A Chip Off the Old ... Stone?

Tony Seegers*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1981 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
A Chip Off the Old ... Stone?

Tony Seegers

Abstract

Dad had turned to stone. It happened on the weekend so we didn’t notice for a couple of days. He always sat there very still like that while the football games were on. Mom would sneak in regularly and replace the half-empty cans of warm flat beer with fresh cold ones...
A Chip Off the Old . . . Stone?

by Tony Seegers, Electrical Engineering Senior

Dad had turned to stone. It happened on the weekend so we didn't notice for a couple of days. He always sat there very still like that while the football games were on. Mom would sneak in regularly and replace the half-empty cans of warm flat beer with fresh cold ones. Sometimes she would slip in a bologna sandwich, too. Mom was the one who finally noticed. She told the doctor that she became suspicious on Sunday afternoon when the beers started coming back full and again on Monday morning when he didn't go to work. He remained slouched in his artifact of a partially overstuffed chair, part of the stuffing had fallen out a long time ago. He still wore his dirty t-shirt with matching torn trousers and his feet were still stuck into a pair of formerly white socks and balanced up on our old wobbily coffee table. She finally realized that something was wrong when Monday Night Football came on with Howard and Dandy Don announcing. Dad hates Howard Cosell. He always turned down the sound during the game on Monday night. He even had one of those foam rubber bricks to heave at the TV screen whenever anything undesirable, such as Howie, appeared. When Cosell's voice came on for the halftime highlights, Mom knew that something was wrong.

The doctor checked Dad over carefully and announced that Dad had indeed become a statue of colored sandstone. He suggested that we be more careful around him since someone had already knocked a chip off of his left cheek. As the doctor packed his surgical steel geologist's hammer and mason's trowel (he fixed the chip) into his bag, he assured us that Dad was probably just going through a phase and that he
would snap out of it soon enough. He instructed us to keep the pigeons away and to make sure that no moss grew on his north side. We just left him there with a sheet draped over his head to keep the dust off.

Mom continued on as before, leaving the beers and bologna sandwiches by his chair. Poor old Mom was used to being ignored by everyone in the family and nothing seemed out of the ordinary to her now. She went on about the same old routine that she carried on for so many years. She never even noticed when the beers started coming back half empty again, she just kept leaving the fresh cold ones and the occasional sandwich. When the cold beers quit coming, my little brother started to complain; that's how we discovered that Mom had also turned to stone. We found her standing by the refrigerator with a beer can in her hand; it was stone too. She looked just like Dad did, a colored sandstone statue with one hand holding a white cylindrical shaped piece with the word "beer" written on its side. I thought that she would have at least smiled before she solidified but she still carried the same tired and rather plain gaze that I always associated with her. I went into the family room to look at Dad again. I lifted up the edge of the sheet to get a look at his face. It was the same old face that for years told me to 'go ask your mother.' Something seemed terribly strange about this whole situation; it wasn't the fact that both of my parents had turned to stone but the fact that nothing really seemed out of the ordinary even now. I couldn't quite figure out why. I thought that I should feel some grief or something. It was just like in the old Charlie Chan movies where a lady's husband would get murdered, not by her, and she would stand around five minutes after the demise and calmly discuss the case with Chan. It always seemed to me that she should be hysterical. I thought about the situation for a bit and came to one conclusion: my little brother would be next.

My brother, Timmy, was a smaller version of Dad. He had the same brown hair, the same brown eyes, the same dirty t-shirt with matching torn trousers, and he spent most of his time at home in front of a portable TV in the basement. The only difference between him and Dad was that he liked to watch game shows instead of football. Timmy thought it was
great that I never made him go to school any more and I let him stay up as late as he wanted but he was bothered by the fact that I never left him alone. I was determined to be there when it happened, so I followed him everywhere and kept my eye on him. Whenever he got irritated at me I would try to explain what I was trying to do but he would tell me how he figured that I was the next to go and that he couldn't wait until he had free run of the house. He even started to poke me on occasion to see how solid I was getting to be.

It finally happened one night during Hollywood Squares and I missed it. I told Timmy to accompany me to the kitchen while I put Spaghetti-o's on for our supper. Unfortunately, contestant number two had just chosen George Gobel to block, and Timmy refused to leave the TV even for a second. I went into the kitchen and set a panful of the Spaghetti-o's on the stove to heat up and when I got back down to the basement it was too late. I found him lying on the floor on his stomach with his legs flat on the floor, the toes pointing in opposite directions. His head was propped up in the palms of his hands. This position reminded me of one of those little plastic army men that lies flat on the ground with his little plastic rifle sticking out in front of him. Timmy's expression was that of the stereotypic TV addict, an unsmiling face with wide unblinking eyes. This position was very natural for Timmy whenever he became absorbed in his game shows and totally oblivious to everything outside of TV land. After about ten minutes, I decided that it wasn't going to do me any good to watch Timmy any more; he wasn't going to do much now.

My family members weren't the only additions to the world of statues, as I soon discovered. I went out to pick up our copy of the morning paper when I noticed our paper boy lying on the sidewalk next to his bike with his arm broken off. I picked up the paper and headed back into the house for some Krazy Glue to put the arm back on. The paper told of hundreds of instances where people were turning to stone. I read about a police report where about a hundred people reported losing members of their families last night during the Carson show. Another part of the same article told about one of the more popular nightspots in town, The Secret Hideout. When closing time rolled around, the manager noticed that over
two-thirds of his patrons were permanently seated. The situation was getting much bigger; it was just like a script out of the late feature where some extraterrestrial being or mutant strain of bacteria threatened the existence of life on earth. The movie always centered around three characters, the brave and daring hero, some great looking woman, and some genius who is an expert in every field of science that exists (or at least the ones that they need in the movie). The movie always ends with the genius staying behind to fall victim to whatever catastrophe is occurring at the moment while the hero rescues the woman who embraces him while the creature either dies or moves slowly into the west where the words 'The End' are being presented as bait. I decided that the best thing that I could do was to find myself a great looking woman and a genius. After a bit more thought, I decided that I had better find myself a hero too.

It took me a long time to decide on who the hero should be for this situation. I considered some of the possible choices at school like the quarterback of our football team or the guy who sits next to me in math who is always combing his hair, or a few others. The problem was that most of these guys had already turned to stone; the few that remained didn't quite seem to be the right choice. I did finally come up with the perfect choice though—me. This decision became very easy after I realized that the hero was the one who never comes to any harm in these adventures. My girlfriend, Doris, was the logical choice for the woman's role, so I dialed her number—no answer. "Oh No!" I thought as I headed for my car to zip over to Doris' house. It had been almost a week since I spoke to her last, all of that time being spent following my little brother around the house. I sped down the street heedless of the traffic signs and past a stationary cop car; the cop inside was stone. I arrived at Doris' house where I pounded on the front door—no answer. I tried the knob, the door was unlocked. Cautiously, I entered and looked around—no one was there, in fact nothing was there except the phone lying on the living room floor. I learned much later on the news that Doris' dad had committed some kind of corporate crime and the whole family had cleared out of the country with a lot of money. I could picture Doris lying on a beach in Rio.
else would have to fill the woman's role.

The choice for the genius role was another obvious one. There was this guy that I knew named Eddie whose ambition was to take his place in history along with Newton, Galileo, Einstein and the others. He was always carrying out these strange experiments with the hope of making some new earth shattering discovery. I always figured that shattering the earth, literally, would be his final act. When I went over to visit him he was working on his latest project in the area of microwave technology, the exploding-cat-in-the-oven phenomena. I explained the situation to him and made the proposal that he assume the role of the genius for me.

"Isn't he the one who always gets it in the end?" Eddie asked.

"Not to worry," I replied. "We're not sticking to the script completely."

"Why can't I be someone else then?" Eddie stared at me.

I stared back, "Because we need a female for the woman's role."

Eddie stared some more. "How come you get it?"

"Because it's my adventure."

"So what?"

"So I get the first choice of whomever I want to be."

"Then forget you," Eddie turned back to his work.

"Look Eddie," I said, "I thought that you would jump at a chance to help figure out this strange problem. After all, if we could find out the cause, we could become famous." This was the old work-on-his-ego trick.

"Just forget it," Eddie turned back to his work.

"Ok, I'll just go out and find someone else then," I threatened.

"Good," Eddie replied.

"Would you do it for twenty bucks?" I asked. Eddie looked up at me. "How about twenty bucks and two tickets to the Linda Ronstadt concert?"

"You got a deal." Eddie shook my hand. I had just learned that there is one thing more effective than persuasive psychology; it's called bribery.

I left Eddie with the instructions to gather together anything that he thought he might need and to be ready for fall 1981.
me when I got there in the morning, then I headed home to get my own stuff. I really didn't know what I should take along so I just grabbed a few things that I thought might be useful. I threw in a flashlight, some Band-aids, a box of Ding Dongs, a baseball bat, and most important, my tennis shoes. If something was going to come after me, I wasn't going to hang around to see if it could catch me. I wanted to take along a trench coat just like in the spy movies but I didn't have one so I had to settle for an old blue sweatshirt. My preparations were finished when I went in to set my alarm for 6:30 (about the time the sun would rise) and gave Eddie a call to make sure that he got up in time. I heard a bunch of strange clattering noises on the phone when he answered, like the old radio show when Fibber McGee opened his closet door. Eddie assured me that everything would be ready in the morning. What he meant by 'everything' made me wonder.

I didn't have to wonder for very long though. It seemed like a matter of minutes between the end of Johnny Carson's Floyd R. Turbo routine till my clock radio exploded in a rendition of ELO's Turn to Stone. The song wasn't a coincidence but merely an early morning DJ's morbid idea of humor. I merely shut the radio off and resisted the urge to reduce it to its component parts using the technique known as slamming-it-against-the-wall. After a shower and a quick bowl of Sugar Pops, I headed over to Eddie's house for a surprise. Eddie was standing out in his front yard with two large garbage bags beside him. When he tried to stick them in my car, I protested, "What makes you think that I'm gonna haul your trash for you?"

Eddie kept trying to stuff the bags into my back seat, "These aren't full of garbage, it's a lot of important equipment that we'll probably need."

"Such as," I leaned way over the seat and tried to push everything back out; one of the sacks tore open in the process, spilling some of its contents. The first item that fell out was a cowboy hat, followed by a bottle of Orange Crush, several complicated electronic devices of the type that you pick up at a NASA rummage sale, several articles of old clothing, and a hockey stick. "What's this hockey stick for?"

Eddie stopped pushing. "That's part of a disguise," the
rest of the uniform is on the bottom somewhere."

I stared at Eddie for a few moments, "What's this?" I picked up one of the odd looking electronic devices. It looked like a cross between a radar scope and a toaster.

Eddie grabbed it out of my hands, "All of this stuff is real useful." His voice had a hurt tone to it. "I only brought what I thought we would use." He looked at me with a doleful expression on his face, the kind that said, 'trust me.' I really didn't want to take the time to dig through everything to see what we could leave behind so I just told him to finish putting the other bag in so that we could get started.

We drove for a while past many silent statues lining the streets and sidewalks. The scene was similar to a great hall of a wax museum. "Where are we headed to?" Eddie finally asked.

"Beats me," I replied.

"We should have some place to start," Eddie stated.

"But that's the part on those detective programs that they never make clear." I glanced over at Eddie. "Those guys just seem to wander around and whatever they are looking for eventually comes after them."

"Is that gonna happen to us?"

"I doubt it."

"Well then let's pull over here and logically deduct a way to limit our area of search." Eddie liked to sound scientific whenever he got the chance.

"How about a twenty mile radius around town?" I suggested.

"How did you come up with that?" Eddie asked.

"That's all I can afford for gas," I replied.

"That's logical. Let's get going." Eddie was silent.

"Well, now what?" I looked over at Eddie who was scratching on a piece of paper.

"I have a theory on the situation." Eddie stared into space. "If we analyze the rain water, maybe we will find some type of chemical that causes this."

"But it hasn't rained in over a month," I stated.

"Right." Eddie agreed before lapsing into silence once again. "It could be the water supply then." At his direction, I headed out to the city water works which was located out by the new shopping mall.
It took a few tries to jimmy the door open which seemed like a lot of trouble when we only stayed long enough to fill a jar up with a sample of water. “Wouldn’t it have been easier to just turn on a faucet somewhere?” I asked.

It took Eddie some time to come up with a reply. “It isn’t done that way. I mean nobody believes in doing anything the easy way any more. Look at the auto manufacturers. They are in constant competition to see who can design the most complicated piece of machinery that still works. You can’t get anything from the government without volumes of paperwork. Even people who go on a trip somewhere take all of the old twisted back roads and call it the scenic route. When you go to school you—”

“Ok, you made your point. Sorry to stop you while you were on a roll but we should get going. How are we going to test this?”

“I don’t really know.” Eddie looked pleased. “I don’t know what I’m looking for in it.”

“So now what?” I wished that I had the answer.

“We could go over to Woolworths and get one of those little test kits they advertise on TV.”

“It would be interesting to see how many people are frozen at the mall anyway.” I turned a corner and headed across a broad expanse of mall parking lot. There was an empty space close to the front door of Sears for us to park in.

The inside of Sears looked like an overstock of mannequins. There wasn’t much difference between the real people and the mannequins except that the mannequins were generally better looking. As we stepped out into the center of the mall, I stopped Eddie. “Look at that statue over there.” I pointed to a guy leaning against a pillar, a cigarette in one of his hands.

“Now what’s the problem?” Eddie asked as he looked at the guy. “He looks just like all of the rest.”

“No, something is different.” I concentrated for a time trying to place it. “I know!” I grabbed Eddie’s arm excitedly. “He doesn’t have that porridge face.”

Eddie drew away and glared at me. “A what face?”

“Porridge face,” I explained. “You know when you look at those statues and it doesn’t seem like any of them were ever really alive. This guy doesn’t look like that.”
"I don’t quite follow you." Eddie headed off toward Woolworths. "Let’s just see if we can figure out what’s in that water sample." I followed, taking a quick glance back at the guy.

It didn’t take us long to find what we were looking for. The water test kits were positioned at the end of an aisle close to the checkouts where you couldn’t miss them on your way out. They were done up in yellow packaging with bright red lettering, what is known in marketing circles as eye-catching fashion. The package bore many of the typical hard sell slogans such as: NEW! Fast Easy to Use, The Original Test-it test kit, Approved for use by the U.S. Olympic Team, and AS SEEN ON TV! I had no doubt in my mind that I would be the envy of my friends and the life of the party with one of those kits. I told this to Eddie; his reply was, in all seriousness, "It wouldn’t be very interesting at a party." I just shook my head, saddened at the fact that a great sarcastic remark was just lost. Eddie ignored my downfallen expression and carefully examined the package. "This'll probably do," he finally said. "Where do we pay for it?" We both looked at the checkout counters where the clerks were frozen in their positions. It seemed fitting that these dime store employees were stone and I felt that it had something to do with that idea that eluded my consciousness.

"Well, what do you think?" I looked at Eddie then glanced toward the checkouts. Eddie just walked past me through the nearest lane plunking a five dollar bill on the counter as he passed.

Once clear of the store, we stopped a few minutes before leaving the mall. Eddie studied the package in his hand once again. "I hope that we can learn something from this. I’d like to get on to something else before too long."

"You can’t drop out on me now," I complained. "I’m having enough trouble finding a female let alone another scientist."

"I don’t really know why you have to have some girl running around anyway." Eddie started moving down the corridor back towards Sears.

"Because that’s the way it always is in the movies," I replied.

"But this is real life," Eddie shot back.
"And people turn into stone all the time, right?" We turned into the entrance to Sears where I stopped again.

"What's wrong now." Eddie's tone indicated slight irritation.

"That guy!"

"What?"

"The one with the cigarette over by the post."

Eddie gave me a startled look. "He's gone!" We both rushed back to the empty spot by the post which we had passed and completely ignored during our argument.

"Eddie, where did he go?"

Eddie shrugged, "That's a dumb question to ask me."

"Yeah, right." I was rather embarrassed so I stared down to the far end of the mall instead of facing Eddie. A bit of motion in the distance caught my eye. "Something is moving down there, maybe it's him." We ran to overtake the guy before we lost him again. It was the same guy, very much alive now, with a dazed look on his face. He appeared to be unaware of his surroundings. Eddie and I grabbed each of his arms and started firing questions in rapid order. "What happened?" "How do you feel?" "Did it hurt?" "Who did this to you?" "How did it happen?" "Why?"

The man continued staring straight ahead and occasionally repeating one word, "Amazing!"

It took us about an hour and two cans of Pepsi before the guy became coherent enough and we could settle down for some questions. We finally got him, Dan, to tell us his story. "I was on my way down to Musicland to pick up the new Styx album and I stopped for a moment to light another cigarette when the next thing I knew I couldn't even move. I thought I was sick or something, you know, paralyzed, because I couldn't move and this little kid came up to me and looked at me real funny and pounded on me with his fist and said 'Look at the neat colored statue Mommy' and it really freaked me out because I couldn't move and nobody paid any attention to me."

He paused for a second, so I jumped in. "You mean that you could still tell what was going on around you?"

"Well sure, I just couldn't move and it got boring real fast. I mean I couldn't get my new album or finish my cigarette or anything."
"What finally happened?" I asked.

"I'm not really sure. I just stood there for a real long time, maybe a week, and I couldn't do anything but think so I thought about a lot of stuff and it finally hit me that I'd never done anything like that."

"Like what?" Eddie stuck in a question.

"Think, I never really took the time to think about anything and I realized that I was missing something. I suddenly became aware of things around me that I never really paid attention to before, like the roof. Have you ever noticed how much roof we got hanging above us right now without much support? Look at the sun coming in through those skylights, it makes the place seem so warm. I bet that even in the winter it would seem like summer in here.

"Hey, Dan, it's been great talking to you." It wouldn't do any good to talk to him any more. I'd learned all I wanted. I shook his hand, Eddie followed suit. "We've got to be going. Do you need any more help?"

Dan shook his head. "No thanks. It was great meeting you guys, we'll have to get together again sometime."

"Sure, see ya." I waved as I turned to follow Eddie out to my car.

I called Eddie the other day to see what he was doing. He was working on a new project, something to do with converting elements. His theory was that if people could turn to stone, perhaps he could turn lead into gold. I didn't hear any more details. I had to hang up; I saw a likely prospect for the female lead out on the sidewalk.