

# Grace

A long time ago I had two sisters and we lived on an island. There was me and Jeannie and Em. They called me Grace, but I have never had much of that. I was an awkward child. I still am all these years later. Our house had two doors, one to the south, one to the north. Its garden looked towards the setting sun. It was a garden of apple trees and fuchsia and everything in it leaned away from the wind. Dry stone walls encircled it and sheep and children broke them down. My mother lived there with us. Boats came and went bringing food and sometimes sheep, and there were times when we lived by catching fish and rabbits, though we were not so good at either. Richard Wood came in the *Iliad*, his wooden yawl, always it seemed when a gale of wind threatened. He dropped his anchor in the sound and stayed for nights at a time. Mother said he liked his home comforts. He was younger than her, though not by much, and she was younger than Father. Father liked to come first, she said. In summertime we swam naked in the crystal water and saw his anchor bedded in the sand, the marks the chain left where it swung to tide or wind. Many a time I swam down that chain, hauling myself deeper, hand over hand, until I could stand on the bottom. But he took no notice. In calm weather we could

see my footprints on the seabed as if I lived down there and had stood a long time in one place looking up. Or perhaps that was not how it happened. Words have that way of invading memory; the stories they tell us become our stories. What I remember and what I forget may be one and the same thing, or they may merely depend upon each other. And what my father remembered for me.

There were three islands and they were youth, childhood, and age, and I searched for my father in every one.

# Jeannie

My first memory, the first memory that I can certainly say wasn't given to me by someone else is of my father hoisting me onto his shoulders so that I could see something. What do you see, Jeannie, he says, what do you see? We're in a crowd and my mother Jane is there. I don't remember whether my sister Grace is there or not and I don't know what it is that I want to see. It must have been before Em was born. What I remember most clearly is the enormous sense of safety and sureness coupled with a giddy vertigo. I remember looking down on the crowd. Many men wear cloth caps and the women wear scarves, as they did still in those days, and my father is smoking a pipe and I can smell the tobacco. One man turns and says something like, What you think of that then, Tom? And Tom takes the pipe from his mouth, releasing my leg in the process, and says something I don't catch. Even now it only takes someone lighting a pipe outside a restaurant for a great wave of security to possess me. Tom is not a tall man but from the height of his shoulders everyone around looks small. Hold on, Jeannie, he says to me, and swings round and moves through the crowd and out onto the street and there I see a horse; a man is holding him by the bridle, and I remember steam coming off his

back and steam coming from a large greenish-brown shit on the road behind him. I can smell the horse and he smells like Tom's old coat.

All my early memories of him are like that. Shelter, comfort, pleasant smells and sounds. I hear his voice sometimes—in the street or in a park or in a quiet room—and I turn expecting to see him. My expectation is always of a young man, trim, loose-limbed, fine-boned, coming towards me in his tweed jacket with something in his hand. My father the gift bringer, bearer of news, the world traveler bringing stones from Italy, California, India. I was a collector of stones. I was his favorite. I make no apologies. I loved him the most. Grace, on the other hand, could never love anyone or anything without some reserve of herself; she has a kind of native hostility or cynicism that prevents her from ever being wholeheartedly loving towards anybody. She's one of those people who feels the world has cheated her of some special experience. I pity her for that.

# Grace

One day on our island my sister Jeannie ran in to say that she had seen a whale in the sound and I ran out after her, my mother calling me: Grace, it's your day, take Em. But I was too excited. And there were three fin whales making their way into the rising tide. We heard their breathing. It carried perfectly in the still grey air. It was reflected back at us by the low cloud. The sea was still and burnished. We ran along the rocks watching for their breaching. We decided it was a mother, a father, and a calf. They were in no hurry. When we reached the beacon, a small unlit concrete marker indicating the western end of the island, we watched them breaching and diving into the distance until we could see them no more. But they left behind their calmness and the unhurried but forceful sound of their blows. We were wearing our summer shorts, and so, once the whales were no longer to be seen, I pulled mine off, threw Jeannie my shirt, and plunged in and swam out into the rising tide and allowed myself to be carried along outside everything and back to the anchorage. That was how, so far out, drifting like a seal in the tide, I saw my mother kissing Richard Wood against the gable of our house. It did not come as a shock or a surprise but I felt a sickening sense of guilt

and shame and I allowed myself to be carried past the anchored yawl and too far out into the sound, so that it was a struggle and a hard swim to get back. My sisters, Jeannie and Em, watched me sullenly for a long time. I think if I had drowned they would have watched that too with the same sullen disinterest. When I came ashore I was exhausted. I threw myself down on the strand and lay staring at the clouds for a long time. My mother was wearing her slacks and a jumper. Her sleeves were rolled back. She had put on weight and I could clearly see the bulge of her stomach low down, pressed against his belt. His hands were on her back inside the jumper. They could not have been seen from the shore. At that time my father was already in England. His name was mentioned in newspapers and from time to time when he wrote home, usually sending a check, he included clippings and reviews.

It's possible that Jeannie already hated me, because while I lay on the sand she prised a large stone out of the shale and brought it steadfastly towards me, approaching from behind, and dropped it on my chest. The shock almost stopped my breath. I think she may well have been trying to kill me, but at five or six she simply didn't have the height to do it. The stone simply didn't reach a sufficient velocity. It landed flat and made a flat sound that I heard in my body, rather than felt, and I was too stunned to cry. I feel certain she dropped it on my chest rather than my head because she wanted to stop my heart. Had she been older she would have tried for my brain instead.

By the time I had recovered my breath she was gone. I searched for her, steadily and ruthlessly working my way west through the hiding places that I knew, and found her near the old tower, crouched in the bracken. She had already forgotten why she was hiding. She had feathers and a collection of bracken fronds, playing some game that involved talking in voices. She did not hear my approach. I caught her from behind by the hair, which was

shoulder length at that time, and swung her onto her back. I was on her then and we fought hard, scratching and pulling, and in the end we had each other by the hair, slapping and pinching and kicking until, rolling off me, she struck her head on a stone and began to cry. I can see her now, a pitiful, snotty-nosed waif curled in a ball, holding her head and wailing for her mother. Now I feel nothing but shame at the memory but at the time I laughed at her, because children know that laughing is the most hurtful reaction to pain, and she ran away again.

She was gone for the rest of the day and we had to search the island to bring her home for tea. By then the calm was gone and Richard Wood was talking anxiously about his anchor and declaring repeatedly that he should make a run for it, and my mother was pressing him to stay.

My father's books, and his color pieces for the *Manchester Guardian*, depicting a family surviving on an island on the edge of the world, part fiction, part memoir, were all the rage when we were children. This was the late 1960s and the world had fallen in love simultaneously with two incompatible mistresses—self-sufficiency and conspicuous consumption. The books represented the former, but my father, I would eventually discover, was more given at a personal level to the latter. It was my mother, my sisters, and I who held the responsibility of acting out the life he felt bound to follow. We were the ones who lived in what he liked to call the peasant economy.

We called it Castle Island, but there never was a castle, only a lonely watchtower, tall enough to survey the whole island and the sound and the ocean beyond, part of a network of revenue-gathering outposts, not to mention occasional piracy, sometime in the fifteenth century, and now just two walls on the side of a cliff where even the crows did not think it safe to nest. He

bought the land with the advance from his first book—in those days you couldn't give land away in Ireland—and installed us in what had been the last occupied house on the eastern shore, near a sweet well, in the shadow of the apple orchard, by a sheltered anchorage and a small sandy strand. We were his experiment; he took readings of us as required. We were his instruments and his utopia.

There were fields where we tried to grow potatoes and salt-burnt kale and onions. Other things too, perhaps, that I have not remembered. We kept hens one summer and had eggs for breakfast, dinner, and tea until the time came to pack up and leave again. Then there was nothing we could do for the hens. The following spring there was no trace of them. We never repeated the experiment. We had a cat who kept the mice at bay—Flanagan was his name. He was white as snow and his eyes were like stones. When Father was there he set a fixed trotline of hooks across the mouth of the strand and in the morning he often had fish—plaice, dabs, flounder, bass. Our job was to dig the worms at low tide and hunt under rocks for ragworm, and in the evenings to thread the hooks with the worms and lay them out so that they didn't foul each other as they ran out. He took photographs. *The children baiting hooks*. We appear in more than one volume. In the morning he pulled the silver creatures ashore and we cooked plaice for breakfast and had bass for dinner. This was before the fishery had been ruined. He wrote about it all, of course: *Living an Island, Loving the World*, by Tom Newman. Now out of print.

When he was at home the house was warmer, fuller, brighter; it functioned as a home and a house, and we functioned as a family. When he went away we settled back into our animal existence. After a few weeks without him the house lost his presence. It began to be possible to think of him as a character we had read about, someone of enormous energy and vision whose part had been to



bring life to the other characters, a catalyst at work among lethargic elements. But the elements only appeared lethargic. Things happened that no one has ever explained. And the dynamic by which we related was frightening and selfish and destructive. When I think of it now I realize that it was not that he made things happen, but that he prevented things from happening. And when he was away there was no god to stand in the doorway and watch inside and out, and what happened inside the house and what happened in the fields, in the orchard, and along the shore were both separate and different and inseparable and the same.

Richard Wood was a poet and my father's friend, but he was of course also my mother's and my sister Jeannie's lover. He was a beautiful man. He was tall and thin and he moved his limbs with the grace of one who was at home in several elements. We thought he understood the air and could tell from simply breathing it what tomorrow would bring. He understood the shapes of clouds and had categorized them and knew rhymes that interpreted them.

Mackerel skies and mares' tails, he would say, make lofty ships carry low sails.

Or: When the rain comes before the wind, topsail sheets and halyards mind.

It was a kind of knowledge that was useful on an island and we wanted it. I see him standing on the highest rock in the face of the marching seas and looking to windward like a god or a figure in a painting. I don't think he ever did that, but the memory is there, as real as a fact. Richard, what do you see? Is the future in the wind? Not now, my dear, not now. More than once he said to me that what landsmen think of as the smell of the sea was, to a sailor, the smell of the land and the smell of danger.

He knew the meaning of the weather systems and could tell by the frequency and length of waves how far away a new gale might