

Ripples by Cameron

Howard

He stared at the pebble in his outstretched hand. His gaze moved past it, to the calm surface of the water. Clenching it tightly in a moment of hesitation, he hurled the pebble with a force so abrupt it surprised him. It was a wild impulse that broke through his indecision, an action faster than thought.

His eyes followed the pebble with ease, though the speed at which it moved should have made that impossible. He could see it clearly, its dark blue hues in stark contrast as it made contact with the bright surface of the water, bouncing defiantly out of its grasp. The stone drifted over the water as it continued to skip, its momentum unaffected as it skimmed the surface once more before sinking into the lake. The water spewed upward in a final splash, ripples echoing from the stone's entry point.

Jasper felt the regret well up from deep within, as if the stone had actually sunk into the pit of his stomach. He had come here with the intention of letting go, but now he found himself wanting to take it back. Watching the ripples from each skip disperse into a haze, he caught sight of something in the water's surface. A cage. The impression was distinct but fleeting. Whether the ripples that muddled the lake's reflection obscured the vague image or manifested it, he couldn't be certain. Before Jasper could ponder this, he noticed something else. The ripples were no longer moving. All was still. A moment the span of an eye blink, suspended.

Slowly, the ripples coalesced, and from their origin erupted the splash, forcible and yet oddly elegant when witnessed at this speed. Just as slowly the plume of water returned to the

lake, and the dark blue pebble emerged in a motion that was the perfect reversal of its plunge. Gravity yielded as the stone moved progressively earlier, escaping the clutches of the lake as it skipped closer to the shore. Astonished, Jasper observed that each time the stone struck the lake it rescinded the ripples it had caused, rendering the reflection beneath faultless. The pebble flitted backward from its initial impact, leaving the complexion of the lake perfect, undisturbed. In an anomalous inversion of cause and effect, the pebble had returned to him. The tactile sensation was different from catching something, gentler than a feather somehow as he accepted it into his hand.

Jasper gasped. The pebble wasn't even wet. He marveled at this small detail before the reality of what had happened set in. With his eyes fixed on the stone, the realization that occurred to him was profound. Of course the pebble wasn't wet — it hadn't been thrown to the lake yet.

Closing his hand around the pebble, Jasper concentrated, willing the stone to turn back time again. Nothing happened. The wind gently rustled the leaves of the surrounding trees, the surface of the lake moving in subtle waves. Time moved forward, same as ever, without pausing or rewinding. Had he merely imagined it? There was nothing to prove that what he experienced had actually happened. But how could there be, when any proof would simply be undone? If the pebble really did reverse time, could he control it? These questions among others filled Jasper's thoughts.

His mother was the only person he could think of who might have the answers; the pebble had been her most prized possession. But she was dead. Jasper would give anything to see her again, but he would have to turn back time to ask her how it worked. She was both the answer to the riddle and the reason he wanted to solve it.

Jasper decided to get the stone examined in town. He didn't know of any shops that specialized in magical time traveling objects, but learning more about the physical properties of the pebble could give him a lead to research its origins. While he was just old enough to get his driver's license, Jasper didn't have a car of his own yet, so he left the lake on foot. On his way back to town, Jasper tossed the pebble into the air and caught it, the mottled midnight blue surface gleaming in the afternoon light. He was fascinated, his eyes drawn with an unnatural focus to the rise and fall of the stone as it returned to his hand. He hated it.

Before, he had managed to avoid the finality of his mother's passing, pushing it from the forefront of his mind with a quiet effort. There was no escaping it now, with something so characteristic of her occupying his attention. In life, she had a fondness for the trinket that bordered on obsession, keeping it close at all times. She had always been an adamant collector of antiques, but this was different. The pebble had been something essential to her — defining. Now Jasper was afraid it was starting to define him. After all, skipping it across the water was the longest it had been out of his possession since he obtained it. He had always dismissed her preoccupation with the stone as superstition, but after what happened at the lake he wasn't so sure.

His mother would have never allowed him to handle the pebble. Once, when his curiosity was too much to bear, he stole it from her while she slept. When she woke to discover it missing she was furious, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him. Her voice shook with anger as she warned him to never touch the stone again. The memory stuck with him, as his mother was nothing if not calm and dispassionate. It was the only time Jasper could remember her emotions getting the best of her. In spite of her intentions, reprimanding him had only fueled his curiosity. She had died unexpectedly months before and left no will, but he couldn't bear to go through her

things until a couple days ago. Reflecting on it now, Jasper reckoned it was this unsatisfied curiosity that lead him to recover the stone from her personal effects.

Jasper stopped walking, having nearly passed the place he was looking for in his reverie. The sign overlooking the little shop read “Brouchard Pawn” in gold letters set against a wood grain surface. Underlining the words there was a symbol, a bar from which three gold spheres were suspended. Though he had seen the storefront many times, he had never been inside. His mother used to warn him about pawn shops, that they were “dreadful places, taking advantage of desperate people.” But he knew the pebble probably wasn't a true gemstone, meaning the jewelry stores in town wouldn't give him the time of day. With his mother gone, this was the only place he could go for more information regarding the heirloom she had unwittingly left him. The irony of it evoked a somber grin as he opened the door, a set of three shopkeeper's bells announcing his presence.

It was like walking into a cave. The lighting in the shop provided a meager contrast to the afternoon sun, which leaked through the dingy window set in the door and framed Jasper's shadow on the floor in front of him. He paused as his eyes adjusted to the dim. Through the swirling dust motes he could make out everything from antiques to used electronics that were fast approaching antiquity. When he was confident he wouldn't bump into one of the dozen dusty shelves displaying the store's wares, he continued forward. As Jasper walked to the front counter he clutched the pebble in his hand, feeling oddly possessive of it now. For the first time he noticed how perfectly it fit in his palm. Absurdly, he wondered if the stone had once fit his mother's hands, small as they were, before he came into possession of it — as if the pebble gradually conformed to its owner.

The man behind the counter, presumably Brouchard himself, looked very bored. The pawnbroker was balding, the remaining hair riddled with gray strands, and wore a pair of reading glasses around his neck, all betraying he was middle aged. To a teenager like Jasper however, he seemed very old. The owner of the shop regarded the kid for half a moment before giving him the canned greeting he had given to thousands of other customers.

“Welcome to Brouchard Pawn. That’s me. Feel free to look around,” he said, with the insincere but respectful politeness that came with years of repetition.

“Oh, uhm, actually I’m not here to buy anything. I wanted to ask you about this,” Jasper said, opening his hand to reveal the dark blue pebble. “I was wondering if there was anything you could tell me about it. Like what type of stone it is or whether it could be considered a semiprecious stone.”

Brouchard gave the pebble a brief glance, unimpressed. "How did you happen across it, young man?"

"Well, it belonged to my mother... she passed away a few months ago," Jasper said, pausing a moment to steady his voice. It still wasn't easy to say.

"I know it's not a true gemstone, but it was precious to her. She used to carry it with her wherever she went, like a good luck charm I guess. If you're not too busy, I was hoping you could tell me more."

Something Jasper had said prompted Brouchard to look at the pebble again in interest.

“You’re Mrs. Hendricks’ son, aren’t you?” he asked, the boredom discarded from his voice.

The three bells on the door chimed as another customer entered, but Jasper hardly noticed.

“You knew my mother?”

“She used to be a regular, several years back. Quite a memorable customer. It took a moment but I remember that stone now. Wasn't right, what happened to her. I recognized her photo in the newspaper months back. Terrible way to go, just unnatural.” Brouchard shuddered, then added, as though it were an afterthought, “I'm sorry for your loss, son.”

“Uh, thanks, I guess...”

Jasper didn't need to be reminded of the accident that took his mother from him. He could also do without being called “son” by a strange pawnbroker, but he kept that sentiment out of his voice. Mostly he was wondering why his mother had apparently frequented this pawn shop when, for as long as he could remember, she was so against them.

“May I?”

Brouchard's eyes weren't on Jasper, but the stone.

Jasper took a step closer to extend his hand over the counter, but hesitated. Why was he so reluctant to hand it over? Obviously, someone else would need to handle it in order to examine it properly, he knew that going in. But it wasn't easy. When Jasper finally opened his hand, Brouchard took the pebble with a covetous smile.

"I'm not selling it though," Jasper protested in a weak voice. "I mean, surely you understand."

“Of course, of course.”

At this, the next customer in line gave an exasperated sigh, muttering “C'mon” under his breath. Jasper acknowledged him now for the first time, a musclebound man who looked almost comically top-heavy. He seemed younger than the pawnbroker, late twenties by Jasper's estimation. The man was tall, towering over the boy like a giant, his arms nearly as thick as

Jasper's legs. Jagged black lines encircled the chiseled muscles in a tribal tattoo, disappearing into the sleeves of the customer's black T-shirt, which barely contained his barrel chest. Jasper couldn't decide if it was the broad shoulders or the man's buzz cut that made his head seem far too small for the rest of his body.

Standing next to Jasper rather than behind, the man looked straight ahead at the pawnbroker, not meeting the kid's gaze. Jasper was beneath eye level, making it easy for the customer to ignore him. Despite feeling the pressure he always felt when he was holding up a line, Jasper persisted, wanting to know more about his mother's history with the shop.

"You mentioned my mother was once a regular here, Mr. Brouchard?"

Brouchard, who had put his glasses on to better examine the stone, didn't seem to notice the question at first. When he realized Jasper was addressing him, the pawnbroker nodded, his focus returning to the pebble as he answered.

"Yes. She visited almost every week, always on the hunt for antiques, artifacts, oddities, what have you. The lady had an eye for authenticity. She was shrewd, too. She never once ended up on the wrong side of a deal."

Brouchard smiled, as if in fond remembrance of a worthy competitor. He continued to turn the stone in his hands, apparently absorbed in his examination of it even as he recounted the memory.

"Whenever we haggled I would feel like she knew something I didn't, even when I was satisfied with the price."

"Do you do business here, or just appraisals?" the big man interjected, with unreserved impatience.

The interruption was met with a glare from Brouchard. It was the longest his eyes had left the pebble. "Being rude won't make the line move any faster, sir. In fact, interrupting me will only make this take longer."

At this the disgruntled customer crossed his arms, his muscles exaggerating the forcefulness of the gesture. It was then Jasper noticed the man had a gun. He hadn't seen the gun behind the man's bulk before, but now that his tattooed arms were crossed the gun was close enough to make Jasper wince. He didn't know a lot about guns, just enough to be afraid. And this guy was intimidating enough without a weapon. How could he hold it so casually like that? It was as if the brute held something as innocuous as a hair-dryer.

It was clear to Jasper that the man was losing his patience. He knew that pawn shops made a profit on the misery of those who needed money and had nowhere else to turn. His mother's words flashed in his mind: "...desperate people."

"Your mother was a bit of an eccentric," Brouchard said, interrupting Jasper's thoughts. "I'm sure you won't mind me describing her as such. She adored her collection of antiques, sure, but I had never seen her so fixated on a piece. Not until she acquired this unassuming little stone. I asked if I could have a closer look, but she wouldn't allow it."

Jasper gave a strained kind of chuckle, the nervousness leaking into his voice. "Well, people can be pretty sentimental at times. In your business, you should know that better than anyone..."

Jasper trailed off, feigning a smile. Relinquishing the pebble made him uneasy. And the way the pawnbroker ogled it only made it worse. Watching Brouchard fondle it with his grubby, hairy-knuckled hands, Jasper considered taking the stone back and trying his luck at the library instead.

"Could we move this along?" the impatient customer barked, interrupting them again.

"If you don't want to wait, sir, do everyone a favor and take your business elsewhere."

There was a bite in Brouchard's tone that bled through the formality of his words.

Before things could escalate further, the bells on the door rang again, admitting an elderly gentleman. If Jasper thought Brouchard was old, this guy was ancient. He had a full white beard and mustache, but well-groomed and worn with pride. The white hair and slow, measured gait indicated his age. He had an air of class, dressed in a suit and hat that were far fancier than a visit to a pawn shop called for. But old people had a way of making that look work.

"Welcome to Brouchard Pawn," Brouchard called, with a sudden change in disposition.

"I'll get to you in a moment, when I'm finished doing business with these two. In the meantime, feel free to look around."

"Oh don't worry, I'm not in any rush, really," replied the dapper gentleman as he moved carefully to the nearest shelf, browsing.

"If only all my customers showed such patience and respect."

Though Brouchard's words were meant for the elderly customer, he was looking straight at the musclebound man beside Jasper as he said them. Arms still crossed, the big man's eyebrows furrowed, his free hand clenching into a fist. Jasper wondered if Brouchard realized the man he was taunting held a gun.

"As I was saying, your mother was oddly protective of this, considering stones of this kind don't have any real intrinsic value to speak of. This made me curious, given her uncanny instinct for the great finds. The last time she was in my shop, all those years ago, I actually offered her money to examine the stone. I thought maybe I could figure out what she saw in it."

Brouchard removed his glasses as he said this, holding a magnifying lens to his eye instead. He continued the examination as he spoke.

"That made her angry. I had never seen her get like that before. She told me not to inquire further on the stone and made it clear that she wouldn't let anyone else have it. But then she said something weird. 'There are no good outcomes to this. Trust me.' With that, she walked out. It was the last time I saw her."

"What do you think she meant by that?"

"I'm not sure. I thought maybe my offer insulted her, but to never come back..."

The pawnbroker paused, peering closer with an adjustment of the magnifier.

"Huh. That's strange..."

Jasper drew breath in anticipation, only to expel it as he was abruptly shoved aside. Before Brouchard could elaborate further, the brute confronted him, gun in hand.

"Listen, mister. The bank closes in half an hour. I need some cash or my account will bounce, and the paperwork to pawn this gun is going to run me out of time. So the boy," he snarled, snatching the stone from the pawnbroker, "and his precious *rock* can wait!"

The meathead hurled the stone behind him, throwing it aimlessly as he turned. Jasper's eyes followed the pebble as it struck the elderly gentleman in the face with substantial force. The old man's head jerked, his fedora dropping as he collapsed to the floor, holding his right eye with an agonized groan. Jasper ran to his side, taking his free hand and pulling him up to a seated position. The man slowly pulled his hand away from his face, covering the uninjured eye to test his vision.

"I can't... it's a blur..."

The old man looked up at the boy, his wrinkled face contorted in pain. His exposed eye was wide open, as if he was trying to will his sight back. Jasper was close enough he could see the blood pooling inside the man's eyeball, obscuring the front of the blue iris like a partial eclipse. Jasper tore himself away, horrified. As his gaze fell to the dark blue pebble on the ground, his shock was overtaken by the rapidly mounting guilt.

Jasper's senses blurred then, like ripples muddying the calm surface of a lake. He blinked as everything seemed to swirl around him, the setting familiar but hazy as he struggled to find his bearings. He tried to turn and look around, but the effort was met with resistance, as if he were underwater, or his limbs were asleep. There was a muffled voice, meaning slowly converging from harsh tones. As the world shifted back into focus, he found himself at the front counter of the pawn shop again. From the same viewpoint as before, Jasper watched the big man snatch the pebble. And then, as if rehearsed:

“...the boy and his precious *rock* can wait!”

With a jolt of realization Jasper struggled against the inertia, launching himself into the furious customer. It had been a couple years since he played football in middle school, but he hit the man low on instinct. Jasper connected as the stone was being thrown, but before the meathead could complete the backward step, knocking the man off balance and taking him bodily to the ground. Jasper looked down at the man he had just tackled, dumbfounded, surprising even himself with the snap decision. But the shattering of glass caught his attention. The path of the pebble had been altered before it went airborne, moving just wide of the elderly man and bursting through the glass panel of the front door. Jasper turned to look at the broken window, surprised that no alarm had sounded from the breach.

“What the hell is your problem, kid?” the man on the floor bellowed, shoving the boy off of him with ease as he rose to his feet.

“You were about to hit that old guy! You’d know that if you were paying attention!” Jasper turned his back to him, not interested in discussing the matter. He had to find the stone. He moved to the front door of the pawn shop, walking around the startled old man as he passed. The pawnbroker shouted something about paying for the window, but whether he was addressing him or not, Jasper ignored it. Something was wrong. This wasn’t just the discomfort he felt when the pebble was out of his possession, this was worse. He felt it in his gut — literally, his stomach tightened.

Peering through the splintered fragments of glass, Jasper’s eyes darted. He looked from the sidewalk outside the door to the street, scanning frantically. The marbled blue surface of the pebble provided just enough contrast from the pavement for him to spot it in the middle of the opposite lane. The bells sounded once again as Jasper stepped outside, eyes transfixed on the pebble even amid the passing traffic. The approach of a semi truck made Jasper uneasy. He watched, dejected, as each tire on one side of the eighteen wheeler passed over the stone. Then the rear-most tire launched the pebble, and with unnerving clarity Jasper saw it whirl straight back into the next car.

Stunned by the sudden impact and blinded by the broken windshield, the driver panicked, swerving into the adjacent lane and crashing into one of the cars parked outside the pawn shop. The car alarm that resounded was punctuated by an even louder clash as an oncoming vehicle smashed into the exposed driver side door in a T-bone collision. Tires shrieked, metal screeched, and alarms blared. Jasper recoiled, the warped body of the car skidding across the road mere feet away from where he was standing, showering him in tiny shards of glass.

Jasper closed his hands over his mouth, eyes wide in horror. He knew with dreadful certainty no one could survive that. Forcing himself to look away from the wreckage, some movement caught his eye. Among the twisted metal debris bounced the pebble, steadily rolling toward him. He retched with a sob, the remorse overwhelming him.

Dazed, Jasper's tears blurred his vision, the alarms echoing outward like ripples in his mind. Through a chaotic haze of noises and images, Jasper fought to discern his surroundings. The physical orientation of his body was beginning to disagree with his perception of it, a disconcerting effect that left Jasper inexplicably on his hands and knees. Something pierced through the sensational fog. A sound like wind chimes, except concentrated and fractured. Jasper turned his head, an action that was difficult in this encumbered state, the nerves in his body firing sluggishly. Through the dissipating stupor he discovered the source of the chiming sound — the broken window. He was on the floor inside the pawn shop, having just tackled the meathead who shattered it. The pebble was in the street. He had to act now.

Jasper lifted himself from the ground, resisting the burden of his deadened limbs. He dove into a sprint, recovering finer control of his muscles after a few awkward lunges. Bowling over the dapper gentleman between him and the exit, he rushed forward, kicking the door open and ripping the shopkeeper's bells from their hinges. His momentum carried him forward, nearly thrusting him into the busy street. A couple cars sped past before the opportunity to cross presented itself. He ran across in two wild strides, the gap in traffic barely allowing him through. A car passed so close he could feel the draft of it behind him, nearly pulling him backward.

The pebble was in reach now. It held Jasper's gaze as he kneeled to recover it, enclosing it in his hand. He had intercepted the stone, preventing the terrible accident that would have followed. Relief washed over Jasper as he stood, but an air horn demanded his attention. An

unsettling sense of déjà vu assailed him as he turned to face the semi truck head on. As it rushed toward him, Jasper had just enough time to see the vertical steel bars that formed the grill guard in front of the truck. A cage. It hit him then. He was trapped. Entangled in a series of nightmarish consequences, rippling from the regret he felt, his inability to just let go.

He stared at the pebble in his outstretched hand, his mind reeling. Before him was the lake, as calm as it had been earlier that afternoon — because it *was* earlier that afternoon. He thought of his mother and the reason he had come here in the first place. This time there was no hesitation. With resolve, Jasper tossed the pebble into the air. He watched it slip into the water with a plop.