

Heart of Stone  
by  
Peter Stekel  
copyright 2007, all rights reserved

### Chapter Three

That first week of school last September, before classes started, was filled with faculty meetings, committee meetings, PTA meetings, meetings with administrators, meetings with textbook representatives, meetings with parents concerned about curricula, plus meetings with corporate sponsors about what advertisements would be running in the classrooms that year. On Friday, faculty members congregated at The Logger to partake of a liquid dinner.

The decor inside the bar was unlike anything Jake had ever seen outside of the Las Vegas Strip. Jerry Merlino, who owns the place, had brought lighting kitsch to new heights in his "drinking palace." Walking in off the darkened town Plaza at six o'clock, Jake was assaulted by so much neon and brightly colored incandescent light that he wished for sunglasses. He could see that *The Logger* was not the kind of place that would live up to its name.

Jake found much to overwhelm his eye in the bar. The linoleum floor consisted of 12 X 12 inch glitter inlaid panels with frayed reflective tape around the edges. The walls were covered with blacklight velvet paintings that belonged in some Latin American bordello. He found the motif of zaftig Aztecan women in various suggestive poses, in equally various stages of nudity, to be an intriguing counterpoint to the land of political correctness he had left behind in California.

Hanging from the ceiling were Christmas tree ornaments and bits of broken glass suspended by fishing line. A mass of driver's licenses were stuck to the ceiling with darts. It would be some time before Jake learned why. For seats, Merlino had a row of barstools designed and painted by someone with a Dolly Parton fetish. Along the wall opposite the bar stood a row of booths colored slightly more sedately than the floor. In the back were three captain's tables for the card-playing patrons and

behind them, through a door, was another room where Merlino kept a pool table, and the men's and women's toilets.

Everywhere, everywhere were lights; so many lights there wasn't any reason to heat the place during the winter. In the coming months, Jake grew to appreciate the dry warmth of Merlino's lights. Big lights, colored lights, Christmas tree lights, flashing red lights, blacklights, full-spectrum grow-lux lights; the entire establishment served as a cornucopia to extravagance in light and color. And lack of taste too.

Jake slid into a booth where he recognized a woman from the attendance office and introduced himself to the four other people there. The conversation was distant, but polite. The booth's occupants were all killing time, waiting for someone else to show up. Country music, something about, "Leaving your lover on a train to east Texas," played softly in the background. As the evening wore on, Jake nursed a series of draft beers while the changing cohort in the booth puffed through fields of tobacco and slammed down whiskey sours, vodka martinis, rum and cokes, straight tequila, cheap red wine, sloe gin, boilermakers, long-necked bottles of Budweiser, and pitchers of beer. He hadn't seen such heavy drinking since his freshman year of college or his stint in Southeast Asia.

The fluid complexion of the bar kept Jake's interest from dulling as a succession of his co-workers; overweight, balding,

and pompous, paraded through the booth. Of course, it's easy to be interested in such things when you don't know anybody and there is nothing in particular waiting for you to do at home. Jake must have fielded the same question a dozen times that night.

"Why'd you leave L.A. to come up here?" The phrases describing "here" changed with each interviewer, "...to God's country?" "...to this shit-hole?" "...to the Pacific Northwest?" "...to the Pacific Northwet?" "...the land where the sun don't shine?" "...to the loneliest place in the world?" "...to the land civilization forgot."

Jake didn't understand it at first, but as the evening progressed he realized in the deprecating comments a certain pride of ownership; a sense of place: the idea that people existed with some kind of continuity with where they lived. They belonged here, not because Port Talbot was where they get their mail, but because they physically and chronologically fit the place. To live here required a certain type of person; someone who wouldn't let rain or weather, remoteness, or solitude and economic destitution bring them down. At least not too far. At least, not as long as there were drinks at *The Logger*.

That realization made his own reasons for being in Port Talbot sound naive and uninformed. It explained the raised eyebrows, patronizing smiles, and head-shaking that accompanied

his colleague's replies.

"You left L.A. 'cause you wanted to live in a dark, wet forest? What are you; some kind of nut?"

"Environmental-types aren't too appreciated around here, you know. Best keep your mouth closed about hugging trees and loving owls."

"Port Talbot is a real place, not some sort of living history museum of logging."

"If you've got half the brains you think you do, you'll open your eyes to the fact that all that tree-hugger stuff you heard back in California is just a load of B.S."

"Ever since that fellow at the forest service caused the Cherry Creek Sawmill to close, people have been awfully sensitive about how saving the ecology means someone loses their job."

Sometime during the evening, Jake found himself sitting in the booth with the high school's four P.E. teachers, their faces a blur in his mind. He had just fielded the question of the night when one of the coaches commented, "It takes a hundred years before anyone accepts you around here."

"Why's that?" Jake asked.

"Too much inbreeding." The man smiled to show he was kidding.

The second coach added, "Folks around here don't trust outsiders."

The third coach contributed, "And it doesn't help that, except for the forest service employees, you make four times as much money as anyone else."

"Anyone else who works," added Number One.

"Don't forget those trouble-making old farts in leisure village." This from coach Number Four.

"Leisure village?" Jake queried.

"Fogytown. Along the west shore of Azazel Bay," Number Four supplied.

Jake had seen the impressive row of expensive homes along the water.

"Retired people," stated Number Two with disgust. "They come up here, with no ties, no children, and no interest in anything except their IRA disbursements. Problem is, they help organize the commuters living in Newtown. They vote more often than anyone else and they vote down school levies, road bonds, and funding for libraries. The only thing they support is less government and more police."

"Can't argue with that," Number One contributed.

"Sure you can. There's a million people in jail in America. That's more people than in college," Number Two replied.

Number One countered with, "If you do the crime..."

"Yeah. And if the glove don't fit..." said Number Three.

"Except our law enforcement is county, not city," argued

Number Two. "They can vote for all the cops they want but we're never going to get anything except for Sheriff Moody and those three dimwit deputies. Any real crimes, like whoever killed that stupid spotted owl, never get solved."

Number Three interjected, "Same thing with those protestors a few years back."

Jake's ears pricked up. "What about them?"

"Speaking of pay, don't forget about the guy that runs the only mill in town," Number Four butted in, changing subjects from crime to economics. "Given what Owens pays his help and what lumber goes for these days..." He left the rest of it hanging, reached across the table and tapped Jake on the chest with a fat finger. "I'm trying to build a house and you wouldn't believe what clear Doug-fir two-by-fours are going for."

"That's because the environmentalists won't let any trees be cut down," said Number One.

"It's that stupid owl," Number Three agreed. "Good thing somebody killed that one, if you ask me."

"So who asked?" Number Two jumped back into the debate. "We've cut down all the first growth and now they charge us just as much for the crap timber they haul out." This coach spoke with the authority of someone convinced that he was correct on every subject.

"What about the storekeepers?" said Number Four.

The four P.E. coaches plainly had practiced discussing these topics. There was no rancor between what should have been disagreeable camps on opposite sides of the issues. In fact, they kept switching viewpoints the moment someone began to agree with them.

Number Three tapped the table with an unlit cigarette to emphasize his point. "They've got to be pretty well-off, considering the prices we pay in their stores. Wait until you need to buy a light bulb."

"Hey, bar keep! Another pitcher over here," Number Four shouted.

"Let me tell you a story, John," Number Two, the know-it-all, began.

"Jake."

"What's that?"

"Name's Jake."

"Oh; right." He gave Jake a curious glance. "That some sort of Biblical name?"

"Some sort," Jake agreed.

Without missing a beat, the coach went on with his story. "You see, this fellow moved to a small town with his wife and baby. They lived there the rest of their lives, died, and got buried in the town cemetery. Pillars of the community and like that, so everybody was sad when they passed on. Their kid got to

be mayor, owned the biggest business in town, lived to ninety, and when he died, on his tombstone it said, "He was almost one of us."

Jake stared stupidly at the story teller.

"That's just the way small towns are; you never belong unless your parents were born here."

The beer, the noise and second-hand smoke, the lateness of the hour, and all the talk helped deaden Jake's senses, and the lights in *The Logger* stopped being quite so bright. The music had risen in volume with the crowd until the bass, boom-boom-boom, throbbed in Jake's head.

The booth had emptied for the umpteenth time, as the occupants got up to circulate, when a solidly built man, slightly gone to seed, sat across from Jake. He was accompanied by a stocky fellow with closely cropped hair who was dressed in well-worn jeans, red suspenders, a red flannel shirt, and heavy work boots. A dirty red bandana, smudged with oil, stuck out of his front pocket. There was a line of moisture that clung tenaciously to the thin mustache over his lip. He sat, sullenly, next to the seedy man and laid a heavily beat-up yellow metal hard-hat on the table. He took a long pull from a can of beer.

"Walter Payne," the first man announced with slurred speech, offering a meaty hand across the table. "Lots of people call me 'Hawk,'" he added with a wink. Jake took the hand in his and

felt the barest hint of a grip. The skin on the hand was heavily laden with lanolin. Payne slipped his hand out from Jake's and used it to tug nervously on a crop of wiry hair. Little flakes and tufts of it floated down to the table and the floor.

Somehow, despite all the hair pulling, Walter Payne was still able to smoke one cigarette and hold another.

"Jake Benveniste," Jake replied. Even in the smokey bar Jake could smell cigarettes on the man's clothing and jacket.

The logger sitting with Walter Payne awoke from his stupor and stared at Jake. A hint of recognition flittered across his face.

A collision of scents descended onto the three men in the booth. A group of young women from all over the bar had instantly gravitated to the booth with the two new male arrivals. One woman, with dishwater hair and big hips poured into tight jeans, sat beside the sullen logger and instantly began to tickle his ear. He swatted at her hand like he would swat at a fly. "Leave it alone," he said.

"Aw, Billy," she replied. "You liked it last night."

Billy made a face. "That was last night and I was drunk." He pushed her hand away again and looked at Jake some more. "What sort of name is that? Ben what?" The smell of beer and bad breath wafted over the table to Jake.

"Benveniste," Jake politely repeated. He smiled a little at

the drunk.

"That some kind of Jew name?" An idiot grin swept over Billy's face and he nudged Walter Payne in the side.

Jake's face froze and his eyes narrowed. An old, familiar, tenseness swept through his body. His hands, which were below the table top came out onto the surface, the right one flexing open and closed. Instinctually, his feet gathered up below the bench and he flexed his knees. "Jewish? No," he said slowly, thoughtfully. "Not that I'm aware of. Of course, I probably don't get around as much as you do," he added with the finest trace of sarcasm.

The sudden frost in the air drove some of the women away. Here was trouble, sure enough. Walter Payne slapped the muscles of his friend's back and said, "Sure doesn't look Jewish to me." The joviality in his voice was phoney and everybody knew it.

"Then why does he..."

Walter Payne interrupted his friend. Without the blitheness this time, firmly, wanting to get the accuracy just right, "He doesn't look Jewish to me." Bits of hair rained down upon the table. Payne reached inside his jacket and brought out a pack of cigarettes. He pulled out one and added it to the already lit butt in his mouth.

The woman who was pestering Billy began to tug on his arm. "Let's go someplace else, Lover."

"That's a good idea, Billy. Why don't you let Roseanna buy you a drink across the street," encouraged his friend. He picked up the pace of hair pulling. Jake wondered how the guy could have any hair left with the way he pulled it from his scalp.

Roseanna cast a grateful look at Walter Payne. "Thanks, Hawk," she said.

Billy allowed himself to be pulled from the booth. He stood, unsteady on his feet. He reached for his hard hat, missed, tried again and missed again. Jake lifted it and held it out to him but he still missed grabbing it. Finally, Roseanna snatched it from Jake's grasp and shoved it on Billy's head. Another insult escaped from the drunk.

Like a cat, Jake slid out of the booth and used his left hand to grab Billy by the collar while his right hand cocked back to throw a punch. The swiftness of the movement surprised everyone, including Jake. He released Billy and sat back down before anyone else could react. Jake could feel his ears burning, his heart thumping wildly, and his stomach churning butter.

"Fuckin' fairy," was all Billy managed to sputter. He gave Roseanna and any of the remaining women close by a toothy grin. "Pussy's too afraid to fight." He gave a short, triumphal laugh. "Gonna go home and tell your mama?"

"Billy," his friend said sharply. "Knock it off." Any

trace of drunkenness in Walter Payne was sloughed off like a snake's skin.

"Faggot can fight his own battles, Hawk." Budd finally licked off the line of moisture that clung to his mustache. "What are you doing it for?"

Jake kept his seat this time but there was no mistaking the violence in his words. "That's why we have lawyers, shithead. And there's nothing you can do to me that I can't have my lawyer return to you in spades. If you lay one of your greasy fingers on me, I can make sure the court gives me everything you own from that broken-down piece of shit Ford you drive to your hard hat. You'll be so dirt poor for the rest of your life you won't be able to buy a gas can to piss in, much less run a chain saw."

Roseanna pulled harder on Billy and succeeded in getting him out of the bar before the man could think of anything else to say.

The taste of anger still heavy in his mouth, Jake watched the woman with big hips drag Billy away. Then he stood up and walked toward the men's toilet. People by the back door made way for him. In the back room he bumped into a man playing pool with a pretty woman with auburn hair. She wore comfortably cut slacks and a tailored shirt. She turned her head to catch him in the corner of her eye. She then leaned over the table trying to make some outrageous shot. He stared at her just long enough to

admire how nice the stretch of her body looked. "Excuse me," he mumbled to her partner.

On the ugly brown paneling of the restroom was the familiar literature, "Those who write on shithouse walls...", "Here I sit, brokenhearted...", "Fuck You," and, "For a blow job, call..." Jake leaned into the rancid porcelain fixture for a full minute before his bladder emptied completely. "Well, that made a good impression," he mumbled to the wall.

The pretty woman was standing beside the pool table when Jake got out of the restroom. He felt as if her eyes followed him as he walked away. As he passed the booth on his way to leave the bar, Walter Payne beckoned. "Hey: Sailor! Can I buy you a drink?"

Payne grasped Jake by the arm and pulled him back into the booth. With the same false joviality as before, Payne remarked, "You sure gave Billy a good talking to. Shut him up right away! What are you drinking?" Payne's tobacco representatives had been reduced to one. It dangled from his lower lip, stuck there like in a cartoon.

Jake was thinking he'd had enough to drink already and was wondering how he could get out of this when the woman from the poolroom stepped up to the bar and had a seat at one of the vacant stools. She wore a thick sweater tied around her waist. She immediately became engaged in conversation with her neighbor,

one of the Port Talbot High teachers. Jake didn't remember seeing auburn-haired woman at the faculty meeting that morning but that wasn't unusual considering there were forty other people in the room at the time. "Draft," Jake finally replied.

"Draft beer, not students, eh?" Payne said.

"What?" Jake asked in a daze. He'd certainly had too much to drink already but that didn't seem to faze anyone around here. Maybe he hadn't had enough?

"I'm having whiskey," Payne said, almost as a challenge.

"Beer's fine," Jake replied, refusing to bite.

A bit disappointed, Payne said, "Be right back, then." Back to being drunk, the fuzzy-haired man rolled to the well, spoke some words to the bartender, and waited for the drinks. He gave the "high sign" to several people including the woman who had caught Jake's attention. When Payne returned to the booth, Jake asked about her.

"That's Janet Webster. She teaches English. Want to meet her? We go back a long ways." The brag in Payne's comment was obvious.

"Not now," he said. "Maybe later." He stifled a yawn. To change the subject he brought up Billy. "He a friend of yours?"

"A town like this? You stay around long enough and the people you knew when you were in school are the people you know when you grow up. Or out." Payne smiled and patted his expanded

waistline. "Billy Budd and I played football together in 1970. Varsity."

"Oh?" Jake commented noncommittally. "What position?"

"Nothing fancy. Billy ran with the ball and I made sure no one got in his way."

"Did he drink as much then?"

Payne burst into hearty laughter. "He'll be barking to the porcelain God by the time Roseanna gets him to her place."

"Must be hard to cut down trees with a hangover."

Payne agreed.

"What's his problem?"

"With you? I think you reminded him of someone.

"Is he that way with everyone who looks familiar to him?"

"Only with the ones he didn't like." Payne laughed through his words. "He's my friend, right? But Billy isn't what I'd call very smart." The man's face sagged as the alcohol took over from the merriment in his voice. "He joined one of those militias a few years back. They wear camouflage and drag their scrotums through the woods, playing army. Like a bunch of kids." Apologetically, "They have to hate somebody."

"They do?"

"Sure. They don't know enough to realize how much they hate themselves. What they are. Who they've become."

"So what do you teach?" Jake asked abruptly. He didn't

really care who Billy Budd hated.

"Got me pegged as a teacher do you? Am I that obvious?"

"Only teachers from the high school have been sitting in this booth all evening. So, I assumed..."

"I'm the art and photography teacher. And I get to do the school newspaper and the Yearbook if we ever get the money again." Payne tugged at his hair a little and asked, "What's your subject."

"Biology."

"Oh!" Payne replied. Shaking his head, he continued with, "So you're the new biology teacher. The guy you're replacing, Mr. Farrel, was my biology teacher in 1969."

"What's with your hands?" Jake asked. "They're so bleached."

"Stop bath and fixer."

"Why don't you use tongs?"

"Probably should but the darkroom is small and when I'm developing prints I can never seem to find my tools." Bluntly, "Where you living? New or Old?"

"New or Old?"

"Newtown is the development down the hill, close to the state highway," Payne explained. "My buddy, Owen Owens, built it. Selling houses to the Seattle crowd they say is the only thing that kept Port Talbot from turning into a ghost town after

Cherry Creek closed down."

"Oh."

"Oldtown is up here. The original town," Payne added.

"Old, then," Jake replied.

"Not too many places for rent up here," Walter dug. There's Mrs. Spooner's place on Cliff Street or Mrs. Hardy's on First and D."

"That's the one," Jake said. "Mrs. Hardy's."

"Crazy lady."

Jake considered how to answer. Mrs. Hardy talked to herself a lot; but when Jake spoke to her, the old woman was lucid enough. "She's all right," he finally said.

They nattered on a few minutes more. Payne explained his passion for photography and his successful attempts at restoring antique cameras and recreating the techniques of pioneering nineteenth century photographers. Payne surprised Jake with his passionate account of "touching off a load of flash powder." Finally, the photography teacher's attention wandered toward two young women, girls actually, who stood at the well, talking to the bartender. The older of the two was pleading for something. Jake could tell by the girl's body posture: All her weight on one hip, stuck out like a deformity, while the opposite hand and arm made wide asynchronous circles and the head bobbed backwards and forwards, left and right. The speech was missing but only

because the music was too loud to hear it. Eventually she got two beers in long-necked bottles.

"They look a little young to be drinking, don't you think?" Jake asked.

"Sure are," Payne responded. His eyes dug into the two girls, feasting on them.

Jake looked closer at the girls and tried to divine their attraction to the photography teacher. The older one had henna hair, short and with a wave. Her features were pleasant, nothing striking, and her figure lithe. The younger girl had red hair pulled back into a pony tail. The blush on her face seen from this distance could only be freckles. She had the tall gangly and boyish figure of a teenager.

Both were dressed as if in uniform: loose chambray shirts, baggy and understated faded jeans with holes in the knees, and running shoes. The henna-girl absently rolled her tongue around the beer bottle's top. Such guileless sensuality surprised Jake. Next to the girl, a burly man with a Santa Claus beard and dressed in a plaid shirt, soiled chinos, and hiking boots, looked on in amazement.

"You know, Jake," Walter Payne said, "One time or another, I had both of those girls in my photography class." There was the same braggadocio Payne had used minutes before with Janet Webster.

Jake was confused by the man's devilish grin. "The redhead on the left doesn't look old enough to vote," he noted. Normally, any man who has taught high school longer than a year or two loses his infatuation with teenaged girls. They may look nice but the moment they open their mouths they become teenaged girls. "I suppose the one on the right does, or will be able to soon."

"Oh, they both do, you can be sure," Payne said, deliberately misinterpreting Jake's observation.

"The law looks the other way when it comes to underage drinking in this town?"

"Oh, sure. Sheriff Moody's not supposed to, of course. But no one complains as long as they don't make a scene."

"A scene?"

"Yeah. As long as they don't drink too much and pass out or throw up all over the place. Kids can't hold their liquor," Payne added. "Besides, her friend, Stacey, is twenty. That's almost old enough."

"That makes a difference," Jake commented sarcastically.

Payne continued, ignoring the bite in Jake's voice. "A lot of the girls at the high school get knocked up their senior year. The ones that don't, they get pregnant soon after."

"Sounds pretty sad."

Payne waved a dismissive hand and bottomed out his whiskey,

sucking in a mouthful of ice and giving it a serious crunch. "Most of the boys around here are like their fathers. They figure that a woman's place is under a man." He pointed past a man with a pocket protector filled with mechanical pencils to a young man on the other side of the room, sitting at a captain's table, leaning his chair up against the wall. Like Billy Budd, the fellow wore heavy, high-topped leather boots, high water pants held up by suspenders, and a long-sleeved plaid shirt. "That's Tommy Jenkins. He and Stacey were married a year ago last summer; shotgun wedding. After they baby came they divorced." Payne smacked his lips. "Happens all the time."

"Who takes care of the kid?"

"Stacey's mother, of course."

"You mean, she isn't here too?" Jake said, the sarcasm again creeping into his voice.

"Nope. Garden Club meeting or something like that, I bet. Her daddy is Don Howell. Owns Don's Drugs on the Plaza next to City Hall. They're loaded."

"And the girls come here every Friday and Saturday night to get picked up, right?" Jake finished the story.

Payne nodded his head. "Whole town has gone to shit since Cherry Creek closed down." He smacked his lips loudly again. "I've been waiting for that redhead next to Stacey ever since she was in the tenth grade."

"How old is she now?" Jake asked mechanically.

"She's a senior this year. You'll probably have her in your AP biology class. Helen Thomas is her name. Father's retired. Ex-Forest Service, I think. Helen's the smartest student in the whole damn school except for the banker's kid."

"What about her friend?"

Payne sadly shook his head back and forth. "Stacey is something else. She's trying to finish up her GED in Continuation High."

"I'm impressed. Mother of a one-year old and all that."

Payne made a face. "Her mother's idea."

"Oh."

Payne gathered his feet under his chair and lifted his body, pushing his hands, roughly, into the table. "Now, if you'll excuse me..." He lurched toward the two girls at the bar and after a few steps wheeled about on his heels, almost falling over. He caught himself just in time.

A disturbance beside the bar involving Janet Webster and her pool partner caught Jake's eye. The partner, a well-dressed fellow with a good head of hair, had Janet Webster by the wrist.

Another man, grinning foolishly, looked on. His nylon cap with an embroidered Smokey the Bear patch on the brim identified him as a forest service laborer.

The pool partner barked something at the woman, yanked her

off the barstool, and she slid ignominiously to the floor. Jake didn't approve of men treating women that way so he stood up to see what he could do about it, and that's how he met Janet Webster. He wasn't trying to get involved with her but sometimes things just worked out like that.