

I found the rock yesterday. It was more or less where Uncle Matthew said it would be, halfway between the knoll and the pond, at the edge of a shallow sink of dead leaves and rainwater. I would never have found it had it not been for the hurricane. I wasn't even looking. Instead, I was watching the sun play through the leaves and listening to the birds. I was marveling at my ability to enjoy these simple pleasures, marveling at the absence of that heavy feeling in my chest, that dread. It was pure luck I found the rock. Pure chance.

Jack calls it paradise here. The pond, the ocean, the woods in between. The woods especially, his own personal Garden of Eden. It used to be pasture when my grandfather was alive, sixty acres of cows and pigs, apple trees and a few struggling crops. Before that it was forest, pine mostly, which was cut down for the ships, the big whalers they were building in Mystic at the time. There's not a pine left, except what's been planted since. And now the pasture's gone too, where we used to play as kids. It's woods now, dense thickets of viburnum and choke cherry, honeysuckle as big as your arm, wild rose and bull briar, and grape and bittersweet everywhere.

No one had stepped foot in the woods for twenty years until Jack cut a path last summer from my mother's house to Uncle Matthew's and Aunt Lillian's. It took him more than a week. And this summer, on account of how fast everything grows, it took nearly as long to make the path passable again. And then there was the hurricane, which blew everything to hell. Jack had to start pretty much from scratch. Uncle Matthew gave him a compass and wished him well. Moses had found his way through the wilderness. He had faith that Jack would, too.

When he was younger, Uncle Matthew had been the one to keep the paths clear. Then his ministry moved, and by the time he came back to Aponeset, all the kids had grown, so there was little reason to put in all the time and effort necessary to keep the woods at bay. He preferred nature to take hold, or at any rate this is what he said whenever anyone asked. It was his father who had originally cleared the land, and I think the truth was that he finally realized he had no obligation to keep it that way.

Of the four men of his generation in my family, three uncles plus my father, Uncle Matthew is the only one left. Partly because of that, we've become closer over the years. He's also become more approachable. And I've become more tolerant. I see him once a year, every August when we come to Aponeset. I paid my first visit the day after we arrived.

It was mid-morning and already hot. The patchwork black top at the end of our driveway that follows the curve of the pond before taking a sharp turn inland was soft underfoot, the tarry areas especially, which felt like gum. I passed my Aunt Mattie's and then my cousin George's driveways, relatives I never saw because their houses were rented out every August to pay taxes for the year. Their mailboxes used to be marked simply with their names, hand written in black paint. Now the names were gone, replaced by stenciled numbers. And the black top had a street sign, two of them, where before it had not even had a name. At its intersection with Beach Road was a new house, taller than any other, lavishly landscaped with fat beds of petunias, topiary shrubs and a turf-perfect lawn that was being picked at by a flock of starlings. We do not welcome starlings in my family, as they are aggressive birds that chase our native birds away, but

I did not know these people, and it was not my place to drive the interlopers off.

Beach Road is our main thoroughfare, running pretty much down the center of the Aponeset thumb, from Route 1 where it originates, to the breachway, where it peters out in a broken concrete parking lot whose exact boundaries shift according to how the sand has blown the night before. The current breachway was machine-dredged and lined with concrete and native rock after the '39 hurricane dammed up the original breachway and made Aponeset pond effectively a lake. This suited neither the commercial fishermen, who wanted access to the pond for flounder and clams, nor the sports fishermen, who wanted access to the ocean for black fish and blues. Now, of course, the pond and coastline are all but fished out, but that hasn't halted the flow of fishermen, especially the weekend variety, who seem perfectly happy to spend half the day idly trailing a line while awaiting a bite. Such languorous lack of ambition would have been roundly ridiculed by my grandfather, who equated ambition with success and success with happiness. Not that he was all that successful, either as a farmer or, some of us have come to believe, a family man. Where he did excel, where he prided himself, was on his fishing, which, in the summers, when I knew him, was his major and abiding interest. He knew every cove in the pond, every sand bar and rock bed, every deep and every shallow. He knew what fish were where and what time to get them. He knew the tides and the weather and the phases of the moon. Boats, bait, hooks, lines and lures, he knew them all, a hundred tricks, a lifetime of experience. He passed on what he knew to my father, and after him, to my brothers. But never to me, or any of the girl cousins. There were other things he gave us.

The breachway is the only public access to the pond, the only piece of Aponeset that isn't private, and as such, it attracts a fair number of locals. There was a steady stream of cars that morning, Rangers and Cherokees pulling boats, Chevy and Ford wagons piled high with beach chairs and coolers and vinyl inner tubes the color of glossy lipstick. I walked on the left, well away from the poison ivy that lines the road, remembering last summer when Emily had gotten blisters all over her legs. Though I had warned her, I felt responsible, but also vindicated in my fears. I expect calamities to happen here, which is why I'm always on guard, always vigilant and tense. To me Aponeset is no paradise. To me Aponeset is a place where from the day we arrive, I start counting the days until we depart.

Uncle Matthew and Aunt Lillian live on the pond side of Beach Road, at the end of a pebbly driveway separated from the neighboring lot by a break of cedar and willow. Their house is a converted barn, left over from the days of my grandfather's farm. Years ago they added a second story and a front porch, and recently, they built a smaller, more private side porch off the kitchen. The house sits at the eastern edge of the woods, which surround it on three sides. The fourth, the front, faces the ocean, which lies across sand dunes and sea grass on the far side of Beach Road, about three minutes distance by foot. It's visible from the second story, and the sound of it, even on the quietest day, is continuous.

There was no one in sight as I walked down the driveway, and I took time to admire Aunt Lillian's garden. Since last summer she has been working with a raised bed and enriched soil, not the nutrient-poor Aponeset sand and rock that she'd had to contend with through the years. The difference showed. The tomatoes were fat and heavy, the peppers a deep and luscious green, the corn and beans and zucchini all thriving as never before. There was a huge clump of basil and at least three kinds of lettuce, as well as onions, cabbage and chard. In the center of the plot she'd

built a dangling contraption of aluminum pie pans and soda cans to scare off birds. There was also a hose on the front porch with a trigger nozzle to shoot them from a distance.

I was about to climb the front stairs when I heard a screen door open, then saw Uncle Matthew amble out onto the side deck. He was carrying a cup of tea and a newspaper, both of which he set down on the outdoor table. Instead of sitting, he went to the edge of the deck and gripped the railing, gazing solemnly into the woods as if to draw solace, or inspiration, or both. He was wearing a short-sleeved orange jumpsuit, the kind that highway workers and sky divers wear. It looked brash against the quiet greens and browns behind him, which was probably what he intended. He was a man who liked to stand out. As my mother was fond of saying, he thought himself a vein of uncommonly precious metal in a mass of very common rock.

I coughed to be noticed and walked around to meet him. He was elated to see me and motioned me up the stairs, then gave me a big bear hug.

"What a delight," he crowed. "What an unprecedented pleasure. Dear Sharon, come to visit her old uncle."

"You're not that old, Uncle Matthew."

"Less by a shake than a moment ago. The very sight of you strips the years like autumn leaves."

He held me at arm's length for a look, then squinted, as if something drew his attention. He reached toward my neck.

"What an enchanting charm," he said, touching the necklace I was wearing.

"It's a hummingbird," I said.

"Indeed." He lifted the tiny silver bird for closer inspection, then let it fall back on its chain. "Remarkable."

"Louise made it."

"Louise? My daughter?"

Louise was a silversmith and had been for years. We were born within a month of each other and felt like sisters.

"This can't be a surprise to you, Uncle."

"I've seen pictures of her work. She sends her catalogues." He leaned in for another look.

"What a lovely creation. The girl has talent." He seemed surprised and somewhat abashed. "Such a delicate figurine. So airy and full of spirit."

"Yes, that's why I wear it. When things get too heavy, it reminds me to lighten up."

He gave me a look as if to say what did I know of such things. "Child. These are the years to cherish. The burden only grows greater."

He had been sick, and I assumed he was speaking of his illness. "My mother told me you were in the hospital."

"In the hospital?" His voice rose an octave. "My dear girl, I nearly croaked."

He proceeded to describe with great relish his hospitalization, from the transient stroke-like attack that felled him to the baby-faced surgeon who slit his neck length-wise like a sausage to clean out the clogged artery responsible. He spent a total of a week in the hospital, seven days that he recounted in delicious, if somewhat grisly, detail. When he finished, he gave a great sigh.

"The burden of age," he said, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. "Mitigated for the present. But ever growing. Ever ready to subdue us."

It crossed my mind that maybe he should be the one wearing my necklace. Louise would probably die of shock.

"I'm forgetting my manners," he said. "May I offer you a cup of tea?"

I declined but urged him by all means to drink his own. I asked if Aunt Lillian were home.

"Gone until Labor Day," he said. "Visiting her dear sister in Vermont."

"I was admiring her garden."

"A remarkable achievement," he agreed, but his mind was elsewhere. He sipped his tea and settled back. "I was reading a book the other day and came across a word. Isostasy. Do you know it?"

I shook my head. "What book?"

"A history of New England, a chronicle of sorts. Geologic, paleontologic, anthropologic. A potpourri of ideas. An ontology, if you will. Full of surprises. You would enjoy it."

Uncle Matthew and I share a variety of intellectual interests, though I couldn't imagine having the time for this. "I'm reading Agatha Christie right now."

"A gifted writer," he said without enthusiasm. "Isostasy is the word that describes the balance between the weight of the earth's crust and the fluid material underneath. One presses down, the other up. Increase the weight of the crust, and it sinks. Decrease it, say by glacial evaporation, and it rises. Or rather it is pushed up. A few millimeters a year, perhaps a foot or two a century. In a thousand years, a few yards; in a million, what? A mile? Two? It's an astounding notion. Plains become hills. Hills, mountains. Mountains, alps of incomparable grandeur, vast cathedrals of stone lifted to the sky."

His voice had become oratorical, as if he were beguiled by his own words, which he probably was. Beguiled by them and of the firm opinion that they were beguiling to others. It was his preaching voice, and he paused, then continued in a slightly quieter tone.

"What a marvelous idea. Jesus himself couldn't have picked a better word to describe his work. His promise. Give me thy burden and ye shall be uplifted. Ye shall be swept aloft to the very gates of heaven."

When he was a boy, Uncle Matthew had a reputation for rebelliousness. Against his parents' warning he rowed alone to Block Island and back again. One winter he took a dangerous solo sailboat trip up the coast to Maine. Some years later, again against their advice and expressed desire, he enrolled in a liberal arts college, where he studied drama, music and dance. He wanted to be an actor, which disgusted his father, who thought that actors were sissies and loafers. He believed his son should have a profession, and eventually he got his way. Uncle Matthew took up the study of religion and upon graduation joined the ministry. His father, a Protestant like all of us, was satisfied, not understanding that becoming a minister was perhaps the most rebellious thing his son could have done. He had made a covenant with a power that was higher than his father. It gave him, at the very least, a moral edge.

If I had been a boy, I might well have gone into the ministry myself. The calling runs in the family. Besides Uncle Matthew, there's Bradley, uncle by marriage and a minister too, though fallen in our eyes since he ran out on my Aunt Mattie. And my father was a deacon in the Church. All of us have been touched by the teachings and promise of Christianity, although religion as it's commonly practiced seems to have taken hold of the men of the family more than

the women. Possibly because the men are just naturally more devout. Possibly because they have a greater need.

When I was a girl, it seemed hypocritical that my granddaddy could go to Church in the morning and molest me at night. Since then, I've come to the conclusion that I was being too kind to think that way, too lenient. Hypocrisy doesn't begin to describe how I felt. You can go to Church and be a killer. You can go and be a saint. I can't go to Church at all anymore, but I'm more pious in a way than I ever was before. I believe in God, and I believe in spirits. I believe in evil too, but I also believe that some evils are worse than others. Some can be forgiven. Some can even be tamed.

Uncle Matthew had more to say about this book of his.

"The author also speaks of shrines. He devotes an entire chapter to the topic of holy sites and sacred spaces. Magical circles and the like. Geometries of stone, revealed by nature and arranged by man."

Louise had once spoken to me of such places. I asked if he knew where any were.

"He describes one near Point Judith. Another in the Quabbin. And a third somewhere in the White Mountains. Most have been scattered. Some few reside partially intact."

"I'd like to see one."

"Indeed," he said, a glint appearing in his eye. "So should I."

He raised himself from his chair and went into the house, returning a moment later with a glossy eight-by-ten aerial photograph of a pasture rimmed by woods, which themselves were surrounded by water. "Aponeset" was printed at the top of the photo and beside it a date, 1950. There was an arrow pointing north and various other marks and notations scribbled by hand.

"My father commissioned the photograph," he explained. "All the markings are mine. You see the pond here, Beach Road, the old orchard, the dump. Here's the knoll, and here, more or less, is the rock."

"What rock is that?" I asked.

His finger was touching a spot in the pasture about halfway between the knoll, our only bit of land above sea level, and the pond. "A speckled rock, about knee high. You'll know it by the hole in its center."

He flattened his hand and held it perpendicular to the ground, then swiveled it like the needle of a compass. "North-northeast, less than an eighth of a mile as the crow flies."

"A rock," I said. "In the middle of a woods full of rocks."

"Woods now. Pasture when I was a child. This rock is unlike the others. Rounded, not sharp. Textured like granite. And the hole is unmistakable. Ancient, one presumes, and most certainly man-made."

He turned back to the map. "The knoll here, the rock here. Two points of a triangle. Two of three. Three to mark the sacred space. The holy triangle. Three to mark the trinity."

In his lifelong effort to stand out Uncle Matthew has been prone to exaggeration. This doubtlessly serves him well on the pulpit, but in his home, where his flights of fancy have often taken the form of windy, self-aggrandizing sermons untethered and in fact deaf to the needs of his family, he is met with more resistance. It did not surprise him, therefore, when I expressed skepticism about their being anything remotely sacred in our little corner of God's earth. If he had cared enough to ask why I happened to feel this way, I might have told him. Instead, he tried

to convince me otherwise, until at last I cut him off.

"Even if there were a rock, there's no way through the woods."

"I'm relying on your husband's industry and extraordinary enthusiasm."

"You've been on Jack's path. Have you seen your rock?"

Such tiresome notions as reality did not concern my uncle. "Have him make another path. Imagine. A site of ancient power, here, where we stand. A kingdom under our feet. It boggles the mind."

"I can't imagine a kingdom."

"Of the spirit, child. Of the soul. Lifted up and revealed by Nature. Transfigured by Her and transformed by man. By our faith and innocence. By our belief in a power beyond ourselves. Remember Saint Peter. He founded an entire church, a kingdom, on a mere stone."

I had had enough of Uncle Matthew for one morning. Leaning up, I whispered, "get him to look then," and kissed him goodbye.

Besides seeing family, summers are a time to be with the kids. Jody was five and just beginning to lose his fear of the water, a good fear to lose seeing how water surrounded us on three sides and the whole vacation centered on beaches and boats. As a child, Emily had had the water fear as well, but only briefly. Typically, she loves to be outdoors, to run and climb and swim. The natural world for her is pure delight. She doesn't worry about getting dirty. She doesn't bother about her clothes or hair. Where she has trouble is in the world of relationships. Where she falters is with friends.

Despite years of trying, she has never had a best friend. Naturally, we used to blame the other girls. As time passed, we asked ourselves what was wrong with ours. Now we have progressed. We are so much wiser. So much more mature. We don't point fingers. We don't cast stones. Emily, we say, is not friendless, but discerning; not haughty, but astute. A child with a low tolerance for displeasure. A girl with standards in terms of friendship that at times are impossible to attain.

Since turning thirteen this year, she has gravitated toward Jack and away from me. The pain I feel at this separation is tempered by my hopes for her. Secretly, I fear that I'm the one responsible for her never having found her heart's desire, that without intending to I've taught her to suspect others and distrust herself. This same voice says it's all to the best that's she breaking away. Maybe Jack, who wouldn't know self-doubt if it bit him, can teach her something different.

The third day of our vacation Emily made a friend her age named Stephanie. Stephanie had a brother Christopher who was a year or two older and hung around the girls when he had nothing better to do. One afternoon, when an invasion of stinging jellyfish forced everyone out of the water, I met their father at the beach. It turned out he and I were distant cousins through a great-aunt, who, by my mother's later account, was a rude and impetuous woman whom nobody liked. What this probably meant was that this aunt of ours was afflicted with some terrible and ghastly habit, like speaking her mind.

In our family women are taught to swallow rather than speak, especially if what we have to say is critical of others. If we simply must voice our opinions, then we do so indirectly, a form of intercourse designed to confound and thus incapacitate opposition. Men, of course, are not

subject to such regulation. Nor, as a rule, are elders. Children, unless invited, are not supposed to speak at all.

My own children, having not been taught these strictures, tend to speak when they have the urge and chatter on at will. The following morning they were doing just that, when my mother, who'd been giving a clinic in the swallowed word, suddenly lost control and yelled at them to go outside. A few minutes later Emily returned to ask if she could take the rowboat out. Jody immediately insisted on going along, but once near the boat, he balked. Jack was ready to take him back inside, but I engineered a compromise that we all go out together. This seemed to ease his fears, as well as my own about staying inside with my angry mother, and five minutes later, with Emily at the oars, we cast off.

Our house sits on a finger-shaped cove separated from the main pond by a narrow channel hazarded by rocks. Jack played navigator, but Emily couldn't hold course, and she grew increasingly frustrated as she kept ramming into them. Jody, who assumed she was doing this on purpose, didn't help matters by demanding that she stop. Finally, she did, tossing the oars angrily against the gunwales and pressing her chin into her knuckles in a clenched-lip pout.

For awhile we drifted, at the mercy of the tide and that peculiar adolescent ability to disable response, until Jack took the oars and Emily the bow, where she refused to speak. In the stern with me Jody caught sight of a horseshoe crab scabbling along the bottom. His fascination overrode his fear, and he leaned over the transom for a better look. Emily came out of her funk to grab the crab net for a swipe. She missed, but now she had something new to do.

She tried to catch another. And then another. After a few more tries she got annoyed.

"I can see them, but I can't catch them," she complained. "They're too fast."

"It's easier at low tide," I said.

"When's low tide?"

"When the birds come in to feed. There's a chart in the kitchen that tells the times."

"Do birds eat fish?" asked Jody.

"Some birds do," I said.

"But not crabs. Right?" He was trying to sort things out, to figure where he stood, especially vis-à-vis this crab thing.

"Some birds eat crabs," said Emily. I assumed she was trying to help, but Jody didn't see it that way.

"No they don't," he said sharply.

"Some **boys** eat crabs, too," she added.

"They don't."

"You know what, Jody?" She had a wicked grin.

"What?"

"Some crabs eat boys."

His eyes widened, and his lips started to quiver. He clutched my arm.

"She's teasing," I told him. "Crabs don't eat boys. They don't eat people at all."

"They bite," said Emily.

"Hush. Why do you want to frighten him?"

She shrugged.

"The world's a scary enough place as it is. You don't have to make it worse."

"I'm not."
 "You were afraid too when you were his age."
 "You always take his side."
 "You're mean," shouted Jody.
 "I'm bored," said Emily.
 "Are we having fun yet?" asked Jack.

Five minutes later we were back at the dock. Emily jumped out of the boat and stalked off. My mother, watching from the back porch, gave me a look implying that I was at fault for allowing such insolence. I glared at her, much as my own daughter had glared at me. Then I went looking for Emily.

I found her in the front of the house, in the maple tree, the only maple on our property. She was sitting on a branch about ten feet above the ground. When she saw me coming, she tried to scramble higher.

Emily is not a clumsy child. How she lost her balance I don't know. She made a noise, a choked cry, then fell. She landed on the ground with a thud. I ran to her, feeling as if I had fallen myself.

Jack took her into Westerly to see a doctor. Four hours and three X-rays later they returned, full of ice cream and french fries and good news. Lots of bruises, but nothing broken. An hour after that we got some other news, not quite as cheery. Hurricane Dorothy was off the coast of Maryland and headed straight for us.

Landfall was estimated at six hours. Pete Cowell, one of the neighbors on the drive, came by with a truckload of plywood, and he and Jack unloaded half a dozen sheets. He said the authorities were calling Dorothy the biggest storm in fifty years and comparing it to the hurricane of '39. He figured we were due for one. Pitch your tent on a beach, he said, and sooner or later you're going to get blown away.

There were ten year-round inhabitants of Aponezet when the hurricane of '39 hit. Two of them died, and the remaining eight, four of whom were my mother, uncle and my two grandparents, huddled a day and a night on top of the knoll, while the storm leveled everything in sight. Uncle Matthew was eight at the time and is the main custodian of these memories. He never tires of the tale, which, emblematic to him of the power of faith and tenacity in the face of misfortune, has assumed biblical proportions. His is the common belief that disasters bring out the best in people, and while this may be true of natural, God-driven ones, I question whether it holds for the more typical variety, the slow-developing, inbred disasters of familial misconduct and wrongdoing. In my meager experience these are a source, not of heroics, but of shame and denial. The best to be said of them is they give us plenty of room for self-improvement.

My mother watched the kids while Jack and I nailed the plywood over the windows. The wind was picking up, and near dusk a State trooper drove in and told us we had to evacuate. They were closing Beach Road in twenty minutes.

We hurried into the car and went to get Uncle Matthew, who was waiting on his porch. I half-expected him to tell us he was staying behind, but apparently today was not the day for a test of faith. He was nervous and beleaguered and once in the car barely spoke at all. His silence was filled easily by the children, who chattered non-stop. Emily, like me, was worried; Jody, like

Jack, excited. My mother, who was driving, was all business. She knew just what to do, as if she'd prepared ahead of time, and it occurred to me that she, like me, lived with a shadow that had taught her to expect disaster and to be strong.

We drove to Providence to stay with my sister. The storm hit land at midnight and blew until dawn. Then the eye came, or what we thought was the eye. We cracked the windows in preparation for the pressure change, but the calmness only deepened. An hour passed, then two, then three, until it became apparent that the storm had either blown itself out or passed us by. Uncle Matthew, who had not slept the entire night, insisted on returning to Aponeset at once. My mother replied that it seemed prudent to wait until we knew that the roads were open and clear. Uncle Matthew, who was older, argued with her, but she had long since stopped automatically deferring to him. And since the car was hers, she got her way. We waited. I was glad.

By noon the radio was reporting open roads, so the six of us piled in the car and headed back. I sat in front between my mother and uncle, between caution on the one hand and fretfulness on the other. Of the two, fretfulness was clearly suffering the most.

Uncle Matthew lived year round at Aponeset and had everything to lose. My mother understood this and tried to reassure him. At his request she kept the radio tuned to the news. She spoke calmly but firmly to the children, asking that they try their best to be quiet. At one of the many halts in traffic she reached across my lap and squeezed her brother's hand.

Apart from this, the most notable event of the trip occurred when Jody spotted an overturned semi in a ditch. This was the source of much wonder and dismay, as he tried to piece things together.

"Did it have an accident?" he asked Jack. At this point we were slowed to a crawl, and he had plenty of time to examine this oddity of nature, a truck on its back.

"Looks like it," said Jack.

"Is the driver inside?"

"I doubt it."

"He climbed out. Right?"

"Right." There was, in fact, no sign of anyone in the wreckage.

"He went home?"

"He went somewhere."

In the rear-view mirror I saw Jody puzzle this over. He frowned. "Are we going to have an accident?"

I turned in my seat. "No," I told him. "The storm's over. We're all very safe."

"Do you have to pee?" asked Jack.

Jody shook his head.

"You sure?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then I agree with your mother." He ruffled Jody's hair, then kissed him. "We're safe as safe can be."

Traffic was light all the way back, but at the Beach Road -- Route 1 intersection we hit an unexpected roadblock. Citing the dangers of contaminated water, fallen wires and possible looting, a State trooper had parked his car across the road and refused to let us pass. This

incensed my uncle, who might have sprung at the man had he been able to get out of the car. But cooler heads prevailed, in this case my mother's, who kept her finger firmly on the master door lock. With tact and perseverance she spoke at length to the officer, until she had him convinced not only of our harmlessness but of our right of passage. He was really no match for her. It was a wonder he even tried.

Beach Road was a mess. Sand everywhere, trees and wires down, chimneys toppled, boats overturned. We had to stop several times to move brush and rocks out of the way. The kids couldn't stop jabbering, but as we approached Uncle Matthew's, they fell silent. The gravity of the situation, the bleak possibility that his house might be gone or irreparably damaged, chilled us all.

My mother pulled into his driveway and had to stop almost immediately at a waist-high boulder that now blocked the way. She cut the engine, and Uncle Matthew rushed out. He walked halfway to the house, then stopped. Slowly, he surveyed the scene.

The front lawn was blanketed by a sheet of sand, and water lay pooled everywhere. One of the cedars was knocked over and another was leaning precariously close to the roof. The garage door was splintered. Aunt Lillian's garden was gone.

He stared at all this a moment, arms at his side, looking lost, then made his way to the house. Sand had piled into a dune against the front porch, and slowly he plodded up its face. He unlocked the front door and worked it free, then went inside. Ten minutes later he reappeared with a report.

A kitchen window had blown out, and there was water damage as a result. Dishes were broken, and in the living room books were scattered everywhere. A favorite vase was in pieces. A painting had somehow been torn from its frame. But structural damage, it appeared, was minimal. The roof, for one, was still in place. The house hadn't jumped its footings. The walls stood where they had before the storm.

My mother's house fared even better. A few shingles were torn from the roof, and the wooden dock had been snapped from its mooring. It lay mired in the cove, which apparently had surged a good four feet, because the entire back lawn was in a state of salt-water shock. But beyond this, and the maple in front, which had been ripped down the middle like a zipper, there was little damage. I never liked the maple anyway, not since my grandfather had used it to hold me in place while he ground his pelvis against mine. That was another way he spread his poison, by making me suspicious and even fearful of beautiful things. I was glad to see the tree destroyed, but when I looked, my mother was crying.

"My father planted that tree," she said, wiping her cheeks and clasping herself in her arms. "It was a wedding present for me."

"You'll have to call the tree man."

She heaved a sigh. "We'll get some firewood at least. Once it seasons."

She gazed at the tree, then turned to me. She knew what I was thinking. It was a struggle for her.

"It was different then, Sharon. People weren't so outspoken. We kept things to ourselves. Looking back, it may seem cowardly, but that's just how it was."

"If it happened to my kids -- and it wouldn't, believe me, I wouldn't let it -- but if it did, I'd feel responsible."

"I didn't know."

"I'd feel responsible for that."

"Yes. That's the kind of person you are." She started to walk away, then stopped. "If you want an apology, you have one. But I don't think that's what you want."

"I want you to love me."

She looked at me as if I'd spoken in tongues. "Why do you say such things?"

I should have been prepared, but how does a person prepare for an answer like that?

"Do you love Emily?" she asked.

I clenched my jaw and didn't answer.

"Jody?"

"Yes. Of course. I love them both."

"And I love you," she said, then surprised me by coming over and giving me a hug. "And I loved that maple too."

Later, I thought of a reply, but by then she had broken our embrace and wandered off. I could have caught up with her but decided not to. Women in our family rarely run. More commonly, we stand in place like trees and watch.

For four days we were without electricity and therefore water, because our pump was down along with everything else. Luckily, the weather turned rainy following the hurricane, and by setting out pots along the drip line of the roof, we managed to collect enough rainwater for cooking and drinking. For washing we used the pond, which left a salty residue.

The electric stove was out, but we had the fireplace for cooking. For light we used candles. If it had just been Jack and me, this would have been romantic, but for Jody it was anything but. Frightened by the flickering shadows on his bedroom walls, he started having nightmares. Extinguishing the candles and putting him in total darkness only made things worse, and we ended up bringing him in bed with us. This made for sleepless nights, which seemed only in keeping with the general mood of deprivation. Of all of us, Emily was the only one who thrived.

Living primitive for her was a lark, an adventure out of one of her books. She loved our fires and candlelight, loved gathering water in pots and cooking over an open flame. She helped Jack patch the roof and retrieve the sunken dock. She organized a crabbing expedition with her friends Stephanie and Christopher. At low tide the three of them rowed out into the cove, and two hours later, ecstatic, returned with a bucketful of the native blues. Spurred by her example, Jack took his snorkel and fins oceanside, where he gathered a netful of mussels from the offshore rocks. That night we feasted, and our spirits lifted. The next day dawned clear. The electricity came back at ten, and in celebration I took a hot shower, then made a batch of cookies in the now-functioning oven. My mother drove into Westerly to stock the refrigerator, and Jack, liberated from his role as survivalist, went to check on his path.

He came back an hour later, shaking his head. It was gone. The Wild Wood Trail, his labor of love, had disappeared. In its place was an impenetrable tangle of uprooted viburnum, bittersweet and honeysuckle. Branches were torn from trees, some of which themselves were torn wholly from the ground. The bogs were flooded. The plank and tire bridge was washed out. And the light, whose play through the thickets and clearings Jack depended on for direction, was

everywhere different, causing him to get lost time and again, until at last he gave up and back-tracked home.

I felt defeated for him, but I needn't have. Fifteen minutes later he was marching back out the door, this time armed with machete, loppers and a hand saw. In two days he had a new path that incorporated cleared sections of the old one with fresh twists and turns. For lack of time it was more primitive than the original, with fallen trees to shimmy over and tunnels of toppled grape to crawl through. On my second trip along it, which was my first alone, I found a cache of old bottles in a pile of dirt. I also saw a muskrat and, before they scurried off, a deer and fawn eating fallen apples. And yesterday, purely by accident, I found the rock.

It was speckled black on a field of gray and shaped like the nose of an airplane. In its center was a fist-sized hole just as Uncle Matthew had described. There was water in the hole, the surface of which was flecked with yellow pollen. Stalks of goldenrod were flowering nearby.

That afternoon I went to tell Uncle Matthew. He was sweeping sand from his porch when I arrived, dressed in his orange jumpsuit and a Red Sox baseball cap. The broken window had already been repaired, Aunt Lillian's garden cleared of sand and the dune against the front stairs shoveled down.

"You've been busy," I said.

"A veritable whirlwind," he replied cheerily, putting down his broom and dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief. "Sloth was drubbed out of me at an early age. A dreadful sin, my beloved wife's exhortations to the contrary. She would have me in bed half the day if she could."

"It's no sin to rest. She cares about you."

"The sin is not in rest. The sin is in sloth. Do you know the definition of it?"

"Laziness," I said. "You're hardly lazy, Uncle."

"Sloth is laziness of spirit. Laxity of purpose. Carelessness. Sloth is taking things for granted."

"What do you take for granted, Uncle Matthew?"

He looked at me, then smiled. "Elephant's child. I take that the sun will rise for granted. That sins can be rectified. That peace is attainable."

"That's faith, Uncle."

"None of it easily," he continued. "I think of the Book of Genesis. The parable of creation. God toiled for six days and rested but one. One day for devotion, for contemplation, for meditation, for prayer. One in seven, more taxing by far than the other six. Which is why He asks no more. One day alone He requires that we search out joy and beauty in the world, one out of seven that we show our love. Every day He asks that we should, and of course hopes that we do, but one day He demands that we must."

"Six days is a long time to wait for a little love."

"As I say, it needn't be that long. It's the ratio that's important, not the absolute number. It could be one-seventh of a day, or an hour. I suppose if one were facile, it could be one-seventh of every minute."

"At a minimum," I observed. "It wouldn't hurt to try for more."

He inclined his head in agreement. "Sloth is the sin of not trying at all. Toiling, but never on behalf of the Lord. Or the heart."

"Is that what Granddaddy taught you?"

"My father believed that children were full of sin. Sloth was but one of many."

"Temptation, I suppose, was another."

He gave me a look, and for a moment I thought I would bite my tongue. But I wanted to know how far it went. How far and who knew and what, if anything, had been done.

He listened solemnly as I recounted to him my experience with and of his father. He was deeply troubled to hear it, though not shocked. By the end, he had his handkerchief balled up in his hands.

"Louise has said much the same. Apparently, she wasn't alone."

"Did you know it was happening?"

He shook his head. "Never."

"Would you have stopped him?"

His body seemed to tremble. "I would have killed him."

I didn't believe that. Nor could I believe that he didn't know. I asked again.

"If I did know," said Uncle Matthew, "it's hidden from me. My father could do no wrong. For that alone I pray daily for forgiveness."

"We all idolized him," I said.

"Yes. It is a hunger the Devil depends on."

"And silence. He thrives on silence too."

He sighed. "We have much to atone for, Sharon."

"I found the rock," I told him.

"The rock?"

"Yes. The one with the hole in the center."

He looked bewildered.

"The stone, Uncle Matthew. Just where you said. The hurricane destroyed the old path. Jack made a new one that goes right by it."

"You say it has a hole in the center?"

"Yes. Like this." I showed him with my hands. "You described it to me."

"Remarkable. The sacred stone. Revealed by the violence of Nature's hand. Discovered by you."

"And Jack's sweat," I added.

"Stout-hearted Jack," said Uncle Matthew. "Blessed be the path makers."

"Will you come and see it?"

"Will I?" He was beaming now, his face as jovial as before it had been grim. "Lead on, Beatrice. Lead on."

That evening he hatched a plan to locate the third point of his triangle, and the next morning, while he rummaged in his garage for an old surveyor's transit left over from the days when his father had parceled out the land, I drove into Westerly for a helium-filled balloon. The only one I could find was made of foil and painted with a picture of Tyrannosaurus Rex. I bought two, gave one to Jody and added an extra twenty feet of string to the other, which I then carried along the path to the rock. There I tied it down and teased it up and out above the trees. Re-tracing my path, I took the long, circuitous route that ended on the knoll.

Uncle Matthew was already bent over the transit, which he had set upon a large, flat rock.

In the distance I could see Block Island and in the opposite direction the entire length of the pond. The dinosaur balloon, glinting in the sun, was clearly visible above the canopy of the woods, and the transit was trained on it. Clamping it in place, Uncle Matthew straightened up.

He was wearing khaki shorts, a matching short-sleeved shirt and a pith helmet. In his shirt pocket was a spiral notebook and a pen. I'm sure he fancied himself an adventurer, but to me he looked a little daffy, like a cartoon character or a slightly addle-brained boy scout.

"Fifty-three degrees east of north," he said, removing the notebook and jotting this down. "Assuming an equilateral triangle, that makes our third point either here, seven degrees west of north, or here, a hundred and thirteen degrees east."

He showed me the notebook, where he had sketched a triangle atop two intersecting lines labeled with the points of the compass.

"Our third point can't be east...it falls in the ocean. You see how simple it is? The only possible location is here."

He left me to puzzle over his drawing, while he returned to the transit, which he swiveled around until it pointed toward the pond.

"Equal sides and equal weight," he muttered to himself. "Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Triangulus mysticus. Triangulus benedicti. Prudence, justice and mercy."

All at once, I heard laughter. A moment later, Emily's friend Stephanie appeared below us. She was walking down Beach Road with another girl, and it occurred to me that I hadn't seen her and Emily together for several days. Automatically, I assumed that they had had a falling out, and just as automatically, I started thinking up ways to mend Emily's hurt feelings.

"At the edge of the woods. That's where you'll find it."

"Find what?" My mind had gone blank.

"A rock, I would think. Or a cairn of some sort. There, I would say."

I followed his finger. It was pointing into the thickest part of the woods. There was no way on earth I was going to get through that. Not in the two days we had left for vacation. Not without a path.

"Go around," he said. "Follow the edge of the cove. Go at low tide."

His vision of a sacred space, which had worked its way under my skin, now paled beside my preoccupation with Emily. You go, I wanted to say. You look.

But he was old, and I was young, and there was no sense offending him unnecessarily. We left it that I'd look if I had time. And the next day, with everybody miraculously taken care of, it turned out I did.

Skirting the undeveloped, rear shoreline of the cove is a deer trail that at high tide is submerged. But at ebb tide it's passable, and in jeans and old sneakers I made my way through the marsh grass and the mud. The day was mild and still: except for sparrows flitting in and out of cattails and egrets picking through the flats, nothing moved. I passed some non-descript rocks, the remnants of an old dock, and a tire that had washed ashore, hardly things to qualify as holy. Reaching the end of the trail, I turned around and re-traced my steps, paying closer attention this time.

Two of the rocks, I noted, were boulder-sized and larger than the rest. One was littered with broken shells, remnants, I assumed, of a gull's meal. The other was covered with poison

ivy. From where I stood, both the knoll and the dinosaur balloon were visible. It seemed more or less the right spot. But what spot, I wondered, was that? There was a nearby apple tree that was failing under a burden of bittersweet. Also a rotted cedar filled with holes. And these two rocks, which were ordinary at best.

I looked another fifteen minutes before giving up and heading home. I felt both disappointed and relieved. Hope tends to run in me like water, and sometimes I can't distinguish the false from the true. True hope is uplifting. I think of it as based on strength. False hope is a sign of weakness. It's a result of not being honest with oneself, not being willing to see things as they are.

I was relieved to come up empty because I had begun to suspect that the search was one of those self-defeating hopes, one of those false promises, like Granddaddy telling me I was special, assuring me there was nothing wrong. Vaguely, I blamed Uncle Matthew for hooking me on this cock-eyed vision of his, for getting me started. On the other hand, I understood how irresistible the idea of an ancient seat of power could be. This was a man, after all, who had dedicated his life to the world of the spirit and the soul. Had I been composed a little differently, I could easily have done the same.

That night my mother cooked lobsters and curried rice, an end of vacation tradition, our last supper. Jody was dumbstruck as she dropped the brownish-green creatures in the pot and ten minutes later pulled them out bright orange. It was a transformation of magical proportions, though neither of the kids would go so far as to eat one. Jody on the refusal-to-try-anything-new principle, Emily on the loftier grounds of unwillingness to participate in such a brutal slaughter. Jack pointed out that she had had no such compunction when she was gleefully boiling up her bucketful of crabs from the pond. That, she replied, was different.

"How was it different?" he asked.

"How would you like to have your hands tied up and kept half-frozen until someone decides it's time to kill you?"

"If you don't bind their claws, they could take your finger off," said Jack.

"It's cruel."

He tried to ease her conscience. "When they're cold like that, they're not suffering. They're not thinking about tomorrow. They're probably not thinking at all."

"Where did you get such a soft heart, Emily?" my mother asked.

"It's not like I have some big thing for lobsters," Emily said. "It's just I feel bad for them."

"At home we eat vegetarian mostly," I said in her defense.

My mother did not reply. She didn't have to. The look she gave me was enough.

She pushed the serving bowl of rice toward Emily. "Well then you better fill up on this."

"I'm not hungry anymore," said Emily, having eaten virtually nothing. "Can I be excused?"

Jack glanced at me. Was discipline in order? I could feel my mother's disapprobation.

"Yes," I said. "You may be. Go ahead."

She carried her plate to the kitchen, where she grabbed an apple and some crackers. She was almost out the door, when she stopped and came a few steps back.

"I'm going out. Okay?"

"Where?" I asked.

She shrugged non-committally.

"I saw your friend Stephanie the other day. Is she still around?"

"They're leaving tomorrow."

"Maybe you should say goodbye. Exchange addresses."

"Mom."

"Let her go," said Jack.

"I'd like a destination."

"I'm taking a walk," she said. "Is there some problem with that?"

It is so hard letting go.

"No," I said at length. "No problem. Have fun."

She kissed Jack and me goodbye, then went over to my mother. "It was nice of you to get the lobsters, Grandma. I'm sorry I didn't like them."

"I wish I'd known sooner."

If it were me, I would have turned my back on her. As it was, I was stiff with fury. But Emily did the opposite. She bent down and gave my mother a hug.

"I love it here," she said. "It's my favorite part of the whole year. Thank you for having us, Grandma."

She kissed her on the cheek, then skipped out of the room, waving goodbye at the door.

My mother, I think, was stunned. I waited for the backlash. But Jack had a better idea.

"I'll have more rice," he said, reaching for the bowl. "One less mouth suits me fine. And if no one minds, I'll have another lobster, too."

"Help yourself," said my mother.

"Please," I added.

"I'm with Emily," he said, as he piled on the food. "It's paradise here. You can't beat it. Thank you, Grandma."

The next day was our last. We would spend the night in a motel at the airport and fly out at dawn the following day. My mother and I took an early morning walk to the breachway by way of Jack's path. There was a heavy mist in the woods that grew heavier as we emerged and neared the water. We could hear the songs of birds and the lap of waves but couldn't see a thing. My mother was sad that we were leaving. I suspected that she was also relieved.

"I do love the peace and quiet," she acknowledged.

"You're used to living alone."

"Yes. Eight years this October since your father died."

I nodded. I, too, counted the years.

"The winters tend to creep by, but the rest of the time seems to fly."

"Do you ever think of living with a man again?"

"No," she said. "I don't."

"Never?"

She thought about it. "Oh, I guess I did, early on. All our friends were married. There was a certain expectation that I would be again. But I don't think about it anymore. I enjoy my widowhood. I enjoy having to please no one but myself."

My mother had also been molested. While I had chosen to work it out in therapy and

elsewhere, she had waited until she could live alone. My father's untimely death had been in this way both a tragedy and a blessing for her. Up to then she had never in her life been absolutely free of men.

"I love you, Mom," I said.

She took my hand, and a moment later, a great blue heron appeared out of the mist. It flew so close we could hear the rush of air through its wings. So big a bird it seemed almost not a bird at all.

Later that morning I stopped by Uncle Matthew's to say goodbye. He had just woken from a nap and wasn't all there at first. He looked disheveled and old, and it occurred to me that this farewell, this visit -- any visit -- could be my last with him. I told him I'd been unable to find the third point. For a moment this drew a blank, but then it registered. He heaved a sigh.

"Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps there is no point. No point, no triangle. Perhaps I've led you on a wild goose chase."

"Did you make it up, Uncle?"

He pondered this. "I think not. I think there is a holiness here. The sea, the woods, all the life herein. This land is a great gift to us, Sharon, a great blessing. I believe in its power. I believe in its ability to bring peace. If we fail in our search, it can only be we who are lacking."

He sounded so sad.

"Don't lose hope," I said. "It could be out there. It probably is. Maybe in winter, when the plants die down. Maybe then you'll find it."

"In winter you'll be gone."

"I will. Yes. In winter I live my own life."

"Of course. You must."

"I'll be back next summer."

This seemed to raise his spirits, or else for my sake he decided to raise them on his own. "What more could a man desire?"

"Goodbye, Uncle Matthew."

He held out his arms to me. "Godspeed."

That afternoon, with Jack at the beach with the kids for a final swim, I stood on our dock for a parting glimpse of paradise. The tide was out, and the mist had lifted. My eyes were drawn to the path I'd taken the previous day.

One last try, I thought, and this time when I reached the boulders, I headed toward the apple tree, away from the shore. Choked by bittersweet, the tree had little fruit, but I managed to find one small apple and was about to bite into it when I heard the sound of oars. A moment later, Emily and her friend Christopher came into view. He was rowing our rowboat, and she was perched at the bow, guiding him. They were headed my way, which seemed a miscalculation, until it became clear that they meant to beach the boat and come ashore. Christopher gave a furious last pull and they hit the mud, then slid a few inches before jumping out and pulling the boat onto the grass. I crept deeper into the tree.

Christopher said something to Emily that made her smile, and they locked hands. She led him toward one of the boulders and with a gesture I had seen a thousand times brushed the hair out of her face. Then she paused, and for an instant I was certain she knew I was there. My heart

was pounding. The two of them drew closer together. And closer still, until their lips were almost touching.

I didn't know what to do. The rock they were standing next to was the one that was covered with poison ivy. If Emily moved but a fraction of an inch back, she would touch the plant and within hours be in a terrible state. I wanted to shout out to her, to warn her and protect her. But at the same time my heart swelled with pride. She was doing just what she was meant to do, in just the way it was meant to be done. In a world full of danger that has to be, in some essential way, the safest course.