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**The Fortune
of the Seventh Stone**

To Helen
and to my inspirational mother

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Cover image (Drakewalls Mine, lino cut) and design by Peter Ursem.

1 A Minor Repair

‘Don’t worry, Steven. It will be fine. The doctors know what they are doing. I’ll be here when you come out again.’

His mum pulls him against her for a quick hug. He tries not to resist her, but it feels strange in the green hospital gown he’s wearing. They’ve also given him a pair of plastic slippers. The slippers make a funny sound on the linoleum floors as he follows the nurse into the operating theatre. His mum is not allowed in anymore. She looks helpless, staying behind with the attempt of an encouraging smile on her face. Then the door closes and he is on his own.

‘Climb onto that couch, love,’ says the nurse.

He does as he’s told.

‘So, it’s Steven, is it? Steven Honest?’

He nods.

‘I need to ask you a few questions to make sure we have the right patient. Your date of birth?’

‘September first, t-t-t-twothousand and one.’ She puts a tick on her clipboard, ignoring his stammer.

‘And the first line of your address?’

‘G-G-G-Greystone House.’

‘Perfect,’ she replies. ‘That is all as it should be.’ She marks another tick on the clipboard and puts it away. ‘Now, when you saw Doctor Price a few weeks ago, did he explain the procedures to you? Did he tell you what we’re going to do today?’

He thinks back to the appointment he and his mum

had with Doctor Price, when the decision was made to have the operation. Doctor Price was a tall man with white hair. He had called them into his office from the waiting room. A folder with various sheets of paper was lying open on his desk.

‘Well then,’ Doctor Price had started, looking only at his mum. ‘Steven is thirteen years old. That is correct?’ His mum nodded.

‘Thirteen is the perfect age,’ he said. ‘We have the test results back and I’m pleased to say that they are all extremely positive. All the tests show that Steven has a perfectly healthy and normal brain, functioning on all accounts exactly as it should, apart from this little defect.’

‘What defect?’ he thought, but he kept his mouth shut.

‘I must stress that a stutter such as Steven has is not unusual in young children. But if you are still stuttering going into teenage years, I’m afraid the stutter is likely to stay, unless we do something about it, of course. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?’

Doctor Price now looked in his direction, but didn’t wait for an answer. Steven didn’t care. He was quite happy for his mum to do the talking.

‘We know from research,’ the doctor continued, ‘that there is absolutely no connection between stuttering and intelligence. The brain scans confirm this.’

That was good news then.

‘We also know it’s a cause of embarrassment. Stutters often lead to teasing or bullying. Fortunately we now have the medical skills to do something about it, so there is no

good reason not to. I strongly recommend surgery. It is a simple operation, a matter of reconnecting a couple of wires so to speak.'

He was trying to picture it, his brain opened up with a few wires hanging out. Something like an old-fashioned computer with red and blue wires entangled.

'As I said, because the test results are positive and Steven is the right age, the outcomes are ninety-nine point nine percent guaranteed. My advice is to go ahead with a corrective operation.'

He remembers that on hearing the word 'corrective' he realised this appointment was more serious than he wished. Did he want to be 'corrected'?

'Are there any risks?' his mum asked. 'Any side effects that we should be aware of?'

'Of course, with all surgery there is always a certain element of the unexpected,' said the doctor, 'but the scans are conclusive. For this type of operation we access the speech centre in the brain, located directly to the left of the semantic lobes. These lobes control how we understand the meaning of words. The medical literature mentions a very tiny possibility of so called 'enhanced imagination'. It only occurs if the lobes are accidentally touched. A chance of one in one hundred thousand. As a senior surgeon I must say that I have never encountered it. And even if this were to happen, who would object to a touch of enhanced imagination?'

The doctor smirked about his joke. Steven didn't laugh. Neither did mum. But the words 'enhanced imagination' echoed backwards and forwards through his head.

'In Steven's case, taking into account his age and healthy

matter as documented by our scans, I would say there is nothing to worry about.'

Steven's mum looked at him. Then she looked again at the doctor and nodded.

'Excellent,' said Doctor Price. 'We'll get a date in the diary.' He stood up and gave them both his hand, as if to seal the deal. His hand was cold. In a strange way it felt comforting, a hand of precision. He directed them back out of his office.

'My secretary will write to you to confirm our discussion today and notify you of the date and time of the operation,' he said. 'Honestly, it will be just a minor repair.'

Had he seen the doctor smirk again when he said this?

That was three weeks ago. Now he is here in this hospital room, in a green gown and plastic slippers. He nods to the nurse. He isn't completely sure what procedures she's referring to and what's going to happen next, but it seems easier to pretend he's ok with it all.

'Perfect,' the nurse says again. 'If you're ready, I will take you through to next door, where we'll send you to sleep. Just lie down. I will open the big doors and wheel you through.'

In the room next door another nurse gives him a black balloon and tells him to blow in it. The taste of it is awful. After that things start to blur rapidly. The last thing he remembers is what seems like a chase through an endless corridor. There's a thunderous roar in his head. He's lying on his side, looking at the blurred metal bars of the hospital bed and people rushing past him with the speed of light. He wants them to stop. He wants everything to

stop. He wants to climb off and find his clothes and go home. Then everything goes black and silent.

What Doctor Price had said about the bullying was true. The week before the appointment he was walking home from his chess club. He was well on his way to becoming this year's champion. At the club nobody laughed at him when he made his move and said 'ch-ch-ch-check'. His opponents had other things to worry about at such times. 'Checkmate' always came fluently. The adrenaline of winning eliminated stuttering.

He was walking along Harewood Road when Tony and Andrew, two boys from his new school, stepped in his way.

'Look who's here!' Tony said. 'It's ste-ste-Steven.'

'What have you bu-bu-bu-been up to?' Andrew demanded to know.

He tried to ignore them, but they blocked his way and wouldn't let him through. 'None of your bu-bu-bu-bu-business,' he said. He wanted to stand firm, but of course his unavoidable stutter instantly made things worse.

'Don't be scu-scu-scared st-st-st-Steven,' said Tony, putting it on even more. 'We are ju-ju-just interested in what's going o-o-o-o-on.'

Andrew stood grinning. 'Ju-ju-just interested mu-mu-mu-mate,' he repeated.

He worked out his options. Tony and Andrew were bigger than he was. They weren't likely to just let him go. Trying to reason with them was pointless. His next stutter would only trigger more ridicule. Going back and choosing a different route home was a possibility, but his

pride didn't let him. So instead he tried to push them aside and go straight through the middle - probably the worst choice. Andrew and Tony pushed him back easily.

'No touching st-st-Steven,' said Tony. 'No-no-no-no ta-ta-touching.'

'Mustn't be st-st-st-stupid mate,' said Andrew. 'We only want to be fr-fr-friends.' Saying this they pushed him back into the prickly shrubs on the side of the road. There they left him and walked off. 'Ju-ju-just wanna be fr-fr-friends,' was the last thing he heard Tony say, and then both of them laughing loudly.

He wasn't going to cry. He had become used to being targeted ever since his stuttering had developed. Having a stutter didn't make him stupid. He was probably twice as clever than Tony and Andrew put together. They were older than the rest of their year. Tony was fourteen and Andrew was fifteen already. They just couldn't stand it that he was better at school stuff. That was why they tried to get at him. Yes, he did have a bad stutter, but was that his problem? Or was it everyone else's problem, everyone who had to be just that bit more patient to listen to him? He got up, brushed the dirt from his trousers and continued on his way home.

He doesn't know how much later it is when he becomes aware of a pink glow through his eyelids, slowly seeking its way into his skull. His eyelids give way and separate, and the glow becomes brighter. He opens his eyes fully and tries to focus. Where is he? There are white walls around him, wires and tubes and unfamiliar shapes, things with dials and displays. Sunlight is streaming into the room.

He moves his eyes and sees his mum. He turns his head towards her. Ouch, that hurts. She looks up from her magazine.

‘Hello darling, welcome back,’ she says. ‘How do you feel?’

He wants to speak, but his mouth is so dry that he can’t. She hands him a glass of juice with a straw.

‘Here, let me raise you up.’ She pushes a button to raise the head end of the bed, enough for him to have the drink without spilling it. He has a sensation of pressure in his head. He brings his hand up to feel it and discovers a thick padded plaster on his left side.

‘They have kept you asleep a while longer,’ his mum says. ‘Just to make sure everything is alright.’

He finally realises where he is.

‘What day is it?’ His mum looks at him and smiles.

‘Wednesday, sweetheart. It is Wednesday today.’

As she speaks, Doctor Price walks into the room.

‘Good afternoon,’ he says. ‘How is the young patient feeling?’

He picks up a clipboard from the foot end of the bed and glances over the notes.

‘Have you found your speech back yet?’

He looks at his mum.

‘Steven has only just woken up. He asked what day it is.’

‘Excellent,’ says Doctor Price. ‘We don’t expect Steven to be the greatest orator immediately, after having spent some days and nights in dreamland. No doubt, however, he will start sooner rather than later. There will be no stopping what this young lad has to say. From my point

of view the surgery was a hundred percent successful. As I expected, it was a tidy piece of work. Healthy brain lobes, easy to spot the loose connection and simple to make the correction. We'll keep him here for another couple of nights to make sure the glue has enough time to set.'

The surgeon looks at him. His eyes don't smile.

'I'm confident he'll be home before the weekend. Then he'll be able to talk for England.'

He drops the clipboard back into its holder and leaves the room.

On Friday afternoon Steven is allowed to go home. Back at Greystone House he inspects himself in the bathroom mirror. His head still feels different. He has a small bald patch above his left ear. His mum says there's a scar – he can't see it in the mirror – but the stitches are already out and soon enough his hair will grow over it again. Strange to think that a bit of his skull bone under that scar is glued back into place. It's even stranger that his stammer is gone. He speaks to himself in the mirror, stringing together the trickiest words he can think of: 'Librarian, indecision, apricots, opening gambit, six o'clock news bulletin.' It all comes out fluently. It's weird to hear his voice like this, word after word, as if he has become someone else. 'Welcome back to Greystone House after a minor repair in your upper quarters.' His face looks different. The muscles in his lips, cheeks and chin don't seize up anymore. Is that face in the mirror definitely his, speaking without hesitation, without the repetition of any starting letters and syllables?

Doctor Price had ordered that he should wait another

week before going back to school. He doesn't have to stay in bed but he must give his head a rest, on the outside as well as on the inside. Not easy to do! How can you stop your brain from working, from thinking, especially when you're at home while everybody else is at school? He decides to ignore the doctor's advice. Instead he spends his days studying chess games and reading books. Kasparov, his five year old cat doesn't mind.

On the morning of Steven's eighth birthday his father had come into his room and put a big cardboard box on his bed. 'You'd better open this small present soon,' he had said, 'otherwise it might go off.' He'd had no idea what could be inside and couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the little kitten peep up at him from the bottom of the box.

'What will you call it?' his father asked, when Steven carefully took the kitten into his arms. He knew the answer immediately: Kasparov, just like his great chess hero.

Two weeks later his father was dead. On a Saturday at four o'clock in the afternoon there was a knock on the door. His mum wasn't expecting anybody. His father wasn't due home until the evening. When she opened the door there were two police officers, bringing the news of the accident near London. At first she didn't believe them. His father had too much to do to suddenly die. He was always working on things in his studio, sometimes late into the night. He was always going to meetings and exhibitions, travelling to other cities and countries on his motorbike and coming back with a hundred and one

stories to tell. He was always full of ideas and inspiration. He was too alive to be dead. It just wasn't possible.

But it was. The police officers said his mum should come with them. For identification, they said. Steven had to stay with neighbours. When his mum came back four hours later life had changed forever.

His mum is nothing like his dad was. She likes reading books and works in a library. But she really adored his dad. She always says that he was a real artist. The house is full of his paintings. There is also the big old fireplace in the sitting room. His father had carved the name of the house in the stone lintel over the opening in the chimney. 'Greystone House' it reads in impressive letters. When he was born his father had also carved his name and year of birth in the big slab of slate in the hearth. So there, right before the fireplace, is his name: Steven Honest, born in the year 2001. When he had just learned to read and write he was so proud to see his name in the floor. What better evidence that you exist, that you really are someone? Now he feels embarrassed about the letters being there and he is glad that they are covered up with a hearthrug. His mum still likes to look at the carving occasionally, but she also complains that ever since his dad had done it, the floorboards in the sitting room were forever creaking.

His dad used to tease him about his stuttering, but in the best way possible. His dad just didn't deny or ignore it. Sometimes he called him 'child of the devil'. He said that in old times people believed that you could recognise a devil, because there is always something wrong with a devilish creature, like a wonky eye or horns growing out of his head. But dad said it in such a way that he was in

no doubt there was nothing at all wrong with him. His stutter was just part of him. Anyway, when they played a game of chess Steven always had his revenge. Even when he was just seven his chess playing was already way above his dad's league.

In the weeks and months after his dad had died Kasparov had helped him through. The kitten just wanted to play and explore the world, be cuddled and fall asleep in his lap.

Kasparov now has the most perfect week with him at home. He spends most of his time in his lap, purring away. When he studies a game, Kasparov watches intently as he moves the pieces on the chessboard and yawns unashamedly when occasionally he says a sentence out loud to check that his stammer hasn't suddenly come back. He is getting used to this new voice, this new identity. He exposes his recovering brain cells to a flood of new information from his books, ignoring the medical advice. His mum has taken the week off work to look after him and wants to know all the time how he is feeling and if he isn't getting too tired from all that reading and chess playing. But he's not.

'Do you think you are ready to go back to go school tomorrow?' she asks on Sunday night.

His school is in Callingfield. He has to pick up the bus at the top of Harewood Hill, opposite the village hall where the chess club meets. His mum wants to drop him off to school on his first day back but he prefers to go by himself. It's only twenty minutes to the bus stop. Andrew

and Tony will no longer be a problem. After all, they can't tease him anymore for having a stutter.

When he walks into the schoolyard he notices Isabella in a group of her friends. Isabella lives in the same village and was in his class in primary school, but they've only become friends since they found out they were in the same class in Callingfield. Last week Isabella dropped by one day after school. She asked how he was and when he answered her mouth had literally dropped open.

'You're not stuttering,' she said.

He replied in one long sentence, that – to be honest – he'd had lots of time to prepare for.

'No, I'm not stuttering, and I never will anymore, because a white haired doctor with cold hands who wasn't very friendly had a look at my massive brain and said there was nothing wrong with it except one loose connection which he fixed and he did a good job, even though he wasn't very friendly as I said before, and the operation can only be called a phenomenal success, because now I can say as many words as I like without repeating myself which makes it a lot easier for me to come to the point.'

During this statement Isabella stared at his face and mouth as if he was an alien from another planet. Then she started giggling.

'Maybe you'd better start reciting poetry, brain boy,' she said.

Isabella has of course told other classmates about the miraculous operation that cured his stutter. Others come to say hello.

'Can you say something, man?' says Joey.

‘What would you like me to say?’ He is prepared, ready to start talking about anything, but his first few words are convincing enough. It’s true: in his former life, before the operation, he wouldn’t have been able to even say those seven words without tripping over at least one of them.

‘Wow man, no stutter,’ Joey says. ‘Congratulations, man!’

Steven is ready to give further proof of his fluency, but the school bell calls them in.

Their first class is history. Miss Henderson waits until they’ve all taken their places.

‘Good morning,’ she says. ‘I hope you’ve had a lovely weekend and have enjoyed the beautiful autumn colours? And I hope you all had lots of fresh air, so that you’re ready for a new week of useful study under my kind but firm supervision. And of course today we need to say a special good morning to Steven. Welcome back, Steven.’

She looks at him.

‘Rumours are going round that the hospital surgeons have performed a little magic to your already magnificent upper part. Is that correct?’

‘Yes, Miss Henderson.’

He likes her. He likes the way she talks, almost mocking, but never for real.

‘You need to give us a bit more than ‘Yes, Miss Henderson’, Steven. We want to hear for ourselves that your vocal imperfection has been repaired. We need hard evidence.’

‘Well, Miss Henderson,’ he says. ‘I can say that I am delighted to be back at school, after my successful

operation, and very much looking forward to submitting myself again, without delay, to your excellent tuition.'

Most of his classmates are grinning, some look in astonishment, not sure if he is the same Steven as before. He can still hardly believe it himself, to hear his voice come out so easily and in front of all his classmates. Tony and Andrew are the only ones who don't bother looking up. They just look bored.

'Thank you, Steven,' says Miss Henderson. 'That's all the evidence we need. It seems they did indeed get rid of your stutter. I'm quite sure that's not all you can say now and I shall have to watch out for this new word-ability that you display. I must hasten to add that of course there is nothing wrong with having a stammer. It happens to the very best. If however, as in your case, it can be helped through a simple operation, then why not? So congratulations, Steven. At least it will save us all quite a bit of time.'

This last remark causes a lot of giggling. He doesn't mind. Nothing will hurt him anymore.

All day long he feels inspired, flying on the confidence that he can now participate in a way he couldn't have done before. Miss Henderson talks about King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table and wants to discuss whether the Knights really existed. Hard to imagine they hadn't. There were so many stories about the Knights' adventures to keep the kingdom safe. And what about the remains of Camelot at Tintagel on the north coast? Miss Henderson makes the point that legends often have historic facts entwined within them, although that doesn't necessarily

make them true.

‘On the other hand,’ she argues, ‘if stories aren’t actual histories, that doesn’t make them lies. There often is some element of truth in a legend.’

In the geography class with Mr Bakefield they look at how the different continents of the world are carried on different plates underneath. Mr Bakefield explains how these plates move around slowly, separating in some places and crashing into each other elsewhere. This has created pressures deep below the surface of the earth and causes earthquakes and volcanoes in some countries, whilst leaving rich layers of oils and minerals underground in other countries.

All through the day he has his hand up whenever he can. Perhaps Isabella is right, perhaps he is a bit of a brain box. Today he feels it’s his right to be heard, to make up for all the times before his operation when he struggled to give clear answers.

It is one of the best school days he remembers. He has always liked school. There is so much that he wants to know more about. Have countries and continents really floated all over the globe like ships on an infinite ocean? Was England once connected to France, without a sea in between? Did it have a tropical climate? The world doesn’t stand still, that much is clear. He wants to understand all he can about it. Where did it all begin and where is it all going? Without his stutter he’s even more certain that the world is waiting for him, waiting for him to become a world explorer, or a scientist perhaps, someone to make important discoveries. Whatever it is – he’s ready for it.

As he walks home he thinks about what Miss Henderson said about stories not being lies, even if they haven't actually happened. Would that make them half-truths, whatever that means? Could something be true and not true at the same time?

'Hello Steven.'

Tony and Andrew step out onto the road in front of him, just like the time before his operation. They have been waiting for him.

'What do you want?'

'What do we want?' says Tony. 'Nothing special. Just a little word with mu-mu-miracle man. We would like to see-see-see the mmmm-miracle for ourselves.'

'You can't get me with that any longer. I don't stutter anymore.'

'Well in that case, perhaps we should call you ta-ta-ta-teachers p-p-p-pet,' Andrew says.

They step up to him, forcing him backwards. His mind is racing. They clearly have no friendly intentions. How to get out of this situation now? He has to act quickly. He takes another couple of steps backwards. Then he turns around and runs. Tony tries to grab his sleeve, but he's too late. In a few seconds Steven is on the corner of Harewood Road and Church Lane, at the gate into the churchyard. He pushes the gate open and runs into the cemetery. Tony and Andrew are on his heels, but he manages to get far enough ahead to the other side of the old church and out of their sight.

'He can't escape,' he hears Tony shout. 'The only way out is through the gate. He has to come back this way if

he wants to get home.'

Tony is right. Although he has got away from them, he's more or less trapped in the churchyard. He'll never be able to climb over the high stone wall on the other side. The only way out is the gate through which he came in. He moves from behind the church to a big gravestone on his left, large enough to hide him from view. Just in time because Andrew now appears behind the church.

'He's not here anymore,' Andrew shouts back at Tony. 'He must be hiding behind one of the stones. Keep your eye on the gate. Don't let him get out.'

But Steven has a plan now. Knowing roughly where Andrew and Tony are, he moves quickly from headstone to headstone, making sure he keeps out of sight. He needs to get closer to the entrance gate, but approach it from a different direction so that they don't expect him. Andrew mustn't spot him. Hopefully Tony will get bored waiting and stray further out from the gate.

It seems to work. After five minutes, hopping from gravestone to gravestone, he hears Tony again.

'Can you see him now?'

'I've lost him,' Andrew shouts back. 'He must be here somewhere.'

What he hopes for starts to happen. Tony moves some steps in Andrew's direction, leaving a bigger distance between him and the gate. If only he would step even further away from the gate, but Tony keeps his eye on the exit and stays within running distance.

'Come back this way,' he calls to Andrew. 'We'll just wait here until he shows himself.'

Steven has no intention of waiting until the two of them

are reunited. He decides to go for it and starts running towards the gate.

‘There he is,’ he hears Andrew shout from behind. ‘Cut him off.’

He runs for his life. He is quicker than Tony and makes it back to the gate before him. But the gate doesn’t open. Tony has tied up the rope around the gate. In the two seconds it takes him to realise why the gate doesn’t move Tony is upon him, soon followed by Andrew. This time they hold him firmly.

‘So teacher’s pet decided to run,’ says Andrew, half out of breath. He is pushed hard. Tony keeps hold of his arm.

‘But teacher’s pet got caught,’ Andrew goes on, pushing him again, hard on his chest, forcing him further backwards. ‘Teacher’s pet is not so clever now, is he? Not clever enough now to escape his friends. No more miracles for teacher’s pet now, what?’

‘You’re not my friends.’

‘We’re not your friends? But we would very much like to be friends, wouldn’t we?’

Andrew pushes him again. He doesn’t want to go down and he definitely doesn’t want to hurt his head, but being forced backwards without seeing where he’s going he loses his balance. He falls sideways to the left. He tries to free himself from Tony’s grip to regain his balance, but Tony doesn’t let go of his arm. He goes down in the worst possible way, his body half twisted. Before he can do anything his head hits a massive granite gravestone, right where he had his surgery. Instantly all goes black.