

*Charles W. Brownson*

## **Le Grand Meulier**

Years afterward, Jo came on the map among her brother Henry's papers. She had no idea what place it portrayed, but Henry had tucked it in among some letters of Nicola's. There was also a genealogy of the St. Hilaire, Coudres, and Arqué families on which Nicola had entered Jo and her brother in a brown, spidery hand. Thirty-five persons were tabulated there, in 2110 all dead except her two vulture uncles and herself. Five generations, arranged on the paper in layers. Ancestral geology. A kind of fault scarp, the layers exposed by the uplift of Henry's death, bringing his papers to the surface, striations of metamorphic rock in bright colors lying one on top of another, pushed up from deep within the earth.

The map, however, was of recent manufacture. Henry's work, perhaps—it bore the marks of his niggling. Ninety-three buildings were indicated; allowing for a few sheds and some abandoned ones, eighty-five inhabited. That made a town of four hundred or so. There they are, the inhabitants: too small and ephemeral to be drawn in, known only by their artifacts. A hamlet of them: Factus Junction. Scatburg, Relicton. But to the fifth generation, grown to thirteen thousand now—a town. They lie, twenty-five or thirty to a house, packed in five layers like political prisoners in the huts of a forced-labor camp. Yet still they are too transient, inconsequential, tiny. They are as imaginary as the automatic rifles and the barbed wire fences are when some agent of an international humanitarian group makes an inspection tour of the compound.

We are thin and faint. You must look out of the sides of your eyes to see us.

She reached out after a time and turned off the light. In the darkness she sat unmoving, fixing her memory of the place in her mind. In the dark the tectonics of the map appeared and now the viscous rock began to fold and overlay itself—here sinking, filled with water; there swelling up—but then crumbling away again in terraces,

in an alluvial fan which the longshore current swept away in a spreading streak like floating hair. The moonlight glinted on the mullioned doors of the room.

Nicola St. Hilaire, eight years old, stared from the window of her grandmother Meulier's house on Moyon Street in the village. Her nose, pressed to the glass, was growing cold. Her mother had gone out again. Grandmother was watching television. It had been raining all day—the moon was hidden, the street black, and at the other end of Courte Street two blocks away the dockhouse light made a glowing yellow ball of mist that was reflected against the underside of the clouds. L'Antre was soaked in for sure, and maybe the Blaireau Ridge too. She probably couldn't see across the river even from the end of the spit. It was a poor night to take the skiff out. At least it was warm, and still. Nicola wished her mother were not so good a sailor, or that she would sink.

Nicola's breath was condensing on the glass. She drew her finger through it twice before the glass cleared again. Two blurry streaks remained. She squinted, and the streaks became two windblown trees in a rainstorm, near the summit of L'Antre. Fogging the glass, she quickly drew in the mountainside.

She was waiting for her grandmother to go to sleep in front of the television. There was a yellowed doily pinned to the back of the chair and when the old woman's head at last fell back the pins would catch in her bun. Then when she got up to go to bed the doily would come loose and dangle unnoticed behind, until she let down her hair before the tall mirror on the bureau in the bedroom. She would smile to herself, and cluck, and put the doily carefully aside to be pinned to the chair again in the morning.

Sometimes the doily would win, pulling the pins out of the old woman's hair when she woke with a start and leaned forward to turn off the television. Then her black hair would spill out and hang in loops down her back and she would brush it out there in the back parlor by the kitchen, telling Nicola how old Meulier had combed her hair until it shone, on winter nights when they were first married. Old Meulier had been a fisherman. He had drowned in a winter storm on another river. That was when Nicola's mother was small.

When Nicola was littler she had sat on her grandmother's lap and stared at the thick tufts of hair which grew in her nose. There was a lone, mahogany-stained tooth in her lower jaw, uncovered by a flaccid lip when she fell asleep. Then Nicola's mother would come and take the cigarette from the old woman's knobby fingers and flick it into the sink, muttering.

Nicola put on a wool sweater and a windbreaker and slipped out of the house. For a moment she stood looking down Courte Street toward the dock but then she went the other way, toward the Liscomb Bay Road. Water hung in the air. On Moyen Street it was all mud and Nicola kept to the gravel path that separated the houses from the street. On the Bay Road the asphalt gleamed in patches under a half-dozen lighted windows. She avoided these lights, walking quietly to keep from setting off the dogs. Between the second and third houses from the end a footpath turned off to the right, going up through a swale toward L'Antre, but forking when it reached the spruce cover on the lowest slope. One trail went around the mountain to the northwest, crossed a ridge sixty meters above the ocean, and ended at Lac Morue. The other trail led through the defile between the Blaireau Ridge and the south arm of the mountain and ended at Point Fourchue just a hundred meters upriver from the lower end of the Bay Road, but separated from it by the branch of the Apohaqui River that was like a short, thick thumb gouging off the village from the mountain's bulk.

She picked her way up the footpath from the road, through the swale which was muddy with seepage and never froze. At the forking there had once been a sign but the post had rotted and now the signboard leaned upside down at the foot of a tree, arrows pointing the wrong way. Blaireau Ridge Trail, 2.1 km. People in the village called it the Point Road—it had been made a road by snowmobiles and four-wheel drive trucks. What they called Ridge Trail went upriver to the village of Kennebucto, some abandoned shacks and the defunct Kennebucto mine. Nicola had been there once, in the summer that her mother brought her from Toronto. She was four, and Georges had had to carry her nearly all the way to the mine.

The Point Road was black between black walls of spruce but Nicola from experience knew the way it went and could sense obstacles in the darkness. Close overhead the paler clouds swirled in the current flowing up the mountain. There was an acidic tea smell in the air. Just where the road passed behind the ridge and began to rise up the shoulder of the mountain, avoiding the jumbled rock in the defile below, she felt the almost silent pass of an owl. It was a sound like a deep breath, with two wingbeats she felt in the pit of her stomach.

The end of the road ran down to the point, emerging from the trees onto the sand of the river bank. Nicola stood for a time at the edge of the water looking for the yellow light on the dock at the foot of Courte Street, but it was not visible through the mist. She turned upriver and

rounded the point, keeping within the fringe of greater darkness at the edge of the trees. There, hidden from the village by the finger of L'Antre, was a cabin. From its porch, built on poles out into a swampy meadow, a half-sunken boardwalk ran down to the beach where the skiff was pulled up. The cabin was dark. Nicola crept up on it through the trees at the rear.

One of the back windows showed a crack of pale light. Nicola stood up on a pipe connecting to the side of the tank of heating oil and pressed her face to the glass, but could see nothing through the slightly parted curtains except an empty corner of the room. The light wavered on the dirty white wall. Slivers of old paint crumbled on the sill beneath her hands. She got down.

On the other side of the oil tank she found the chopping stump, which she hauled up beneath the window. Standing on the stump, she could see a different part of the familiar bare room. A kerosene lamp was burning on the floor beside the metal bed where Nicola's mother lay asleep. The quilt had slipped off her shoulders. Georges lay on his back between her and the bare wall, his mouth slackly open, hands crossed on his stomach.

Georges. Georges couldn't sail worth anything. He was a carpenter. Nicola had one fear-tinged memory of him as he stood smiling in the doorway of her room in the apartment in Toronto. His hands in the pockets of his overcoat had bunched the material over his stomach. One shoulder was hunched higher than the other. Smiling caused his moustache to twitch.

Nicola sat on the chopping block for a while breaking a paint chip up into dust in her palm. Then she walked down to look at the skiff.

It was only a little single-hand boat, with a centerboard and a sprit-sail, that her mother had taught her to sail that summer. She was just heavy enough to steer it by leaning from side to side, if the wind were not too high. Tonight, in the shelter of L'Antre, there was hardly any wind. If she would round the point close on shore to keep out of the deep current that would pull her toward the far side she would be all right. In the slack water behind the spit she would have the boathouse light to guide her.

She tried to drag the skiff backward on the sand. It came easily.

But on the river it was blacker than she imagined it would be. Before she got the sail up the shoreline had faded back into the staring darkness and she could only guide herself by the breeze and the set of the current. It was essential to keep to the lee side to avoid being swept out into the ocean. Beads of nervous perspiration began

to form under her arms. The current in the river seemed to pick up. She bore to starboard. After a few moments a diffuse light appeared dead ahead, like a match that hisses wetly and dies. But then it flared up, with the bright core of a sodium-vapor lamp, and she bore hard to port to avoid running aground. The skiff slipped through the gap of the harbor entrance. Nicola's hand on the halyard relaxed.

She ran the two blocks up Courte Street. In the back parlor the television was now running with the sound off, but the old woman was still asleep. Nicola's hair was wet with mist. She got a towel and sat on the floor by her grandmother's chair and slowly rubbed her hair dry.

Où est Nikki? the old woman asked, waking suddenly.

Avec Georges.

Grandmother Meulier smiled, her one brown tooth standing out. She leaned forward, turned off the television, and rose slowly to her feet. The doily hung from her bun by one crocheted point, like the remnant of a bride's coif, as she shuffled from the room.

Nikki would not return until morning now, when she could see the trail. Nicola wrapped her hair in the towel and went to bed.

That winter Nikki was pregnant and in December she went back to Toronto to live. At the end of February a rail ticket came in the mail for Nicola and one of the old men who looked after Grandmother Meulier drove Nicola up to Sydney to catch the train. At the Sydney station he made arrangements with the clerk in French and went away immediately, anxious to be home before early dusk and leaving her to wait alone.

Nicola sat in a molded plastic chair by the window, the last chair in the row, with her paper sack of clothes occupying the chair beside her. She could see little of interest through the window, only a parking lot in which some light poles rose into a gloomy sky and the wall of a factory building. Lights were burning in the factory at midday. Here there were not the opalescent, swirling clouds of L'Antre. They were solid and dirty, like the underside of a sidewalk. The air stank.

Ce sont les fourneaux, the old man had said. Acier et houille. À Glace Bay i'y a un puits dans l'océan—tres allongé.

The dirt was something he took for granted. Coal dust covered everything, to him a curiosity. Nicola kept her hands in the pockets of her jacket, gazing from the car at the plumes of smoke that rose a little way and then flattened out, coating the bottoms of the clouds.

Toronto was not so clean as she remembered, either. Some friends of her mother's met the train, a man who introduced himself as Henry Nome and claimed to have known Nicola when she was little. Nicola was dubious. He was a wispy man inclined to long, melancholy silences. The woman was harder, abler. Nicola sat in the back seat by herself and said nothing. They drove her to an apartment in the suburbs where there was nothing to do. Her mother was there, wan and depressed, and the baby. It was a boy, which they had named Jean. Its second name was neither St. Hilaire nor Meulier, but Arqué, after Georges. She stayed four days, and spent most of the time in her mother's bedroom sitting by the bassinet. Once Georges came to the door, but he only stayed in the hall talking in a low voice with Henry Nome. He kept his hands in the pockets of his trenchcoat, rucking up the material in front. Georges, being a tall, thickset man, was obliged to stoop and bend, and seemed to whisper into Henry's hair.

At the end of the week they took her back to the train. Henry was in a better mood and made a few jokes to which no one listened very carefully. Nichola sat in the back seat again, her cheek against the cold glass window.

When summer came Nikki returned alone to the village. She looked haggard, and as time passed she grew fat. Georges reappeared—he had taken over a shack at Kennebucto. After that Nikki and Grandmother often sat for hours in the kitchen, talking in low voices, drinking wine or coffee and brandy. Nicola lay in bed listening, hardly breathing, but she could not understand them. They never went sailing now—Georges came for Nikki in a Landrover. Sometimes there were others with him, and once Nichola thought she recognized Henry Nome—his thin face and spectacles beneath a black cloth cap. She disliked the whining of the Landrover's gearbox, audible so many blocks away. The truck ground slowly through the pitted village streets, bucking—Georges drove straight over all the ruts and potholes.

Waiting, Nikki grew restless. After lunch she sat in the front parlor, unable to pass the time. The house had few books and she had never learned to knit or crochet, or simply to sit, so that every few minutes she pushed aside the window curtain with her finger and let it fall again, vainly. Sometimes she patched some of Nicola's clothes or, on warm afternoons when Nicola had to go out walking with her grandmother, Nikki went along.

Wait! Wait! she called out, running up the street after them. One arm was caught in the sleeve of a sweater, an old cardigan of coarse gray wool, and she struggled with it as she ran. It had been her

father's. She swam in it, running crookedly, akimbo, pushing the billows of wool away from her face, and arrived at their side laughing, out of breath.

Then they would walk. The old woman shuffled between the other two, grinning, her rough and calloused hand on Nicola's bare arm. Along Moyen Street to the intersection with Gourin and the Cove Road, down Gourin past the big house, back along South Street to the alley that ran along the old mill race behind the Gourin house, up the alley and home again on Moyen Street. These slow six blocks took the heart of the afternoon. Sometimes they turned left onto Apohaqui Cove Road rather than right onto Gourin Street, or continued straight, down Anne to the Chemin de l'Anse and back, but most often it was to Gourin's old gristmill they went.

The mill race, no wider than a culvert, was now silted up and overgrown. Nikki remembered when after a rainstorm it still ran with floodwater from the creek, and her grandfather saying he once had a little corn ground there. Now the mill wheel was grown into the ground, turned very slowly by the hard earth, rusting. It was all Pierre Gourin's idea, flushed copper red with the success of the Kennebucto mine. But it never amounted to anything. The copper failed too, as a matter of course, and Gourin went back to mining coal farther north, leaving the house he had built to some MacPherson, his wife's relative. Grandmother Meulier, an old sans-culotte, had no good to say about Chez Gourin or the parvenu MacPhersons either, but Nikki left the old woman muttering, her face turned to the sun, and dragged Nicola inside to look at the millworks.

Not much had changed during the winter. A few more boards had fallen off the west wall, making it less gloomy, and as a consequence the weeds were thicker this year. The millstones seemed to have sunk deeper into the ground. One lay flat in the grass, almost flush, the upper stone lying against it like the lid of a box, half off.

Nikki rubbed the edge of the tilted stone with her thumb, looking out through a chink at the wheel outside. Sunshine dappled her hair and streaked the sweater's gray with thick yellow. She sat down on a crosspiece of collapsed scaffolding and picked the heads of some of the weeds growing along the wall.

When I was little, she said, you could still find wheat growing here. She tickled Nicola with the hairy weed. Nicola slapped it away.

Sixty or seventy generations of wheat. It must have died out finally. Maybe it's too early, Nicola suggested.

No, it died out. I was always fond of the stones, especially, because my name was Meulier. I'd lay there and try to imagine Le Grand Meulier, that remote ancestor who made the millstones. To cut rock, to grind it so flat, so round, like a cheese. Rock was like cheese to that one. And then to carry them here on his back—he must have been a great, hard man. I'd run home full of questions about Father. How tall had he been, and how strong, and could he have carried a millstone down from L'Antre? Oh, I was very young. Much younger than you—you are so solemn and clever. How disappointed I was to learn the stones came from Boston, bought ready-made from someone named Sturtevant.

I'm cold, Nicola said.

Do you want my sweater?

No.

They went back out into the sunshine. The old woman had walked up the alley a ways and was looking at MacPherson's cabbages growing in the patch beside the shed. Her heavy black shoes and white stockings, her hands in the pockets of the man's jacket that she wore over her thin print housedress, some coils of black hair come loose from her bun—

Watch, Nikki whispered. Your grandmother will ask if we've learned what vainglory is, from old Gourin's mistake.

The old woman turned to them, hunched, her hands still in her pockets.

Enfin! Vous savez l'orgueil maintenant, hein?

Her eyes glittered with mischief. Nicola giggled, and the two younger women burst out laughing together. But then came the whining of the Landrover, and Nikki frowned. The three of them set out for home in silence. Georges was waiting, leaning against the buff, mud-spattered fender.

He stayed sometimes, to eat something from a paper plate, hastily, standing on the porch with the plate held close to his mouth, eyes darting from under his brows. Sometimes, more relaxed, he stayed to talk idly with Nikki or the old woman, to repair something in the house, or only to watch some match on television. But more often there would be no idle talk—just a terse, muttered greeting, a short exchange, and Nikki would get in. Nicola watched from the front parlor, pushing the curtain aside with her finger.

She went to the beach with them once. Georges drove the Landrover through the creek at the end of Lanark Road and parked it on the sand, and they walked down to the end of the spit and back.



Nicola followed behind, picking up bits of shell. Ahead, Georges and Nikki walked together and talked in low voices. They went along clumsily, floundering, insecurely attached together. Georges had thrown his arm around her shoulders but Nikki walked with her arms huddled. They threw each other off balance. When she lurched, he stumbled, and his misstep caused her to stagger. Nicola trudged behind, picked up scraps of things the ocean had ground up, and smiled to herself.

Fragments of conversation reached her. Nikki was to go back to Toronto. Nicola's brother Jean, left with Ciel Nome for the summer, had had a fit—a seizure or perhaps just a spasm. A doctor was watching for signs of epilepsy. Nicola was to go on living with her grandmother.

At the end of the spit, looking out into the mouth of the river, they sat on a driftwood log. Nikki bent and scooped up a handful of coarse sand which she let run through her fingers.

Sand is milled rock, she said, scooping up another handful. Look, you can see the rock chips in it. The current will carry it south. The farther south it goes the higher the surf, and the sand will get finer and whiter and finer and whiter—

She laughed and dribbled some sand on Nicola's bare foot.

This is the work of Le Grand Meulier, eh? He's somewhere up on L'Antre making grindstones, and the river brings down the rock dust he makes.

Nicola shook the sand from her foot.

I'm going wading, she said.

Georges and Nikki exchanged covert glances. The water was icy. After a time they started back.

The beach had been empty before, but now a beachcomber appeared, a little figure in the distance criss-crossing the space between the water and the high tide line, stooping here and there to get something the ocean had thrown up. Like a sandpiper. Then he vanished. A little later he reappeared, near the lower tidal pool, and vanished again. They found him sitting on a spur of rock near the Landrover. It was Henry Nome.

Georges and Henry shook hands. They walked on ahead.

When did you come up, then?

An hour ago. I left my things in the cabin.

How long can you stay?

Until Monday. Jean is all right. Is Nikki coming back with you?

Yes. Next week, or the week after.

What have you found out?

The two men passed out of earshot. Georges was speaking intently, hunched forward, tracing some lines on his palm. Henry's eyes were turned toward the sea. Then he stopped. Georges pointed toward L'Antre, at the broad vertical face of the peak. There were caves in the rock face, at the back of an open knoll. The mouth of the largest was clearly visible. Henry nodded, and they went on.

So at the end of the next week Georges went back to Toronto and Nikki went with him. Nicola was left behind. After Christmas her grandmother died and she went to live with a neighbor. The winter passed in silence—the soft silence of old people's habits, of snow-smothered roads, of listening at night for small sounds—a cough, the rustle of sheets, the restless turning over in bed waiting for sleep—which would indicate that death had not yet come. She wrote to her mother and received replies in French, full of excuses. Finally, at Easter, Nikki opened the house on Moyon Street again. But she was distant, nervous. She had quit speaking English. For weeks a letter from Georges lay on the bureau unopened, reflected in the tall mirror. After school Nicola would open the door of her mother's bedroom to see if the letter was still there. The room, unchanged, smelled faintly of her grandmother's perfume. The envelope lay, still and mysterious in the pale spring light, reflected in the canted mirror, handwritten address indecipherable beneath small white jars of cold cream and salves her mother never used.

Then one day the letter was gone. And Georges returned. He brought her little brother Jean, who was taking some medicine that could not be found in the village, so that Georges had to go after it once a week until some arrangements could be made. Henry and Ciel Nome came up too, with their two year old William, and they all lived for days in the house in the village until Georges had finished repairing the cabin at Kennebucto.

Nikki spoke nothing but French, which the Nomes did not understand, and kept to her bedroom. During the day she was gone to work in the village post office. Georges slept in the house, but at night the bedroom was quiet save for his soft curses, French muttering. The jars and bottles on the bureau were taken away, but the smell of perfumes, cold cream, and old women's salves remained.

Jean and William fought continually, ineffectually. They were too small to mount pitched battles or campaigns of terror, but had to be satisfied with petty vindictiveness and with screaming. Yet Jean managed, accidentally successful, to hit William with a stone. He had

been obsessively gathering pebbles all afternoon from the rubbly corner lot on which the neighborhood cars were parked. He had made a hoard just under the edge of the porch, money which he had no qualms about throwing at small, curious robbers. He hit the bone at the edge of William's eye.

Nicola retrieved the stone, a round pebble of quartz streaked with red and yellow, which she later spent hours pulverizing with a hammer to find out how much effort was required to do it. Now Ciel came out, drawn by William's shriek. William fell silent. Jean sat on the narrow strip of dirt between the porch and the street aloofly piling up his pebbles again beneath the step. And Nicola watched from a corner of the porch, fingering the stone in her pocket.

But it was Jean whom Ciel picked up to comfort, not her own son. William stared, twice hurt, confused. Nicola shook her head in warning to Ciel. Jean burst into tears, burying his face against Ciel's neck.

Ciel squatted on her heels. You see, she said, ruffling William's hair with her free hand. You provoked him. He's sorry.

William thought it over. Solemnly and ceremoniously he patted the other boy on the head. But the truce was short-lived. Jean made a few half-hearted attempts to defend his pebble collection, which at last he abandoned with a sigh.

Inevitably, amid the confusion and ill will, Jean's medicine was forgotten. He had a seizure. One evening at bedtime, standing in his crib, he was extinguished. Nicola, sitting on the edge of her bed darning a sock for herself, sensed something odd and looked up. He hadn't fallen, but stared at her with sightless eyes. She shivered, sticking herself with the needle. Then Jean's head tipped to one side, his eyes rolled up and he sat down. Nicola very carefully wove her needle into the toe of her work, laid the sock on the bed, and crossed the hall to her mother's room.

Jean had a fit, she said. Her voice was a little squeaky.

Nikki had been reading. When she raised her head the reading light cast harsh shadows over her face. She reached for her cigarettes.

*Pourquoi personne ne lui a donné son drogue?*

Nicola continued to stand in the doorway, uncertain. When her mother continued to read, she closed the door softly and went to get Ciel.

What was she to have done? she wondered as she hit the red—and yellow—shot pebble with a hammer. She had not known how to follow Ciel's example. The pebble cracked in half. The streaks did go all the way through. She hit the pieces again.

Ciel seemed to be a lot like her grandmother must have been when she was young. A little less impish than her grandmother, maybe. Nicola pounded the fragments of pebble until there were too many to count. One stung her on the cheek.

Those women were like stones—dignified, patient. Her mother was not much like that.

She scraped the chips of quartz into a smaller pile and brought the hammer down on them. Again and again she swung the hammer, grinding the little quartz pebble ever finer, ever whiter, until her clenched fingers hurt so that she could no longer grip the handle and the hammer flew across the yard and into the bushes beyond the garden.

When at last they all went up to Kennebucto, Nikki did not go. She stayed by herself in the village, in her mother's house on Moyon Street, and continued to work in the post office sorting letters, filling the boxes and mail bags, managing the counter. The postmaster seldom bothered her—his sinecure required only the daily run to Liscomb Bay and back with the mailbags. The Halifax newspaper reached her three days late. At home, she removed the crocheted doily from the back of the television chair to prevent its catching in her hair.

Nicola spent the summer roaming in the hills, looking for the fossil bones of Le Grand Meulier, and in the autumn she went with Georges back to Toronto. Her mother came up the river to Kennebucto once, in the skiff.

There was a pier of which only two posts remained, where Nikki tied up the boat. She waded ashore through gelid water. They had all gone down to the water to meet her. Everyone behaved with bizarre civility, exactly as if a curious villager had come up to see what arrangements the communards had made in the place where on Sundays past she had been accustomed to come now and then for a picnic. She stood on the bank among them, white deck shoes in her hand, jeans rolled up to her knees, looking from face to face. Nicola could not meet her mother's eyes at first, but found that she could not look at her naked feet, either—so starkly white, bony, blue-veined, the toes crushed together.

The three of them—Nikki, Nicola, and Jean—went by themselves up into the hills above the mine. They walked aimlessly for several hours, Nikki chattering intermittently. She had brought a lunch in a day pack and when Jean became tired they sat down on a slope of

fireweed, Queen Anne's lace, and tansy. Tearing a chunk of bread from the loaf which lay on the grass, Nikki pointed to the buildings below.

Georges t'a porté ici une fois à ses épaules, t'en souviens-tu? Tu avais quatre ans—c'était le premier été que je t'ai amené ici. C'était quand Georges avait cette idée. Pauvre Georges—tu étais si lourde pour qu'il puisse te porter toute cette distance.

Nicola picked up a plum and said nothing. A hare with one white spot on its haunch bounded across an open space in the bushes to their left.

Georges est très solide, n'est-ce pas? Si grave. Il travaille beaucoup.

Jean had fallen asleep. Nikki scratched her bare ankle and sighed.

Nous devons partir, she said at last.

She stood up, Nicola took the day pack with the remains of their lunch and Nikki picked up Jean, who nestled his flushed cheek into the hollow of her shoulder and fell asleep again.

Later, as Nikki was putting Jean to bed, she noticed in Nicola's room a map of the Maritime Provinces which Georges had gotten for Nicola to put up as a decoration. For a long time Nikki stood looking at it, putting her finger down here and there. Suddenly she burst into delighted laughter.

Oh, regarde, ici c'est une Ile du Meulier. Elle est une des Iles de la Madeleine, dans le Golfe du St-Laurent.

Nicola bit her tongue. Her mother continued to stare at the map, seemingly oblivious. White-eyed, Nicola ran out.

The sun had already withdrawn from the surface of the river when Nikki went down to the pier, but it still shone on the hillsides. Nicola, sitting on the rocks upstream, watched her mother go. Nikki cast off the painter. The skiff moved away into the current. The sail went up, cracking as the breeze filled it, and a white curl of water twisted away from the bow. Nikki, gripping the rudder and the halyard with one hand, leaned gracefully backward over the water and exultantly threw the butt of her cigarette as far as she could. It arched out, sparkling in the dusk.

It was the winter before, when Nikki's mother died and she went to work as a postal clerk, that she started smoking. She lost weight then. When she was an old woman she was thin, almost gaunt, and she coughed incessantly.

Nicola was herself an old woman of almost sixty then, and the two of them sat in the kitchen talking in low voices while the others ate dinner in the front parlor. Nikki seemed much bemused, as if in half a century she had so forgotten them that in the evening, when they were gone again, she should stare thoughtfully from the front window into the empty street, her finger parting the curtain, shaking her head in puzzled wonder. Of necessity, they spoke English—Nicola had forgotten her French. The words were spoken with a little amused maliciousness on Nikki's part, but for Nicola they were as bitter as vomit.

There had been a photograph made that afternoon. Perhaps it lay on the table between them, pushed stealthily forward and backward, an inheritance neither of them wanted. Years afterward, Jo found it among Nicola's letters.

The brash laughter of Nicola's son Henry reached them, and the giggling of Henry's feeble-minded daughter. It was plain that everything with which Nicola had unconsciously thought to grieve her mother was as ashes.

Jo, sitting in her dimly lit study with the map, the letters, the photograph—all that was left of five generations—tried to overhear what passed between them, but it was a faint murmuring difficult to understand. Perhaps, as they were getting into the car for the drive back to Halifax, Nikki had leaned through the window and put her hand on Nicola's shoulder.

Bon voyage, Madame le Grand Meulier.

Or would she have remained silent, smiling slightly as she stood on the porch to wave goodbye?