

Ursula K. Le Guin

HAND, CUP, SHELL

The last house on Searoad stood in the field behind the dunes. Its windows looked north to Briton Head, south to Wreck Rock, east to the marshes, and, from the second story, across the dunes and the breakers, west to China. The house was empty more than it was full, but it was never silent.

The family arrived and dispersed. Having come to be together over the weekend, they fled one another without hesitation, one to the garden, one to the kitchen, one to the bookshelf, two north up the beach, one south to the rocks.

Thriving on salt and sand and storms, the rose bushes behind the house climbed all over the paling fence and shot up long autumn sprays, dishevelled and magnificent. Roses may do best if you don't do anything for them at all except keep the swordfern and ivy from strangling them; bronze Peace grows wild as well as any wild rose. But the ivy, now. Loathsome stuff. Poisonous berries. Crawling out from hiding everywhere, stuffed full of horrors, spiders, centipedes, millipedes, billipedes, snakes, rats, broken glass, rusty knives, dog turds, dolls' eyes. I must cut the ivy

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right back to the fence, Rita thought, pulling up a long stem that led her back into the leafy mass to a parent vine as thick as a garden hose. I must come here oftener, and keep the ivy off the spruce trees. Look at that, it'll have the tree dead in another year. She tugged. The cable of ivy gave no more than a steel hawser would. She went back up the porch steps, calling, "Are there any pruning shears, do you think?"

"Hanging on the wall there, aren't they?" Mag called back from the kitchen. "Anyway they ought to be." There ought to be flour in the canister, too, but it was empty. Either she had used it up in August and forgotten, or Phil and the boys had made pancakes when they were over last month. So where was the list pad to write *flour* on for when she walked up to Hambleton's? No-where to be found. She would have to buy a little pad to write *pad* on. She found a ballpoint pen in the things drawer. It was green and translucent, imprinted with the words HANK'S COAST HARDWARE AND AUTO SUPPLIES. She wrote *flour, bans, oj., cereal, yog, list pad*, on a paper towel, wiping blobs of excess green ink off the penpoint with a corner of the towel. Everything is circular, or anyhow spiral. It was no time at all, certainly not twelve months, since last October in this kitchen, and she was absolutely standing in her tracks. It wasn't *déjà vu* but *déjà vécu*, and all the Octobers before it, and still all the same this was now, and therefore different feet were standing in her tracks. A half size larger than last year, for one thing. Would they go on breaking down and spreading out forever, until she ended up wearing men's size 12 logging boots? Mother's feet hadn't done that. She'd always worn 7N, still wore 7N, always would wear 7N, but then she always wore the same kind of shoes, too, trim inch-heel pumps or penny loafers, never experimenting with Germanic clogs, Japanese athletics, or the latest toe-killer fad. It came of having had to dress a certain way of course as the Dean's wife, but also of being Daddy's girl, smalltown princess, not experimenting just knowing. "I'm going on down to Hambleton's, do you want anything?" Mag called

out the kitchen door through the back-porch screen to her mother fighting ivy in the garden.

"I don't think so. Are you going to walk?"

"Yes."

They were right: it took a certain effort to say *yes* just flatly, to refrain from qualifying it, softening it, *Yes I think so*, *Yes I guess so*, *Yes I thought I would* . . . Unqualified *yes* had a gruff sound to it, full of testosterone. If Rita had said *no* instead of *I don't think so*, it would have sounded rude or distressed, and she probably would have responded in some way to find out what was wrong, why her mother wasn't speaking in the mother tongue. "Going to Hambleton's," she said to Phil, who was kneeling at the bookcase in the dark little hall, and went out. She went down the four wooden steps of the front porch and through the front gate, latched the gate behind her, and turned right on Searoad to walk into town. These familiar movements gave her great pleasure. She walked on the dune side of the road, and between dunes saw the ocean, the breakers that took all speech away. She walked in silence, seeing glimpses between dune grass of the beach where her children had gone.

Gret had gone as far as the beach went. It ended in a tumble of rusty brown basalt under Wreck Point, but she knew the ways up through the rocks to the slopes and ledges of the Point, places where nobody came. Sitting there on the windbitten grass looking out over the waves bashing on Wreck Rock and the reef Dad called Rickrack and out to the horizon, you could keep going farther still. At least you ought to be able to, but there wasn't any way to be alone any more. There was a beer can in the grass, a tag of orange plastic ribbon tied to a stake up near the summit, a Coast Guard helicopter yammering and prying over the sea up to Briton Head and back south again. Nobody wanted anybody to be alone, ever. You had to do away with that, unmake it, all the junk, trash, crap, trivia, David, the midterms, Gran, what people thought, other people. You had to go away from them. All the way away. It used to be easy to do that, easy to go and hard to

come back, but now it was harder and harder to go, and she never could go all the way. To sit up here and stare at the ocean and be thinking about stupid David, and what's that stake for, and why did Gran look at my fingernails that way, what's wrong with me? Am I going to be this way the rest of my life? Not even seeing the ocean? Seeing stupid beer cans? She stood, raging, backed up, aimed, and kicked the beer can in a low, fast arc off the cliff into the sea unseen below. She turned and scrambled up to the summit, braced her knees in soggy bracken, and wrenched the orange-ribboned stake out of the ground. She hurled it southward and saw it fall into bracken and salal scrub and be swallowed. She stood up, rubbing her hands where the raw wood had scraped the skin. The wind felt cold on her teeth. She had been baring them, an angry ape. The sea lay gray at eye level, taking her immediately now into its horizontality. Nothing cluttered. As she sucked the heel of her thumb and got her front teeth warm, she thought, My soul is ten thousand miles wide and extremely invisibly deep. It is the same size as the sea, it is bigger than the sea, it *holds* the sea, and you cannot, you cannot cram it into beer cans and fingernails and stake it out in lots and own it. It will drown you all and never even notice.

But how old I am, thought the grandmother, to come to the beach and not look at the sea! How horrible! Straight out into the back yard, as if all that mattered was grubbing ivy. As if the sea belonged to the children. To assert her right to the ocean, she carried ivy cuttings to the trash bin beside the house and after cramming them into the bin stood and looked at the dunes, across which it was. It wasn't going to go away, as Amory would have said. But she went on out the garden gate, crossed sandy-rutted Searoad, and in ten more steps saw the Pacific open out between the grass-crowned dunes. There you are, you old gray monster. You aren't going to go away, but I am. Her brown loafers, a bit loose on her bony feet, were already full of sand. Did she want to go on down, onto the beach? It was always so windy. As she hesitated, looking about, she saw a head bobbing along between

the crests of dune grass. Mag coming back with the groceries. Slow black bobbing head like the old mule coming up the rise to the sagebrush ranch when? old Bill the mule—Mag the mule, trudging obstinate silent. She went down to the road and stood first on one foot then the other emptying sand out of her shoes, then walked to meet her daughter. "How are things at Hambleton's?"

"Peart," Mag said. "Right peart. When is whatsername coming?"

"By noon, I think she said." Rita sighed. "I got up at five. I think I'm going to go in and have a little lie-down before she comes. I hope she won't stay hours."

"Who is she, again?"

"Oh . . . damn . . ."

"I mean what's she doing."

Rita gave up the vain search for the lost name. "She's some sort of assistant, research assistant I suppose, to whatsisname at the University, you know, doing the book about Amory. I expect somebody suggested to him that maybe it would look odd if he did a whole biography without talking to the widow, but of course it's really only Amory's ideas that interest him, I believe he's very theoretical the way they are now. Probably bored stiff at the idea of actual *people*. So he's sending the young lady into the hencoop."

"So that you don't sue him."

"Oh you don't think so."

"Certainly. Co-optation. And you'll get thanked for your invaluable assistance, in the acknowledgments, just before he thanks his wife and his typist."

"What was that terrible thing you told me about Mrs. Tolstoy?"

"Copied *War and Peace* for him six times by hand. But you know, it would beat copying most books six times by hand."

"Shepard."

"What?"

"Her. The girl. Something Shepard."

"Whose invaluable assistance Professor Whozis gratefully, no, she's only a grad student, isn't she. Lucky if she gets mentioned at all. What a safety net they have, don't they? All the women the knots in the net."

But that cut a bit close to the bones of Amory Inman, and his widow did not answer his daughter as she helped her put away the flour, cornflakes, yoghurt, cookies, bananas, grapes, lettuce, avocado, tomatoes, and vinegar Mag had bought (she had forgotten to buy a list pad). "Well, I'm off, shout when she comes," Rita said, and made her way past her son-in-law, who was sitting on the hall floor by the bookcase, to the stairs.

The upstairs of the house was simple, rational, and white: the stairs-landing and a bathroom down the middle, a bedroom in each corner. Mag and Phil SW, Gran NW, Gret NE, boys SE. The old folks got the sunset, the kids got dawn. Rita was the first to listen and hear the sea in the house. She looked out over the dunes and saw the tide coming in and the wind combing the manes of the white horses. She lay down and looked with pleasure at the narrow, white-painted boards of the ceiling in the sea-light like no other light. She did not want to go to sleep but her eyes were tired and she had not brought a book upstairs. She heard the girl's voice, below, the girls' voices, piercing soft, the sound of the sea.

"Where's Gran?"

"Upstairs."

"This woman's come."

Mag brought the dishtowel on which she was drying her hands into the front room, a signal flag: I work in the kitchen and have nothing to do with interviews. Gret had left the girl standing out on the front deck. "Won't you come in?"

"Susan Shepard."

"Mag Rilow. That's Greta. Gret, go up and tell Gran, ok?"

"It's so lovely here! What a beautiful place!"

was plump, pink, round-eyed, and Rita had to make the interpretation "intellectual" consciously. It would not arise of itself from the pink face, the high voice, the girlish manner, as it would from the pink face, high voice, and boyish manner of a male counterpart. She knew that she still so identified mind and masculinity that only women who imitated men were immediately recognizable to her as intellectuals, even after all these years, even after Mag. Also, Sue Shepard might be disguising her intellect, as Mag didn't. And the jargon of her subject was a pretty good disguise in itself. But she was keen, it was a keen mind, and perhaps Professor Whozis didn't like to be reminded of it, so young, so bright, so close behind. Probably he liked flutter and butter, as Amory used to call it, in his graduate-student women. But flutters and buttery little Sue had already set aside a whole sheaf of the professor's questions as timewasting, and was asking, intently and apparently on her own hook, about Rita's girlhood.

"Well, when I was born we lived on a ranch out from Prineville, in the high country. The sagebrush, you know. But I don't remember much that's useful. I think Father must have been keeping books for the ranch. It was a big operation—huge—all the way to the John Day River, I think. When I was nine, he took over managing a mill in Ultimate, in the Coast Range. A lumber mill. Nothing left of all that now. There isn't even a gravel road in to Ultimate any more. Half the state's like that, you know, it's very strange. Easterners come and think it's this wild pristine wilderness and actually it's all Indian graveyards underfoot and old homesteads and second growth and towns nobody even remembers were there. It's just that the trees and the weeds grow back so fast. Like ivy. Where are you from?"

"Seattle," said Sue Shepard, friendly, but not to be misled as to who was interviewing whom.

"Well, I'm glad. I seem to have more and more trouble talking with Easterners."

Sue Shepard laughed, probably not understanding, not having

met enough Easterners, and pursued: "So you went to school in Ultimate?"

"Yes, until high school. Then I came to live with Aunt Josie in Portland and went to old Lincoln High. The nearest high school to Ultimate was thirty miles on logging roads, and anyhow it wasn't good enough for Father. He was afraid I'd grow up to be a roughneck, or marry one . . ." Sue Shepard clinked on her little machine, and Rita thought, but what did Mother think? Did she want to send me away at age thirteen to live in the city with her sister-in-law? The question opened on a blank area that she gazed into, fascinated. I know what Father wanted, but why don't I know what she wanted? Did she cry? No, of course not. Did I? I don't think so. I can't even remember talking about it with Mother. We made my clothes, that summer. That's when she taught me how to cut out a pattern. And then we came up to Portland the first time, and stayed at the old Multnomah Hotel, and we bought shoes for me for school—and the oyster silk ones for dressing up, the little undercut heel and one strap, I wish they still made them. I was already wearing Mother's size. And we ate lunch in that restaurant, the cut-glass water goblets, the two of us, where was Father? But I never even wondered what she thought, I never knew. I never know what Mag really thinks, either. They don't say. Rocks. Look at Mag's mouth, just like Mother's, like a seam in a rock. Why did Mag go into teaching, talk, talk, talk all day, when she really hates talking? Although she never was quite as gruff as Gret is, but that's because Amory wouldn't have stood for it. But why didn't Mother and I say anything to each other? She was so stoical. Rock. And then I was happy in Portland, and there she was in Ultimate . . . "Oh, yes, I loved it," she answered Sue Shepard. "The twenties were a nice time to be a teen-ager, we really were very spoiled, not like now, poor things. It's terribly hard to be thirteen or fourteen now, isn't it? We went to dancing school, they've got AIDS, and the atomic bomb. My granddaughter's twice as old as I was at eighteen. In some ways. She's amazingly young for her age in others. It's so

complicated. After all, think of Juliet! It's never *really* simple, is it? But I think I had a very nice, innocent time in high school, and right on into college. Until the crash. The mill closed in '32, my second year. But actually we went right on having a good time. But it was terribly depressing for my parents and my brothers. The mill shut right down, and they all came up to Portland looking for work, everybody did. And then I left school after my junior year, because I'd got a summer job bookkeeping in the University accounting office, and they wanted me to stay on, and so I did, since everybody else in the family was out of work, except Mother finally got a job in a bakery, nights. It was terrible for men, the Depression, you know. It killed my father. He looked and looked for work and couldn't find anything, and there I was, doing what he was qualified to do, only of course at a very low level, and terrible pay—sixty dollars a month, can you imagine?"

"A week?"

"No, a month. But still, I was making it. And men of his generation were brought up to be depended on, which is a wonderful thing, but then they weren't allowed ever *not* to be depended on, or even to admit that they could be dependent on anybody, which is terribly unrealistic, I think, a real whatdyoucallit. Doubletime?"

"Double bind," said young Sue, sharp as tacks, clicketing almost inaudibly away on her little lap computer, while the tape-recorder tape went silently round and round, recording Rita's every maunder and meander. Rita sighed. "I'm sure that's why he died so young," she said. "He was only fifty."

But Mother hadn't died young, though her husband had, and her elder son had drifted off to Texas to be swallowed alive so far as his mother was concerned by a jealous wife, and her younger son had poured whisky onto diabetes and died at thirty-one. Men did seem to be so fragile. But what had kept Margaret Jamison Holz going? Her independence? But she had been brought up to be dependent, hadn't she? Anyhow nobody could keep going

long on mere independence, when they tried to they ended up pushing shopping carts full of stuff and sleeping in doorways. Mother hadn't done that, she had sat here on the deck looking out at the dunes, a small, tough, old woman. No retirement pension of course and a tiny little dribble of insurance money, and she did let Amory pay the rent on her two-room apartment in Portland, but she was independent to the end, visiting them only once or twice a year at the University, and then always for a full month here, in summer. Gret's room now had been Mother's room then. How strange it was, how it changed! But recently she had wakened in the deep night or when it was just beginning to get light and had lain there in bed thinking, not with fear but with a kind of frightened, lively thrill, "It is so strange, all of it is so *strange!*"

"When were you able to go back to college?" Sue Shepard asked, and she answered, "In '35," resolving to stick to the point and stop babbling.

"And then you met Dr. Inman when you took his class."

"No. I never took a class in Education."

"Oh," Sue Shepard said, blank.

"I met him in the accounting office. I was still clerking there half-time, paying my way. And he came in because he hadn't been paid his salary for three months. People used to be just as good at mistakes like that as computers are now. It took days and days to find out how they'd managed to lose him from the faculty payroll. Did he tell somebody that I'd taken his class and that's how we met?" Sue Shepard wasn't going to admit it; she was discreet. "How funny. It was one of the other women he went out with, and he got his memories crossed. Students were always falling in love with him. He was *extremely* attractive—I used to think Charles Boyer without the French accent—" They both laughed.

Mag heard them laughing on the front deck as she came through the hall, edging around her husband. A gooseneck lamp

standing on the floor near him glared in his eyes, but he was holding his book so that its pages were in shadow.

"Phil."

"Mm."

"Get up and go read in the living room."

He smiled, reading. "Found this . . ."

"The interviewer's here. She'll be staying for lunch. You're in the way. You've been in the way for two hours. You're in the dark. There's daylight six feet away. Get up and go read in the living room."

"People . . ."

"Nobody's there! People come through *here*. Are you—" The wave of hatred and compassion set free by her words carried her on past him, though she had checked the words. In silence, she turned the corner and climbed the stairs. She went into the southwest bedroom and looked for a decent shirt in the crowded closet; the cotton sweater she had worn from Portland was too warm for this mild coastal weather. The search led her into a rummage-out of summer clothes. She sorted, rehung, folded her clothes, then Phil's. From the depths she pulled out paint-stiff, knee-frayed bluejeans, a madras shirt with four buttons gone that had been stuffed into the closet unwashed. Even here at the beach house, her father's clothes had always been clean, smelled clean, smelled of virtue, *virtù*. With a violent swing she threw the madras shirt at the wastebasket. It draped itself half in half out, a short sleeve sticking up pitifully. Not waving but drowning . . . But to go on drowning for twenty-five years?

The window was ajar, and she could hear the sea and her mother's voice down on the front deck answering questions about her husband the eminent educator, the clean-bodied man: how had he written his books? When had he broken with John Dewey's theories? Where had the UNICEF work taken him? Now, little apple-cheeked handmaiden of success, ask me about my husband the eminent odd-job man: how did he quit halfway through graduate school, when had he broken with the drywal-

ling contractor, where had his graveyard shift at the Copy Shop taken him? Phil the Failure, he called himself, with the charming honesty that concealed a hideous smugness that probably but not certainly concealed despair. What was certain was that nobody else in the world knew the depth of Phil's contempt for them, his absolute lack of admiration or sympathy for anything anybody did or was. If that indifference was originally a defense, it had consumed what it had once defended. He was invulnerable, by now. And people were so careful not to hurt him. Finding that she was Dr. Rilow and he was an unemployed drywaller, they assumed it was hard for him; and then when they found that it wasn't, they admired him for being so secure, so unmacho, taking it so easily, handling it so well. Indeed he handled it well, cherished it, his dear failure, his great success at doing exactly what he wanted to do and nothing else. No wonder he was so sweet, so serene, so unstrained. No wonder she had blown up, teaching *Bleak House* last week, at the mooncalf student who couldn't see what was supposed to be wrong with Harold Skimpole. "Don't you see that his behavior is totally irresponsible?" she had demanded in righteous wrath, and the mooncalf had replied, with aplomb, "I don't see why *everybody* is supposed to be responsible." It was a kind of Taoist koan, actually. For Taoist wives. It was hard to be married to a man who lived in a perpetual condition of *wu wei* and not to end up totally *wei*; you had to be very careful or you ended up washing the ten thousand shirts.

But then of course Mother had looked after Father's shirts.

The jeans weren't even good for rags, even if they would sell in the Soviet Union for a hundred dollars; she threw them after the shirt, and knocked the wastebasket over. Faintly ashamed, she retrieved them and the shirt and stuffed them into a plastic bag that had been squirreled away in a cranny of the closet. An advantage of Phil's indifference was that he would never come downstairs demanding to know where his wonderful old jeans and madras shirt were. He never got attached to clothes, and wore whatever was provided. "Distrust all occasions that require

new clothes." What a prig Thoreau was. Ten to one he meant weddings but hadn't had the guts to say so, let alone get married. Actually Phil liked new clothes, liked to get them for Christmas and birthdays, accepted all presents, cherished none. "Phil is a saint, Mag," his mother had said to her shortly before they were married, and she had agreed, laughing, thinking the exaggeration quite forgivable; but it had not been a burble of mother love. It had been a warning.

She knew that her father had hoped that the marriage wouldn't last. He had never quite said so. By now the matter of her marriage, between her and her mother, was buried miles deep. Between her and her daughter it was an unaskable question. Everybody protecting everybody. It was stupid. It kept her and Gret from saying much to each other. And it wasn't really the right question, the one that needed asking, anyhow. They were married. But there was a question. No one had asked it and she did not know what it was. Possibly if she found out, her life would change. The headless torso of Apollo would speak: *Du musst dein Leben ändern*. Meanwhile, did she particularly want her life to change? "I will never desert Mr. Micawber," she said under her breath, reaching into yet another cranny of the closet and discovering there yet another plastic bag, which when opened disclosed rust-colored knitted wool: a sweater, which she stared at dumbly till she recognized it as one she had bought on sale for Gret for Christmas several years ago and had utterly forgotten ever since. "Gret! Look here!" she cried, crossing the hall, knocking, opening the door of her daughter's room. "Merry Christmas!"

After explanations, Gret pulled the sweater on. Her dark, thin face emerged from the beautiful color with a serious expression. She looked at the sweater seriously in the mirror. She was very hard to please, preferred to buy her own clothes, and wore the ones she liked till they fell apart. She kept them moderately clean. "Are the sleeves kind of short, a little?" she asked, in the mother tongue.

"Kind of. Probably why it was on sale. It was incredibly cheap, I remember, at the Sheep Tree. Years ago. I liked the color."

"It's neat," Gret said, still judging. She pushed up the sleeves. "Thanks," she said. Her face was a little flushed. She smiled and glanced around at the book lying open on the bed. Something was unsaid, almost said. She did not know how to say it and Mag did not know how to allow her to say it; they both had trouble with their native language. Awkward, intrusive, the mother retreated, saying, "Lunch about one-thirty."

"Need help?"

"Not really. Picnic on the deck. With the interviewer."

"When's she leaving?"

"Before dinner, I hope. It's a good color on you." She went out, closing off the door behind her, as she had been taught to do.

Gret took off the orange sweater. It was too hot for the mild day, and she wasn't sure she liked it yet. It would take a while. It would have to sit around a while till she got used to it, and then she would know. She thought she liked it; it felt like she'd worn it before. She put it into a drawer so her mother wouldn't get hurt. Last year when her mother had come into her room at home and stared around, Gret had suddenly realised that the stare wasn't one of disapproval but of pain. Disorder, dirt, disrespect for objects, caused her pain, like being shoved or hit. It must be hard for her, living, in general. Knowing that, Gret tried to put stuff away; but it didn't make much difference. She was mostly at college now, and Mother went on nagging and ordering and enduring, and Daddy and the boys didn't let it worry them. Just like some God damn sitcom. Everything about families and people was exactly like some God damn sitcom. Waiting for David to call, just like a soap opera. Everything the same as it was for everybody else, the same things happening over and over and over, all petty and trivial and stupid, and you couldn't ever get free. It clung to you, held on, pinioned you. Like the dream she used to have of the room with wallpaper that caught and stuck to

you, the Velcro dream. She reopened the textbook and read about the nature of gabbro, the origins of slate.

The boys came back from the beach just in time for lunch. They always did. Still. Just as when your milk spurts and the baby in the next room cries at the exact same moment. Their clomping in to go to the bathroom finally got Phil off the hall floor. He carried out platters to the table on the front porch and talked with whatsername the interviewer, who got quite pink and pleased. Phil looked so thin and short and hairy and vague and middle-aged that they never expected it till whammy! right between the eyes. Wooed and won. Go it, Phil. She looked like an intelligent girl, actually, over-serious, and Phil wouldn't hurt her. Wouldn't hurt a fly, would old Phil. St. Philip, bestower of sexual favors. She smiled at them and said, "Come and get it!"

Sue Student was being nice to Daddy, talking with him about forest fires or something. Daddy had his little company smile and was being nice to Sue Student. She didn't sound too stupid, actually. She was a vegetarian. "So is Gret," Gran said. "What is it about the U these days? They used to live on raw elk." Why did she always have to disapprove of everything Gret did? She never said stuff like that about the boys. They were scarfing up salami. Mother watched them all loading their plates and making their sandwiches with that brooding hawk expression. Filling her niche. That was the trouble with biology, it was the sitcom. All niches. Mother Provides. Better the dark slate levels, the basalt plains. Anything could happen, there.

She was worn out. She went for the wine bottle; food later. She must get by herself for a while, that bit of a nap in the morning hadn't helped. Such a long, long morning, with the drive over from Portland. And talking about old times was a most terrible thing to do. All the lost things, lost chances, all the dead people. The town with no road to it any more. She had had to say ten times, "He's dead now," "No, she's dead." What a strange thing to say, after all! You couldn't *be* dead. You couldn't *be* anything but alive. If you weren't alive, you weren't—you had been. You

shouldn't have to say "He's dead now," as if it was just some other way of being, but "He isn't now," or, "He was." Keep the past in the past tense. And the present in the present, where it belongs. Because you didn't live on in others, as people said. You changed them, yes. She was entirely different because Amory had lived. But he didn't live on in her, in her memory, or in his books, or anywhere. He had gone. He was gone. Maybe "passed away" wasn't such a whatdyoucallit, after all. At least it was in the passed tense, the past tense, not the present. He had come to her and she had come to him and they had made each other's life what it had been, and then he had gone. Passed away. It wasn't a euphemism, that's what it wasn't. Her mother . . . There was a pause in her thoughts. She drank the wine. Her mother was different, how? She came back to the rock. Of course she was dead, but it did not seem that she had passed away, the way he had. She went back to the table, refilled her glass with the red wine, laid salami, cheese, and green onions on brown bread.

She was beautiful now. In the tight, short, ugly fashions of the sixties, when Mag had first looked at her from any distance and with any judgment, she had looked too big, and for a while after Amory's death and when she had the bone marrow thing she had been gaunt, but now she was extraordinary: the line of the cheek, the long, soft lips, the long-lidded eyes with their fine wrinkle-pleating. What had she said about raw elk? The interviewer hadn't heard and wouldn't understand if she had heard, wouldn't know that she had just been told what Mrs. Amory Inman thought of the institution of which her husband had been the luminary, what indeed she thought, in her increasing aloofness, her oldwomanhood, of most human institutions. Poor little whatsername, trapped in the works and dark machinations of that toughest survivor of the Middle Ages, the university, ground in the mills of assistantships, grants, competitions, examinations, dissertations, all set up to separate the men from the boys and both from the rest of the world, she wouldn't have time for years

yet to look up, to look out, to learn that there were such bare, airy places as the place where Rita Inman lived.

"Yes, it is nice, isn't it? We bought it in '55, when things over here were still pretty cheap. We haven't even asked you indoors, how terrible! After lunch you must look round the house. I think I'm going to have a little lie-down, after lunch. Or perhaps you'd like to go down on the beach then—the children will take you walking as far as you'd like, if you like. Mag, Sue says she needs an hour or two more with me. She hasn't asked all . . ." a pause, "the professor's questions yet. I'm afraid I kept wandering off the subject." How sternly beautiful Mag was, her rockseam mouth, her dark-waterfall hair going silver. Managing everything as usual, seeing to everything, the good lunch. No, definitely her mother was not dead in the same way Father was dead, or Amory, or Clyde, or Polly, or Jim and Jean; there was something different there. She really must get by herself and think about it.

"Geology." The word came out. Spoken. Mother's ears went up like a cat's, eyebrows flickering, eyes and mouth impassive. Daddy acted like he'd known her decision all along, maybe he had, he couldn't have. Sue Student had to keep asking who was in the Geo department and what you did with geology. She only knew a couple of the professors' names and felt stupid not knowing more. She said, "Oh, you get hired by oil companies, mining companies, all kinds of landrape companies. Find uranium under Indian reservations." Oh, shut up. Sue Student meant well. Everybody meant well. It spoiled everything. Softened everything. "The grizzled old prospector limps in from twenty years alone in the desert, swearing at her mule," Daddy said, and she laughed, it was funny, Daddy was funny, but she was for a moment, a flash, afraid of him. He was so quick. He knew that this was something important, and did he mean well? He loved her, he liked her, he was like her, but when she wasn't like him did he like it? Mother was saying how geology had been all cut and dried when she was in college and how it was all changed now by these new theories. "Plate tectonics isn't exactly new," oh, shut up, shut up. Mother

meant well. Sue Student and Mother talked about academic careers in science and got interested comparing, colleaguizing. Sue was at the U but she was younger and only a grad student; Mother was only at a community college but she was older and had a Ph.D. from Berkeley. And Daddy was out of it. And Gran half asleep, and Tom and Sam cleaning up the platters. She said, "It's funny. I was thinking. All of us, the family, I mean, nobody will ever know any of us ever existed. Except for Granddaddy. He's the only real one."

Sue gazed mildly. Daddy nodded in approval. Mother stared, the hawk at bay. Gran said in a curious, distant tone, "Oh I don't think so at all." Tom was throwing bread to a seagull, but Sam, finishing the salami, said, in his mother's voice, "Fame is the spur!" At that, the hawk blinked, and stooped to the prey: "Whatever do you mean, Gret? Reality is being a dean of the School of Education?"

"He was important. He has a biography. None of us will."

"Thank goodness," Gran said, getting up. "I do hope you don't mind, if I have just a bit of a lie-down now I'll be much brighter later, I hope."

Everybody moved.

"Boys. You do the dishes. Tom!"

He came. They obeyed. She felt a tremendous, a ridiculous surge, as warm and irresistible as tears or milk, of pride—in them, in herself. They were lovely. Lovely boys. Grumbling, coltish, oafish, gangling, redhanded, they unloaded the table with efficiency and speed, Sam insulting Tom steadily in his half-broken voice, Tom replying on two sweet notes at intervals like a thrush, "Ass-sole . . . Ass-sole . . ."

"Who's for a walk on the beach?"

She was, the interviewer was, Phil was, Gret surprisingly was.

They crossed Searoad and went single file between the dunes. Down on the beach she looked back to see the front windows and the roof above the dune grass, always remembering the pure delight of seeing it so the first time, the first time ever. To Gret

and the boys the beach house was coeval with existence, but to her it was connected with joy. When she was a child they had stayed in other people's beach houses, places in Gearhart and Neskowin, summerhouses of deans and provosts and the rich people who clung to University administrators under the impression that they were intellectuals; or else, as Mag got older, she and her mother had been taken along with Dean Inman to one of his ever more exotic conferences, to Botswana, Brasilia, Bangkok, until she had rebelled at last. "But they are interesting *places*," her mother had said, deprecating, "you really don't enjoy going?" And she had howled, "I'm sick of feeling like a white giraffe, why can't I ever stay home where people are the same *size*?" And at some indefinite but not long interval after that, they had driven over, to look at this house. "What do you think?" her father had asked, standing in the small living room, a smiling sixty-year-old public man, kindly rhetorical. There was no need to ask. They had all three been mad for it from the moment they saw it at the end of the long sand road between the marshes and the sea. "My room, OK?" Mag had said, coming out of the southwest bedroom. She and Phil had had their honeymoon summer there.

She looked across the sand at him. He was walking at the very edge of the water, moving crabwise east when a wave came washing farther in, following the outwash back west, absorbed as a child, slight, stooped, elusive. She veered her way to intersect with his. "Phildog," she said.

"Magdog."

"You know, she was right. What made her say it, do you think?"

"Defending me."

How easily he said it. How easy his assumption. It had not occurred to her.

"Could be. And herself? And me? . . . And then geology! Is she just in love with the course, or is she serious?"

"Never anything but."

"It might be a good major for her. Unless it's all labs now. I

don't know, it's just a section of Intro Sci at CC. I'll ask Benjie what geologists do these days. I hope still those little hammers. And khaki shorts."

"That Priestley novel in the bookcase," Phil said, and went on to talk about it, and novelists contemporary with Priestley, and she listened attentively as they walked along the hissing fringes of the continent. If Phil had not quit before the prelims, he would have got much farther in his career than she in hers, because men got farther easier than of course, but mainly because he was such a natural; he had the right temperament, the necessary indifference and passion of the scholar. He was drawn to early twentieth-century English fiction with the perfect combination of detachment and fascination, and could have written a fine study of Priestley, Galsworthy, Bennett, that lot, a book worth a good professorship at a good school. Or worth at least a sense of self-respect. But self-respect wasn't a saint's business, was it? Dean Inman had had plenty of self-respect, and plenty of respect, too. Had she been escaping the various manifestations of respect when she fell for Phil? No. She still missed it, in fact, and supplied it when she could. She had fallen for Phil because she was strong, because of the awful need strength has for weakness. If you're not weak how can I be strong? Years it had taken her, years, until now, to learn that strength, like the lovely boys washing the dishes, like Gret saying that terrible thing at lunch, was what strength needed, craved, rested in. Rested and grew weak in, with the true weakness, the fecundity. Without self-defense. Gret had not been defending Phil, or anybody. Phil had to see it that way. But Gret had been speaking out of the true weakness. Dean Inman wouldn't have understood it, but it wouldn't have worried him; he would have seen that Gret respected him, and that to him would have meant that she respected herself. And Rita? She could not remember what Rita had said, when Gret said that about their not being real. Something not disapproving, but remote. Moving away. Rita was moving away. Like the gulls there ahead of them, always moving

away as they advanced towards them, curved wings and watchful, indifferent eyes. Airborne, with hollow bones. She looked back down the sands. Gret and the interviewer were walking slowly, talking, far behind, so that she and Phil kept moving away from them, too. A tongue of the tide ran up the sand between them, crosscurrents drawing lines across it, and hissed softly out again. The horizon was a blue murk, but the sunlight was not. "Ha!" Phil said, and picked up a fine white sand dollar. He always saw the invaluable treasures, the dollars of no currency; he went on finding Japanese glass netfloats every winter on this beach, years after the Japanese had given up glass floats for plastic, years after anyone else had found one. Some of the floats he found had limpets growing on them. Bearded with moss and in garments green, they had floated for years on the great waves, tiny unburst bubbles, green, translucent earthlets in foam galaxies, moving away, drawing near. "But how much Maupassant is there in *The Old Wives' Tale*," she asked, "I mean that kind of summing-up-women thing?" And Phil, pocketing his sea-paid salary, answered, as her father had answered her questions, and she listened to him, and to the sea.

Sue's mother had died of cancer of the womb. Sue had gone home to stay with her before college was out, last spring. It had taken her four months to die, and Sue had to talk about it. Gret had to listen. An honor, an imposition, an initiation. From time to time, barely enduring, she lifted her head to look out across the gray level of the sea, or up at Briton Head towering closer, or ahead at Mother and Daddy going along like slow sandpipers at the foam-fringe, or down at the damp brown sand and her grotty sneakers making footprints. But she bent her head again to Sue, confining herself. She had to tell and she had to listen, to learn all the instruments, the bonds, the knives, the racks and pinions, and how you became part of the torture, complicit with it, and whether in the end the truth, after such efforts to obtain it, would be spoken.

"My father hated the male nurses to touch her," Sue said. "He

said it was woman's work, he tried to make them send women nurses in."

She talked about catheters, metastases, transfusions, each word an iron maiden, a toothed vagina. Woman's work. "The oncologist said it would get better when he put her on morphine, when her mind would get confused. But it got worse. It was the worst. The last week was the worst thing I will ever go through." She knew what she was saying, and it was tremendous. To be able to say that meant that you need not be afraid again. But it seemed like you had to lose a good deal for that gain.

Gret's escaping gaze passed her mother and father, who had halted at the foot of Briton Head, and followed the breakers on out to where the sea went level. Somebody had told her in high school that if you jumped from a height like Briton Head, hitting the water would be just like hitting rock.

"I didn't mean to go on telling you all that. I'm sorry. I just haven't got through it yet. I have to keep working through it."

"Sure," Gret said.

"Your grandmother is so—she's a beautiful person. And your whole family. You all just seem so real. I really appreciate being here with you."

She stopped walking, and Gret had to stop too.

"What you said at lunch, about your grandfather being famous."

Gret nodded.

"When I suggested to Professor Nabe about talking to Dean Inman's family, you know, maybe getting some details that weren't just public knowledge, some insights on how his educational theories and his life went together, and his family, and so on—you know what he said? He said, 'But they're all quite unimportant people, aren't they?'"

The two young women walked on side by side.

"That's funny," Gret said, with a grin. She stooped for a black pebble. It was basalt, of course, there was nothing but basalt this whole stretch of the coast, outflow from the great shield volca-

noes up the Columbia, or pillow basalts from undersea vents; that's what Mother and Daddy were clambering on now, big, hard pillows from under the sea. The hard sea.

"What did you find?" Sue asked, over-intense about everything, strung out. Gret showed her the dull black pebble, then flipped it at the breakers.

"*Everyone* is important," Sue said. "I learned that this summer."

Was that the truth that the croaking voice had gasped at torture's end? She didn't believe it. Nobody was important. But she couldn't say that. It would sound as cheap, as stupid, as the stupid professor. But the pebble wasn't important, neither was she, neither was Sue. Neither was the sea. Important wasn't the point. Things didn't have rank.

"Want to go on up the Head a ways? There's a sort of path."

Sue consulted her watch. "I don't want to keep your grandmother waiting when she wakes up. I'd better go back. I could listen to her talk forever, she's just amazing." She was going to say, "You're so lucky!" She did.

"Yeah," Gret said. "Some Greek, I think it was some Greek said don't say that to anybody until they're dead." She raised her voice. "Ma! Dad! Yo!" She gestured to them that she and Sue were returning. The small figures on the huge black pillows nodded and waved, and her mother's voice cried something, like a hawk's cry or a gull's, the sea drowning out all consonants, all sense.

Crows cawed and carked over the marshes inland. It was the only sound but the sound of the sea coming in the open window and filling the room and the whole house full as a shell is full of sound that sounds like the sea, but is something else, your blood running in your veins, they said, but how could it be that you could hear that in a shell but never in your own ear or your cupped hand? In a coffee cup there was a sound like it, but less, not coming and going like the sea sound. Caw, cark, caw! Black heavy swoopers, queer. The light like no other on the white ceiling boards. Tongue and groove, tongue in cheek. What had the

child said that for, that Amory was the only real one of them? An awful thing to say about reality. The child would have to be very careful, she was so strong. Stronger even than Maggie. Because her father was so weak. Of course that was all backwards, but it was so hard to think the things straight that the words had all backwards. Only she knew that the child would have to be very careful, not to be caught. Cark, ark, caw! the crows cried far over the marshes. What was the sound that kept going on? The wind, it must be the wind across the sagebrush plains. But that was far away. What was it she had wanted to think about when she lay down?