

Stone's Throw
A Novel

Faith Reyher Jackson

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by Faith Reyher Jackson



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Meadow Fugue And Descant, 2002, won Washington Writers Publishing House annual Prize.

Pioneer Of Tropical Landscape Architecture: William Lyman Phillips In Florida, 1997, University Press of Florida, nominated for four non fiction prize awards.

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Lyrics from unpublished "A Rainbow In The Street" recorded as, "Mary Martin Sings For Children," late 50s, Young Peoples Record Club

Latest short story, *A Window On Tomorrow*, on-line PersimmonTree.org, 2008

Other Books by Faith Reyher Jackson...

Meadow Fugue and Descant

Pioneer of Tropical Landscape Architecture:

DEDICATION

For the women of my family, past and present, who have enriched my life: Alice, Claudia, Elisa, Elisabeth, Marinn, Maureen, Nancy, Rebecca, and Susan.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction, set on a real river that runs into the Chesapeake Bay. All of the characters and *Stone's Throw*, itself, are products of my imagination. Betty Snyder Bedell was my first editor and gave me my title, for which I am very grateful; it was better than mine. Jeffrey A. Schaler, author of *Addiction Is A Choice*, was very helpful when we talked. Eli Flam, when he was Founder and Editor of *The Potomac Review*, hired me to do reviews and articles and became my mentor many times over on various manuscripts. Frances Kalorek and Kay Clark both read and caught errors and sped me on. Finally; I have been held together in hard times and better, by my friend and secretary, Roseann Hammond; I could not have come this far without her.

PART ONE

1

When the telephone rang late that April morning, her youngest daughter was on the line. Liddy, for Lydia, sulky when crossed, had a knack for reaching out to hurt someone to ease her own pain. Wait until I get through with you, whoever, and you'll be in worse shape than I am. Liddy was the flip side of her father, who had given in to his daughter's wishes beyond anything she could ever scramble to invent, yet asked for more. Until, evidently, now.

What had Buzz done to her, or failed to do, to create in their petulant youngest daughter the vindictiveness and malice to call her mother and create a terminal scene?

"He promised me," over and over; it was all Liddy could say. Finally, Abby ventured to interrupt the flow.

"Promised you what, Liddy?"

Abby waited, wondering what would topple over

while her daughter composed herself. Then, "You remember when I told you Marty and I have this idea for a freelance architectural research service?"

"Yes!" Abby jumped in, hoping they were on solid ground. "I thought the way you two outlined it for me was sound. What's happening?"

Liddy resumed her high-pitched babbling.

"I told Buzz weeks ago we were ready to go and I needed money up front. I asked him for a loan and he promised, then he said he needed security. "Okay," I said, "if you don't believe we'll pay you back, you can have my stock in Design-All."

"Right," he says.

This morning I call him, "I have the papers and am bringing them to you," I say.

"What papers, little girl? I'm busy. What's this about?"

"My business, *my business*," I say. "I'm bringing you the stock."

"'I'm really short,' he tells me, 'what's it worth today, chicky, the market's way down, you know?' I begin to lose it, he knows what his stock's worth. 'Ten K,' I say. Then he puts it to me. 'You're way off, little girl. I'll try to find you five by next weekend, I hope, if I can make it.' I hung up on him. The bastard, he promised. Marty will never forgive me." She was crying. "My father. I'll get even, just wait."

"Liddy," Abby said, "I believe in your project. I went over it thoroughly and it's sound. I'll buy your stock. For ten K. That's a promise."

God, forgive me, that stock is worth a hell of a lot more than that, and Buzz and I both know it. Why didn't he snap it up? Carelessness?

"Oh, sure, sure," Liddy howled. "You're down there in Toad Pit, probably without a dime, too, and you think you can ask your dear husband for the money and he'll give it to you, just like that? Bet me he won't tell you he's really short—?"

Her voice suddenly went cold and deadly even. "You're on sabbatical, indeed." Abby stood listening with the phone in her hand as the life she had known for twenty-six married years began to unravel.

"He's lying to you, mother dear. Where have you been while he's knocking around with his new cute arm candy? No passing fancy, she's gorgeous, she clings like a burr. He's put her in Mrs. Loewen's place as his secretary/assistant and given her your office. How do you like them apples? And guess what? They're flying to Paris on Monday."

Into the absolute silence Liddy spoke in the voice of the child who pulls up, knowing she has gone too far.

"Listen, mother, forget it, Marty and I will find something."

"You listen, Liddy. I keep my word. If you want the money for your business you bring me the papers today before the banks close. Yes, we have banks in 'Toad Pit' and it closes at 2.30 p.m. It's today, or never, so get in the car and start driving," and she hung up.

Abby came away from the telephone angrier than she had ever been. "Forget it, Marty and I . . ." not a moment's thought for what she had done to her mother.

Abby fought to control the adrenalin coursing through her in waves. First question: was Liddy telling the truth? Abby thought so. Could she have known? Had she been deliberately looking the other way, during the past year and a half as she was building her own

agenda? Certainly; be honest. But in her arrogance, it never occurred to her that another woman with Abby's same talents would slip into her space.

Her handsome husband, just fifty-two, loved bright and savvy young girls, if they were pretty. He loved new potatoes, spring onions, the bright day. He adored youth, period. He was obsessed. He had loved Abigail Lydia Wyndham, the prettiest girl in her sorority, and married her, barely twenty, the minute she graduated, over—she remembered—over her father's protest. "A four-flusher, bet he's served time. He's breaking my heart, as he'll surely do to our daughter."



Smart, sassy, and exuberant, Abby had built a successful business with him; Design-All. Her contracts for perfume boxes and fancy labels brought real money from the beginning, before she branched out into designing a logo image for two cosmetic companies, and tackled chairs, hardest of all furniture design, which brought them even more money. She was all over the lot those days, to keep herself from growing stale, dreaming up fresh ideas, designing yacht interiors, drawing fancy cars; she loved them all. Anything she was asked.

"I'll be good when I grow up," she'd say. *When I grow up*. More prophetic than she knew.

"Maid can do anything," Buzz would say.

And what was dear old Buzz doing? He was always out there, glad-handing, making friends and contacts; he was an idea man, full of good ideas, and he was a good critic, who left the dog work to others. Abby al-

ways rejected the stories that reached her about her husband, the sometimes outright cracks that Abby could run the business on her own without Buzz as front man. She never failed to defend him.

"What would I do with all my designs if they languished in a warehouse without Buzz to sell them?"

They were a team, because they were young and popular and Abby, who had not known many other men, thought she was in love, and so it had worked for all those years.

Abby produced two beautiful daughters, who teased and flirted with Papa outrageously. Had he ever treated them and their mother as young women? They were his "three girls," his "little maids." Only Abby had betrayed him: she grew older. Buzz did not want to grow old and he did not want to grow old with her. What could a forty-seven year old woman give a man enamored of younger and younger?

Remarkably, they never confronted each other directly. How clever Buzz had been in "guiding her" to work on the most salable projects. His true love, she saw now, was the dollar, and Abby had provided far more than either of them imagined. Was that cute arm candy as good a money-maker?

Only once, and it was memorable, had Abby rebelled. She started painting abstract water colors, working towards oils. It thrilled her. Buzz was not pleased.

"My goodness, maid." He followed her to the kitchen one morning. "What have you been doing? A silly little detour? A painter you are not. Back to the drawing board, love, we are all of us hungry and time's a-wasting."

She was so all-consumed in deep anger that she

picked up her heavy iron skillet and hurled it as hard and far as she could. It crashed into the wall and fell. "Haven't I made you rich enough yet? Haven't I earned the right to paint what I fucking well please for a change?" White to the lips, she left the room. Her terrified husband stood mute where she left him.

Abby did not speak to him or anyone else, save the children, for weeks.

"Of course, he won." Abby was bitter. "I wasn't grown up yet. I went back to the drawing board."

Still, it was always in her mind, a growing thought of departure when the time was right. Abby's way was slow and deliberate; she would go when she was ready without making waves. But now, suddenly from out of the blue had come the new day, Buzz, always out in front, his new day, mortifying and humiliating her. Was the old incident still in his mind and was he paying her back? There are no second acts, Abby. Take it from the frying pan.



Abby walked out on the terrace and took deep breaths of the morning air. Think, she told herself. Think, dammit, you are not Liddy, this is no time to let go. She sat down and forced herself to finish the iced tea she was drinking when the phone rang.

"This is Tuesday," she reminded herself, "there's very little time before he's off to France." She called Vivian, her older daughter.

"Viv, darling, it's me. I'm in a dreadful rush, I'm in big trouble and I need you. Liddy will probably call you

to justify her miserable behavior."

"She already has. What can I do?"

"You're joking, so quickly? Then you know all about me, a woman shelved and much too angry to be sensible. It's my fault, really, which doesn't make it easier. I'm the golden goose in this outfit, or thought so, but let it all go to have my own obsession with a house, my adultery with a new life. I should have had it out with Buzz, let him know we were coming to a closing point, instead of thinking a bit of a leave would change my mind. But I was convinced that when I was ready everything would be waiting for me, unchanged."

"Mom. Please."

"Arrogance is never becoming, Viv," Abby said. "Even," and she laughed a little, "when you really think you're the whole cheese. What's galling me now more than anything is my work, My business, my life blood. Is she that good?"

"Never," Viv said.

"Still, I don't want to do anything rash. It's imperative that I pick up the pieces and don't let my professional property go down the drain. Liddy actually gave me the idea, that if I have her shares and yours, too, to add to mine, I'll control Design All, whatever else they or I choose to do. Simply said, although there have been stock splits, Buzz and I each have 40 percent, you girls ten each. Those shares are worth a lot more than Liddy thinks, I'll have to make it up to her, and you, if you're willing."

She was speaking so quickly that Vivian could not interrupt her.

"May I buy your stocks, honey? I'm in a time bind, I'll try to pick them up in the morning, if you're willing,

and give you a check. I'll return your stock as soon as I can, if all goes well, for free. It's just that right now I very much want to have the controlling interest. It's my start, down a long road."

"The stock is yours," Vivian said. "I'll sign it over this afternoon, have it witnessed and you'll get it by FedEx. Pay me whenever. I love you, Mom. I'm as blitzed as you are, I think. Is there anything else?"

"No." Abby slowed down. "I really don't know what I'm thinking. My mind is clicking off in all directions. I don't even know yet what I want to accomplish. My old life is slipping away from me. If Liddy was telling the truth, I desperately want to have some control that matters. The only part of what I heard this morning that doesn't fit with what I know is the bit about Dora. You remember the indomitable Mrs. Loewen, who held off enemies and bill collectors from the very beginning when she answered our ad for a clerk typist?"

"Who could forget her? I always wondered how she could see with all that mascara and false eyelashes."

"You always see well when you think you look ravishing. Anyway, in a year she had our finances under control and has been pushing us along ever since. Do you believe she was kicked out of her office, sent to Coventry, so to speak, and just stood there and took it? And never contacted me? Something's very screwy. I'm going in to find out."

"Want me to call her, set you up for lunch?"

"No, I'll just go in. She's a snoop who probably knows everything by now. She'd get the wind up if you called."

"Okay. Are you all right alone, should I come? I'm a budding lawyer, remember. Dear Mom. I love you. Call

me. Promise."

"Yes."



Like it or not, Abby was directed on a new course. It had been so gradual that she never suspected, or refused to believe, the visible signs. "*I am the complete fool,*" she told herself over and over, "*it is my fault. I deserve it.*"

Buzz had praised her extravagantly. "My little maid can do anything she sets her mind to, in the business, our house, see what she has made of the old place, turned it around to be unique, we love her for it, isn't she a smart little beauty? Now it's time for a break. She's earned it. Miz Abby is going on sabbatical. We'll tell our clients, everyone," he assured her, "that you're on leave, restoring your energy, working on new designs for next fall, into a fantastic new project. You're close, if we need you, far enough not to be bothered." It was basically nauseating.

She had felt awkward at first, then allowed herself to stay down for longer periods when Buzz went back to town, because plumbers or painters were coming, she wanted to go antiquing or to auctions, she wanted to paint. Deep in her heart she remembered the frying pan. Buzz never forgot a slight or criticism; he let it rankle, got even, but Abby let that slip out of her mind until now. She went back to Washington every week for a night or two, went to dinner with Buzz and friends, and checked her mail and the action at the office, until firmly told by Buzz, backed by Dora, to stay away. Gradually, she relaxed, let weeks pass, and Buzz either did or did-

n't come to the country on the weekend.

So it went, and she was becalmed in endless non-communication. Until now, at last, she was wide awake, no longer the only girl for Papa Sloane. The stale adultery plot was moldy, even though it hurt deeply. *"Still, here's the twist, papa Buzz. I'm not your dear little 'maid' any more. Watch out. Keep your head, Abby, surprise is your best weapon. Move it."*



As she waited for Liddy to call, or not, Abby wandered out to the herb garden by the kitchen door, picked some basil and took it in for a tomato sandwich, which she made with unusual care: just a bit of salt, ground pepper, her homemade mayo, such a little housewife, put it on dark bread, sat down and tried to eat.

"Let's have a little lunch music," she said, only half smiling, popped a Mozart tape into the machine, and went back to the terrace with her tray and cell phone. *"Tell us, Abby dear, now you are talking to yourself, what have you been doing since you left off being a Washington hostess and designer in your own design firm, and sometime translator of French poetry for the Pound Press? Maybe you should start an essay on solitude versus loneliness; you're going to learn a lot about it, I hear."*

Solitude had enveloped her these past months like a new friend. She was always too occupied to have met lonely. She reveled in the warmth of privacy and choice that she had lost along the mother and wifely way.

If she were forced to leave, which was unthinkable,

who would remember the hedgerows, the big sycamore where the eagle lived, or the small houses, all taken away by the damned mall, with its attendant noises and ugly architecture, built at a terrific speed, leveling the rolling land and larding it over with concrete parking lots; not a tree or shrub in sight?

"You get used to anything," Buzz Sloane said, "We can't see them from our house and it'll only raise our value, we're not so deep in the boonies any more; a lot of people like that."

"I like the boonies, I thought that's why we're here. I refuse to believe I'll grow accustomed to such trash," Abby said.

"You'd better, dear child. Everything changes, take it or leave it."

Everything changes. The warning bell sounds.

The house had been a challenge. For all its charm at first glance, its condition was daunting. A small eighteenth century farm house in the Maryland "manor style," double-ended with great brick chimneys and large fireplaces, dormer windows on the one and a half, not two story frame, an old ploy to cut taxes. Abby's first task was to open doors and windows wide to dry away damp and mold, clean up old mouse and raccoon droppings and sweep out nut shells left in corners by resident squirrels. Next went dirty, torn linoleum on most of the floors, hiding old pine. She called in, and kept after, roofers, carpenters and plumbers, bribed and cajoled when spring planting, oystering and crabbing interfered with her schedule.

Finally, her house emerged; a large square living room looking to the water, windows on two sides with cushioned window seats, a sliding door to a screened

porch, glass-paneled in winter as a solarium, a small hall with a welcome bench and her desk with phone, a bright dining room with its fireplace, and a side door with steps down to the original brick patio. The kitchen was full of high tech equipment, green marble counter tops, white cabinets and ceramic tile floor. Outside, at the windows flanking the door to the main flagstone patio that Abby had built, were window boxes stuffed with seasonal blooms. Her dormer bedroom, in white and yellow, began to look more feminine as Buzz removed most of his belongings.

There it was, everything simple, in keeping with age and size, with warm yet muted colors, and she loved it. Stone's Throw. Her house. In keeping with her surroundings: the fallow fields stretching to the water, shades of gold and broom when the hay was cut, sketched and painted over and over—one day she'd get it right. Same for the black wet patches come November, the winter sky reaching and reaching, taking her aloft in spirit in clear and gnawing cold. Then spring with the first white drifts of wild plum and shad bush and early bulbs. Abby was a city girl, who had never lived so close to nature. Suddenly, here she was, quite alone, in a sanctuary for birds, snakes, deer and small animals fleeing the mall's bulldozers. To protect her sanity, she began to keep a journal.

In right and proper season the gulls were a noisy cloud above the tractor as the farmer who rented her fields made first cuts in the rich earth. They swooped down for juicy treats. Around the house, her lawn was black with grackles; the snow geese made a stop on the way down from Canada; the crows woke her in the morning; the whippoorwills and the hoot owl often dis-

turbed her sleep; and she considered it a lucky day when she saw a red winged blackbird fly off from the ravine, or caught a glimpse of the turquoise indigo bunting against the morning sky.

No contest; it was the whistling swans she waited for. At dusk she'd walk out and watch them with the same pleasure she had watched her daughters when they were children in the park. The swans would come in at the far end of the field, and play their hilarious game, it had to be a game, of dive bomb. Down would come a swan which sent another tumbling up into the air; it would fly off, circle and crash land, sending another and another up. Three or four could play at once: alley, alley up and around, alley alley down. She drew them in the margin of her journal, and then couldn't stop before she filled several full pages. "Whistlers In My Field," she called them.

Automatically, she began translating what she saw into workable design. The swans would look marvelous etched in glass. Weren't they once classified as royal birds? How about platters with the stately bird? A band in gold? A band in bright purple? Swan fabric for somebody's sofas? Enough. She found herself free-forming shades of green water color across a page, shot through with darts of white. Abby Sloane abstracts.

"They look as if they're having such fun, Buzz," she told her husband when he called. "Is there such a thing as a happy bird?"

"Tell me about it," he said, bored.

"Come see for yourself," she said, stung. She was not aware she was in free fall.

Buzz would call her from Boston on a Friday night, or Chicago on a Sunday night. Until this very moment

as she sat thinking it over, it never occurred to her to doubt him, that he might be calling from the apartment.

"I'll take care of all the Washington bills at the office," he told her, and it made sense, she thought. Fool, foolish Abby.



She received visits from the rector of nearby Trinity church, a jaunty handsome man in his forties who wore an Irish hat and tweeds and somehow always appeared at sherry time. She welcomed his visits, began to go to church and they became good friends. She soon discovered there were many interesting women in the community. It was clear that if she did not know how to say no she would be inundated with a rush of activities. It was pleasant, it was stimulating to join a new circle without her husband.

During the last few months, as she found herself becoming involved in a highly satisfying and independent life, suddenly, she knew why. For the first time in years, she was relaxed. She did what she pleased, she said what she thought. She thought a great deal in new ways. She enrolled in a philosophy course at the nearby college and loved it. It startled her to realize she was guiltily pleased to be more and more free from her husband's control. Not for a minute had she doubted her own control of their life; she was the money-maker, the designer, after all.



At last, the phone rang. Liddy was on the road, ten minutes from the bank. Abby put the dishes in the sink, brushed her hair, found her car keys and purse and was off. She scolded herself for being nervous.

Liddy had made the effort to look less grungy. Her white shirt was wrinkled but clean and her long brown legs emerged from a denim hip hugging skirt far up from the knees. Her taffy hair was pulled back and up with casual strands falling on her face. *She's lovely, my vixen*, Abby thought, and looked over at Marty, hands in pockets, quietly waiting for her by the door, a rugged, dependable, ambitious boy. Liddy, obviously besotted, would do well to honor him. Is he to be my first son-in-law? Liddy's impatience and nervousness calmed Abby as she greeted them.

Abby had called ahead and the transactions went off in a hurry. Oddly, her daughter was paying scant attention. Her eyes were fixed on a point somewhere south of Marty's chest and she had to be prodded gently to answer questions. Her man stared at her coolly and she straightened up for a few moments before lapsing back into her reverie. However, she did come out of it to sign the paper, reach for the certified check and put it snugly into her purse.

When they came out into the hot sun Abby offered to take them across the street to Carr's Perch for a drink, or early dinner; whatever they wished. "God, the names around here," Liddy said, her bad temper restored. "We have to get back, see some people."

Marty stepped in. "Very grateful thanks to you, for this all important first leg up. We can get started now. Really, really appreciated, Mrs. Sloane."

Liddy was fanning her face with one hand and lift-

~ Faith Reyher Jackson

ing the hair off the back of her neck, hoping for a breeze. She had always hated the heat.

"Don't start learning to say Mrs. Sloane," she said. "It may not be a permanent position."

Abby could not help it. The tension of the day, the pain she had suppressed since morning boiled over. With all the strength she could muster she slapped her daughter hard across the face. "I should have done that years ago," she said and went to her car.

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