

Promised Land

Steven Utley

TIM'S COLOR HAD IMPROVED by the time Rene found him on the starboard catwalk under the helicopter deck. She gave him a solicitous smile and said, "Feel better now?"

"No. Just emptier."

"You're carrying on a great tradition. Charles Darwin was seasick most of the time he spent aboard the *Beagle*."

He looked sheepishly at the calm graptolite-choked sea; the surface glistened with sunlight reflected from the creatures' semitransparent and iridescent flotation bags. "I can't speak for Darwin, but I'm ashamed of myself. I feel like I've just defiled this place."

"You'll get your sea legs yet."

"It wasn't until this trip that I've ever been out of sight of land in my whole life."

"Well, perk up, we're almost there," and she directed his attention to a point off the starboard bow.

From that distance, the island looked like nothing so much as an immense heap of broken glass. Most of the Paleozoic real estate they had seen before now had tended toward dun, the grayish brown of barren, heavily weathered rock. This island was as black as tar, with here and there a gleam of sunlight on a ribbon of moving water. Rivulets rushed down from the interior; waterfalls cascaded directly into the sea or splashed onto scree at the bases of jagged cliffs. In places the cliffs dropped straight into the sea; elsewhere the waves had gouged out caves or carved away softer portions of the coast to create isolated irregular pillars. These sea stacks stoically endured endless battering while, behind them, the cliffs retreated across rocky, wave-cut platforms.

Tim made a face. "Not really a place you'd want to bring the family."

"Oh, I don't know. That's prime pre-Pangaean oceanfront property. Grand view of Panthalassa. Put in a concession stand, some rides, a water park—people would come from eons around."

"Think Dick'll like it?"

Now more than ever before, she thought, Dick is incapable of liking anything. But she said, "He'd goddamn well better like it, after what we've done to get him here. And he's going to have it all to himself once we've come and gone. A whole prehistoric island to call his own."

"Where do you suppose it'll end up—plate-tectonically speaking?"

She shrugged. "Part of Scotland, maybe Ireland."

"Scotland and Ireland are good."

She glanced at her watch and turned from the rail. "They should be just about ready for us in the boat bay. You sure you've got everything?"

"Everything. Everything except breakfast, lunch, and dinner, that is. And my socks. Those came up right after dinner did. I wish we could fly over in a 'copter."

"Take it up with the Navy. Besides, I thought you said you suffer from airsickness, too."

"Airsickness, seasickness, carsickness. I can be utterly miserable on land and sea and in the air."

"You're certainly versatile."

"It's the hike once we get ashore that I'm not looking forward to."

They went below decks and waited until the bluejackets had finished stowing equipment and supplies into the boat. Then they stepped aboard and took their places under a canvas awning, and their Navy

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"It's the hike once we get ashore that I'm not looking forward to." They went below decks and waited until the bluejackets had finished stowing equipment and supplies into the boat. Then they stepped aboard and took their places under a canvas awning, and their Navy pilot deftly maneuvered the craft

out into the open and made for shore. He put in to a cove where the sea had first created a small inlet and then, breaking through relatively soft rock, enlarged it. A second bluejacket had stationed himself in the bow as lookout. From time to time he raised his left or right hand, and the pilot gave the wheel a twist. The water here was smooth and clear, and on the bottom lay large, dark, irregular masses capable of holing the boat's hull. Two other Navy men, including an older one who was in charge, sat amidships. No one spoke. The only sound was the thrum of the boat's motor. Within the cove, rubble from the crumbling cliffs encircled a muddy fringe of beach. One section of cliff had collapsed entirely.

The landing party, comprising the two civilians and three of the Navy men, had to climb the steeply graded scree burdened with all their gear before they could at last consider themselves safely ashore. When they were about halfway up, Rene overheard one young sailor remark that "that skinny old lady climbs like a goat," and called a halt for rest. While the sailors caught their breath and looked on with varying degrees of interest and bemusement, she and Tim poked among the rocks and exclaimed in delight as they fished out wriggling primitive arthropods and insubstantial green plants. Tim showed the Navy men his muddy fingers.

"Ah?" said the one in charge.

"Dirt," said Tim. "Soil."

"Ah," said the Navy man. "That's good." He sounded tentative, almost dubious.

"Next time," said another, younger Navy man, "I hope you folks'll pick someplace closer to home and not so high out of the water."

The Navy man in charge nodded agreement. "What's so special about *this* island?"

"It's on the dark side of the world." Tim nodded toward the horizon. "All your major landmasses are thataway. From there all the way around to back of there is one big stretch of ocean with just the occasional crescent of volcanic islands wherever there's a subduction

zone close by. And these isolated islands are the forcing houses for evolution. We can expect to find some very strange species here."

"Oh, thrill," said the young bluejacket. "Like there aren't enough strange species back at Stinktown. But why *this* island?"

"It was named for a colleague of ours. So, when we started planning this little field trip—well, we wanted a remote island, so we said, 'Why not this one?' It fit our needs. Isolated, yet not literally on the back side of the world."

"Well," the young sailor drawled, "if I was your colleague, I'd be more particular about what I gave my name to."

"He's dead. We submitted his name to

the nomenclature committee. They applied it to this island."

"Sorry," the sailor said.

"He died a long time ago," Rene said, "or a long time from now, however you want to put it."

* * *

A NURSE CARRYING A TRAY emerged from the room as Rene approached. They exchanged smiles, and Rene asked, "How is he? May I see him?"

"Go right in. His wife's with him. But he's not being polite to anybody today. You'll have to stand in front of the television to get him to pay you any attention. He's into one of his science things." Rene ventured an experiment.

"Do you know what it is, this science thing?" The nurse lifted her shoulders in a meaty shrug. "I'm afraid I couldn't tell you if my life depended on it. Science isn't something they teach in nursing school."

"No. Of course not."

The nurse backed against the door and pushed it ajar, and through the tinny sound of television voices came a testy query, "What is it *now*?"

"You have another visitor."

"Kindly tell whoever it is to go away. Kindly tell him to go get stuffed."

"It's another lady."

"Then kindly tell *her* to go get stuffed. No, wait a second. Is she this dumpy bad-smelling thing with stringy mousy

hair, wearing a too-small T-shirt and too-tight jeans?"

"It's a tall brunette, the same one as ever."

"Send Doctor de Souza right in. I'll tell her personally to go get stuffed." The nurse winked broadly at Rene and moved out of the doorway. Rene composed herself, then peeked around the doorframe. Dick lay amid a thicket of intravenous tubes and connections to monitoring devices; his wife, Judy, sat on the far side of the bed, holding his hand. The light coming through the opened blinds was cruel. Dick looked even more faded and shrunken than he had on the occasion of her preceding visit, a mere four days earlier. Judy

looked puffy and tired, as though she had slept badly. Probably she had, Rene decided as she rapped on the doorframe and said, "Are you decent?"

"Sure, like I am *ever* decent. Come on in. You two have met, haven't you?"

"I hope I'm not intruding," Rene said as she stepped into the room. Judy appeared not to know what to say, to fumble for words, for a moment that lasted just long enough to make Rene acutely uncomfortable. Judy was somewhat of an unknown quantity to Dick's colleagues; he had always kept his professional and domestic lives well apart from each other, with the result that Rene could not now be certain that she and Judy had said two dozen words to

each other in as many years. She could not even recall when she had last seen Judy—the last time Dick had been in the hospital, or the time before, or the time before that?

Finally, Judy said, "Dick's been talking back to the TV, but I've lost track of the argument," and fixed a smile on the lower half of her face. It only accentuated the sag of her jowls and the smudginess of the flesh beneath her pale eyes.

Rene moved a chair close to the bed. She had always towered over Dick, but now, even seated, she thought he looked dwarfish. "Good thing you came now," he said. "Later this afternoon I'm scheduled to have my brain transplanted

into the body of the Frankenstein monster."

" *That* would be a monster." Rene looked across him at Judy and said, "Don't ask me why, it's nothing I can really put my finger on, but I strongly suspect he's been giving the staff a hard time." Judy worked on her smile. "The person at the desk got that look on her face when I asked how he was today."

"I know That Look. With two capital letters."

Between them, Dick growled. "What do you expect? It's not like I *want* to be here. You know, for what it's cost for me to be here these past few days, we could finance a major expedition into the Paleozoic. Maybe two."

"Ah," said Rene. "You've heard the news."

He gestured at the television screen, at a man who stood behind a podium and addressed himself to the camera. "Got it straight from the man of the hour."

"—Roman poet Seneca," the man of the hour was saying, "wrote that the fates lead the willing and drag the unwilling. He could have been writing about paradigm shifts."

"To hell with Seneca, then," Dick said, "quote from Thomas goddamn Kuhn. Showoff. Overeducated schmuck. God, I hate physicists!"

"Dick," Judy said, "you shouldn't let yourself get worked up."

"Hatred gives me strength, honey."

"Paradigm shifts," the man of the hour went on, "are by definition unsettling. In fact, they can be downright scary. Back around the turn of the century, when I was an undergraduate, the news media announced that someone had got a pulse of light to exceed the cosmic speed limit. Actually, they had done no such thing and hadn't claimed to do any such thing. It was science reporters in the mainstream media who'd misunderstood and misrepresented the facts. All the same, for just a moment or two, before reason kicked in, I felt the world tilt ninety degrees out of plumb. Everything I believed was wrong! I experienced exactly the same kind of unease, almost a frisson of terror—and I know I speak for

my fellow researchers, too—that moment of vertigo when we actually realized what we had, what we'd stumbled onto—"

"Hear that?" Dick said. "'*Stumbled onto.*' He credits serendipity! It was all luck! He's trying to sound modest."

"Modesty is a becoming trait," Judy said, "even in a scientist."

"Especially in a scientist," Rene said.

"Hah. Any second now I expect to see him dig his toe in the dirt and say, 'Aw shucks.' But you can tell he *knows* he's next year's Nobel winner. And in the meantime he'll be beating female grad students off with a stick. Or maybe male ones. Fruity bunch, physicists. It's all Professor Schmucko there can do to

keep from exploding with satisfaction."

"I can't say I blame him," Rene said. "He's entitled. It's his time machine."

"It isn't a time machine. It's a wormhole."

"Whatever it is, Dick, it's too wonderful a thing for such a slimy-sounding name."

"You're in the wrong line of work if slime upsets you."

"Oh, you know what I mean. They should call it a time warp, a space warp. Something—*grand*. Something science-fictiony."

"My distinct impression's that they're trying to make it sound as un-science-fictiony as they can. Anyway, what's in a name?"

"At least they should stop referring to its mouth. A mouth implies the existence of a nether aperture. Hardly an image to encourage explorers."

"Hah. It won't discourage a single one. I bet the line at the Directorate of Geosciences already stretches clear around the block. You should be in it instead of here."

"I'm there in spirit. Someone else is there in person. Don't think for one second we're going to miss out on this."

"Some of us are."

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence in the room. Finally, Rene asked, "How are you today?"

He grimaced, then worked the grimace into a tight smile. "I'm how I

was a mere four days ago, only more so. I'm awful, thank you. Just bloody awful. I think this time is it." Rene looked at Judy, who would not meet her eyes. She could read nothing in the woman's expression, no clue as to how to proceed. Rene weighed possible responses. Nonsense, you'll be out of here before you know it. Or: You mustn't give up hope. Or: I wish you wouldn't talk that way. But she had said those things to him on previous occasions and knew that he expected better from her now. She said, "You know, you don't *always* have to be the pessimist of the team."

"You angling for the position? Feh. Amateur. Rene'll deny this, honey, but

deep down in her heart of hearts she always thinks the glass is half full. Me, I know it's half empty. And dirty. And I'm the one who's going to have to wash it."

Judy said, "Dear, you don't have to do your whole comedy routine for us."

"Speaking of comedy routines," he asked Rene, "how did the conference go?" Rene, grateful for the change of subject, said, "It went—it started out okay, but then the news broke—" she nodded in the direction of the television screen "—and after that it just became impossible to get anyone to stick to the program. It devolved from a conference to a bacchanal."

"And probably stopped just short of a panty raid. In other words, nothing out of

the ordinary. Paleo boys loose in the halls. Booze flowing like wine. Poolside furniture tossed into the deep end. Someone making a pass at Tetyana Pylpiv. Tetyana passing out from the shock."

"Basically. On the other hand—do you remember Caroline Warren?"

"Paleobotanist from Cornell." For an instant, his eye sparkled mischievously. He turned his head toward his wife. "Redhead. Woof."

"See?" Judy said quietly. "Plenty of life left in you yet, old dog."

"As soon as the news broke," Rene went on, "and the implications started to sink in, Caroline Warren jumps up and says, 'Screw this conference,' and goes

and shuts herself up in her hotel room. The next morning—"

"As the usual idiots are dragging around and comparing hangovers!"

"—she comes in with an entire study plan for determining the precise relationships of all those plants that're always lumped together as Cooksonia. 'Just give me one week in Paleozoic time,' she says. And of course she was all hot and bothered about some of the other specimens the probe brought back, the ones like nothing we've ever seen before."

"I would join in the celebratory jig," Dick said, "but under the circumstances. ..."

"Everyone sent regards and hopes you

get well very soon."

"Ugh. Tell everyone for me, 'Up yours very much.'" He grimaced again; this time, he let it remain a grimace. "I distinctly recall telling the head nurse to block all incoming regards and hopes. No flowers, no get-well cards. All visitors to be stripped and cavity-searched. All optimism, however guarded, to be confiscated on the spot."

"Don't we even get points for meaning well?"

"I hate to disappoint everyone. But like I said, I think this is it. The disease's led a merry chase all through me these last couple years. Bladder, lungs. Now it's holed up inside my head where you couldn't get at it with any instrument

more delicate than an axe."

He glared suddenly at the television screen, which had bifurcated to show the man of the hour on the left, listening as an audience member on the right asked a question.

"That's enough of that crap," Dick said, "now let me show you something really cool," and when he spoke to the television screen an underwater scene instantly appeared. Shafts of sunlight slanted downward through green murk to illuminate patches of bottom mud. A shadowy form came swimming along just above the bottom, came head-on, purposefully, straight toward the viewer. Seemingly at the last moment, it turned sharply aside, affording Rene a glimpse

of many pairs of bristly jointed appendages clustered on the underside of the blunt head. A long, flattened appendage extended oar-like from each flank. Halfway along its length, the segmented body narrowed, terminating in an affair like a dirty ice pick.

"Eurypterid," she breathed.

"*E. remipes* in the flesh," he said, "or its kissing cousin, anyway."

"That is just incredible."

"Lucky it wasn't one of the big eurypterids. Pterygotus would've tried to eat their roboprobe. Haven't you seen this already?"

"Not this particular clip."

"Want to see it again? Can you stand it?"

"Are you kidding?"

They watched the eurypterid a second time, and a third, in slow motion, and he told the television to freeze the image as the creature was halfway through its turn to the side, and to enlarge and enhance a particular section so that she could clearly see the underside of the head, the arrangement of the legs around the toothplate, the grisly orifice of the mouth. Then he let it swim on, and glowed with pleasure for a moment. Then his face clouded over again. "It moves," he said, "just like your computer models."

"Our computer models."

"Don't be generous. You did all the work. I began to die." He told the

television screen to go away, and it instantly blanked itself. "At the risk of sounding really really bitter, this is as close as I'm ever going to get to going there, being there."

She took his free hand. It was cool in hers, the bones felt very fragile, and the blue veins showed prominently through the pale translucent skin. On the other side of the bed, Judy seemed intent on the hand she held.

"A week ago," Dick said, "I could've died happy and at peace with the world. I mean that. I'm tired and in pain all the time and I keep finding myself at the point of striking a bargain with some deity or other. 'Since you aren't going to cure me, God or gods, could you please

just kill me a bit faster?' Don't either of you dare tell anybody I got religion on my death bed."

"I swear on a stack of Bibles," Rene said, "I wouldn't dream of it."

"Better not. I'll find some way to haunt anyone who tells lies about me. Anyway, at least till my brain turns to gleet, I've got to lie here and watch all this exciting stuff on television. Part of me's thrilled, of course. But the part of me that's dying, and it's the part of me that gets bigger all the time, crowding out the other parts of me, that part feels cheated, big time. That part's resentful as hell. That part of me feels like Tantalus in the old legend. In Hell he's hungry and thirsty and food and water are just out of reach. Whence,

tantalize."

"I seem to recall Tantalus was being punished for his sins."

"That's what *really* pisses me off—it's a bum rap. If there's a God, I'm going to kick his ass for this. Here I'm coming up on the end of my life and after due reflection I'm deciding it's been a pretty good one. And then, suddenly, just out of reach, there's the thing that makes everything I've ever done pall. Time travel! Goddamn *time travel!* Brainboy on television's going to be one of the immortals of science, everybody'll get to jump through his wormhole, they'll make important discoveries and win fame and glory. And guess who has to stay right here at home and be worm's meat." The

women said, " *Dick*, " in unison and then looked at each other in embarrassment.

"Oh, both of you, don't look so goddamn stricken. I'm the one who should look stricken. *I feel* stricken. There's a party in the Paleozoic, and I can't go. I'm not going anywhere from here. Well, to the hospice, for a while, then it's off to the morgue. I wasn't afraid of dying—*as* afraid of dying—before all this. I'd already made it clear that no heroic measures are to be taken—what a stupid phrase! Heroic measures! Mock-heroic is more like it. But now I'd be grabbing at straws if there were any straws to grab at. I don't care what, untested drugs, yak dung extract. Anything as long as it promises

recovery. No, not even recovery. Just a little more time. A year, six good months, so I, too, could go jump into that wormhole and see this prehistoric wonderland for myself."

Judy had let go of her husband's hand. Now, as she reached for it again, Rene studied her expression and after a moment realized what it was: That Look, with two capital letters—embarrassment and exasperation commingled with, and held in check by, resignation.

She started as the big nurse filled the doorway behind her and said, "Sorry to interrupt—" Dick glowered at her past Rene. "What do you want now? No, wait, just let me take a wild guess. It's time for more unpleasantness, isn't it?"

Fresh indignities against my person."

"Dick," said Judy, "*be nice.*"

"Why change my ways at this late date?"

Rene made a smile on her face and said to the nurse, "Allow me to apologize for my colleague's rude behavior. It never used to be a problem when we kept him chained in the basement." The nurse chuckled and advanced into the room, radiating a kind of genial purposefulness. "Perhaps his problem is he always was too healthy till now. Someone who's never sick a day in their life doesn't know how to behave when they do wind up in the hospital."

"He doesn't know how to behave

anywhere."

The nurse chuckled again and said to Dick, "Now are you going to let her talk about you like that?"

"Rene, if you're going to talk about me like that, please be a love and do it behind my back."

"Well," said the nurse, "I'm afraid visiting hours are over."

"Sorry," Judy said, "I—we lost track of the time."

Rene stood. "I'll see you tomorrow, Dick, if I can get away."

He effected part of a shrug. "You only have to bother with me as long as I remain lucid. Tell everybody to be brave."

Judy said, "We all have to be brave,

don't we?" and leaned over the bed to kiss his cheek, near the corner of his mouth.

Rene patted his hand in farewell. "Don't make life too hard for these nice nurses. Try not snapping at just whoever's handy."

Dick peered around the nurse's bulging flank as she insinuated herself between visitors and bed. "If I only yelled at people I'm really mad at—life's too short for that degree of discrimination."

"Be good. Till tomorrow."

Judy stood no taller than Dick; as the two women walked slowly toward the elevators, Rene could not help hunching her shoulders and stooping slightly in an

effort to compensate for the disparity in their heights. Judy glanced up at her and said, "He always did describe you as his tallest, slimmest, and most limbful colleague." Rene started to laugh, but then Judy added, "I feel like such a dumpling, waddling along beside you. Well, thank you for coming to see him. I'm sure you must be very busy with that—that time-travel business or whatever it is."

"Whatever it is, it is pretty exciting, isn't it? If I don't get on the team that goes through this wormhole, it won't be for lack of trying."

"I'm sure it won't."

"But, meanwhile—if there's anything I can do to help, anything any of us can do

—"

"Yes. There is something."

"Dick is just—there's nothing we wouldn't do for him."

"I'm sure. Everyone tells me how much they've always liked and admired him." They arrived before the elevator doors, and Judy dug a handkerchief from her purse. Her eyelashes glistened wetly. As she daubed at her eyes, she said, "If you want to know the truth, sometimes I have a hard time remembering him when he *was* likeable and admirable. You see how he's becoming extremely difficult to be with. Well, he's ill. And he's full of anger and self-pity. Anyway. I started thinking about what I have to say before you

came. When he was watching television. I've never been good at talking to people. Not around Dick, anyway. It was always easier to fade into the wallpaper. But now I'm having to step into the foreground and take charge of everything, and it leaves me wide open for his famous caustic wit. The less of a sense of humor he has, the more caustic what he does have becomes. I go home in tears after every visit. But I guess a sense of humor's a lot to expect from a dying man. Especially one with a brain tumor. Anyway. I'd be very grateful if, from now on, you would downplay work when you come to see him. Particularly if it involves this new discovery."

"Well, I'm—"

The elevator doors slid open, and they stepped inside and rode down in silence with three other people.

In the lobby, Judy drew Rene to one side, out of the way of traffic, and said, "You saw how excited he is. It's not good for him. He needs rest and quiet from now on."

"Yes, of course, but—"

"He has a lifetime of valuable work to look back on. That ought to satisfy him. It ought to satisfy all of you. For all these years, I've had to share him with you. It was more like I had him on loan from you, when I did have him. When he was off in Australia or Antarctica, or even just off to a conference, I was at home with the children and my half of the bed.

We were *only* his family—his real rapport was with his colleagues and with things that died millions of years ago. Well, now he doesn't have much time left. I want as much of that time as I can have. If I'm being horribly selfish, I'm sorry, I can't help it. But I am claiming my rights as his wife."

Judy turned abruptly and left. Numbly, dumbly, Rene stood and watched her go, then, after the better part of a minute, moved suddenly. She got out of the building as quickly as she could without breaking into a run. She was okay until she had come within arm's reach of her car. Then she felt as though all warmth had flowed from her, suddenly, in an instant, to disperse in some vast dark

void. Her legs went rubbery. She staggered against the car, clutched desperately with both hands at its smooth surfaces.

"Open the door," she said, and sounded thin and tremulant to herself, and when the car hesitated, she yelled, almost screamed, "Open the damn door!" and the door opened, and she got in. The car said, "Please fasten your seatbelt."

She gripped the steering wheel and pressed her forehead against the backs of her hands. Her hands felt cold; her face felt hot.

"Please fasten your seatbelt."

She flung herself back in her seat, pummeled the steering wheel with her fists. She could not see for tears. Her fist

collided with something less yielding than steering-wheel padding, and pain lanced her from knuckles to elbow. She clutched the throbbing hand to herself, curled around it.

"Please fasten —"

" *I know. Shut up.* "

She blindly fumbled with the seatbelt until she heard the click of the buckle. Then she wiped her eyes with her fingers and glared at the dashboard.

" *There,* " she gasped. " *Happy?* "

* * *

THE BLUEJACKETS HELPED Rene and Tim pitch camp above the slope and tested the radio for them, and then she expressed her gratitude to the United States Navy and said, "See you in six

weeks." The Navy man in charge said, "Happy collecting," and led the detail back down the slope to the waiting boat.

Watching them pick their way through the rubble, Tim sighed and shook his head. "Six whole weeks without cute sailors."

"You've always got me, big boy."

"Sorry. For starters, you're way too tall for me."

"You men. But at least you didn't say I'm too old."

Tim turned and surveyed the rocky jumble of the island. "Not that we came for the scenery, of course, but the view's scarcely worth all the effort we put into coming up."

"You'll feel better after you've

collected a scorpion sting or two. Well. Shall we go ahead and get it over with?"

"Please, let's." Tim produced a metal canister from his backpack and set it on the ground. "I can't tell you what a relief it'll be not to have a dead man on my hands. I'm temperamentally unsuited for grave robbing."

"We didn't rob a grave, Tim."

"I'm also temperamentally unsuited for smuggling. We *have* broken the rules."

"I appreciate your help."

"For chrissake, Rene. It's Dick. I wouldn't have done it for just anybody, you know."

"Me, either."

She unfolded the blade of an entrenching tool and began to dig a hole

in the gritty earth. When she had finished, Tim handed her the metal canister. She gripped it firmly with both hands while he unscrewed and removed its cap. Then they knelt together over the hole, and he said, "Do you want to say something first?"

"I've been wondering all along what to say. All I've ever come up with is some lines from Housman. And an apology, I guess. 'Sorry it took us so long to get you here, Dick.' Ah, Tim. I never once told him I loved him. It just never occurred to me to say it in all those years we worked together. Then, at the end, I was made to feel I didn't have the right to say it. I didn't want to intrude."

"I'm sure he must have known. You two were best buds. Inseparables. There were *rumors*."

"That's all they ever were, just rumors."

"Of course. I never believed them for a second."

"To the best of my knowledge, he was absolutely faithful to his wife."

"Beats me how."

"Not nice, Tim."

"Well, maybe not, but even so."

"She was his wife." After a long moment, Rene added, "She just wasn't his first love. What a terrible thing, to be shut out like that. He felt cheated by fate, but she felt cheated by him." She carefully upended the canister and

poured its ashy contents into the hole. Then she recited: *I see the country, far away,*

Where I shall never stand;

The heart goes where no footstep may

Into the promised land.

"Nice," said Tim, "in a singsong kind of way. Housman, eh?"

"I would've recited it at the memorial service, but she was there, in full possession of the event, so to speak. I didn't want to make her resent us—resent *me* even more than she already did." Tim waited a moment before taking the canister from her and returning it to his backpack. He watched Rene refill the hole. When she had finished, he said,

"Well, that's that, at long damn last."

"After he died, someone suggested talking to the widow about bringing his ashes through the time portal and burying them here. I said, 'You'll never wring that concession from her.'"

"I'm surprised her children went for the idea. I'd've thought she'd've turned them against us."

"No, it was their wish. The whole time he was dying, they had to listen to him rant about not getting to come through the time portal. So they let Mom keep him on the mantelpiece. After she was gone, they brought him to me, and now I've brought him here."

"So she was happy, and now they're happy, too. Maybe she's still happy, now

that she's got him for all eternity, if there is an eternity." Tim looked around in the failing light. "And I hope he's happy with his island."

She smiled wanly. "He didn't have a mystical bone in his body, but if he is anywhere, I'm sure he thinks we've taken an awful chance and are being horribly sentimental. He's probably pretty disgusted."

"And you?"

"I think we're being horribly sentimental, too."

"No, I mean, are you happy now?"

Rene gently smoothed the earth with her hand. "Is anyone ever really happy?"