The Murmur of Stones

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Extract

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You thought you were a crystal stream, cleansed of debris, especially the vast store of facts and quotations you'd early acquired and later suppressed, so that you'd finally become exactly what the Old Man had so contemptuously called you, a 'movie fan.'

But in truth you were a river of fear, clogged and murky, with your own dark undertow.

You know how deep this river ran by what has been dislodged from its silt-covered bottom, a whole world of buried reading.

You suddenly recall Tolstoy's 'Three Deaths.' You remember following the story through the first death, then the second, growing anxious as it nears its end and still there is no third death, nor even any character who seems destined to suffer it. Then a workman appears, an axe balanced on his shoulder, trudging across a cemetery toward a large tree. With the first blow of the axe you feel the great tree shudder. Its outspread limbs tremble in panic. You sense the tree's terror in every quaking leaf. With each blow, it weakens, a life-force ebbing until the murdered tree finally groans, falls, becomes the tale's third death.

Now four deaths swirl around you like the splintered remnants of a stricken ship. You feel a hint of unexpected

moisture on your fingertip, rising water at your ankles, a span of rain-drenched black wrought iron, a heavy limb.

A guard appears, his badge muted by the dull gray light. Still, for a moment, you can focus on nothing but the badge. Then it flashes brightly, like a photographer's bulb, and you wonder if that is how she saw it, blinding, and in some way unforgiving.

The guard draws open the cell's steel door.

'Detective Petrie is ready for you now,' he says.

You rise from the cot, move across the concrete floor, then down the corridor and into a room where you expect to find Petrie waiting to hear your version of what happened. You have waived your rights, will, according to your own counsel, tell your tale.

But Detective Petrie is not yet in the room, so you take a moment to survey it, get your bearings as best you can. There is a card table with a coffee machine, its glass urn already full of coffee. A stack of Styrofoam cups rests next to the machine. There is a clock on the wall, and a calendar.

You walk to the window, and peer out at the small portion of earth that has held your little life like a pebble in its palm. You have become a student of re-enacted murders. You recall a TV movie about the Hillside Strangler, how the prosecutor took the jury to a hill, then had the light from a police helicopter move first to this spot, then that one, then that one over there, each where a body had been found. The last light illuminated the killer's house, the grim geometric center of this carnage. Now you stare out the window and move your gaze like a spotlight from Victor Hugo Street, to Dolphin Pond, to Carey Towers, to Salzburg Garden. You imagine long bands of yellow tape running from site to site, connecting supposed scenes of crime.

'Mr Sears.'

You turn.

Petrie steps into the room and closes the door behind him. 'Have a seat.'

He nods toward a table and two chairs. You notice a tape recorder, a note pad, a blue pen. You recognize these things as the usual instruments of interrogation, though you know you are surely not the usual suspect.

You walk to the table and sit down.

Petrie sits down in the chair across from you, turns on the tape recorder, recites his name, your name, the date, time, location. He is dressed very neatly, everything in place, jacket buttoned, the knot of his tie pulled tight and straightened, a cool professional, convinced he has heard it all, will not be jarred by what you have to tell him.

'Ready?' he asks.

You don't know where to begin. There is so much to tell, so many currents in the river.

'Ready?' Petrie repeats.

A woman's voice chants in your mind

Father/Sister
Twister.
Father/Daughter
Slaughter.

You are a river of fear, with bodies circling in the still churning water. You are at the tragic terminus of this river and must now return to its origin.

'Where do you want me to begin?' you ask.

Petrie appears as solid and impenetrable as unweathered stone. 'Choose your own starting point,' he says.

And so you do.

ONE

We lived on Victor Hugo Street in a rambling, dilapidated house that was the family's last remaining asset. For years the Old Man had strung a living together in pale bits and pieces, like popcorn on a string, freelance editing, book reviews, a little fact-checking here and there, the table-droppings of the literary profession. Sometimes, when his ever-fluctuating mood allowed it, he'd even worked as a substitute teacher at the local vocational high school. He called this 'educational day labor,' and despised it. His students were beneath him, as were the lowly, salaried teachers who, he said, pursued their modest pensions like scraps of holy writ. His contempt was bottomless, and it erupted in fits of spiraling rage.

In the midst of such seizures, he used the telephone like a whip. In the room where I was made to study, a tiny thing beneath its towering bookshelves, I could hear him leafing through the ever-expanding pages of the 'enemies list' he kept in plain view on his desk, each entry made up of the enemy name and occupation, along with the Old Man's one word judgment of them: *James Elton, professor, lackey; Carolyn Bender, editor, coward; Stephen Horowitz, headmaster, charlatan,* and the like. At some point he would inevitably

select certain names from this roll of the damned. Then the calls would begin.

I remembered a particular afternoon when I'd suddenly paused outside the door of his study, then glanced through its slightly open door. He was sitting behind his cluttered desk, screaming into the phone: *You are a fake, you hear me! You are a plagiarist!* I listened as he steamed on, citing the crimes and misdemeanors of whomever he'd called. He'd gone on and on, then abruptly stopped, so that I'd heard the voice at the other end, metallic and inexpressive, *The time allotted for this message has expired. Please call again to continue.*

It was pathetic, I thought at the time, all that mighty rage futilely expended into the insensate ear of an answering machine. King Lear had thundered against our earthly plight. In comparison, the Old Man's fury seemed little more than sour grapes monstrously inflated. When he died, I felt that a dark, devouring force had been stilled at last. I wore his death like wings.

At the gravesite, I told my sister exactly that, then added, 'You can go on with your life, Diana. You don't have to take care of him anymore.'

She nodded silently, then tossed a single rose into his grave.

And I thought, *At last she's free of him. At last she can be happy.*

But then came Death, as the Old Man might have put it in his stilted and archaic dictum, an untimely death that came like that fabled highwayman whose poetic exploits Diana had so often recited for his

pleasure, *Riding, riding, riding,* as I can hear her even now, *up to the old inn door.*

It was a Friday afternoon when the court pronounced its judgment that no one was to blame for Jason's death and that no one would be held accountable for it. Since Diana had already separated from her husband Mark by then, I'd come to the courthouse with her instead, the two of us seated at the front of an almost empty courtroom, listening silently as the judge declared Jason a 'victim of misadventure.'

'Shallow,' Diana whispered. Then she stared directly at the judge, watching as he rose and left the room.

'Shallow,' she repeated in a tone exactly like the Old Man's when he closed a book and with a word pronounced his verdict.

I started to get up, and expected Diana to do the same, but she didn't move.

'Not yet,' she said, and gently tugged me back down onto the bench beside her.

She remained seated for a long time, her hand resting on mine, both of us now waiting as Mark rose and left the courtroom. He was dressed in a white shirt and dark blue trousers, his usual attire. As he left, his eyes briefly darted toward Diana, then no less quickly skirted away.

For her part, Diana never glanced toward Mark, but instead held her gaze on the mythical representation of blind justice that hung from the wood-paneled wall behind the judge's bench. She breathed slowly, rhythmically, and her hands remained steady, with no hint of trembling. She kept her back straight, her head erect

and seemed determined to stay that way, not to grow faint or swoon. In such an attitude, she looked more like a warrior than a grieving mother, as if grief itself had become a lifted sword. Her eyes were dry and her lips were pressed together tightly, like someone sealing in a scream, though other than the few words she'd already uttered, she made no sound at all. After a moment, she closed her eyes and for those few seconds she actually looked resigned to the court's decision, ready to accept it and move on.

'Diana,' I said softly. 'We should go now.'

She nodded but her eyes remained closed, her body eerily still.

After a moment, people began to trickle back into the courtroom, Bill Carnegie among them, looking suitably solemn in his neat gray suit. He'd represented Mark in the divorce, though there'd been little for him to do beyond making the offer Diana had immediately accepted.

'Hello, Dave,' he said as he passed on his way to the defense table.

Diana opened her eyes and stared at him.

'Hello, Mrs. Regan,' Carnegie said.

'I'm Miss Sears now,' Diana told him, though without any hint of bitterness, merely a fact-checker making a small correction.

'Ah yes, of course,' Carnegie said.

'The court has determined that my son died by misadventure,' Diana added.

Bill glanced at me warily then turned back to Diana. 'Anyway, nice seeing you,' he said, and quickly continued down the aisle.

We rose, walked out of the courtroom and into a

radiant late September afternoon, its light so bright it seemed to sparkle. Diana drew her hair into a bun and pinned it, exposing her long white neck in such a way that she looked oddly sacrificial, like a woman to be killed in exchange for rain.

We reached my car, and without a word Diana took her place on the passenger side and waited for me to get in behind the wheel. She said nothing as I put the key in the ignition, turned it, and began to back out of the shady space where I'd parked. We were already at the main road before she spoke.

'Truth matters, doesn't it, Davey?' she asked.

Her question abruptly returned me to the dinner-table inquisitions I'd endured from the Old Man, philosophical questions to which he'd demanded quotation-studded responses. His intimidating voice crackled in the air, *What say you, my young Daedalus?*

'You sound like the Old Man,' I told her.

'I didn't mean to remind you of Dad,' Diana said.

I shrugged, as if wholly indifferent to the mention of his name, though I continued to recall the nightly interrogations at the dinner table, the Old Man firing questions or demanding that I recite whatever passage he'd assigned me. I'd always responded haltingly, stammering and faltering, forgetting lines, going blank. Which was when Diana had always cut in, lifting her small white hand into the air, saving me from any further ridicule or humiliation.

'*Bleak House*,' Diana murmured.

Before the Old Man's death it had been typical of Diana to encapsulate everything in a book title, as if her mind worked in a high-velocity shorthand. But the

practice had abruptly disappeared at his gravesite, and it surprised me that she'd suddenly returned to it.

'Not bleak for you,' I said. 'You were his shining star.'

Again I found myself returned to the house on Victor Hugo Street, watching Diana from the shadowy corner where I stood like a poor relation, listening as she recited passage after passage, the Old Man erect in a chair before her, breathing softly, his shining black eyes fixed upon her. These recitations had been the way she'd found to quench the fires that burned inside him, the rage he felt for the world's indifference to his genius, its corruption and mediocrity, what he called, quoting the *Rubáiyát*, 'the sorry Scheme of Things entire.'

'He could be cruel,' Diana said. 'What he said to you that last day.'

I saw him turn as Diana led me into his study, the cold glint in his eyes, that twitching mouth, the dreadful words they formed. *You are dust to me.*

'But he was crazy,' Diana said. 'He didn't know what he was doing.'

Her mood was clearly darkening. I moved to stop its descent.

'Why don't you have dinner with us tonight?' I said. 'We can all relax. It's been a long day.'

She nodded silently.

'Good,' I said, then hit the small button on the console and locked all the doors.

Her eyes shot over to me. 'I'm not going to jump out of the car, Davey,' she said. 'I know what I'm doing.' She seemed suddenly seized by a grim recollection. 'Don't ever think that I'm like Dad.'

'So you saw nothing particularly alarming?' Petrie asks.

You know that in an old noir detective movie, Petrie would be slouched in his chair, with a rumpled shirt, perhaps wearing suspenders, certainly smoking. He would speak in a hard, tough-guy vernacular, refer to you as 'pal' or 'fella', as he urges you to 'spill your guts.' But the modern version is neat and well groomed, Petrie a college graduate, a degree in criminology from John Jay, a student of profiles, astute at defining human behavior.

'No early warning signs?' Petrie adds.

You search your memory for such signs. Was there something wild in Diana's eyes that day? Did you see some spark of madness in them? These questions direct your mind to a deeper one: In any long journey of error, where is the first erroneous turn?

With the posing of this question, you are a little boy, sitting on a darkened staircase, facing the front door, squeezing a red rubber ball. You see the door open, Diana standing in the light, backlit by the sun. Is that where it began?

Petrie's gaze does not waver. 'But nothing … suspicious?'

'No.'

'So what was your first inkling?'

You're not sure. Was it the reference to *Bleak House*? Or

was it the way her mood darkened when you first mentioned the Old Man?

'Mr Sears.'

It is Petrie's polite use of formal direct address that pulls you back to the room, the table, the soft purr of the recording device. Mr Sears. As if you are a client or a patient. Mr Sears. As if you could rise and leave. Mr Sears. As if there is no blood on your hands.

'Inkling,' Petrie repeats in order to return you to the question at hand, the well-trod path of murder, a crooked road, perhaps, but one usually navigated quite easily, marked with road signs that say 'SEX' or 'MONEY.'

'Your sister,' Petrie adds. 'An inkling.'

You know you have to give him something.

So you do.

'Maybe at my house later that night,' you answer. 'That business of the apes.'

TWO

I lived in a subdivision, with one house quite close to the next, all of them laid out on a clean, uncomplicated grid, everything, all wilder routes, in forfeiture to order. Had I been able to find a walled city, I probably would have chosen it, aware, as I was, that the Old Man had often wandered the undefended streets of our town. We'd gone in search of him many times, but as I drove Diana toward my house that afternoon, a particular episode returned to me. Diana had been old enough to have a driver's license by then, so I must have been around thirteen years old at the time, too young to rebel, and so still under the Old Man's stern instruction to read and read and read.

We'd spotted him on the outskirts of the college campus where he'd later made such a horrendous spectacle of himself, been arrested by campus police and subsequently transferred to Brigham Psychiatric Hospital.

'There he is,' I said when I saw him shambling across an open field, a huge figure with massive shoulders, coatless and bare-headed, dressed only in baggy corduroy pants and a soiled gray sweatshirt despite the cold wind and icy rain that hurried other people past him so

quickly they probably heard not a word of whatever he was muttering.

Diana pulled over to the curb and we got out of the car and headed toward him, Diana calling, 'Dad, Dad.'

He turned when he heard her, then stood in place and waited until we reached him.

'You have to come home now,' Diana told him.

I touched his arm, but added nothing.

He felt my touch and drew his arm away.

'You are Checkers,' he said to me. His eyes swept over to Diana. 'You are Chess.'

It was the first time he'd made such an overtly invidious comparison, and all through the following night I'd turned it over in my mind, an upheaval Diana had later noticed and tried to soothe with kind words, *You're the best brother in the world, Davey.*

Now it seemed up to me to do the soothing.

'You should think about moving into this part of town,' I told her. 'Maybe a house just down the block.'

'Mark wanted to live outside of town,' Diana said as if she were reconsidering the matter. 'Way outside,' she added. 'Isolated.'

And so they'd rented an old stone house several miles from town, remote and surrounded by forest, with a large pond only a short walk away.

'He said it was better for Jason,' Diana said.

And it probably had been better for him, I thought, since its seclusion had presented fewer of the distractions that would have otherwise bedeviled him, traffic and the sounds of other children, ordinary in themselves, but which would have filled Jason with foreboding.

'Are you going to stay in the house?' I asked.

She shook her head. 'Not without Jason.'

I saw her son in my mind, a little boy with blond hair and pale complexion like his mother, but with his father's darkly glittering eyes. Then I thought of my daughter Patty, the life that stretched before her, then again of Jason, how little of life's bounty he had known, not only because his years had been cut short, but because even those years had been blighted, his world so filled with invading shadows he'd probably glimpsed no light at all.

Abby was sitting on the porch when Diana and I arrived. She is a tall woman, thin, with brown hair and large green eyes. We'd met in Old Salsbury, where I'd briefly worked at a law firm. She'd been a paralegal in the law office, and I'd found her quiet and self-effacing, not at all prone to challenge. We'd married a year later, and since then built a life based on smoothing the edges, avoiding conflict, a world where father knew best, or someone did, where no line ever blurred or skirted out into infinity.

Abby rose and came down the walkway as Diana and I got out of the car.

'Nice to see you, Diana,' Abby said cheerily.

'The judge declared Jason's death accidental,' I told her in order to get the subject out of the way.

Abby nodded softly. 'Well, I guess it's nice to have closure,' she said.

'Closure,' Diana repeated, as if she were going through the word's various definitions, trying to decide if any of them were relevant to her state of mind.

'Diana's staying for dinner,' I added quickly. 'I thought we'd cook out. It's certainly warm enough.'

We all went into the kitchen. I poured each of us a glass of wine, then walked out onto the deck to light the grill. A glass door separated the deck from the grill, and through it I could see Abby preparing a salad while Diana sat on a wooden stool a few feet away. Abby was talking in that animated way of hers. Diana listened, but said nothing, her fingers wrapped loosely around the glass, as if such sustaining refreshment, the actual food and drink of life, were no more than an afterthought.

Our daughter Patty had gotten home by the time the table was set. She was fifteen and could not have been more typical, a member of her high school band, with rows of B's on her report card, attired in clothes from the Gap or Old Navy, exactly the opposite of Nina, my partner Charlie's daughter, a teenaged girl who dressed in Gothic black and continually changed the luminescent colors of her hair, and whose sudden presence at the office had never failed to set my mind wondering what she might have tucked in the pocket of her long black coat.

'Hi, Aunt Diana,' Patty said politely as she lowered herself into a chair.

Diana looked at her in a way that appeared oddly penetrating, like one stripping plaster from a wall to view the structure beneath.

'How are you, Patty?' she asked in a tone that was unexpectedly solemn and which appeared to take Patty somewhat off guard.

'I'm fine,' Patty answered.

Diana took a sip of wine, but her eyes never left Patty's.

'Did you know that apes can never speak?' she asked.

Patty shook her head.

'I read about it last night,' Diana continued. 'Even if an ape had the same intelligence as a human, it wouldn't be able to speak.'

'Why not?' Patty asked, her curiosity sparked in a way that surprised me.

'Because the tube that goes from the vocal cords to the mouth and nose is too short,' Diana answered. 'There's not enough room for the air to vibrate, and so it can't make words.' She appeared to retreat to some distant place, remain there a moment, then return, her gaze once again directed toward Patty. 'Do you read much?' she asked.

Patty looked at me quizzically, then turned back to Diana. 'Just what they assign.'

'Dad made us read all the time,' I said.

Diana looked at me. 'Schiller,' she said. 'Remember Schiller?'

I did, but shook my head, claiming that I didn't, knowing that no matter what I recalled of him, Diana would remember vastly more.

'He said that before love, we would not have felt the deaths of others,' Diana said. 'Not even our own children. We would have been numb.' She shifted her gaze to Patty and raised her glass. 'Let's hope your life is anything but that,' she said.

Shortly after dinner, I drove Diana back to her house on Old Farmhouse Road. It was a cool, clear night, full of stars, and I recalled the look on Diana's face the first

time she saw Van Gogh's famous painting of a starry night. The Old Man had taken us to the Modern, one of his 'scholarly trips,' as he called them, and which often included nearby battlefields and historic villages. It was our first trip to New York. Diana was twelve years old, clothed in a dark blue dress with black shoes and white socks, beautiful as girls can sometimes be on the brink of adolescence. She kept her hand tucked in the Old Man's arm, as if to anchor him, though for the last few weeks he'd seemed almost normal, making meals at actual meal times and combing the paper for various jobs.

'The brushstrokes are very deep,' Diana said as she stood before the painting.

My father nodded. 'Van Gogh died very young,' he said quietly.

Diana gazed at the deep furrows of circling blue. 'Maybe he always knew that,' she said.

I glanced over at her now, and saw her face almost as it had been that afternoon in the museum, grave and strangely probing, eyes that held you dangling, like hooks.

'Do you ever talk to Mark?' she asked. 'I thought he might have called.'

'No, he hasn't called me.'

She nodded briskly, then got out of the car and waited for me to join her at the end of the walkway.

When I reached her, she turned and we headed toward the house together.

'Why did you think Mark might have called me?' I asked.

'I thought he might have questions.'

'About what?'

'About me,' she answered. 'The fact that I scare him.' She looked at me. 'That's the word he used. Like I might pull a knife on him.'

I laughed at this vision of my sister's violence, how exaggerated it seemed, no less impossible than her suddenly taking flight.

'He said my eyes scare him,' she added. 'The look in my eyes.'

Her gaze grew very intent, like someone peering at something either very large or very small. I couldn't tell which. 'Don't call me for a while, okay?' she said. 'I know you want to check on me, but please don't. I want to think a few things through.' She smiled. 'I'll be okay. I really will. I just want some time alone.'

'All right,' I said.

'I'll call you,' she assured me. 'Don't worry. I'll call you when I'm ready.'

When I'm ready.

In the coming days, I often thought of those words of what they actually meant. At first I supposed no hidden meaning at all, that Diana was simply saying that she was ready to walk the rest of the way to the house, ready to open the door and step inside. She did all those things only a few seconds later. But later I came to believe that she had been declaring a different readiness that night, a readiness to let slip the lines that had bound her for so long, the trusty moorings of her life, and thus set sail toward that place whose dangers the ancient cartographers could not guess, nor act against, save by issuing the dark and futile warning they inscribed upon their maps: *Here there be dragons.*

'So she said strange things?' Petrie asks.

He wants it to be simple, this Q&A, simple questions and simple answers. A constricted inquiry: the color of the car, the caliber of the bullet. You see that his life is rooted in the sturdy matter-of-factness of evidence. He wants identifications that are positive and fingerprints that match. How will you ever be able to show him the cloud and the mist, the view blurred by rain, bad lighting, distance, prints whose whorls spin into the unknowable void.

You look at the notepad he balances on his lap, the small blue pen with which he has been scribbling notes. One of them says 'Bleak House.'

'Is mentioning a book title strange?' you ask.

'You seem to think it is.'

'Perhaps I do,' you admit. 'Did.'

'Why would you think that?' Petrie asks.

'I don't know,' you answer. 'It's just that it was strange, the way Diana was doing it again. Talking in that way. She hadn't done it since the Old Man died.'

Petrie appears briefly to return to that rainy day ten years earlier, a young detective then, thinner, but only slightly, everything else the same, the self-confidence, trusting his eyes and ears, the testimony of voices that come from moving lips.

'The weather was dreary,' you add softly. 'That day. And cold. We had trouble with the fire.'

You wonder to what extent Petrie recalls the room's stark details, the Old Man dead in his chair, eyes closed, mouth open, Diana beside him, cradling him softly, you on the tattered brocade sofa, peering out into the backyard where a mound of ashes still smoldered, the remains of what had once been a bathrobe, a pair of tattered house shoes, a large green pillow.

'So this manner of speech struck you as some kind of reversion?' Petrie asks.

Reversion. A technical word. The sort Petrie clearly prefers and may have encountered in one of his criminal psychology classes: *Prior to psychotic breaks, certain reversions in behavior may present themselves. These include bed-wetting, infantile speech, and various forms of obsessive nostalgia.*

'Like someone who suddenly starts using an old accent,' Petrie explains, 'from the place he'd lived as a child, returning to the past. Did Diana do much of that?'

'Just using literary references,' you tell him. 'No other … reversion.'

Petrie is obviously disappointed by your answer, would have preferred designated signposts.

'All right,' he says. 'Did you notice any other changes in Diana?'

There were so many, you think now, and they had seemed so large. But were they? Were they really?

'Yes,' you answer. 'There were other changes.'

'Like what?'

The list is long. You pick one randomly.

'Her music. She'd always listened to a wide range of music. Classical. Folk. Rock. You name it. But a wide range.

After Jason's death it became very narrow, repetitive. Only one singer.'

'Who?'

You see the CD pass from Diana's hand to Patty's, and in that vision, now so fraught with tragic error, you wonder that you have not made those same hands tremble.

Petrie's pen comes to attention. 'Who?'

You feel the name in your mouth like bits of bone in an evil potion.

'Kinsetta Tabu.'