

The Christmas Stone

It was cold. A strong wind was pushing across the playground and a looming gray wall of clouds rose in the west. I was in my first year of teaching first grade in a school with a decided split in prosperity, pretty much divided by railroad tracks and the hills that surrounded Newtown Elementary.

What a morning it had been. Kids came in with packages for the gift exchange and for me. It's good to be a first-grade teacher. Three bottles of wine sat on my desk surrounding a fifth of Chivas Regal. Plates and tins of cookies sat on the bookshelves closest to my desk. There was a long wool scarf in brown, tan, and orange, Christmas cards with a ten or a twenty stuck in the middle, a monogrammed silver money clip (a strange gift for a teacher I thought), a couple of books ("The Thornbirds" was one, can't remember the other.), Santa must have thought I'd been good that year.

I bundled up, pushed my collar up around my neck, pulled on my gloves and headed out for after-lunch playground duty. A group of kids huddled and shivered near the doors to try and escape the wind, but most ran rosy-cheeked around the frozen field, whooping and hollering, tired of being cooped up all morning and excited knowing that the Christmas party would begin shortly after recess.

I kept moving. No point in standing still and having your feet freeze. Checking my watch, only five minutes to go, I turned and watched the playground for a minute before beginning to walk back to the doors. I felt a small hand pat the middle of my back, I turned and there stood Michael Wayhoff, hands behind his back. Mike was one of the kids who often walked home for lunch. He looked up and said, "I've got you a present Mr. Brandt. Can I give it to you now?"

"Sure", I answered.

Mike swung into action, there in his right hand was something wrapped in tissue.

I accepted the gift and pulled the tissue back.

"It's a stone, Mr. Brandt. A special stone, I found it down by the creek this summer," he said, gesturing with his arm and pointing in the direction of the Little Miami River. "It's my favorite."

I pulled off my gloves and held the stone. Dark brown and shaped like the end of an arm or leg bone, it had been split by something or someone. The bottom side was smooth and glossy. What kind of rock was it, I asked myself, instantly regretting not paying more attention in Geology 416 back in my undergrad days.

"Thank you very much, Mike," I said. "I can see it is a very special rock." I rubbed it a few times and then stuck it in my jacket pocket. "Come on, let's join the rest of the class and head back in."

I read to them to quiet them down, then gave them some drawing paper and free time to color. Green trees and red Santa's left little doubt as to what was on their minds. The room mothers came in with more cookies, ice cream, and punch. More presents appeared on my desk. The bus announcement came over the PA and the energy and noise flowed out of the room as if someone had pulled the stopper on a bathtub. I packed my loot into my car, wished the other teachers happy holidays and drove home. Kathy, who taught in a junior high across the Ohio River, arrived a few minutes after me

and we began to compare gifts. A quick assessment showed that junior high teachers were held in nowhere near the esteem of first-grade teachers, cookies and a small box of chocolates was the extent of her gifts.

Meanwhile, my wine collection had doubled and there were enough tens and twenties for a couple of good restaurant meals over the break, maybe four if we went to Captain Billy's on Ludlow for fish sandwiches and beer. The scarf and the books went under the tree and the Chivas sat like a shrine on the kitchen countertop.

Almost an afterthought, I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out Mike's stone. "And then during recess, one of my kids hands me this." I told her the story, but my tone was one of amusement. I understood that not everyone in my class could afford a bottle of wine, much less a fifth of Chivas, "But he wanted to give me a gift of some kind, so this was it. He told me it was a special stone."

Kathy was on the verge of tears, "It is a special stone! That's the best gift you received." She held the stone in her hand, rubbing it and turning it over to feel the slick bottom. "That little boy cared enough to give you something only he could give, not something his parents bought, or his mom baked."

She was right and I was ashamed that I hadn't accepted the full value of the gift. She took the stone and walked over to the mantle where we had set up a creche, placing it next to the crib.

Forty-one Christmases later the wine is gone, the Chivas made it a little past New Year's Eve. The money clip sits unused and the scarf went to Good Will a few years after I received it. What remains is Mike's rock, still taking its place of honor next to the crib in our crèche: A very special stone, a Christmas Stone.

