

Stones

by Dave Clapper

"Good evening, Mrs. Walter," I said, holding my hat in my hand. I'd never owned a hat before her husband had died. He'd left it to me along with a written request:

Please drop in on Marguerite from time to time. You'll want to wear a hat. She believes in the social niceties, and having a hat to doff will help ingratiate you to her. I'd be much obliged.

Your pal, Henry.

Henry and I had met at the hospital. He'd been forty years my senior, but we'd been in for precisely the same reason: kidney stones. He was a surprisingly tough bastard. At 5'5" and 130 pounds wet, he didn't look like much, but he grunted through the pain without medication and squeezed them out after they'd used some device to break them up.

I'd had just one, a fairly small one as it turned out, but I'd hyperventilated and moaned until they mercifully hooked me up to a morphine drip. I passed a blood clot that day, but nothing more. I was still on the morphine, phasing in and out of sleep when Henry was cleared to leave.

I was vaguely aware of him saying, "Hang in there, kiddo" and leaving a slip of paper on my chest with his phone number and a brief note:

Drink lots of water and it shall pass. When it does, give me a ring. You'd be surprised how useful a stone can be.

Best, Henry.

It wasn't until three days of obsessive water consumption later that I passed the stone, almost unfelt, into a strainer. I stared at the thing obsessively. What a nightmare of technology it appeared to be: a perfect gray cube but for a sharp and clear crystal at each of one face's four corners.

After studying it, I thought about the old man's note. My curiosity regarding a stone's possible uses was piqued and I called him. He

congratulated me on its passing. He gave me directions to his house, which turned out to be an old Victorian.

I remember best my first impression on entering the house was the smell of fish. On the center of the dining room table was a candelabra for massive candles. Lying in each waxy bowl were perhaps a dozen pickled herring.

Henry laughed as I noticed them. "Marguerite knows I love fish, especially herring. You like herring?" I surprised myself by nodding. I'd never had pickled herring before. "Help yourself," he said, and I surprised myself even further by not only taking some but also enjoying it. "You bring the stone?" he asked.

I pulled it, linty, from my pocket and held it out in my palm.

"Oh, that's a nice one," he said. "Marguerite!" he called to the back of the house. "I'm going fishing!" There was no reply. "Let's go," he said, smiling broadly.

Why not? I thought, and we piled into an old Nash, overflowing with fishing gear. He drove us to one of our state's alleged ten thousand lakes and pulled in under a willow.

From the trunk, he retrieved a battered tackle box and two rods. He opened the box and displayed a dizzying array of lures. I found them fascinating, but he seemed uninterested in them. He unfolded the tray upward on a hinged ladder to reveal two more trays, one of which held several kidney stones, each in a tray with a date. They ranged in size, but most had similar shapes to the one I'd passed.

"They make surprisingly effective leaders," he said. "I haven't bought a new leader in years. What do you say we tie yours on a line and see how she does?" I shrugged and pulled it from my pocket again. He took it gently from my fingers and donned a jeweler's loupe. "You mind if I put a hole in it?"

"Be my guest," I said. He smiled, setting off a relay of smile lines and crinkles throughout his face. He pulled a tiny drill from his box and carefully pierced the stone. When he'd finished, he blew dust from the hole and casually tossed the drill and the loupe back into the box.

"A fine leader indeed, I'll wager," he said.

He removed a reel from the Nash and snipped away the end of the line, just above the old leader, which he placed carefully back into an empty compartment dated October 13, 1973. He then slid my stone up the line and knotted it in place.

He folded the trays back down and rummaged through the lures until he found one he found appropriate and tied that on as well. Finally, he attached the reel to one of the two rods he'd pulled from the car. From beginning to end, I watched his fingers at work and wished that my father had been interested in fishing.

He handed the rod with my stone on the line to me and grabbed the other for himself. We fished for perhaps four hours. He gave me pointers throughout our time on the lake and I surprised myself by catching a couple fish. They were both too small to keep, but I was delighted by the feel of the line tugging, by the struggle to bring the fish to shore without losing it under snags.

"You're a natural," Henry told me at the end of the day, and I knew it had been obvious I'd never fished in my life until that day.

For the next several days, Henry called to ask if I wanted to go fishing. I always wanted to go and was tempted to call sick into work every time he asked, but I never did.

After each invitation was regretfully declined, Henry asked almost shyly, "Do you mind if I use your leader?" I always said yes.

I was excited for the weekend to arrive. When it finally did, I arose early and waited by the phone for Henry to call. When he hadn't called by eleven o'clock, I called his house. The phone rang and rang, but there was no answer. I decided to go down to the lake where we'd fished, but there was no sign of him.

Driving back, I passed his house, but the Nash wasn't there. I returned home and tried calling again several times, but there was never an answer.

Finally, the next day, I heard from his daughter, whom I'd never known. Henry had passed away and would I like to come to the funeral? I wondered how I'd rated an invitation since we'd only met twice. She told me that I had been named in his will. Of course I'd come, I told her.

It was a little odd. Henry was buried in a dignified three-piece suit, but with his favorite rod and reel. And my stone as the leader. I thought about saying something, but it seemed inappropriate. And frankly, I was touched.

After the coffin had been lowered into the ground, a woman perhaps twenty years my senior touched my elbow. "I'm Naomi," she said. "We spoke on the phone."

"Of course," I said. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Listen," she said. "I'd understand if you don't want to come to the reading. I can tell you what he left you."

"I don't mind," I said.

"Walk me to my car?" she asked, and I did, extending an elbow. It had just started to drizzle.

I opened the door of the limousine for her and she retrieved a brown paper sack. Inside was a fedora and the note about visiting Marguerite.

"This is pretty much it," said Naomi. "Except that he wants you to have his fishing gear."

I couldn't think of anything appropriate to say. "Okay," was all I managed.

"I'll be in town taking care of Mom for a few weeks. Why don't you just call when you'd like to come over to get it? Would that be okay?"

"Sure," I said.

She smiled a rueful smile and entered the back seat. I closed the door behind her as she waved once before looking ahead.

I waited a week before calling to pick up the gear. I didn't want to intrude. Naomi actually helped me with the unloading of the gear from the Nash.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she said. "He had a happy life, you know?" She cocked an eyebrow.

"Yes," I said. "I got that impression. How's your mother doing?"

She shrugged lightly. "She's lonely, but I think she'll be okay."

"Listen," I said, after we'd finished moving all of the gear to my Corolla. "Would you like to go fishing some time?"

She laughed. "Thank you, but no. I've never particularly liked fishing. That was Dad's thing."

"Okay," I said. "Well, I guess that's it."

"I guess so," she said. "Thanks for fishing with Dad."

"We only went once," I said. "I wanted to go more, but I had to work."

"Once was all it took with Dad sometimes."

"Okay."

"Take care of yourself," she said and extended a hand.

"I will. You, too." We shook our hands and then I drove away.

I didn't see Naomi again, but a couple weeks later she called. "I just thought you'd like to know that I'm heading back home. My husband's getting lonely."

"Okay," I said.

The next evening, I telephoned the old Victorian. Nobody answered. I paced my living room and finally grabbed Henry's old hat and drove over to the Walters' house.

"Good evening, Mrs. Walter," I said after doffing my hat.

"Well, hello," she said. "Won't you come in?"

"Thank you," I said, and walked into the entryway.

"Pickled herring?" she asked.

"Mrs. Walter, I would love some pickled herring."

