man."

The old man grumbled and spat. "Can't play with lake stones anyway. Not if that's all you have, or had," he added emphatically while ascending the bank. He pouted and abjectly scooped up his metal contraption.

The bald man stared at the curved, receding figure. He felt a tightness in his throat which wanted to express itself in desperation. He had a question lingering on his mind's edge that he didn't want the old man to misinterpret as being sarcastic or contemptuous, so he called placatingly to the stooped figure, the metal disc waving back and forth like a pendulum. "Have you found it yet, old man?"

The old man whipped around with greater celerity than his ancient, shrivelled body should have had the potential for. His cheeks were drawn in, his eyes sunken. He pointed down to the sand. "It's under there, waiting, boy."

Clickety-clack, boom, hiss, he gazed at the setting sun as the breeze picked up and white caps decorated the wave crests. Clickety-clack. He realized now the old man had kept one of the stones. Boom, he wondered if he should wait until the water almost reached hissssssss . . .