

# LAPIS EXCLILLIS (PROVIDENCE UNKOWN)

By Christopher Johnstone



“Hey!”

“Ow! Damn - Paul - Cripes! That hurt. Don’t creep up like that.”

I recall the afternoon clearly. The wind was hunting clouds across the Victorian summer sky and the sunlight was baked and golden. The teenage kid who’d just whacked his head into the underside of a second-hand 1946 Ford was my older brother. Every Saturday he worked on that ute all morning. Bolting on a new mudflaps. Checking on the work he did on the muffler last week. Washing and polishing.

We lived in Ferntree Gully back then.

This was before there was a Burwood Highway, before the housing developments and shopping strips. We still got day-trippers from the city, but it was nothing like the busloads they get on weekends now. We had a house on land that would later become a highway exit. It was nice, you know. A good time to be a kid. A good place, too.

I’d just been into what we called town - a smattering

of businesses, a corner shop and a hotel in the old sense of the word, which to me still means a big, fretted wood pub. My bike was lying in the dust, one wheel spinning lazily. I loved that bike. I still have a photo of me riding it in oversized gumboots, the red of the paint captured as a sort of old photo orange-grey.

Dave crawled out from under the Ford. He was rubbing his bruised head and getting dusty grease all over his brow. “What?”

“Look what I got.”

“Nice, bruv. Another rock.” Dave began shuffling back into the gloom. “I’m going down to Amaroo Falls in a few minutes. Mic and Devo will be there. Maybe Matt too. We’re going swimming. You wanna come?” Dave was pretty cool for an older brother. Sure there were Chinese burns and sometime he’d pretend he didn’t know me. But mostly he was cool.

“Yeah. Sure. Just gimme a sec.”

The wooden steps thudded and from the kitchen Mum’s voice shouted, “Walk, don’t run!”

I probably slowed down a little. I can't really remember. What I held in my hand was a small white crystal. Bob Haworth owned and ran the Ferntree Gully Friendly Grocer. It was an age when a bit of any outlying store could cater to the owner's hobbies - the shop wasn't in competition against big chain stores back then. If Bob chose to stock some shelves with random dust-collectors, no one really cared. I remember him as a bit of a funny fellow, big and nervous, with glasses that made his eyes look like they filled up his whole face. He was the sort of person who today would be into Star Trek and Lego, but back then was just into collecting stuff, wheatbix cards and stamps mostly. But also rocks, so he kept a shelf of them along with everything else.

The label on the cardboard box in Bob's shop was 'Spodumene' and there was just the one little piece of it. Only it wasn't spodumene. I did a rubbing in the store. Spodumene streaks white. This didn't streak at all. All stones leave a mark if you streak them hard enough. This? Nothing. Nil. Zip.

Strange, huh?

I thought so. I parted with two weeks' pocket money and took home a new pocket mystery.

It was my summer of gemstones, and I was into them only the way a ten year old can be. Posters of beautiful shapeless lumps covered my walls. Jars full of multihued pebbles rested on top of Phantom comics. I used to flip through badly coloured geology fieldbooks while listening to Clancy of the Outback on the radio, eagerly listening as used his bullwhip to right the wrongs of the world. I'd constantly pester Mum and Dad about going into Melbourne City to visit the museum, and my Batman Super Secret Detective Lunchbox soon turned into storage for the most precious specimens. I'd already wrapped the mystery stone in a handkerchief and was about to put it away when I changed my mind and slipped it in my pocket to look at later.

As soon as I heard the truck start up I raced back downstairs.

Amaroo falls disappeared long ago. It was years back when they dammed off the creek and diverted the water into a 'retardation pond' just west of the Dandenongs. That was the end of little tumble of water and our lake. But back in the day it was just

beautiful. A big muddy expanse of glistening water that looked endless to a ten year old. In summer dragonflies shot over the water like living jasper. The wattles that lined the lake used to cast feathery shadows over the grey dirt and yellow grass.

I was an anaemic sort of kid. Never did well at rugby or cricket - which made me less than popular at the local primary. I tired easily. After half an hour in the water I got out. My brother and his friends were still splashing around so I sat on a sunny rock near the falls, drying off, listening to the popplebonk frogs and crickets. I didn't notice the guy walk over to me. In fact, it was only when he sat down a few feet away that I even saw him.

Awful stories about strangers weren't so common back then. We hadn't watched any news stories about bodies in the outback when I was a kid. Maybe we were still told to be careful of strangers, I'm not even sure about that anymore, but my brother wasn't far off and I could see he was watching me and the stranger. Also, the thing was, I thought I recognised the guy.

He was odd looking, but dressed to the nines in a Pommy sort of way. His moustache was way too big for his face, and he had on this pair of dark, round spectacles that hid his eyes. The black suit and bowler that he wore looked too hot. At least he'd taken off his shoes and socks and rolled his pants up to the knees. I've never seen such white, chicken legs.

Finally it clicked.

"You were at Bob's. I saw you at the counter."

"Indeed I was."

"You English?"

"No. Born and bred in Scotland. Though I boarded at a school in Kent, so perhaps I turned out a little too English, eh?"

"I s'pose."

"Quite."

"What are you doing out here? Hardly no one comes out to Amaroo Falls. I had to pause as a flock of crimson rosellas passed overhead screaming like wild, cranky children. He looked up, watching them intently. 'You birdwatching or something?'"

"Actually I came looking for you. Or more precisely for what you recently purchased from Mr Haworth. I'm rather interested in it." He turned to

me and smiled. His slightly crooked teeth reminded me of a dog's mouth. Ugly and friendly all at once.

"How'd you reckon we was here?"

"Lucky guess."

That didn't make sense to me but I already knew that some of the rock nuts were a bit strange. Bob always got some friends together on the first Wednesday of the month in the Memorial Hall and I'd been to two of the meetings. I watched the others in the water for a while. "You want to trade for the spodumene?"

"Yes. Or buy it. I'm afraid I don't have many minerals and suchlike on me at present. May I see it? I won't steal it. I can't you see – it's against the rules."

I guessed he meant against the law and wondered if the English or Scottish or whatever he wanted to call himself were a bit funny in general. I shrugged, took out the bundle, now soggy, and handed him the stone. He held it to the sun, smiling like mad.

"Wonderful. Exquisite. I was told by an associate that a piece of it was drifting around the collectors in Sydney and Melbourne. Going cheap from one to another. A little curio that no one wanted to keep hold of for long but no one could quite bear to throw away. Fascinating. Took me some time to follow the trail out here. You live a damned way out in the hinterlands, if I may say so. I had to take the train and then walk quite a ways. Ah, a black cab, a black cab, my kingdom for a black cab."

"Can I have it back?"

"Certainly." And he handed it to me. "It's quite dangerous you know. You should be careful."

"Why? Is it radioactive?" I suspect I actually might have liked that. It could have been exciting. Maybe I'd have taken it to show and tell. Or maybe I would have kept it under my pillow thinking that if I were lucky I'd get invulnerability or x-ray vision or super strength.

"Radioactive? Good God, no. Not in the usual sense. What you have is a piece of the Lapis Exillis. The Worthless Stone. It has a lot of other names, but that's the one I prefer. It's the name Wolfram von Eschenbach gave it. He was a German poet, lived around twelve hundred AD. Wrote Parzival and a good swag of other nice works. Do you read German?"

"No."

"Hmmm. Pity." He was watching the dragonflies. When he spoke he barely looked at me at all. "I'd like to buy it. How does a hundred Australian Pounds sound? I can make it small notes, so people don't think you swiped the money. Or I could visit your house so that your parents can see the mad Scottsman pay you good money for a piece of worthless rock."

A hundred pounds! I lived in a shilling and penny universe. Two-pence bubble gum and ten-pence comics – that was my life. To me a hundred pounds was the sort of money millionaires had. I almost took it. Right there and then. But I was a bit too clever. I thought, y'know, if this guy will pay me a hundred quid right off the cuff – well maybe he's not the full quid himself – but then maybe he knows something. Maybe someone else will pay more. Maybe the rock is a diamond in the rough, like in the movies, and maybe the English guy is a gangster or spy. Maybe the rock's worth five hundred pounds. Or a thousand...

Too bloody smart.

"I'll think about it."

"Please do. I must emphasize that the stone can be quite dangerous. It would be much better if you were willing to part with it now."

"I'll think about it."

"Well, feel free to call me anytime." He took a card from inside his jacket. The phone number looked strange and the address was a hotel. There was no name. "I look forward to hearing from you." He stood up, tipped his hat and left.

"Whoooooooooa. A hundred pounds." I looked at the thumbnail sized crystal sparkling in my hand. I held it to the light the whole way home... that is, until I remembered the bike. I'd left it beside the driveway and Dad would be home soon. He had been ropeable the last time I left the bike out.

I damned nearly started crying in the car. I just sat there staring at the dark and the occasional lights that drifted by, wishing so hard that I'd remembered to put my bike away. As we pulled into the driveway I could already see that the bike was gone. I checked the garage and saw it leaning against the wall. Dad's dinosaur of a Holden was already in the garage.

I slinked into the living room terrified. But I knew

I'd already come a gutser. I just swallowed my fear and walked right over to my father. Best to get it over with. He was generally vegging out and looking frazzled and happy all at once.

"I'm sorry about the bike, Dad."

Suddenly he didn't look so happy. "Why? What have you done to the bike, Paul?"

"- Nothing... but... nothing. I forgot to put it away, is all -"

His face relaxed. "But it's in the garage now. I saw it."

"Yes."

"So you remembered to put it away before I got home then?"

Mum! Dear, sweet Mum! "Um, yes."

"Then I guess you've learned your lesson. I'm glad to see you are thinking about your property. And it was very grown-up of you to apologize for leaving it out. You look after that bike. I paid a damned sight more than you can imagine for it."

"I will." I went into the kitchen. Mum was sorting out dinner. "Thanks, Mum. I thought Dad was gonna blow a fuse."

"Sorry, darl?"

"Can I have a glass of milk?" Mom nodded and I opened the fridge. "The bike. I left my bike out. Didn't you put it away?"

"No. It must've been you brother. Better go thank him." I drank the milk and began to rinse the glass. "And Paul, I won't tell your father this time, but don't let it happen again."

"I won't."

The thing is, Dave can't have put the bike away. It was still sitting beside the driveway when we left for the lake. I remember seeing it there and just not thinking about it. I went out and sat on the porch. The sun was just setting fire to the west. A straggled line of mallards whistled overhead.

I took out the little chip of white stone and wondered. I sat there wondering for quite a while. I'd read a lot of *Weird Tales* and *Amazing Stories*. It just popped into my head. The reason the Englishman wanted the rock. It wasn't a diamond. And it wasn't worthless, either.

I wished for an ice cream.

Nothing.

I wished again.

Still nothing.

Oh well. I slipped the stone in my pocket. A hundred pounds was looking pretty good again.

It wasn't until we were nearly finished dinner that Mom said, "Now, don't run off you two. Your father's got a surprise."

Dad smiled. "Mr Hurstwood just phoned. He liked the work I did on the Wool Board project. He really liked it. He's asked your Mother and me to the Camberwell Cricket Club on Sunday. To celebrate I thought we could all go out for..."

You don't really need me to finish that sentence. That's how the stone worked. Quietly. Subtly. Behind the scenes. I'd wish for the latest DC 'World's Finest Comics' Superman and I'd find it on a bus stop bench, no one else in sight. I'd wish to ace a test and it'd all happen to be questions I knew the answers to.

Boy, did I have one hell of a week.

I know. You're wondering why I didn't wish for world peace or an end to hunger or even just a big promotion for Dad. I didn't think of it. Ten year olds don't think that way. Or at least I didn't.

So I just kept on wishing for the small things.

It was the following Saturday. Dave was under his car again and I was in the back yard trying to hit a cricket ball. I was swinging the bat around my head the way you aren't supposed to swing a cricket bat. I was no good at sports. The rules never meant much to me. Envision arguments with PE teachers about the difference between throwing and bowling. I still don't get it. And what was I doing? Throw the ball up. Swing. Miss. Throw the ball up. Swing. Miss. You get the picture.

And then thwack. I hit it. At first I'm thrilled. It sails up over the house. Then I hear another thwack. You might think that the tinker of a broken window is the worst thing a boy can hear after he whacks a cricket ball. I can tell you that there is something worse. It's the sound of a small, steel-hard object striking your older brother's 1949 Ford ute.

I ran around the corner of the house. There was a horrifying silence as Dave clambered out from under the pickup and walked to the hood. He looked at the metal real close up. Then he looked at me. He looked at the car again.

"I'm gunna give you the worst hiding you ever..."

I ran.

He caught me pretty quick though. Dave was bigger and stronger and faster. He punched me until Mom heard me crying and looked out through the screen door. Dave took off before she had to say anything.

It wasn't that bad. Really, it was nothing that anyone with an older brother hasn't had to put up with once or twice. I wasn't even very bruised. But bloody hell, did I scream as the ute as it drove off. "I hate you. I hate you." Nasty stuff like that. "I hope you go away! I hope you never come back. Never! Never ever, ever come back! Go away!"

For a smart kind I was pretty stupid. Dave wasn't back for dinner. Mum was frightened. Dad was more philosophical. First he called all of Dave's friends. When no one knew where Dave was, then Dad began to worry.

I heard the knock at the door after I'd gone to bed. There were two quiet male voices. And then I heard my mother crying. She cried for hours. I think I fell asleep listening to her.

I found out what had happened the next day. The truck was spotted by a passer-by who noticed the skid marks and damaged barrier. It seemed Dave lost control going around a corner. He went right through the barrier into the thin blue air.

No one blamed me. Why would they? We'd just had a brotherly punch-up. Nothing strange about that. The cricket ball had made him angry. Maybe that meant he wasn't concentrating as much as he should have been. But no one blamed me. It was just stupid, dumb luck.

I was pulled out of school and I spent the next few days either feeling bloody guilty and staring out the window or feeling bloody guilty and crying. Dad took time off work and spent hours sitting with Mum, both of them saying nothing. Uncle Jock trained in from Adelaide to help with the funeral.

It wasn't until a couple days passed that it really sunk in for me, though. I remember lying in bed, looking at the evil little piece of stone glinting on my dresser. I was thinking about the cricket ball and then I realised that Dave'd never beat me at backyard cricket again. I was never going to see him again. He was never going to drive me down to the falls or buy me a wagon wheel. He was never

going to be there.

That was the first night I felt something other than consuming guilt. I wanted my brother back.

I woke up.

It was dark. An electric ghost-glow from the porchlight shone through the thin curtains and cast a bit of grey into the blackness. But mostly it was just bloody dark. Which meant it was difficult to see who was sitting on my bed.

"Hey, bruv. How're you going?" His voice was made of black ice. It dripped the way drowned bodies drip and voices do not.

I sat up. "Dave?"

"I don't feel so good, bruv. I feel bad. Sorta cold."

My voice was a little smaller. "Dave?"

"I saw some bad stuff. I was in a dark place on the other side of everything. I saw the way things really are. And you know what? I understand. I know about things no one else knows." I crawled backwards, pressing my spine into the headboard. "I know all the secrets – important secrets and little ones – Dad's secrets and Mum's. Dad's been going to dinner a lot with a woman from work. They're doing other stuff too. And I know your secrets, Paul."

Just then a car drove by outside. The lulling hum of the engine rose and roared. Its headlamps flared through the room. I saw Dave. What I remember most was that he didn't have any eyes. It's not like they were bloody holes or anything, it's just that there was nothing there. His eyes were empty darkness. And in his fingers glistened a small, white crystal.

It was about then that I jumped out of bed and ran.

I was downstairs in the hall before I stopped. I could hear the slow footsteps on the stairs. I thought about yelling and screaming and then I thought about calling the police, then I thought about the English guy. He knew about the stone. And although the card was upstairs, as soon as I thought about the strange Pom I remembered the address and phone number. I still do when I picture him in my head. Some days I forget my own daughter's address, but I can still see that card as clearly as if it was in front of me. Freaks me out sometimes. I don't like it, having that thing burned into the back

of my brain like that.

The footsteps were growing closer.

I fumbled with the receiver. It rang, there was a buzzing noise as if the line was bad, and then a very proper voice said, "Good evening."

"Hi."

"Excuse me?"

"It's Paul. We met at the lake. You wanted to buy the stone."

"Oh, hello there. Just one moment."

I waited. The line went silent.

And then I felt a hand on my shoulder. I must have been using every lily-white curse I knew as I turned around. A face taken up by a whiskery moustache and an ugly, friendly smile was looking down at me. "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, lad, more things..." I put the phone down. "I am a man of my word. The offer still stands. A hundred pounds, though I suspect you'd accept a lower price now."

"I didn't want this. I never wanted any of this. I didn't..."

"It knows, dear boy. It gets inside your head and it feels around in there. We are full of whims and wishes tickling away inside the skull. Oh, why can't my tea be sweeter? It's too cold today! Why is the Number 86 always late?" He let go of my shoulder. "That's why in the old stories everyone's a little afraid of wishing caps and djinni. They hate us, Paul, and so they give us what we want." His shoulders rolled with a concise shrug. "At least, that's my theory. Others would disagree. Now, if I may have the Lapis Exillis?"

"Dave has it."

"Is that so? You have rather messed things up. Oh, don't look so miserable. It's not really your fault, not completely, but you have done poorly."

The footsteps were in the hall now. I could see the black shape.

"Go to the kitchen. Get yourself a sweetie or biscuit. You mother won't know, I promise."

I never actually saw what happened. There was scuffling and then an ear-piercing scream that should have woken everyone from Phillip Island to Williamstown, only it didn't even wake my mother and father. I wondered later if the scream was in my head – something I knew, rather than heard.

A few minutes later the Englishman came in and sat down at the table. The day before I would have sworn he was as pale as a human being could be. But now he looked worse. He put the stone down on the green plastic tablecloth and asked if we had any tea. I said we did. He made himself a cup and made wet, smacking sounds with his lips while he drank it.

"I've put things right, lad. You caused a number of problems, but most of them were minor. Easily fixed. I can't bring your brother back, though. I'm sorry." He didn't say much after that. Once he finished the tea, he took out a wallet that looked like a lump of polished black butter. I watched silently as he counted out a hundred in five-pound notes.

After he left I sat in the kitchen for a couple hours just staring at the cash and quietly crying. Eventually my eyes felt too much like wet sand to keep them open. I hid the cash in a jar in my room.

It was a half a year before I went back to the jar. On Dave's birthday I took a fiver and bought him some flowers. It seemed the right thing to do. I put the change back in the jar. I did the same thing the year after. I never bought anything fancy – just something plain and happy looking. On his twenty-first birthday I bought him a little model Porsche. He'd have liked it. I bet one day he would've bought himself a real one. The Englishman's money lasted about fifteen years. After that I put a hundred of my own into the jar.

I miss Dave. Sometimes I wonder what he would have been like once he got through the turbulence of being a teenager. What would he have grown up to be? A mechanic I bet. Or maybe even an engineer. He was damned good with machines. Then I wonder about the girlfriend he never got to marry or even if he would have married at all. What would it have been like to have nieces or nephews? That sort of thing.

Dave was pretty cool for an older brother. Yes, there were the Chinese burns and sometime he did pretend he didn't know me. But mostly he was cool.

First published in *Fables and Reflections* magazine (Issue 8) 2006. Released under a Creative Commons, attribution, non-commercial, no derivatives licence. This means that you can copy and distribute this file, but please don't change the file or charge money for it. All other rights reserved. Christopher Johnstone © 2001