

The Samaritan Stone

Derek Hanson was rich, handsome, in his mid-30s, and totally lost. A self-made millionaire, he started an online investment company that struggled for five years and then skyrocketed. It quickly caught the attention of several international financial institutions, one of which made him an offer that was too tempting to resist. The buyout didn't push him into superstar status, but he wouldn't need to work again for the rest of his life. And if reincarnation turned out to be a real thing, he wouldn't have to work for several more lives, either.

He began his early retirement by indulging in the pleasures he'd dreamed of as a kid. Skiing trips to Switzerland, SCUBA diving on tropical reefs, sailing in the Caribbean, motorcycle racing, sailplaning – every exotic activity that caught his fancy. When that paled, he tried his hand at starting another company. He no longer had the “hunger” to start from scratch and claw his way to the top, and when he invested in promising start-ups, he felt like he was stealing someone else's dream. They needed his capital, but they resented his attempts to steer them in directions he thought they should go. Things went better if he let them follow their vision. Some of these investments turned out to be profitable, but being a silent partner wasn't very fulfilling.

One midnight he found himself standing on a dock near his yacht, leaning against the railing and staring into the black water. He found himself thinking about the kids he'd gone to school with. None of them had done as well financially as he had, but most of them were married, had kids, and were pursuing careers that would keep them occupied for the rest of their lives. He suspected they were happier than he was. In his drive to succeed he had somehow bypassed the normal social interactions that lead to friends and families. Now it seemed like the only people he met were wealthy snobs or shallow gold diggers. He felt like life had passed him by.

An old man in a dark pea coat and a stocking cap walked slowly down the dock. He turned and stepped to the railing a few feet for Derek. For a while he just stared at the water. Then he spoke.

“You look like a young man who has no purpose in life.”

“What makes you an expert on my life?” Derek responded. He was irritated that the old man had disturbed his solitude and offended by what sounded like criticism. The fact that the old man was right just made things worse.

“My life,” the old man said. “I sailed on everything from submarines to cruise ships. First Mate on a few of 'em. Ships are grand, but what makes them sail are people. You can't be a successful sailor, least not anything more'n a simple seaman, if you don't know how to read people. I took one look at you, your clothes, your bearing, and your expression, an' I says there's a man who's found an empty success.”

“I'm doing OK,” Derek said defensively. It really bothered him that this man seemed to know so much about him.

“Suit yourself,” the man said. “I was thinkin’ about offering you somethin’ that would put a little purpose in your life, but if you don’t want it that’s your business.”

Derek turned and looked directly at the old man. He leaned against the railing, the picture of indifference. “What could you possibly have to offer me?” he asked.

The old man pulled something out of his pocket and dropped it into Derek’s hand. It was a black and white speckled stone, a little bigger around than a half dollar. It was well polished, like it had been in a riverbed for ages. Derek examined it curiously. “It’s heavy,” he said. “What is it?”

“It’s called a Samaritan stone,” the old man said. “As far as I know, it’s the only one in the world so don’t throw it in the water. It would just wind up back in my pocket anyway. It’s heavy now, but it will get lighter as you use it.”

Derek gave a start when the old man told him not to throw it. He wasn’t seriously considering throwing it, but when he first felt it, it struck him that it would be a good throwing rock. That thought was immediately followed by the realization that it probably wasn’t a good idea to throw away something a lunatic had just handed you. “What would I do with a Samaritan stone?” he asked.

“It does good things for other people,” the man said. “It’s not like a magic wand, or a genie in a bottle. There’s no big ‘poof’ and everything changes. But over time, good things will happen. If you hold it in your hand and wish that a poor man had money, his luck will change. He’ll inherit from a relative, or win the lottery or something. You can wish sick people well and they’ll get better. If a guy’s lost his leg he won’t grow a new one, but if he’s got nerve damage and can’t use his leg that stone will heal the nerves, a little bit at a time, so he can use it. Little miracles like that. It won’t end world hunger, stop a war, or change the tides, but it can help individuals one at a time. It don’t do nothin’ if you wish good things for yourself, though. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Derek turned the rock over in his hand and examined it carefully. He knew the man was dead serious, but as crazy as it sounded, he was tempted to believe him. Something about the way he said it didn’t work on himself had the ring of truth to it. “Where’d you get it?” he asked.

“Istanbul,” the man said. “A Russian sailor gave it to me. Russians don’t usually give nothin’ away for free, but he said it had stopped working for him and he wanted somebody to do some good with it. That’s the same reason I’m offering it to you. You see, every time you use it, it loses a little of its power. It feels lighter, too. Eventually, it loses all its power and no longer works. But if you give it to someone else, it gets its power back. That’s why it felt heavy to you. It feels light to me. I can’t do anything with it anymore, but you struck me as a feller who could use it to do some good in the world.”

Derek continued to stare at the rock. The story sounded too bizarre to be true, but on the other hand, what harm could there be in trying it. “How do you make it work?” he asked.

“There are no magic words or anything, if that’s what you mean. Just hold it in your hand, you might want to wrap your fingers around it, and make a wish. You’ll know when it works. It’ll

communicate with you. I can't think of any other way to describe it. Somehow, you'll know that it worked."

Derek closed his hand around the stone, held it at arm's length toward the old man, and said "I wish you had more money." He immediately felt a strange sensation in his hand. It was almost as if the stone had vibrated and buzzed, except it hadn't moved and it hadn't made a sound. But *somehow* he knew that the stone had reacted to his wish.

"You're right!" he said. "I felt something."

"I was going to warn you that if you accepted the stone, you wouldn't be able to give it up until you used all its power," the old man said. "But now that you've used it, it's yours. You won't want to give it up anyway. You'll feel like it's your most valuable possession, but if you do try to give it to someone else or throw it away, it will wind up back in your pocket."

"Oh, I don't want to give this up," Derek said. "How much do you want for it?"

"I'm not selling it," the old man said. "I already gave it to you. It's yours now."

"I owe you something for your troubles," Derek said as he looked in his wallet. He held out a wad of cash. "Here's a thousand dollars. It's all I have with me at the moment. Is that enough?"

A slight smile spread across the old man's face. "I gave it to you," he said. "I didn't sell it. But if you want to give me something for my troubles, I don't see how I can say no. 'Specially since you wished I had more money." He took the money, gave a slight salute, and walked back to shore. Derek stood on the dock with the perplexing realization that something had compelled him to make his own wish for the man come true.

It was late and Derek didn't feel like driving to his apartment, so he walked back to his yacht to spend the night on board. He fixed himself a drink and settled into his favorite recliner while he pondered what had happened. The old man had never asked him to buy the stone. He never suggested Derek test it by wishing the old man would come into money. Yet Derek felt that he'd been scammed somehow. He didn't know how it was done, but that was the mark of a good scam. He thought he felt a communication with the stone, but that could have been faked. Maybe there was a tiny vibrator in it that was controlled by a remote switch in the old man's pocket. Maybe it was just the power of suggestion – he thought he felt something because he was looking for it. It should be easy enough to test. All he needed to do was to try using the stone again. Without the old man standing beside him.

He tried to think of a good way to test the stone. He had lots of acquaintances, but not many friends. Hell, maybe they were just acquaintances too. In any event, none of them needed anything. Or at least, nothing that Derek was aware of. They never really talked about needs or wants. His conversations always seemed to be about things – restaurants, cars, boats, jewelry. . . When they did talk about people it was mostly gossip. Who did he know that needed help?

Uncle Bill! Whenever he saw Uncle Bill and Aunt Marsha, Bill complained about his lumbago. Derek took the stone out of his pocket, clenched his fingers around it, and said “I wish that Uncle Bill’s lumbago would go away.”

Again, he seemed to sense rather than hear or feel a vibration from the stone. That could just be because he was trying to sense something, though. The only way to know for certain was to call Uncle Bill. He looked at the clock. It was past midnight. Damn. He’d have to wait until tomorrow. If he called in the middle of the night they’d want to know why he was calling, and he sure as hell didn’t want to tell them he was testing a magic stone he’d just bought. That would be like telling them he just traded the family cow for some magic beans. He finished his drink and went to bed.

He had trouble sleeping that night. He kept thinking about the old man and the Samaritan Stone. The next morning he fixed himself breakfast in the galley, drank coffee, and forced himself to wait until 9:00 AM before he called. Aunt Marsha answered the phone.

“Hi Aunt Marsha. This is Derek.”

“Well my goodness! This is a nice surprise. How are you?”

“I’m doing great, Aunt Marsha. How are you guys?”

“Well, I’m fine, but Bill’s lumbago is acting up again. I was letting him sleep in because he was up half the night because of the pain. He finally took a couple aspirin and fell asleep in his recliner, with a hot pad on his back. I can wake him up if you want to speak with him.”

“Oh, no. Don’t wake him up. He needs his sleep. I was just calling to say hello and to see how you two were getting along. I was hoping Uncle Bill’s lumbago was better, but I guess it isn’t.”

“The doctors say he needs surgery, but you know Bill. He says he’s not going to let any sawbones mess around with his back. He thinks they’ll just make things worse.”

There was a long awkward silence while Derek tried to think of something to say. He finally settled for “Well, I’ll let you get back to your day now. I was just calling to see how you were. Tell Uncle Bill I’m sorry his back’s still bothering him. Let me know if it gets better.”

“I will, dear. Thanks again for calling.” She sounded puzzled, like she was trying to figure out what the call was about.

“Shoot!” Derek thought as he hung up the phone. “I knew the whole thing was a scam!”

He stormed out on the deck to throw the stone into the sea. He paused to look at the stone when he took it out of his pocket. “It *is* kind of pretty,” he thought. “It must be good for something. If nothing else, it’s a reminder not to throw my money away on useless junk. Look how it sparkles. I wonder if it’s valuable. . .”

Then he remembered how the old man said it would feel like his most valuable possession.

“That’s for you, old man!” he said out loud as he hurled the stone into the sea. “You’re not going to scam me any more!” He closed up the boat, walked back to the shore, and drove to his apartment.

Two days later his Aunt Martha called.

“Derek? You asked me to let you know if Bill started feeling any better. Well, he’s feeling much better now.”

“Really? I’m glad to hear it.”

“He woke up a couple hours after you called the other day, and said he was feeling better. He had a doctor’s appointment yesterday, and he was feeling even better when he went to that. The doctor had him walk back and forth, bend over like he was picking something up, and do a few other things. The doctor said it was amazing how quickly it had cleared up.”

“That’s really good news,” Derek said. “And how are you feeling?” The last question was an afterthought, but he didn’t want to offend her by only talking about Bill.

“Oh, I’m still doing fine, thank you. I just told you I’d call if Bill started feeling better so I wanted to give you a call.”

They exchanged a few pleasantries and hung up.

“Damn!” he thought. “The old man told me it took time to work. I should have paid more attention.” His SCUBA gear was on the boat. It might take him days to find the stone, but he was going to search every inch of the sea bottom around his boat until he found it. He grabbed his wallet and reached into his pocket to make certain he had the car keys. The keys weren’t in his pocket, but the Samaritan Stone was.

“Damn! The old man was right about that, too.”

Now that he had the stone and he knew it worked, he sat down to think about what he should do with it. When he talked to the old man on the dock it never occurred to him what a truly awesome, intimidating gift the stone was. He had the power to pull someone out of poverty, make the lame walk, or heal a shattered soul. But every time he used it, it lost a little of its power. He needed to use the stone wisely. He already regretted having frivolously used the stone to give the old man a few bucks and to cure his uncle’s lumbago. Not that those actions weren’t good, but there were other ways to cure those problems. He felt a crushing responsibility to only use the stone to help people who had no other options. But how would he find those people?

One thing he knew for certain. He couldn't let anyone else know about the stone. If word got out, he would be overwhelmed by thousands of people who desperately needed his help, and by millions of people who wanted him to make them rich. They wouldn't believe him when the stone stopped working, and when he passed the stone to someone else they would be cursed by the mob as well.

After giving the matter a lot of thought, he decided to set up a foundation. His accountant had been pestering him to do something like that for tax purposes, but now he saw it as a way to really do some good in the world. A foundation for sick children, or something like that. He'd have to do a little research to see what the needs were, but he could set up a foundation to pay for expensive treatments, fly children from impoverished countries to modern hospitals for surgery, maybe do medical research to find cures for incurable diseases. He wasn't rich enough to fund the entire thing himself, but he could get the ball rolling and use his contacts to get others to donate. He would set up a team of experts to review applications, and he would sit on that team. If an applicant needed surgery, expensive medications, or other available treatment, they would pay for it. If the case was hopeless, he could secretly use the stone to cure the patient.

It took several months and a ton of lawyers to set up the foundation, but the Hanson Pediatric Foundation was finally able to accept applications. Within a month Derek found his first candidate. A bright, cheerful nine-year old who tripped while playing dodge ball and hit her head on the gym floor. She complained of nothing more than a mild headache at the time, but that night she started convulsing. Her parents rushed her to the hospital, where she went into a coma. She failed to respond to traditional treatments, and Derek's staff assured him there was nothing they could do for her that the local doctors hadn't already tried. Insurance was covering the medical bills so the family didn't need financial help. They just needed a medical miracle.

As soon as Derek found some privacy he took the stone out of his pocket and wished for the miracle she needed. It seemed to him that the stone "vibrated" longer than usual, and when it stopped it felt much lighter. He sensed that it had a little power left, but not much. He hadn't noticed any difference in the stone's weight when he wished the old man would come into money or when he cured his uncle's lumbago, so apparently major miracles took a lot more power out of it than small tasks. There might not be enough power left to perform another miracle cure. So much for his idea of using the foundation to find people who needed the stone's help.

He was surprised that he didn't feel particularly bad about the stone's waning power. Maybe it was because his foundation was helping many more people than he could have possibly helped with the stone. No miracle cures, but they had already helped a couple dozen families obtain the medical and financial resources they needed to pursue a conventional cure. Derek had worked very hard at finding additional donations, and the foundation no longer depended solely on his support. For the first time since he sold his business he felt like he had a purpose in life. Then he had been focused on financial success for himself and the employees who worked for him. Now he felt like he was having a bigger impact on the world.

All that changed when Derek got his diagnosis. Over that past few years he had occasionally experienced mild gastric distress, and lately he seemed to tire easily. It was the itchy skin that made him

go to the doctor, though. Fortunately, he had a doctor who didn't dismiss minor symptoms as "these things happen." After a battery of imaging, blood tests, and an exploratory "periscope" exam, his doctor told him he had pancreatic cancer. They had caught it fairly early, but it was still questionable as to whether surgery would help. Derek elected for the surgery. They removed the tumor but found evidence that it had metastasized. The doctor recommended chemotherapy to try to kill the cancer cells that had spread. He had hope because they were starting early, but he told Derek the truth. The odds were against him.

Derek's whole perspective on life changed. His yacht, the condos in exotic locations, his racing motorcycles, his Ferrari – all seemed meaningless. He sold those and donated the proceeds to his foundation. The foundation was still important to him, but he no longer had the energy to devote much time to it. It dawned on him that the foundation was the only thing in the world that would be affected by his death, and that would only be a passing effect. He had secured enough other sponsors that the foundation would go on. His parents were dead. He had no brothers or sisters. He had never married. Uncle Bill and Aunt Martha might think of him occasionally, but he had never really been close to them. He was facing death alone.

He had chemotherapy twice a week. It was an experimental drug, given frequently at low doses in an attempt to kill the cancer cells while minimizing the side effects. Minimized or not, he still felt lousy. He realized he was being poisoned, but with a poison that affected cancer cells more than it affected healthy cells. The goal was to kill the cancer cells before they and the chemicals killed him. The treatments required him to sit quietly in a comfortable recliner while receiving an IV drip of the chemicals. There were two chairs in every treatment room, as some patients liked to talk during the treatment. It helped take their mind off their cancer. The nurses soon realized that Derek wasn't very talkative, so they gave him a room to himself whenever possible.

One afternoon a nurse wheeled a young boy into the room while Derek was getting his treatment. Derek thought he looked about ten years old, but it was hard to tell. He was bald, and his arms and legs were painfully thin. He was alert and talkative, though, keeping up a running conversation with the nurse and with his mother, who helped the nurse lift the boy into the recliner. The mother caught Derek's attention, too. She looked to be in her early thirties and was quite pretty, but more than that she had a cheerful, effervescent attitude that seemed to light up the room. The room seemed a bit dreary when she left with the nurse.

Derek and the boy sat in silence after the others departed. The nurse had told Derek the boy's name, but he was terrible with names and he didn't remember it. He decided to just ignore whatever the nurse had said and ask the kid his name.

"So, what's your name, kid?"

"Link" the boy answered.

"That's an interesting name. I don't believe I've ever met anyone named Link before."

“Actually it’s Lincoln,” the boy said. “I was named after my father so my mom says I’m Lincoln Spencer the Second, but I think that’s a sissy name. Who ever heard of a baseball player named Lincoln Spencer the Second? I just go by Link.”

“Does your father go by Link also?”

“I don’t know,” the boy said. “He died a long time ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Derek apologized.

The boy just shrugged. “I don’t remember him. I was too little.”

There was an awkward silence. Derek decided to try a different topic.

“So, do you like baseball?” he asked.

“Yeah!” the boy said enthusiastically. “It’s great. Do you like it?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about it,” Derek answered. “I was never very athletic as a kid, and when I grew up I was too busy running a business to watch sports. Or much of anything, for that matter.”

“I was a pitcher in Little League before I got sick,” the boy said. “I had a pretty good fastball and I was working on a curve. Do you know who Jacob deGrom is?”

“I think I’ve heard of him, but I don’t know much about him,” Derek admitted.

“I wanna pitch like him,” the boy said. Then, after a short pause, he said “The Mets are playing a day game now. Ya wanna watch it?”

“Sure!” Derek answered. One of the few things he knew about baseball was that it was boring to watch, but he could tell it meant a lot to the kid. He picked up the remote beside him, switched on the TV, and found the game.

It only took a few questions for Link to discover how little Derek knew about baseball. Then he started filling Derek in on the individual players, what their strengths and weaknesses were, and why the batting order was arranged the way it was. He talked about the strategy of the game, and pointed out how the players backed each other up in the field. Derek was amazed at how much the kid knew, and he also discovered the game was a lot more interesting to watch when he understood what was going on.

Link’s mom showed up with the nurse shortly after the game ended.

“Hi Mom!” Link said. “Derek’s been watching the game with me. The Mets won! Four to three.”

Link's mother walked over to Derek. "Hello, I'm Ella. I hope my son hasn't been talking your ear off."

"I'm Derek Hanson. I've thoroughly enjoyed talking to your son. He's an amazing young man."

They chatted for a minute, and then Ella excused herself to help the nurse lift Link into his wheelchair. He waved and said "See ya next time!" as they wheeled him out of the room. The room seemed empty after they left. Derek realized it was the first time since his diagnosis that he'd gone several hours without thinking about his cancer.

The nurses noticed that Derek and Link enjoyed each other's company, and they arranged the schedule so they shared a therapy room whenever possible. Link only had therapy once a week, and Derek found his therapy boring on the days Link wasn't there. He read books and magazines about baseball, trying to make certain he could carry on a decent conversation on the days when no games were televised. They didn't always talk about baseball, though. Some days Derek told Link about the adventures he had. Flying, skydiving, racing motorcycles – Link seemed particularly interested in SCUBA diving. And his mother Ella took time to chat with Derek every time she dropped Link off or picked him up again. Derek found himself looking forward to the days when he had therapy with Link.

One day, to Derek's horror, Link seemed listless when they wheeled him into the therapy room. Ella put on a good show of being upbeat, but he could tell that she was worried. Link didn't talk much that day. They watched a game, but neither one of them could focus on it. After Link left Derek asked the nurse about him.

"We're not supposed to talk about other patients," she said, "but I know you two are very close. Link has brain cancer. It killed his father when Link was little, and now he's got it. It seemed to be under control for a while, but it's growing again. The doctors are still hopeful, but it doesn't look good."

The news hit Derek like a thunderbolt. He had assumed Link was getting better. The kid seemed so happy. So alive. So much to live for.

When Derek got home after his therapy, he wrapped both hands around the Samaritan Stone and prayed that Link would get well. The stone buzzed weakly in his hands and then died. Its power was gone. Derek hoped it had been enough. But the following week, when they wheeled Link in for his treatment he looked as bad as he had the previous week. Maybe even a little worse.

"Mrs. Spencer?"

"Yes?" Her voice didn't sound as cheerful as usual, but he realized she didn't have much to be cheerful about.

"This is Derek Hanson. Your son and I have chemotherapy together."

“Oh, yes. I’m sorry. I didn’t recognize your voice.”

“This is going to sound really weird, but I need to talk to you about your son. Someplace where the nurses, your son, and other people won’t overhear us. It can be a public place if you want, like a diner or something. I just need to talk to you without being overheard.”

“Lincoln is very tired and is resting. I can’t leave the house. Could you come over here?”

“Well, yes. That would be perfect if you don’t mind. I just thought you might be nervous about having a stranger come to your house.”

Derek thought he could hear a smile in her voice when she replied.

“That’s OK,” she said. “I think I can trust you. Your foundation is paying for Lincoln’s treatment.”

She gave him the address. As he was driving there he realized he hadn’t been paying much attention to his foundation lately or he would have known it was paying for Link’s treatment. It also occurred to him that he had never mentioned his foundation to Ella. She must have checked him out. He didn’t blame her. He would have done the same thing if he had a son and some stranger was becoming his friend.

When he got to her house they sat down at the kitchen table, where Link couldn’t hear them. She poured him a cup of coffee, and he told her all about the Samaritan Stone.

“I tried to use it to heal Link,” he said as he finished describing his experience with it, “but it didn’t have enough power left. Every time I used it, it lost some of its power. It has no power left for me, but if I give it to someone else it will recharge. I’d like to give it to you so you can heal Link, if you’ll take it.”

“I’d take a handful of molten lava if I thought it would heal Lincoln,” she said.

He took the stone out of his pocket and handed it to her.

“It feels heavy,” she said.

“It will feel lighter as you use it,” Derek said. “Just don’t make the mistake I made and waste some of its power testing it on trivial tasks. My guess is that it only has enough power for one major healing.”

“How do I use it?” Ella asked.

“Just wrap your fingers around it and wish for something good to happen to someone else,” Derek explained. “I held it out at arm’s length, but I don’t think that’s really necessary.”

“Can I do it now, while you’re here to tell me if I’m doing anything wrong?”

“Go ahead,” Derek said.

Ella gripped the stone tightly, held it at arm’s length, closed her eyes, and said “I wish that my son Lincoln’s cancer would go away.”

Her eyes opened in surprise. “I felt it vibrate!” she said. “At least, I think I did.”

“I know,” Derek replied. “It’s hard to describe. It’s like you know that it buzzed and vibrated, but you didn’t actually hear it or feel it. That means it worked. Now you just need to wait. It doesn’t take effect right away, and the improvement may be gradual, but he will get better.”

The next week Link seemed more like his usual self when he came in for therapy. They watched a game together, and talked about the post-season prospects. The following week Link walked into the room instead of riding in a wheelchair. Ella walked over to Derek’s recliner, gave him a big hug, and said “Thank you.” It was hard to tell who was the most surprised. The nurse, Link, or Derek.

The following week Link didn’t come at all. The nurse told Derek the doctors had run multiple tests, and the tumor which had entwined itself around his brain was completely gone. They were calling it a medical miracle. Derek smiled weakly at the news. He was overjoyed to hear that Link was healed, but his own cancer was getting worse. The pain had started shortly after he gave Ella the Samaritan Stone, but with the help of pain killers he was able to keep that hidden. Now he also had nausea, vomiting, and his skin was turning yellow. His doctor asked him if he wanted to skip the chemo and go into hospice, but he wanted to give the chemicals a little more time to work.

“It’s me or the tumor,” he said. “As long as I’m taking the chemicals, we’re just waiting to see who dies first. If I stop the treatment, there’s no contest. The tumor will win.”

In two weeks it was clear the tumor was going to win anyway. Derek had trouble falling asleep, and he lay awake thinking about it. He decided to tell the doctor he was ready to stop the treatment. With that question resolved, he finally fell asleep.

The next morning he felt a little better. He decided to wait one more day before going into hospice. The following day he felt even better. In two weeks he asked the doctor if there was any reason to continue taking chemotherapy.

“It’s absolutely amazing,” his doctor said. “I’ve read about recoveries like this, but this is the first time it’s happened to one of my patients. You were right not to stop the treatments earlier. Sometimes if you push the patient to death’s door, the tumor dies first.”

The doctor was amazed. The nurses were amazed. Derek was amazed. The only person who wasn’t amazed was Ella.

They were married the following spring.