The Stone

Benjamin Braley*
THE STONE

AL GORDON took a deep breath of the cold November air, wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, and looked up out of the well he was digging. Timmy stood above him at the edge of the well, peering down through thick glasses that made him look like some undernourished owl. If his old man would make him do a little work he wouldn’t be so skinny, Al thought grudgingly. It burned him up to think that, when old Tom died, Timmy would take over the place without ever so much as lifting a shovel. “God damn junk,” he muttered as the spade struck a piece of buried metal. He stopped working momentarily and rested on his spade. The air chilled the sweat that was running down his back and made him shake. Taking a tattered red handkerchief from his pocket, he blew violently.

“Getting tired?” Timmy asked hesitantly. Al glared at him as he silently put the handkerchief back in his coverall pocket.

I suppose he thinks I should keep working without a break. If he was my kid, I’d teach him what it’s like to work hard. Reaching into his torn shirt pocket, Al took out a pack of cigarettes. He’d teach him what it was like to sweat day in and day out for a crumby 50 bucks a week. That’s what his kid would have had to do if he hadn’t died of pneumonia from living in a drafty farmhouse. Taking a drag on the cigarette, he blew the smoke toward Timmy. “How ’bout a smoke, kid?” He grinned, revealing crooked, tobacco-stained teeth. Timmy started to back away from the well. “Hey! where ya goin? Ya have to go back in and practice the piano with the other girls?” He laughed sarcastically. “Come ’ere and smoke like a man!” Timmy kept walking
away, his feet shuffling in the barnyard dust and his glasses continually falling down on his narrow nose. A wave of disgust welled up in Al. He’d fix that scrawny little bastard. There was no one in the barnyard except for Timmy and himself. Grinning, he scrambled out of the well and ran toward Timmy. Seeing Al coming, Timmy started to run. A board caught his foot and threw him violently to the ground just as Al caught up with him. Before he could move, Al was upon him. “When I tell you to do something from now on, DO IT!” he exclaimed, jerking Timmy to his feet. Terror filled Timmy’s eyes as Al took out a cigarette and lit it. With a cold hand, gray from a day’s work, he held Timmy’s head and placed the cigarette between the boy’s trembling lips. “Puff on it, God damn it! Puff on it.” His laughter cut the still air and echoed from building to building. Timmy started to choke on the smoke. The cigarette fell from his lips and down his open collar. Grabbing at Timmy’s shirt, Al pinched violently, trying to extinguish the cigarette. The cigarette was still smoldering when he removed it from the shirt. A few tears of pain rolled down Timmy’s cheeks but he didn’t utter a sound. Al released him. “Good God, kid! Can’t you even hold a cigarette in your mouth?” Timmy backed slowly away, the reflection of the sun in his glasses hiding the hate in his eyes. “Go ahead. Tell your old man . . . I can get a job someplace else . . .” His words grew louder as Timmy disappeared behind the barn. “You can’t do anything on your own! It’s a good thing you’ve got somebody for protection!”

Al stood at the bottom of the well waiting for Timmy’s father. The sun cast long shadows across the lower portion of the hole. He threw a few shovelfuls of dirt out of the well and lit another cigarette. What if Timmy’s father did file charges? At least he would get three square meals a day in jail. His wife’s harping about another baby was making him sick too. It would end up in the same place as the last one. He couldn’t get a better job. Some people just had it made and others didn’t. That was all there was to it. His wife knew what he was like when she married him. Removing the last cigarette from the pack, he lit a match. A faint breeze extinguished the flame. He cursed under his breath as he
searched through his pockets for another pack of matches. There was none. He looked at the cigarette quivering in his hand and then threw it violently to the ground.

Still no one came. I'll bet the little thing was even too scared to tell his old man, he thought sarcastically. Feeling a little relief, Al went back to work. Sensing someone, he looked up from the ground. Timmy was standing at the edge of the well. The stupid little brat. You'd think he'd have sense enough not to come back after what had happened. Well, he wouldn't bother him any more. The fun was over for one day. Al turned and started to dig savagely. It was then that he saw it. It was lying, small and round, in a corner of the well. The stone sparkled in the sun like a diamond. Picking it up he laughed. Where did he think he was, Africa? Anyway, it wasn't even shaped like any diamond he had ever seen. Timmy stood there looking at the stone which Al was holding in his hand. Al knew Timmy wanted the stone for his rock collection. The kid was always wandering around picking up rocks. Well, if he wanted this stone, he'd have to work for it. Giving the stone a heave, he watched it arc through the air and come down in the hog lot. Without a word, Timmy turned and hurried toward the lot. Al laughed and went back to work.

He could smell hamburger frying as he took off his boots in the hallway. It was the same greasy smell that met him every night. Dismally, he anticipated another night of going to bed on a half-empty stomach. His wife smiled sympathetically as he came into the kitchen. “Have a hard day today, honey?” she asked as she always did when he came in to supper. What was he supposed to say? No, he had taken things easy, went into town for a beer and played cards all afternoon. She'd like that. Then she'd be able to feel sorry for herself staying home and washing clothes all day. He didn't say a word. Pulling up an old wooden chair, he sat wearily down at the table. His dirty hands rested heavily on the red-and-white oil cloth.

“You didn't wash,” she said reproachfully. Her words sounded ironic in the dingy, dimly-lit kitchen. She tried to make conversation. “Timmy was over today. I gave him some cookies.”
"What'd ya do that for?" he growled. "Is his old man so poor that he can't afford to feed his own kids?"

"Now Al, don't be so hard on the boy. He seems so nice. He's always so quiet and polite," she said and then added softly, "Sure wish we had one like him."

"Fer Christ's sake, Alice!"

"Okay, okay, I won't mention it again." They sat quietly eating. The only sound was the fire crackling in the kitchen stove. The food was soon gone and he looked at her expectantly. I suppose she didn't have time to fix a dessert again today, he thought to himself, knowing they couldn't afford it. She looked up at him and tried again to start a conversation.

"Timmy did bring some magazines for me to read."

"I suppose you've been reading magazines all day," he said bitterly.

"No I haven't, but it wouldn't have hurt if you'd done some reading when you were young. Maybe we wouldn't be here today. Why, did you know that there are diamonds in Wisconsin if anyone wants to spend the time hunting for them? I'll bet you didn't know that," she answered in a self-righteous manner.

"Just as I thought. You were wasting your time reading magazines while I was out digging that well," he said before the sudden realization of what she had just said began to overwhelm him. "Oh, God," he muttered.

"What did you say?" She looked at him questioningly.

He spoke softly at first. "I think I found a diamond today." Then his voice rose. "And I gave it to that little son-of-a-bitch Timmy."

"You're kidding," she said, not knowing whether he was sarcastically leading her on or whether he was telling the truth.

"No, I'm not," he answered, his voice quavering and his normally red face turning pale. "It sparkled just like a diamond."

"I don't know. I've got to get it back somehow, without Timmy knowing about it."

"Al, you can't do that. It would be stealing," she said, a look of disapproval crossing her face.
“But Alice, it wouldn’t be like we were really stealing it. Timmy doesn’t even know its a real diamond. To him, its just another rock in his collection. What good is it doin’ him?”

“I don’t know. It just isn’t right, Al. Why don’t you talk to the old man and tell him what you think. If it really is a diamond, he might give you part of what it’s worth.”

“Not old Tom. He’d keep every cent of it for himself.” He thought for a moment and then added, “It wouldn’t be hard to get. I can get into their basement. That’s where Timmy has his rock collection. He would never miss it . . . I’ll bet he just puts those rocks down there and never looks at them again . . . Once I get it, we can go somewhere else and I can get another job. I can’t stand working for Tom any longer anyhow.”

“It’s just not right, Al,” she persisted.

“Don’t you see, Alice? The rock isn’t doing anybody any good now. If we could just sell it for a good price and I could get a decent job, we might be able to afford to have another baby.” Alice remained silent, staring at her plate. They didn’t speak to each other the rest of the evening.

When he left the house, Alice was sleeping soundly. During the evening a heavy snow had fallen, giving the surrounding yard an unnatural glow. He hurried along the path toward the darkened house, the fresh snow making a crunching sound under his feet. The moon appeared as a faint glow in the overcast sky. He pulled his mackinaw up around his face to keep away the cold north wind which had begun to blow harder, heralding an oncoming storm. The cold tempted him to hurry. Slow down, he thought to himself. Can’t afford to make any mistakes now. The path led to the broad kitchen porch. The steps were drifted over by the snow which seemed to form a ramp leading up to the porch.

He turned from the path and made his way slowly along the side of the house past the tall dining-room windows. The room was dark inside, but he could visualize a long table that ran the length of the room, where he had eaten many a threshing meal with old Tom sitting at the head of the table, stern and straight, offering a prayer of thanks for the meal. A meal which low wages for the help had put there,
Al thought wryly. He hurried on past the windows and around to the front of the house. A row of bushes ran along the front of the house hiding the basement windows. Without hesitating, he moved to a bush near the small front porch and squatted down in the snow. Crawling between the bush and the porch, he found the basement window covered with snow. He dug furiously, the wet snow soaking into his gloves, making his fingers numb. At last the small window was exposed. It was frozen slightly by the snow, but he knew it would come loose. He had taken it off several times in the past when he had unloaded coal for Tom. He tried hammering on it with his fist. The sound seemed to be magnified in the still night air. It came loose and nearly fell in before he could catch it. Carefully, he turned it on its side and pulled it through the frame, placing it next to the porch. The basement was completely dark. He had to chance a flashlight. There was a pile of coal just below the window. He hoped it was high enough so jumping wouldn't be necessary. A quick sweep with the light beam brought a sigh of relief. Old Tom, the cheapskate, hadn't used much coal. The coal was piled high enough so that he could crawl straight through the window and onto the pile. The coal was sharp and loose as it cut into his knees and threatened to roll out from under him. He reached the bottom of the pile and stood in the blackness trying to accustom his eyes to the dark. The glow from the snow cast a faint light through the basement window. Casting the beam of the flashlight around, he spotted the old wooden door that sagged on rusty hinges. He quickly moved over to it. The door opened into the main room of the basement. He knew Timmy's rock collection was in the room somewhere. He flashed the light around the room and what he saw made him gasp. The entire wall on one side of the room was covered with rocks resting on tiers of shelves. They all looked frighteningly alike in the pale beam of the flashlight. He couldn't remember exactly what the stone looked like. He was sure it was a good-sized stone. Or was it? Maybe it seemed bigger than it actually was. His hands raced furtively over the stones. Which one was it? Panicky thoughts raced across his mind. He couldn't take them all. My God, which one was it? The confusion in his
mind drowned out the soft pad of footsteps on the cellar stairs. The creaking sound of the doorknob being turned jarred him back to reality.

He spun around just as the door began to open. His mind blurred with terror, he dropped his flashlight and rushed blindly for the doorway leading into the furnace room. As he raced through the door and scrambled up onto the coal pile, the light came on in the other room, casting a revealing glow through the door. Old Tom was shouting; his words were a jumble in Al’s mind. His only thought was to get away. A nail on the window frame ripped into his coat as he scrambled through and into the snowbank. He jumped to his feet, the bushes tearing at his exposed face. Breaking free, he stumbled out into the front yard. He ran across white emptiness toward the protection of the barn. The howling wind drowned out Tom’s shouting from the basement window. Suddenly a searing pain tore through Al’s back. The impact of the bullet knocked him to his knees in the snow. He staggered to his feet. Another shot rang out from the basement window tearing into his thigh. He pitched forward in the snow and lay there, the blood trickling from his shoulder onto the new snow. He could hear people shouting as lights came on in the big house. Then old Tom was beside him shouting above the howling wind. “Why, Al? Why did you do it?” What could he say? Old Tom never had to eat hamburger every night of the week or see a kid die of pneumonia. No matter what he said, Tom wouldn’t understand. You couldn’t expect a guy like Tom to see things like that. His wife bent over him, tears in her eyes. He couldn’t look at them. They turned and hurried back to the house for help, their shouting fading away in the distance.

It seemed as if Timmy appeared out of nowhere. One minute Al was alone in the snow, the next minute Timmy was standing over him, his hands in his pockets. It seemed that a faint smile crossed Timmy’s face as he pulled one hand from his pocket. He felt something hard land on his chest. He knew what it was without looking. Jumbled thoughts raced through his mind. How did Tom find out so quickly that he was in the basement? How did Timmy know about the stone, or did he? It was the triumphant smile on Timmy’s
face that made him realize the full significance of what had happened. He had to find out for sure. His words came painfully from a mouth that trickled blood. "Did you know it was a diamond?"

Timmy answered timidly but with the slight trace of a smile still on his face. "It's not a diamond. I checked to be sure after I found it about a month ago." The world was spinning rapidly around Al. Timmy couldn't have done such a thing. Oh God, he couldn't have. Managing one last breath Al mumbled, "You threw it in the well when I wasn't looking, didn't you?" Timmy could suppress himself no longer. A wide grin spread across his face. It was the last thing Al ever saw. The howl of the wind grew louder.

Timmy's mother met him on his way back to the house. "Now, Timmy," she said, "you'd better get inside out of the cold. I'd hate for you to get sick."

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This Hill

Stitched of multicolored flannel flecks,
an autumnal blanket of bordered blue and white
spreads in folds from the river up to specks
of wild geese in south-veeing flight.
Squirrels shuttling through nut-heavy trees
shatter the silence with irate
chatter — gone the tender trembles of bees
that bred the harvest. Too late
man comes to this. He cannot deprecate:
This hill has captured all of summer's wait.

James Wickliff, Sc. & H. Grad.