

THE BIRDSTONE

Marjorie Snodgrass

"Thank God it's Friday!", laughed Karen, her brown eyes sparkling, and her shiny dark hair swinging as she quickly carried the supper dishes to the sink. "What a week it's been; tests to mark, essays on American History to grade and the eleventh grade historical drama to supervise. A week's vacation couldn't come too soon for me."

"You can think of me everyday, slaving away at the university, while you lie around relaxing at home," rejoined her husband, Charles, teasingly, as he rolled up his sleeves to help with the dishes.

"Don't be too sure of all that relaxation," Karen responded. "What with painting the living room, trying to research my next unit on American Indians, preparing lesson plans for at least one week, let alone tagging and cataloging all the specimens we find tomorrow, I don't think I'll have too much time on my hands. . . .

"When we finish these, let's make a list of what we hope to find tomorrow in Wyandotte. The cave should be full of good geological finds for your work and interesting Indian artifacts, if the tourists before us haven't stripped it clean. It is great that Dr. Glick persuaded the Park Service to allow us to take specimens when they are so strict now," Karen continued.

"According to Professor Glick, who was there three weeks ago, the section we're going to has not been disturbed much since the Indians lived there themselves," explained Charles, as he opened a notebook. "It's going to be quite an adventure," he went on. "To get there we have to climb down through the Devil's Mouth by the old totem pole. Only the more advanced spelunkers are allowed down there. But Dr. Glick managed to go down and he also managed to get permission for us. There really must be something down there!" he concluded enthusiastically.

Although the couple left their small apartment at five the next morning, the sun was already well up, promising a beautiful, warm April day when they arrived at Wyandotte Cave. A park

official was waiting to check out their gear and direct them to the spot in the upper part of the cave where the Devil's Mouth yawned up out of the floor revealing nothing of what lay below. Karen excitedly fitted her hard hat over her neatly braided dark hair while Charles checked the extra batteries and flashlights and adjusted his knee pads.

"Dr. Glick, his assistant and our guide went down ten minutes ago. You should have no trouble finding them. No one else is here, although a group of high school students from Indianapolis is due around eleven," the park official informed them. He added, "Dr. Glick left your specimen bags near the Pole along with a diagram of the passage he was planning to take. Good luck," he offered, as he steadied Karen in her descent down the pole on small foot-holds, clicking on the headlamp fastened to her head disappeared beneath the floor.

"See you at three," he reminded Charles just before his head also disappeared into the gaping, black hole.

Once on the lower level the couple quickly deciphered Professor Glick's diagram and headed in the direction he had indicated, carrying small burlap bags for specimens. Hearing voices ahead, they relaxed their gait and began looking for unusual rock or crystal formations and artifacts left by the Indians who had lived in the cave so long ago.

They had to walk carefully in this section because the floor dropped abruptly to the right of the dry, firm walkway. A wall of jumbled rocks rose just as steeply on the left.

Charles stopped to examine a diverse collection of rocks piled within a small area, noting that they could not possibly have developed there naturally. Karen was quick to observe that they might have been left there by a previous inhabitant or explorer as she reached up for one peculiarly shaped, smoothly polished stone.

"Look at this, Charles!" she exclaimed excitedly. "I believe it is a birdstone. I'm so happy to find one. Remember when we saw several of these in the Indiana State Museum last summer?" she asked. "I have tried to find out how they really were used. Maybe this one will lead me to a clue. You know, some anthropologists claim they were merely smoothly shaped handles, for tools, while

others believe they may have had religious symbolism or served as talismans. This one is so beautifully shaped and polished from the basic dark, shiny stone. It seems to glow from within," she mused as she gently fondled the smooth bird-shaped stone, becoming mesmerized by the soft glow emanating from it. "How quickly it has warmed to my touch," she remarked, now holding it in both hands, having dropped the burlap bags to the walkway.

Charles turned at the strange, far-off quality of her voice.

"Lookout!" he called, but as he spoke she stepped off the path, as if in a trance, falling onto the jagged rocks below. The light from her headlamp went out as her hat slid from her head, leaving only the sound of falling rocks as a clue to her whereabouts. Immediately he shouted to Dr. Glick, whose light shone a few yards beyond, having turned toward the sound of falling rocks.

Karen herself was surprised that the fall was painless and quite startled to find herself now in the bright sunshine, sprawled on spongy moss.

"Oh, sister, how clumsy!" someone nearby laughed. Karen looked up to see two smiling, moon-like faces looking down at her from two warmly padded short stocky figures. The hoods of their fur-lined parkas had been thrown back revealing warm, soft leather dresses above thick leggings and shoes. Both girls wore their hair pulled into one thick, shiny black braid. Each carried two leather buckets tied to each end of a long bone, which they balanced across their shoulders.

"Well, don't just sit there staring! Get up on your feet and pick up your buckets. You know Mama wants lots of water to cook the reindeer Papa killed yesterday. So, come on," commanded the larger of the two.

Karen obediently got up, slipped the bucket's woven skin handles into grooves at either end of the bone yoke and placed the yoke across her shoulders quite naturally. She carefully watched while the two girls took turns lowering the buckets, which had been fastened to a thick leather thong, until they heard them smack the water. As each girl quickly pulled up the second bucket full of clear, cold water she took a long drink, wiping her chin with the wide sleeve of her jacket, before fastening the buckets securely to the bone yoke.

As Karen diligently copied their actions, the larger girl spoke impatiently. "Hurry up, Karooma, we're going on home before Mama gets angry. You can easily catch us."

Karen felt panicky, standing alone at the well, not knowing where home was. The second bucket slapped the surface of the water and rapidly sank until she heard it grate against the bottom. It took all her might to turn the bone handle to bring it back up this time. When she lifted the bucket to drink she saw the bottom littered with gravel. She reached in to remove what she could. When her fingers closed around the last large stone its familiar shape startled her. Not hesitating, she slipped it into a pocket in her side sleeve. Finding the beautiful birdstone filled her with such joy that she burst into song, not aware of the words or tune which came so spontaneously from her, as she swiftly skipped after the other two, balancing her load easily.

"Aha, here she comes, happy little Karooma-bird . . . and just as foolhardy," remarked the larger girl sarcastically.

"Maybe she hopes to attract Uglik or Larum," giggled the pretty younger one. "It's time she took a man instead of singing and dreaming all day, Mama says."

"Run, run!" shouted the older girl, looking back toward Karen. For behind them rapidly galloped a troop of Mongol ruffians riding small, hairy horses. Karen turned to look wonderingly at them before running as fast as she could with two buckets of water hanging from the yoke across her neck. Suddenly, her way was blocked by two horsemen.

"Stop!" they shouted in harsh, guttural tones. "Who are you?"

"Karooma, the elder daughter of the great reindeer hunter," she responded unhesitatingly.

But her reply was met with loud guffaws. "Just look at your great father, he can't help you now," the spokesman sneered. With dread, she forced her eyes to focus on the still figure draped over one of the hairy beasts. She bolted in terror at the vacant, staring eyes and bloodied face, so like that of the younger girl she had just been with. But, before she could run ten steps, strong, rough hands grasped her. The yoke was pulled from her shoulders, water splashed on her shoes as she made a last, vain a-

tempt to escape. One of the horsemen quickly tied her legs together before throwing her over a riderless horse. She watched the muddy ground move beneath the horse's hooves, feeling faint with her head hanging down, until she was tossed into a thicket, untied and assaulted so painfully she screamed in agony.

"Shut up, you cow, or I'll slit your throat," threatened the cruel faced attacker, dressed in crude skins smelling of rotten flesh from hunting and fighting.

Just when it seemed unbearable, Karen felt a cold, smooth object slide into her hand from the sleeve pocket. Holding it in her hand brought relief from the excruciating pain and filled her with a relaxing warmth.

"Hey, now, what's that in your hand?" inquired the somewhat subdued ruffian, trying to pry open her fingers.

"It's mine! It's mine! You can't have it!" she shrieked, uncontrollably. Even when he held a knife to her throat, she did not yield.

"Give it to me or lose your head, you silly girl," he threatened.

She felt the sharp pain of the knife as it cut through the skin of her neck, slicing ever deeper. In desperation she screamed for help.

* * *

"Karen, Karen, we've found you! My God, you're hurt! Your neck . . . you must have cut it on a rock when you fell." Charles gently lifted her from the rocks and with the help of the guide carried her to the walk from which she had fallen.

Looking about her at the dark walls on which shadowy forms flitted to and fro filled Karen with alarm. Realizing she still held the birstone, she impulsively reached out toward Charles, pleading, "Please take this."

He obediently put it in his pocket, before asking "Are you OK?"

"Oh yes," she sighed, "but my neck hurts."

Professor Glick approached with his hard hat filled with cold, clear water from an old army canteen. He soaked his handkerchief in the water and gently cleaned the blood away from her neck.

"Amazing!" he exclaimed. "I wouldn't have believed a rock could make such a clean-edged cut as this. It looks more like a knife wound. I think we had better call off the expedition, now. Karen, at any rate, can't go on. And we do have two bags nearly filled; and yours, Charles, has some very interesting samples. It's not a total loss. Besides, we can come back another time."

On the way back home in the car, Karen tried to relate her dream to a skeptical Charles, who was preoccupied with driving and his own thoughts.

"It was kind of Professor Glick to let me have the rocks he found for my research project, so at least I can begin to identify something when we get home. But, I will never understand how you fell off that wide walkway," he puzzled. "Thank God, your neck was just scratched."

Both were relieved to climb the stairs to their cheerful, three room apartment, finding the small, burlap bags fairly easy to carry. As he closed the door behind him, Charles pulled the smooth stone from his pocket and tossed it into one of the bags. Karen watched pensively.

The next morning, after a leisurely brunch during which they perused the Sunday paper, the couple poured out the contents of the bags and began the tedious job of sorting, identifying and labeling each small rock specimen. By mid-afternoon, Karen felt terrible, with the symptoms of a chest cold developing along with frequent sneezing and a sore throat.

"I think I'll step out to the drugstore for some cough syrup and cold medicine, before it gets dark," she announced abruptly, throwing a warm sweater over her shoulders. She stooped down to pick up the birdstone from the scattered stones on the rug, putting it in her jeans pocket.

"This will keep me company on my perilous journey two blocks away into the wilds of Bloomington," she quipped to her husband, concentrating on the identity of a particularly interesting rock.

Once outside, Karen shivered in the unexpected cold. Rain mixed with sleet stung her face. As she unconsciously caressed the stone in her pocket, she could feel warmth spread from her hand to her arm. She pulled it out of her pocket, happy to see it glowing softly in her hand. Concentrating on the gracefully shaped bird, she inadvertently stepped off the curb into the slush.

"I'm so tired," she thought, as she staggered on against the freezing rain, trying not to slip again. "This trip does seem endless," she whimpered to herself, looking ahead at a group of warmly clad figures plodding on. Something heavy on her back was slowing her and pulling her down. Her feet felt cold and numb. She staggered again, trying not to fall, but her foot slid between two large chunks of ice, bringing unbearable pain to her knee. Near her ear there was a loud wailing noise.

"Help me!" she shouted to the retreating figures, one of whom quickly ran to her side. "I've hurt my leg and I'm so tired. Please help me get up again," she pleaded.

A pleasant looking, dark-haired young man untied a cloth sling from her shoulder, releasing the weight from her back so suddenly that she lost her balance, further dislocating her leg.

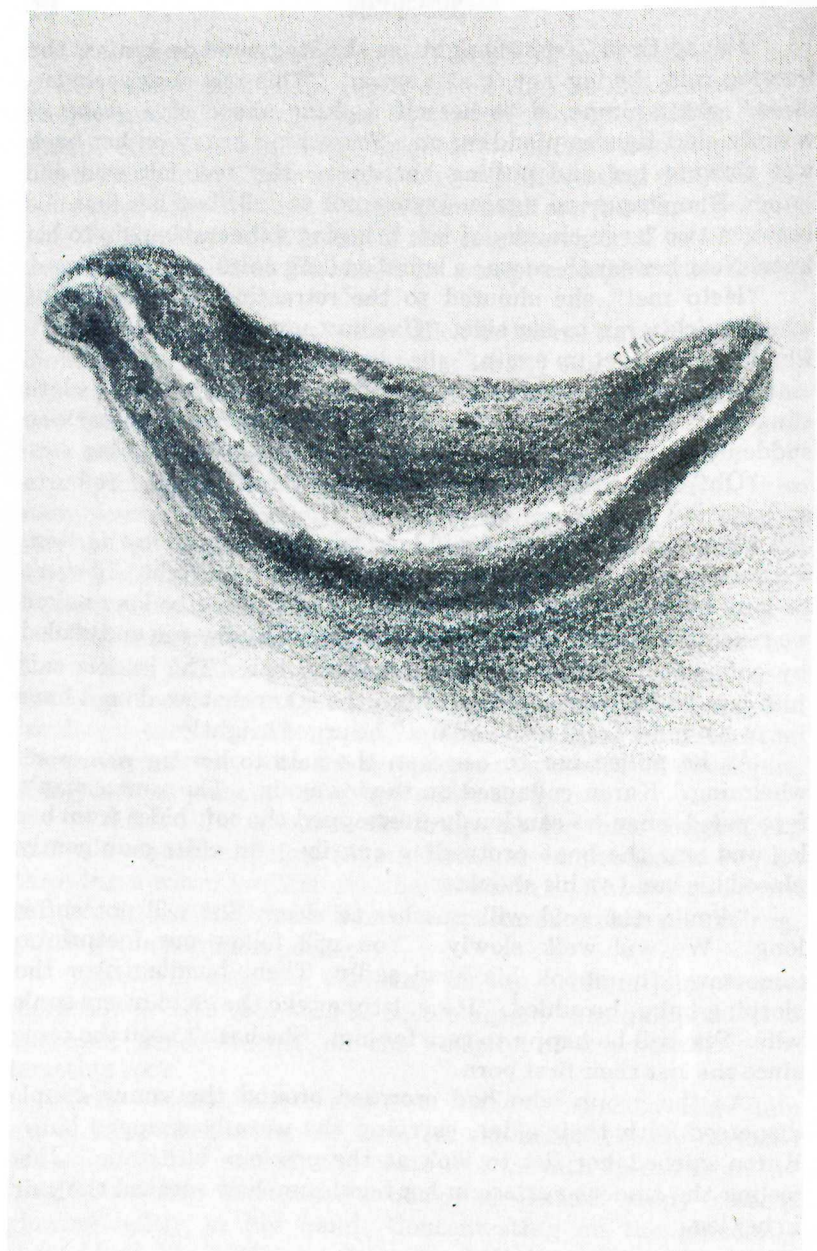
"Oh!" she wailed in pain. "What if I can't go on? It hurts so."

"Don't worry, Kera, I will help you. Be strong, my darling, we must continue before the others are gone from sight. It won't be long before we stop for the night. And it won't be long before we reach the land of grass and trees warmed by the sun and cooled by soft rain," the young man reassured her. "The leaders said just last night they could tell from the stars that we do not have far to go, now; I will help you up," he urged brightly.

As he pulled her to her feet, the pain to her leg was overwhelming. Karen collapsed on the ice again. The young man's face paled when he cautiously unwrapped the soft hides from her leg and saw the bone protruding angrily. An older man gently placed his hand on his shoulder.

"Amik, the cold will put her to sleep. She will not suffer long. We will walk slowly. You will follow our footprints, tomorrow," he shook his head sadly. Then, bending over the sleeping baby, he added, "Here, let me take the child to my son's wife. She will be happy to care for him. She hasn't been the same since she lost their first born."

As the group who had crowded around the young couple dispersed with their elder, carrying the warmly wrapped baby, Karen opened her fist to look at the precious birdstone. Just feeling the smooth surface in her hand somehow soothed the pain in her leg.



"Oh, Kera," Amik spoke in alarm, "your father told me never to let you gaze on the magic stone. How did you get it from me?" he asked, searching the empty lining of his parka where the stone had been kept for luck on this journey.

"Please let me hold it," she begged. "It feels so warm in my hand. I feel peaceful and sleepy, my leg hardly hurts now." And she closed her eyes.

"Karen! Karen!" the words were repeated until with great effort she opened her eyes in spite of her comfortable lethargy. She was filled with terror at the sight of the strange apparition bending over her, a monster in green with bright blue eyes. Stifling a scream, she tried to rise, but her leg was too heavy, covered with a white, rock-like substance.

Then a familiar tan face with sparkling brown eyes grinned down at her.

"Karen, honey, you're finally awake! You really scared us there for awhile, sleeping for two days. Thank God, only your leg was hurt when that car careened around the corner by the drugstore. But a compound fracture is bad enough!" Charles commented ruefully, leaning down to kiss her forehead.

"Charles, I'm so frightened," Karen began softly. I dreamed again about the birdstone. There is something about that stone I should know. But it just eludes me. I almost knew it but then I woke up."

"When you're able, you can check out as many books on Indian lore as you can find in the library. For now, just do what the nurses and Dr. Robbins tell you to, so you can come home Thursday," he admonished.

"Wait! Wait! Charles," she cried out anxiously. "Where is the birdstone, now?"

"Don't worry, we haven't thrown it away. It is downstairs with your wallet and watch. Hospital policy, you know, to keep valuables in their safe," Charles answered calmly.

Two days later, following a final x-ray of her leg Charles helped Karen into their small car for the short drive home.

"What a stupid thing to do on my vacation!" the young teacher lamented. "My students won't let me forget it, I bet. And, now all the things I planned to do are out except helping you catalog the specimens. I guess I'll spend most of my vacation just lying around, as you said last week," Karen laughed.

"Well, I do need help finishing up the project. Most of the specimens are indenified but some still need to be tagged and listed. Incidentally, Dr. Glick wanted to know if you would be willing to give the birdstone to the I.U. Museum. How about it?" he asked, as they arrived at the apartment entrance.

"No! No! I just can't let it go yet!" she exploded, adding angrily, "I found it and it's mine. You can't take it away from me. Just tell him a big no!"

"Sorry, Karen," Charles responded, looking uncomfortable. "I didn't mean to uspet you. Here, let me help you inside."

After a quick supper of frozen pizza, which Charles had prepared, they began working carefully with the rocks again.

"It seems like a million years since we went to the cave, doesn't it?" began Karen, thoughtfully. Those dreams were so real. And, the funny part is I could understand everything they said even though I know it is not English the girls spoke or that the two men spoke in the second dream. All day I have been wondering who the girls were who called me sister. And I wish I knew what became of the husky baby—or the kind young man. He didn't want me to look at the birstone. But here it is," she remarked cheerfully, taking it out of the hospital envelope, cradling it in her hand lovingly, as she gazed at the shiny, gracefully curved bird.

So deep was her absorption that she did not hear the shrill ringing of the phone nor Charles calling to her. With a shock she realized he had struck her hand, nearly making her fall of the chair and driving the stone far back under the sofa.

"It's your mother, Karen. Wake up! She wants to talk to you on the phone," he announced impatiently, not having been able to get her attention until he slapped the stone out of her hand. Then noticing the startled expression on her face, he apologized, "I'm sorry, Karen. Hope I didn't hurt you."

"Oh, it's Mother," she replied, dreamily as she hobbled to tell her she was OK. After a short conversation, she hung up and related that her mother was planning to come the next day to help.

The next afternoon as her mother was leaving, Karen spoke earnestly, "Mom, I can't thank you enough for all you have done. Now, I think with the freezer full and the house really clean for a change, I'll make it through next week, crutches and all. It was good just being with you, expecially since I couldn't drive up very well this week."

"You take it easy tomorrow, stay in the house where you aren't apt to fall," her mother admonished. "Everyone will be happy to hear you and Charles are driving up Saturday," she added enthusiastically. "You know, Jennie's so excited about being admitted to Know College and Cindy wants you to read the essay she wrote for ninth grade history. And, naturally, Dad was much to tell you about his promotion to president of the company. Even Queenie and her seven pups will be happy to see you. So, until then, take care."

"Oh, Karen, I forgot," her mother began again, as she reached the door. "When I was cleaning under the sofa I found an Indian artifact. It's beautifully carved bird. I put it on top of the book case. And don't forget, the casserole should be done by six. Charles can take it out for you. Well, good-bye, again."

"Bye, Mom, see you Saturday," called Karen as she hobbled back toward the sofa, stopping to turn on the TV. She paused in front of the bookcase, pulling a large notebook from one of the shelves before she gently removed the birstone from its perch.

It was peaceful in the warm apartment. She began to write in the notebook as she studiously observed every detail of the smooth, dark stone. Glancing up briefly, she noted the movie on TV was one she had already seen, not worth her attention.

As she concentrated once more on the stone, she frowned, trying to remember what had worried her before. She put the pen and notebook down, picking up the flawless stone. How wonderfully familiar it felt as she curled her fingers around it, sensing the warmth growing from it. Sunlight streaming in the window

heightened the glow from its polished surface. With a smile Karen relaxed, knowing she was safe in her own apartment, safe to doze and dream if she wished.

But loud voices shattered her peaceful dreaming. It had grown quite dark and chilly. Just as she shivered some one took her hand, shouting urgently, "Wake up! Quick, follow me. We must leave this place!"

Karen did not hesitate to follow her mother, sensing that something about those voices prompted the fear rising in her. "Where are we going?" she inquired, as her mother pulled her into the darkness.

Not answering, her mother dragged her to the Evil Spirit's Mouth where she quickly climbed down the pole, urging Karen to follow. Once on the lower level, both women crept silently to hide behind a rock cairn familiar to her. There they clung together in fear listening to the many feet tramping overhead.

"Who are they?" she asked her mother, who whispered that they were the same warriors who had killed her father two dawns before, adding that she was happy that the two younger sisters were safe with the rest of the tribe. Karen now remembered that they had been hiding here for two days while her mother searched, alone. She had not told Karen what it was she sought, nor why Karen was only to warn her of trouble. How ashamed she felt that she had fallen asleep and it was her mother who had warned her.

Simultaneously, she and her mother spied a dimly glowing object wedged in among the stones of the cairn. Both reached for it, equally determined to grasp it. Karen, quicker in her youth, grabbed it. Then with astonishment, she realized it was her birdstone.

"This is mine, Mother," she stated coldly. "You may not have it," and she covered it with her hand.

"I must see it, Kiri. Give it to me. If it is not the sacred birdstone, you may keep it. If it is, woe to you," she moaned.

But Karen would not open her hand, feeling this was her own find, not her mother's, even though her mother tried to pry open her fingers, and finally slapped her face in desperation.

"Kiri, you don't know what it is you hold. It is your death sign. I must have it now!" and she began to sob.

"Your father warned me of this many years ago before you were born. The stone has come down generation to generation in his family, bringing good luck, bestowing wisdom, fleetness of foot, power over enemies and great honor as chieftains to the sons. This has been true from the time before our people came across the bridge of land from the old country of long winters, frozen ground, poor harvests, misery and sickness to this time. . . .

"The stone is a curse when there are no sons in the family. It brings a death sentence upon the eldest daughter if she should hold the stone in a time of danger. When sister Tiki was born, your father hid the stone here in this dark passage. He did not tell me exactly where for fear I would lead you to it. We did not allow you to come to this place. It would have gone to his first grandson after your death as an old woman. Now, bad luck has come to us all. You must give the stone to me," she pleaded, once more.

Karen slowly opened her fist, not looking at her precious stone, although she desperately wanted to.

"Here, Mother, take it. I believe you."

As she handed the stone to her mother they ran quietly, feeling their way along the side of the jumbled rocks around a bend where their hunters could not find them without risking falling on the loose rocks. Her mother pulled her into a recess behind a pile of shadowy, jabbed stone.

As they waited quietly, Karen began to feel overcome with grief. She just had to take a last look at this miraculous, family stone, that had brought such good luck to her ancestors. If she could hold it once more, she would feel happy again.

Without warning she pounced on her mother, snatching the stone from her hand. Startled, her mother reached out instinctively to steady herself, knocking several rocks loose from the cairn. The sound of their descent echoed from the vaulted ceiling, followed by her screams as she accompanied more, tumbling down, down into the depths of the cave.

Karen stood happily oblivious to the commotion, cradling the precious stone in her hand again.

"Ah, you beautiful, graceful bird. I have you at last," she exulted. "No one can ever take you from me, not even my beloved mother. You're mine forever!"

She walked along the path, full of peace and warmth from the stone. As she rounded a corner, torches blinded her just long enough for a young warrior to place his arrow in his bow and release it to its mark. The stone flew up from her hand into a pile of rocks as she fell, down off the path, to lie still a few feet from her silent mother. Four strong, young warriors carefully climbed to them, turned them over and carried their limp bodies up and out of the cave.

* * *

Karen felt cold night air rush over her inert body. Something had been clamped over her nose. In a panic she realized the sacred stone was not in her hand. She must have it. But strong hands held her down. To no avail she kicked and pushed at them. Strange words flew around her ears, but as she lay quietly again, they became intelligible.

"Gas . . . defective pilot light . . . another five minutes and . . . lucky her mother called when she did."

Karen's large brown eyes opened on a scene of confusion on the sidewalk in front of her apartment. Her mother smiled down at her as an intern took her pulse. The cement beneath her felt cold and she shivered in spite of the coat someone had thrown over her.

"Oh, Karen," her mother began, her voice quivering, "I'm so sorry. After I left your apartment I remembered you had told me about your oven not lighting properly unless you used a match. I stopped at the first filling station to call you. But you didn't answer, so I had to call the police. Thank goodness I called when I did. They were just carrying you outside when I got here."

"When that strong officer carried you over his shoulder, down the steps, that bird-shaped stone I found under the sofa today fell from your fingers. Here," she offered, "do you want it?"

Karen's eyes lit up with desire as she eagerly held out her hand to grasp her wonderful stone again.

The young intern bumped into her mother as he stepped back from Karen. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry," he remarked, watching as a small shiny object dropped between the grating of the sewer at the curb. "I hope it wasn't anything valuable."

"No, not at all. Just an Indian relic of some sort," her mother replied cheerfully. "You can find more like that, can't you dear?"

Tears rolled down Karen's face, dripping onto her straight, black hair. As she wiped them away with her tan, slim hand she smiled at her mother.

"No, Mother, I doubt it, really. But I guess I will have to live without it."

a poem

Mike Pettygrove

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