

## The Whispering Stone

There's a peculiar plaza in a place I needn't name. It's the sort of spot you'd recognise immediately once you saw it. Not that it stands out too much in any way. At a passing glance, it might look no different than the town square a few blocks away from home. Concrete so smooth you can only wonder what untamed history is covered up there, effaced. Trees uprooted, mangled, delimbed, ripped apart, and built back up again as boxes. They keep out the wind and its breezy melody, make room for the shuffling humdrum of chattering bodies.

I'm told it used to be a lot more peaceful. Less people, less noise. I can hardly imagine what it would have looked like back then. Even if I could, it wouldn't be more than a faithless imitation. The few fading memories of its bygone days will eventually become nothing more than hearsay, until someone forgets to pass on the story at all. Just like that, it's lost, and we won't even realise it's gone until we need it most.

The centre of the plaza holds the only hint of whatever time stole from the place. A strange phenomenon occurs there, one which even now I can't quite explain. Embedded in the ground is a stone square painted charcoal black, its rugged surface and uneven edges shattering the uniformity of the pavement surrounding it. The stone is always visible because no one ever steps on it. As if enclosed in a glass sphere, it parts the chaotic tide of passers-by, some cursed or hallowed space where no mortal feet dare tread.

When I first beheld it, nothing struck me more than its emptiness, as if it were the dusty bedroom of a daughter departed too soon, untouched by a father too anguished to gather the courage to open the door and face what's no longer there. An imperceptible precipice lay between the area surrounding that black square and the rest of the world. Even as I stood before it, no more than a couple of paces away, I couldn't find it in me to take another step. Its hollow gaze transfixed me with a sphinx's query.

"Most people don't bother to stop."

Shuffling feet and a gentle, granular voice composed a presence beside me. He had a short stature further reduced by a slouching back, weary from passing years. From what I could notice in my peripheral vision (my gaze still prisoner to the gateway on the ground) wisps of grey hair wreathed his otherwise bare head like a crown. His eyes were deeply set, thick brows and wrinkles threatening to swallow his corneas. A frown strained his cheeks, though not one of dissatisfaction so much as wistfulness. These details caught from a mere impression.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"I couldn't say for sure," the old man replied. "If I had to gander a guess, perhaps it's because this spot is nothing more than a blotch on the pavement to them."

“Then why do they avoid it?”

“If there’s a well-paved road, people tend not to forge through brambles.” The man shrugged. “I suppose it’s something like that.”

I extended my fingers, but they reached no further than a few inches beyond my waist. “Do you know what it is, exactly?”

“I take it you’re not from around here, then.”

“Because I don’t already know?”

“Because you cared enough to ask.”

For the first time since his arrival, I turned my head towards the old man. Even in my full view, the only difference I found were the lines that sharpened the pallid colours of his previously sidelong image. Only so much foam can be gleaned from the surface of a lake.

“It’s meant to be a reminder,” he said, now the one looking ahead. “Funnily enough, it seems to have had the opposite effect. People see it and assume that’s all there ever was to it.”

“Couldn’t someone put up a sign?”

“That assumes anyone would spare the time to read it.”

The two of us were the only ones standing still in that plaza.

“It helped a lot of people,” he murmured. “Then, once it could help them no longer, they decided to forget. Before that happened, they used to call it the Whispering Stone.”

My silence was all the cue he needed to begin a story that fades from my memory with each passing day. His words took me centuries into the past—when a man with undeserved years yet left to him could simply open his eyes and find an uninterrupted horizon; when soft soil sprung underfoot, supporting his steps to a large, upright rock; when, had he lived so much longer ago, he would have found before him not the demure face of a painted cobble but the strong, solemn sheen of the Whispering Stone. Its base was round, tapering upwards like the shadow of a sheet hung over a dormant floor lamp. Its surface was smooth enough to pass for polished marble. It was warm to the touch.

Not even the old man could quite say how the seeds of the stone’s tradition first sprouted. It would have taken decades of care to help it grow, a succession of tears to moisten the earth, the radiance of smiles to encourage it forth. A ritual preserved across generations. The only certainty was that someone some night decided to entrust the stone with something precious,

giving what was once a nameless feature of the landscape a reason to exist on its own, well beyond its destined time.

A single secret was whispered to the stone, concealed in its petrified flesh.

Only the stone knew why that nameless mouth thought to share those weighted words. It couldn't tell another soul, only accept the unwanted gift with silence. What became of the first, how much time passed until the second, whoever came after that—those queries were threads of a mystery impossible to unravel. It mattered not if they were tangled, though. The stone's history may have been an ill-woven tapestry filled with clashing colours and glaring holes, but it shared with us the heart of what we wished to discover.

If you whispered your secret into your palms and pressed them against the surface of the stone, it would receive your secret and relieve you from its burden.

A young girl would have called that the silliest thing she'd ever heard, but if she'd only been given a few more years, she might have grown to find some wonder in those words. Perhaps. Regardless, it wasn't an issue of belief in what was said. This promise, this hope, drew countless pilgrims to the stone's landing, all of them bearing some crippling load in their chests, reaching out in desperation, waiting for the rock to embrace them with hands it didn't have. I can imagine the scene. A throng of people swathed round the grand, unmoving column, outstretched arms forming the spokes of a wheel, all brought together for reasons eternally unknown. Something indistinguishable, unquantifiable, but undeniably real dissipating from within, passing through their fingertips into the throbbing veneer of the Whispering Stone.

Forbidden love. A guilty pleasure. Stolen goods. Abuse. The real father. Snide remarks. Gifts for children fighting drooping eyelids as they hold a vigil in front of the chimney. A lost cardigan. A shattered vase. Gashes on the forearm. Inner demons. Whoever fills the bed when she's not home. How long he's gazed from afar. Envy. Sabotage. Embezzled funds. A deposit on the neighbour's lawn. Pregnant. Engaged. Boy or girl. A smear of blood from a murder still fresh on the hands of the one who wrought the confession. Broken promises. Lingering regrets. The one thing you're afraid to remember, afraid to let go. What you wish you could have said and done before you saw her for the last time.

The joy you refuse to acknowledge because of the sorrow its absence brings.

Whatever secret lurked in the depths of a conscience, the Whispering Stone accepted each one indiscriminately. It brought liberation to those who supplicated its waning face. It offered not forgiveness but a release from condemnation. It helped people leave behind the failures of their past and move beyond the present. A steppingstone to bear the weight of humanity's faults.

As the tale flitted atop the open breeze, the distance grew vaster over which burdened hearts were willing to cross. All to witness, to experience, the blessing of the rock. Venturing minds devised schemes for profit, settling down on the outskirts of the stone's abode, laying their foundations. It wasn't too long after that more people found a reason to live their lives basking in the landmark's growing fame, to ensure that its boons were always within arm's reach. The earth was overturned and suppressed. Trees were conquered, violated, groomed. A pedestal was built around the stone's base, transforming it into a monument, an attraction. The plaza was flooded with an ever-rising tide, the clamour of hushed voices and straining hands reaching towards the withering rockface, begging for absolution. They gave it a name.

So, the Whispering Stone ceaselessly embraced their pleas, their admissions. Even as the friction of tens of thousands of palms wore away at its once polished surface, defacing its lustre, reshaping it into something they wanted, needed, craved. It accepted them all, and no one cared to notice how the wind caught in its forming cracks, sighing, moaning in the dead of night.

When the old man was but a young boy himself, his grandfather took him to this very plaza, the one which imprisoned the Whispering Stone. They waited long, rode the currents of people as they ebbed and flowed round the pedestal's shore. As they did, the old man's grandfather told him the story. Even back then, the surreal dreamscape painted by a relic of generations past had already melted before the setting sun. The Whispering Stone was wrinkled with age and indifference, hunched over, frail. Each touch, each secret, threatened to topple it entirely. No horizon could be seen past the rows of fallowed roofs.

The two of them finally reached the vaunted rock, jostled against it by the pressure of the impatient horde. With the sombreness of a prayer, the grandfather extracted the secret from his lips and placed it against the stone's surface. The old man swore he saw it quiver. As his grandfather's hands returned to his sides, he asked him what secret he had shared with the stone. To the old man's surprise, his grandfather answered readily: that he loved his grandson and the rest of his family with all he had. Hardly a secret, but that wasn't a concern. All his grandfather wanted that day was to express a truth he held dear.

Many years passed before the old man revisited that plaza, those languid memories stirring in his mind. However, when he got there, he found the Whispering Stone gone, a small black square painted in its place upon which not a single foot stepped.

They said it just crumbled one day, without warning. Fell apart into brittle pieces, fleeing from hundreds of fingertips, trying to dig through concrete to reach the stale soil below. Almost as if it gave up, as if it couldn't take another whisper. Whatever happened to the boundless breadth of secrets it harboured, who can tell? At the very least, there was no longer a place for them to be held. Perhaps they dissolved into the sky. Perhaps it was hollow all along.

Just like that, the Whispering Stone was no more. People forgot, moved on, wore a smile even as their secrets clawed at their innards. Whether out of respect, fear, awe, disgust, or some other emotion that can't quite be named, they avoided the place where the stone used to stand, until they lost sight of the reason and the habit became second nature. There was never a cause for them to question their past. They pushed it down.

"I was one of the few to hold on," said the old man. "To me, that stone wasn't a martyr. It was just another something to cherish in the world, even if it had departed long ago."

"That day," I responded as the story came to a close, "Did you end up sharing anything with the Whispering Stone, the last time you saw it?"

"Ah, that's a bit embarrassing to tell." The man scratched his exposed scalp. "See, back then, my hands tended to get quite clammy. I imagine even if I did have a secret to give, it would have slipped right out of my palms well before it reached the stone."

"That so?"

"What about you?" The old man turned to face me for the first time since his story's start. I could see the stark blue of his widened irises. "If the stone were still around today, would you have a secret to share with it?"

The visage of a young girl flashed in front of me, one I hadn't seen in what felt like the longest time. My nose...her eyes. A strange sense of *déjà vu*, of sorrow, of loss.

"No," I murmured. "This is something I need to bear myself."

"I wonder if the stone felt the same."

We stood in our places for some time after that, but the old man eventually bade me farewell. I never asked for his name. Another secret lost with the façade of the Whispering Stone. Another secret lost because I chose to forget, because I chose to run away from the only one left who could have shared the burden with me.

Falling into the endlessness of the black splotch where the Whispering Stone should have been, I stood for a while longer, even as the plaza emptied and the sun dipped below the barricade of buildings. Then, when night fell, I whispered something into my palms which I can't quite recall, before throwing them up to the starlit sky.

THE END