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ANN GELDER

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## *Origin*

A man named Everill Gander was born in Elkhart, Indiana, in 1920. His father was an engineer and his mother a schoolteacher. He was the sixth of eight children. He often joked that his parents had given him his unusual first name so they would not forget about him completely.

He volunteered for service in the Second World War and spent time aboard a submarine in the Pacific theater. Returning stateside, he landed at the Port of Seattle, where he saw an ad on a bulletin board seeking loggers. Within two days he was on a crew, living in a company-owned boarding house in the small town of Prince, Washington. Everill relished being outdoors all day after the confinement of the submarine, and the trees gave him cover when he needed it. The submarine, you see, had made him different. He could not say how, only that at some point he had stepped outside of himself, and when he'd returned, his body no longer fit him very well. He remained sturdy and powerful throughout his life, but looked years older than he was. He had jowls by the age of twenty-six.

Everill started out on the logging crew as a choker setter. He fastened cables around felled logs, signaled with a spin of his index finger, and sprang away as the whistle punk delivered two blasts from his instrument. The log raced

through the brush like a snake. Despite his size and apparent age, Everill's leaps to safety were a thing of wonderment. He seemed to get higher and stay up longer than was humanly possible, as if God were weighing him for future reference.

"It's because I'm free," he explained to those who marveled. "A guy can't jump like that on a submarine."

Everill's daytime world was green and scented with the benign blood of timber. It resounded with saws, axes, bulldozers, and trucks doing their duty. Trees bowed in reverence for their lost lives and crashed. Men shouted, not in terror or rage, but to confirm that all were out of harm's way. The battle with nature was titanic but orderly.

Only occasionally did Everill glimpse a thing in the forest that the others could not have been expected to see. Occasionally a red cloud rippled through the trees. Inside the cloud pale faces flashed, as if the cloud were lit up by lightning. The faces shouted gibberish that made Everill's skin crawl. Sometimes he flinched and whimpered in response, and if his fellow loggers saw him, he had to think fast.

"Whoo!" he shouted. "What a world! What a crazy world this is!" He shadowboxed, did push-ups and even a cartwheel or two as his friends

nodded, bemused.

"You're a wild man, Everill," they said.

In the evening the crew repaired to Prince's lone bar. Everill invented and danced jigs, which he called "the Gander" and "the Goose." These dances discharged the residual traces of the image from his soul. But when Everill lay in his bed and the night closed around him, he was a sitting duck. As rain pummeled the roof, the cloud spread itself across his vision till he couldn't see anything else. So most nights, Everill got out of bed. Most nights, walking functioned as sleep.

He walked fast, blinking rain out of his eyes. First Street was obsidian-black. Reflections of streetlights rushed into gutters with the water. The cloud hovered a few feet in front of him. Everill swiped at it, flinging raindrops right and left as he tried to clear it from his eyes.

"Son of a bitch!" he shouted.

He turned right at the traffic signal between the diner and the gas station. He passed the farrier's, still doing a brisk business on draft horses worked to the bone from dragging logs. The pavement gave way to dirt, and Everill turned again and skirted the north end of the town past the sawmill, where the night shift was pushing screaming trees through the blades. Fingers of rain reached into his collar. The cloud rippled, taunting him. He grabbed at it, but it was as far away as the edge of the universe. He thought he heard the pale faces laughing.

One day, just before the lunch whistle, he spotted the cloud and decided to have it out once

and for all.

"I'll be right back," he said to the foreman.

He was being destroyed by something that did not even exist. There was no reason he could not take these pale guys and their magic carpet, or whatever, out. He was a wild man, and what were they? Sprites at most, sickly and weak. He followed them into the forest, till he was sure none of the logging crew could hear him.

"Face me," he shouted. "I'm sick and tired of this hide-and-seek game. Show yourselves. Make your demand of me. Be men, if that's what you are."

But apparently they were not men. The faces looked at him with open mouths and hollow eyes. The cloud swallowed them and together they sank into the hushed glade. Everill stood alone.

Well, wasn't that what he'd wanted? But it had been too easy. These guys weren't gone for good. They had gone somewhere to lie in wait. Everill turned and headed back to the job site, shaking from head to toe.

His senses were tender as a new wound. Everill smelled the stew the men were eating from their thermoses long before he could see them: carrots, onions, stringy cubes of beef. They poured it into metal cups and masticated, stabbed it with folded slices of bread. They laughed. Soon flickers of color appeared among the trees, hard hats resting on logs, woolen shirts. Breath mingled with steam from the cups and rose with the men's speech. Everill gathered their words like silvery minnows into a net. He was nearly back now,



back with his friends.

Freddie, the rigging slinger, said, "Where's Everill? I thought he went off to take a dump. But that's a pretty involved dump, if you ask me."

"He probably wandered off." That was Everill's roommate, Charlie, the bucker. "You know he walks around town all night. He never sleeps."

"You see the way he jumps sometimes? Like he's seen a ghost? He starts dancing around to make it look like nothing's wrong." (Freddie, demonstrating.)

"He's a wild man." (Unclear who said that. All murmured assent.)

"It was the submarine." (The foreman, Dave.) "Anyone would be a little tetchy, all those months in a metal tube under the water."

"I had a dream about him once." This was Stevie, the faller, who was no more than eighteen and looked like an overgrown twelve-year-old. The men treated him that way, too—gently. Possibly this was because he could wield the gigantic new chainsaw all by himself.

"What kind of dream, Stevie?"

"I dreamed Everill was a tree. I was about to cut him down, not knowing it was him at first. He just looked like a regular Doug fir, only, actually, a little bigger. I fire up the saw and the teeth are just about to bite in. And then Everill bends down and says, 'Whoa there, what are you doing?' He's not mad, he's just asking, like. And I say, 'I'm doing my job, Everill.' And then he doesn't say anything, but he bends down and picks me up, and then he carries me all the way out to the seashore. And he says 'Look.'"

"Then what?"

"I saw water and waves crashing on big rocks. There was no color—everything was black and white, like in a photo. That was it. That was the end of the dream."

"You're a wild man, Stevie."

"Not as wild as Everill." More laughter.

Charlie said, "Your dream was right. He ain't quite human."

The howl boiled up through the soles of Everill's feet. His mouth opened and became a volcano, spewing sorrow for whatever he had done to cut himself off from his fellow man. It was later said, although never proved because the tree in question was cut down, that the howl caused all the needles on the Doug fir he was standing under to fall off.

One man dropped his stew, another gasped. Charlie crossed himself twice. All stared in the direction of the howl, but saw nothing but a shadow moving behind the trunk of the bare tree.

A minute later Everill appeared, rubbing the palms of his hands together.

"Sorry about taking off like that," he said. "Nobody swiped my lunch, did they?"

"Did you hear that?" Stevie asked him.

"Hear what?"

"That sound," said Freddie. "Like an animal howling, only . . . like it was trying to say something."

Everill shrugged. "Guess I missed it. But, you know, what a world this is, eh?"

The men finished lunch and went back to work. But from that day on, they were all a little

jumpy. They looked over their shoulders; they stared at strange shadows, of which there were many in the forest. They paid closer attention to the stories the Indians told them at the bar, about the Seeat'co, the Lost Tribe—enormous, hairy men who threw sticks and sometimes kidnapped children. Without intending to, Everill had opened a few cracks in the loggers' reality—enough, he figured, to give himself some breathing room next time the cloud showed up.

But it did not show up. It was, evidently, truly gone. Perhaps Everill's howl had banished it along with its inhabitants. His prehistoric grief had scared them off.

As time passed, Everill's wariness faded, and a peace settled down upon him. He stopped walking at night and started sleeping. He dreamed of a house, something like the one he'd grown up in; but it was new and all his own, full of rooms he had not even realized were there. In the rooms were luxurious couches, fireplaces with polished andirons, and carpets that glittered. When he bent down he found gold coins embedded in the pile. Everill woke feeling rested and curious.

The other men noticed the change in him, too. At first they did not know what to make of it. The jittery Everill who danced and boxed with the air was no more. In his place was a serenely nodding figure, who seemed as wise as his apparent years.

"What's with you, Everill?" the other men asked. "You feeling all right?"

"Never better."

It was undeniable. He set the chokers as deftly

as he always had, and leapt away. But now the leaps were normal, earthbound as everyone else's. When Everill leaned against a tree trunk, calmly examining first the sky, then the pine litter under his feet, some tried rushing at him, yelling "Boo!" But he did not flinch. He smiled and rubbed his chin, and the man who had rushed at him slunk away, wondering what had gone so wrong with his own life that he would want to startle a peaceful soul like that.

At the bar, Everill sat by himself at a corner table, sipping from a mug of beer that lasted all evening. In truth he was a trifle unsettled. There was an empty spot in him that the struggle with the red cloud used to occupy. Something would have to fill it, but what? He watched the knot of men at the bar, telling jokes, flirting with the waitresses, occasionally beckoning to him with perplexed grins. Everill raised his glass, but did not join them. Though some of them were twenty years older than he was, he had begun to think of them as children. As they played, a feeling stirred in him which he could not name.

One night Stevie came over to Everill's table and sat down.

"I've been thinking, Everill," he said, digging a blackened thumbnail into a gouge in the tabletop. "I've been thinking you know something the rest of us don't. You're so calm-like. So I was thinking I'd like to know what you know."

Everill pondered for a moment. It seemed he knew less than he ever had known in his life. But he had to help Stevie. Like a forest creature, the boy saw water and gratefully bent his head



to drink, never pausing to wonder if it was poisoned. Everill couldn't let him down.

"I rid myself of an illusion," Everill said at last.

"What do you mean?"

Everill thought hard. "I used to believe the past could be redeemed," he said. "But now I know what's gone is gone. It no longer exists. You understand?"

"I think so," Stevie said.

The next day Stevie backed away from the spar tree he was about to climb and pointed skyward.

"You lay off!" he yelled at the clouds. "I'm doing my best down here, and I'm fed up with being told I'm no good! Can't you ever be happy with me? How about a little encouragement once in a while? I know I've made mistakes but I always intended to do good, and I always will intend it! I don't need this crap from you anymore! I don't accept it, you hear me? You lay off me, God!" It appeared to those watching that the sky then got a little bit brighter.

That summer brought Everill the joy of his life. Myra Waltz, the youngest daughter of Mrs. Waltz, who ran the boarding house, came back home. She had been living with an aunt in Seattle while attending the university there. Everill spent many pleasant hours wondering if it was her schooling that had made her so fascinating, or if she'd been born that way.

Myra wore her pale hair in two braids that extended to the middle of her back, along with granny glasses and an expression of permanent concentration that made people stammer in her

presence. Her own words were clipped, like her gestures, as she helped her mother with the cooking and washing. At every spare moment she repaired to the common room, where she folded her lanky frame into an armchair, her left arm cradling some book or other. But the cradling was deceptive; that book was not in for babying. She whipped pages back and forth in ferocious reexamination, as if they would dare to conceal even the tiniest shred of insight from her. She scribbled notes in the margins, gnawing her lower lip and the pen as she scoured the pages for more secrets. Everill had never seen anyone attack a book like that. His mother, the schoolteacher, had held them in her palms like offerings.

At first he was terrified to approach Myra. In waking nightmares he loomed over her, about to say something he'd rehearsed for hours—like "What's that you've got there, Myra? A book?"—when the red cloud sprang from behind her armchair and enveloped her. He yelped and pawed at her; Myra's book went flying. She bent down to collect its sprawled carcass, her braids brushing the floor. In Everill's imagination, she glared up at him over her granny glasses, and when he apologized, she groaned, "Idiot." But gradually, Everill realized that such a scenario could no longer happen.

So, one evening after dinner, when the others had gone off to the bar, Everill brushed his teeth, Brylcreamed his hair, and made his way across the creaking floor of the common room. He paused a few feet from his objective and made a show of examining the bookshelf, replete with

dozens of volumes that Myra had brought back from Seattle.

"Graduated, have you, Myra?" he asked, pulling out a volume of essays by Wittgenstein. From the corner of his eye, he saw Myra raise her head. She quickly ducked back into the pages she was wrecking.

"Yep," she said, her eyes racing along lines of print.

"What are you going to do now?"

"What else? Cook and clean. I have to take this place over some day. I'm stuck here."

"For good?"

"Yep."

"I guess I am, too."

Everill had never thought this before. He had been so busy crawling through his nights toward the relative safety of daytime—with its chainsaws and massive, crashing trees—that he had given exactly zero consideration to what the next forty years of his life might look like. He saw now that the figure in front of him, her legs entwined under the meadow of her skirt, was his future.

"You ever read Plato?" Myra asked, holding her book up so Everill could read the cover.

"Can't say as I have." Everill decided not to tell her that the bulk of his reading, even as a grown man, amounted to Tarzan, H. Rider Haggard, and the occasional Superman comic.

"He says everything in this world is only a shadow of the real one. All we see is a kind of projection, like a movie—but we mistake the movie for the real thing."

"Hmm," Everill said. Did she want him to

believe this or not? It reminded him of Sunday school in Indiana. This world was like a ladder, his teacher had said. You have to climb it in order to get to your destination, but once you're there, the ladder falls away.

"It's bull-puckey," Myra said. "What's right in front of us is all there is."

Everill said, "That means you're all there is, Myra."

Myra smiled. Her teeth were small, like a child's. Everill shivered.

Does God lie in wait for us? If he does not react right away, or reacts too subtly for us to notice, how do we know that something we've done has pleased or angered him? Is meeting the man or woman of our dreams—dreams we did not even know we had—our reward for picking up that desperate hitchhiker last week? Or is the hitchhiker's theft of our checkbook a punishment for joining the playground gang that mocked the splotchy-faced new boy thirty years ago? Possibly it's for something we will never even remember doing. And what of that hitchhiker—is she an agent of the Lord or an outcast? Have her scores of similar thefts—she's been on the road for five years after fleeing her stepfather, who raped her but also once saved her from drowning—added up to a diagnosis of evil? If she and her stepfather both repent, are both of them equally welcome in the kingdom of Heaven? Does God ever change his mind?

For Myra, the fact that such questions could be even asked proved that God did not exist.



Early in their courtship, she set about stripping Everill of any faith he might be harboring. Everill got a kick out of the intensity of her efforts, so he provoked them as often as he could. As for God's existence, he didn't actually care one way or the other. If the past was really past, the question did not seem to matter.

"Epicurus," Myra said, tapping her toe against Everill's calf (they were at the diner, eating hamburgers), "says God is either omnipotent, or good, but cannot be both."

"Then I choose good," said Everill, smiling around a greasy mouthful.

"You don't get to choose!" Myra shouted.

"Why not?"

"Look," Myra set her hamburger down so she could point at Everill with both index fingers. "Say there's a God."

"OK, there's a God."

"Let's *posit*, for the sake of argument, a God. By definition we do not control his nature. At best we can only seek to discover it."

"Who decided that?"

"Well, in this scenario, God did. You can't go around choosing what kind of God you want. You don't have that kind of power. For the very reason that *you are not God*." Myra's cheekbones flushed with the effort of getting through to Everill. A braid slid off her shoulder, its tail curled in the crook of her elbow.

"Maybe God is whatever we believe about him," Everill said. "We believe in an angry God, that's what we get. We picture a nice, loving God, we get that instead."

Myra laughed. "You're saying we make God in our image."

"That's not it."

"Then what?"

Everill aligned his remaining three French fries in order of ascending height. "We bring God out," he said carefully. "It's up to us to bring him out in the best possible form." It was just an idea.

Myra laughed again, and dumped the ice cubes from her soda glass into her mouth. She crunched the ice with her little teeth, and for that alone, Everill thanked whichever God he had—possibly, inadvertently—called forth.

The wedding took place three months later at the Lutheran church, with the whole town and loggers from all over the Olympic Peninsula in attendance. Two of Everill's brothers came, as did his parents. They looked like a pair of exhausted strangers, which, in fact, they were. They had driven cross-country in their 1938 Terraplane to see Everill for the first time since he'd left for the war. He'd written to them often since returning, mostly in the form of postcards—sepia photos of enormous trees with loggers posing in the under-cut. *Jonah in the whale, ha ha!*, he wrote. But he didn't want to see his parents face-to-face. *I can't tell you what I did in the war*, he had explained in one card. *I mean I can't tell you because I don't know, and I don't want to know, and if I see you I might remember*. They understood, his mother wrote back. They both walked with Everill down the aisle, each clinging to one of his arms. His fear of seeing them had been absurd. They were

tiny. He could have lifted them each off the floor as they walked.

At the reception, Everill asked the pastor why there was a fence around the church. The sight had always bothered him a little. The fence gave the slight suggestion of keeping something out, which seemed wrong, and there appeared to be nothing to keep in. The pastor explained that back when the church was first built, there had been sheep in the yard. Wolves had taken the sheep, all of them, in one horrific night decades earlier, but the pastor had left the fence up as a memorial. Wolves had since been erased from the Pacific Northwest, and the pastor was thinking of getting sheep once again. Everill did not mention that there were still the coyotes to consider.

"Wars of all kinds have ended," the old pastor said. "Now is a time of hope." Everill nodded, crying, and kissed his bride's hand.

Two decades rolled by in blissful fashion. After Mrs. Waltz gently passed into whatever realm she believed awaited her, Everill and Myra presided over the boarding house, welcoming new generations of loggers. Older members of the crew, Charlie and Freddie and the others, built homes of their own nearby and raised smart, mannerly children. On Wednesday evenings young and old gathered in the common room for Myra's philosophy seminar. At one time Myra had dreamed of being a philosopher herself. She would have been the itinerant type, living off the land and the alms of strangers and writing books about her experiences. But are we not all philosophers,

whether wandering or confined? At any rate, thanks to Everill's encompassing love, she had apparently come to terms with life in Prince. She did not bang the pots so loudly anymore when she cooked.

Everill was promoted to faller, and then almost immediately to foreman when Dave retired. He was a natural leader. He purchased state-of-the-art equipment. He researched and taught the men new techniques for timber management. He talked headquarters into hiring a tree-planting company to replace the ones the crews had cut. The company put up signs by the highway explaining how birds thrived in second-growth forests. People seemed to appreciate that, especially the tourists. Profits soared.

In the spring of 1969, Stevie disappeared.

To Everill, it was a scene reminiscent of twenty years ago. The men gathered around a huge old stump they were using for a table and opened their pails. The smell of Myra's chicken à la king blended with the earthen dampness of the forest.

"Where's Stevie?" someone asked.

"Taking a walk," said Freddie, still with them after all these years. "Said he'd be back soon."

"He's a dreamer," said Cyril, the new buckner.

"A wild man," Everill agreed.

"Sometimes we are inclined to class those who are once-and-a-half-witted with the half-witted, because we appreciate only a third part of their wit," said Freddie, who'd been attending Myra's seminars and had become a fan of Thoreau.

They ate, and waited.



"Well, we'd better go and look," Everill said. He remembered, though not with bitterness, how no one had come to look for him when he had disappeared in the woods for a short time.

They walked in pairs, shouting for Stevie. They looked in and under the skidder, the crew bus, the trucks. They tramped through the forest, shouting, listening for a call or a snap of a twig. Some of the more intrepid fellows doubled over and scanned the ground for footprints, but found none they could recognize as Stevie's. His chainsaw was missing, too. His boots and climbing spikes were discovered beneath the branches of the last tree he had felled.

As night fell, they collected flashlights from the trucks and fanned out in twos and threes. They walked for hours under an indifferent strip of stars. They splashed light on stumps, slash piles, ruts from skidders. The light made negatives of everything, the forest a backing peeled off a Polaroid photo. To Everill it seemed that something was exposed in this peeling—a blueprint for the world's destruction. War had returned, spewing flames that seared people's flesh clean off. Any day a bomb could kill the whole planet.

The crew drove back to town and delivered Stevie's boots to the sheriff, who'd been apprised over the radio and was getting up a search party of his own. Then Everill, his men, and Myra went to see Stevie's wife.

Alice came to the door wearing a red shawl around her shoulders, which gave Everill a start. They sat in the living room while Everill ex-

plained how everything was going to be OK. Alice, a Quinault Indian, wrapped the shawl tighter as she listened.

"See'atco," she said. "Stevie told me he heard one in the forest once, howling."

"He just wandered off," Everill said. "He's a dreamy sort, as you know. He'll turn up." He wanted a shawl to wrap around Myra, Alice, himself, and the little girl—Alice and Stevie's daughter—peering at them around the corner. But not the red shawl. What was it doing here? Was this a joke? Divine vengeance? It couldn't be. Not after all this time.

Alice shook her head. "They took him," she said. "He was always like a child, is why. They take children. He's one of them now."

"He'll come back, you'll see." Myra took Alice's hand in both of hers. Everill could tell from the furrow in Myra's brow that she thought the See'atco story was crazy. It would make good fodder for the seminar when this was over, but that was all. Myra still had very strong opinions on such issues. She also did not believe that a person could simply disappear.

Alice and Stevie's daughter drifted into the living room. Freddie made a bunny rabbit at her with his fingers.

"He'll turn up, I promise," Everill said.

He was wrong. Still, over the months and years that followed, he never gave up hope. In the back of his mind Everill always believed he would find Stevie wandering barefoot in the woods with his chainsaw. He was fine, just a little hungry. He had only gotten a little turned

around.

Early the next morning, Everill drove his and Myra's pickup as far as he could on the logging road. He parked and hiked up a ridge, wearing a pair of binoculars around his neck and carrying a rope, harness, and climbing spikes. At the base of the tallest tree he could find, he put the spikes on, attached his harness, and kicked his way up the trunk.

The top of the Doug fir swayed gently as he leaned out, sweeping the binoculars over the forest. The air was soft and green-gray. Below, logging crews were making dents in the carpet. The trees shuddered as chainsaws attacked them—the firefights of the North American jungle. Here, at least, there were no bombs falling, no peasants appearing out of nowhere with machine guns. To Everill this relative peace felt obscene. It had swallowed Stevie.

He thought of all his men, young and old, as his sons, but Stevie especially. He still looked like he was twelve, and had never shed that absurdly trusting nature. And then there was that business years ago of yelling at God in the sky. In a sense, Everill had put him up to that—though he'd never believed the kind of being who would respond to yelling was up there. But he couldn't help thinking this had opened a gap in Stevie's universe, and Stevie had slipped through.

"Stevie!" Everill called, as if the binoculars could amplify his voice as well as his vision.

Down below, it was easy to forget how close

the forest was to the ocean. In all their years together, Everill and Myra had gone to the seashore a dozen times at most. They loved it there. Myra spread a blanket on the sand and gathered their two English shepherds and all their provisions inside its boundaries. "Pretend we're on a raft," she said, as they stared out at the silver waves. But once they got home, the ocean vanished from their memories within days. Eventually some reminder, like a TV show or a postcard from a former boarder, took them by surprise, and they said to each other: *We should go there. Why don't we ever go there?*

Now a mere tip of the binoculars filled Everill's vision with water. It was red and alive with screaming men.

Everill ignored their cries, or more precisely, he was encouraged by them, because what he was doing was exactly the right thing. The submarine had torpedoed a Japanese supply ship, and surfaced in order to finish off the survivors. The commander had chosen Everill specifically for this task, because, unknown to Everill, he had been noted during training for his marksmanship. The unexpected recognition thrilled him, and he vowed to confirm the commander's faith.

Bracing himself against the swells, he seized the deck-mounted machine gun and poured bullets into the water. The men kept popping back up, thrashing and screaming, and so he moved over to the deck gun and blew one after the other to smithereens, pieces almost too small for the swarming sharks to bother with. He felt bad for the fish, their confusion whipping the water into



pink froth, and he tried to avoid hitting them and aimed at men only. But after awhile he could not tell what was a man and what wasn't. So he kept firing until someone pulled him away and told him *Good job*. He said, *Thanks*. The air tasted of salt and iron. The swells carried him up and down.

The next thing he knew he was on a troop ship. Somewhere in the middle of the Pacific, they pinned a medal on him.

Everill vomited down through the branches. Then he lay back in his harness, facing the sky. Tears ran down his face into his hair. Eventually he decided that he could not live with himself, the self he now recognized as his. It is impossible to say how long he hung in the treetop before he came to this decision. But at some point he unhooked the harness and let himself fall.

He must have fallen like a leaf to the ground. It must have taken a very long time—a minute, an hour—for he landed unhurt, or at least unable to feel any pain. Pain is a form of memory. And the man once called Everill did not remember anything at all.

He walked for days. He slept while he walked, not noticing any difference between states of consciousness. His path was an ever-widening pattern that took him deep into the rainforest. Moss hung from branches, which became the arms of orangutans. Crocodile heads sprouted from ferns. Streams chattered; rain chattered. The whole forest conversed urgently, even though there was nothing to talk about, no one but the

shell of a man passing through.

He came to the beach. Water swirled around sea stacks, dashing itself against the dumb idols. The shell-man felt the roar of the surf go through him. He threw back his head and roared with it.

In the distance, a woman in a red jacket had been walking along the narrow strip of sand. The roar froze her right in place. Everill—an oddly familiar word to the shell-man, but when he tried to apply it to himself, it wouldn't stick—waved to her. It seemed like the thing to do.

The woman's arm rose slowly from her side. Then she screamed and ran into the trees.

The shell-man looked down at his body. Every inch of him was covered with dirt and leaves. His clothes were like layers of bark: mud had soaked through them and dried partially, and more had collected on top. He must have fallen several times, slid down a slope, but he couldn't remember. He had also jettisoned his boots and socks. His feet were caked with mud. He touched his hair and discovered a miniature forest of leaves, twigs, and needles. He seemed to remember someone having a dream like this once. But he had not been the dreamer.

I must go home, the shell-man thought. "Home" was a strange word, like "Everill," but he could picture rows of windows, a passenger ship in the night. There was warmth there, and children, possibly. But the children had all drowned, hadn't they? Hadn't someone thrown them overboard as an offering to the bloody ocean? Home was not a place for the man. He could no more live there than a fish could.

He heard voices.

"There! Don't get too close. Hurry up!"

The woman in the red jacket had returned with a man. That man lifted his hands to his face and light flashed off the brim of his cowboy hat. He had taken a picture.

The man and the woman whooped and laughed. "That's something, all right," the man said, "but I don't know what."

The couple's laughter made the shell-man

smile. It appeared they had been fighting before. The shell-man had brought them back together. The woman tucked the camera under her jacket and both ran.

A wave broke and reached the shell-man at the edge of the forest. Foam circled his ankles like a cat. The shell-man did not know what he was, either, although it struck him that he might be some sort of god. Whatever other gods there were had left this place.

