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Quoits

URSULA K. LE GUIN

THE DAYS AFTER BARBARA'S DEATH had not been a period of time but a place of a certain shape, a place where Shirley had to crouch down and hold still because it was the only thing to do.

On the day of the memorial service she had begun to be able to stop crouching. She found that she was with Angus and Jen, Barbara's children. But since Barbara was not there, she did not know what her relationship with them was or ought to be. Angus had behaved as a son; of course he was a son, Barbara's son—but not her son. But kind, quietly and efficiently kind, unhesitating. And now, the day after the service, he was going.

Shirley had only threadbare words. "I don't know what I would have done without you."

He had something to say, and said it: "My father should have come to the service."

"Oh—well—" In fact Shirley was glad Dan hadn't been there; but Angus was right.

"Daddy doesn't come. Daddy has back spasms," said Jen, predictably savage. "You graduate from law school, he has a back spasm. I graduate from law school, he has a back spasm. He won't come to his own funeral. Just can't move, terrible pain, you'd better bury somebody else!"

"I'm sorry he wasn't there," Angus said, direct, severe.

He kissed his sister, putting his arm around her shoulders in a reassuring, brotherly way that Shirley found pleasant, though Jen's angularity did not visibly soften to it. He kissed Shirley lightly, without an embrace; she patted his tweed shoulder. He went down to his car, got in, glanced unsmiling farewell to them up on the porch, and drove off down Clark Street in a spurt of dusty gravel.

"What a good man. A proper man," Shirley said, watching the breeze from the northwest blow the dust in a golden haze onto the Hanningers' geraniums.

"You aren't supposed to say that."

Alarmed and discomfited, a trespasser, Shirley said nothing.

Jen, who usually stooped, stood puffed up, speaking in a slow, gobbling voice: "You hate men. You want men castrated." Jen was doing an imitation of her father, Shirley realized as she went on, "Better yet, abort 'em all," in Dan McDermid's gobbling, pompous voice, but crying at the same time. Shirley looked away at once, more dismayed than ever.

"I think Angus looks like Gary Cooper," she said.

Jen said nothing, and Shirley wondered if she knew who Gary Cooper was. All the names had changed, and nobody knew the ones she knew. Since they moved to Klatsand five years ago, she and Barbara had seen no movies and watched nothing on television except what Barbara called *MacNeill and Lacey*, and had got out of touch; but surely Sean Connery was not an old man, and when she had mentioned Sean Connery the other day to little Chelsea Houk in the bakery, the girl had looked quite blank. But then, she generally looked blank, faced with anybody over twenty. Jen was going on crying, silently, so Shirley had to go on talking, trying to save face for both of them, and to hide the fact that they were afraid to touch each other.

"Angus is moral, too, the way Gary Cooper was," she said. "I mean in his movies, I suppose he was just a movie star really. But that kind of moral vulnerability. Just the opposite of all that digging in and resisting, that moral armament sort of thing. It's like rock, but it's exposed—vulnerable. What my grandmother called 'character.' People don't seem to use that word any more, do they?"

It wouldn't do. Jen continued proudly strangling sobs. Shirley set her jaw, turned to Jen, and patted the thin shoulder, muttering, "It's all right," while Jen stood rigid with resistance, gasping, "It's all right!"

In desperation, Shirley went down the two steps into the yard and began to pull up pigweed.

She wished Jen would go too, go soon. They had no comfort for each other. She was all right now, she could stand up, and she wanted to eat when she wanted to eat, and to go down to the beach alone, not leaving Jen in the house alone.

The strip of ground between the porch and the wobbly paling fence was hardly wide enough to kneel in, crammed with the fits and starts of Barbara's gardening, impatiens, lobelia,

roses, tigerlilies throttled in pigweed. Shirley got down on her knees to free the lilies. As soon as her hands touched the sandy dirt, the image of the stones in Cornwall came back into her mind. She knew then that that image had been there all along, all week, that it was what she had seen listening to Barbara's long, loud, widely spaced last breaths, and that now it was the image of herself, the shape she was in her soul.

Three slabs of uncut granite, a roof weighing down on two parallel walls. Earth had been piled over that stone house, a great mound of dirt. It had blown away over the centuries like the dust from the wheels of Angus's Honda, a haze of dust in the long autumn light, in the sea-wind. Nothing was left but the stone slab walls, the stone slab roof, the wind blowing through.

She and Barbara had seen the stone places on their two-week walking tour of Dorset and Cornwall—their honeymoon, Barbara had called it once but only once, after which they had agreed not to use the wrong names just because there were no right ones. They had entered together under the roof, crouching down, between the walls. Now with her hands on the dirt she saw and felt the quality of that sea-wind, that other sunlight, and was aware of the shadow inside the walls of weathered stone leaning inward to the roof, a cold, clear darkness. The floor was dirt. They were graves, those places. Quoits, they were called, in Cornwall. They stood about on the worn slopes of the hills over the sea. They were not single graves. They had had a door, a fourth stone, pivoted; it remained on some of them. By that door, time after time, the dead had gone in and the living had come out. Like Romeo and Juliet, and Tybalt lying there keeping them company under his sheets and cerements, and older bones of older Capulets, companionable. Death used to be not a hole but a house.

There has to be some kind of companionship, Shirley thought.

Angus was probably Jen's truest companion. Her mother dead, her father a bully, her husband remarried, no kids—unless there was somebody she didn't talk about, what companion had she? With all the moving about and the breakdown of family and then of course incest being so fashionable, people

didn't talk much about being brother and sister; yet Jen might well weep when her brother left.

As she rooted after a rosette thistle, Shirley thought of her own brother, Dodds. Dodds had been an insurance agent of thirty-five when hippies were invented, but he knew his hour when it came. He had put on a headband and gone to play drums and be communal in northern Maine. There he still was, Buddha-faced and beaded, drumming and farming, in his sixties, with five or was it six adopted children and a variable number of wives, or whatever they were. He raised potatoes and read *Black Elk Speaks*. Angus had called Dodds. Angus had done all that should be done, those first two days when Shirley had crouched on the floor or bed and could not talk for the great weight she bore. After she had come back out, Dodds had called twice from a pay phone in his village, with other voices faint on the crackling, roaring line, as if he were calling not only across the continent but across decades. He told Shirley to come stay on the farm as long as she liked. And she would do that. She would go be with her brother for a while. But she had to walk on the beach first, and in winter, in the dark days when you could not stand straight against the wind.

The thistle had tangled its tough roots with those of a rose. *Out of her grave there grew a rose, and out of hers a briar*. Had she done what should be done, like Angus? She need not crouch now to know the clear dark place, the shape of it. She looked up to the porch. Jen had gone indoors. The sun was cooling down in a bank of bright fog. Warmth drained out of the day like water from a tub. I kept the vigil the night she died. I called her children in the morning and they came. Then when I could come back out, the phone calls; and the notice in the papers; and the cremation and the service; and then we came back here; and wrote letters; and people called; and now. Now Angus has gone. Jen will go. Then it will all be done, won't it? And I will be alone in the house. Is there something I left out? She was sure she had omitted something, some act or obligation, but she knew also that the omission was Barbara. Barbara was what was left out, so nothing done could be complete.

Barbara's daughter had gone into the house in tears. Coward Shirley had deserted her for pigweed and thistles. She had

not done what should be done. They must weep together if need be. *They twined into a true lovers' knot, for all men to admire*. She hurried up onto the porch, beating dirt from her hands, and into the house. Jen was sitting on the sofa reading the newspaper indignantly. "Judge Stevens has taken himself *out* of the case? What's *his* excuse? Back spasms? Jesus H!" Jen's vocabulary of expletives was curious; probably she had got Jesus H and Jehosaphat from her father, but Lordy Dordy was, as the *OED* would say, of unknown origin. She said it now, skipping to another column. "Lordy Dordy! what has *happened* to the Brits? If Thatcher proposed privatizing the *air*, would they all say, *Euh, how ebsolyutely syupah*, and vote for it? Privatizing water! Jesus H!"

"It is a funny word," Shirley said, much relieved by Jen's wrath. "Barbara had to explain it to me. I mean that the private sector just means business. And then the opposite of privatize ought to be publicize, but it isn't—what is it? Socialize, I guess. But nothing gets socialized anymore, does it? Except little kids in preschools."

"Socialism? Gone the way of character," Jen growled, flapping the paper around to get at the comics.

Shirley appreciated the reference. Jen was a noticer, like Barbara. But not like her, not like her at all. It was comforting to see Barbara in Angus; it was painful not to see her in Jen, to be reminded of her absence by her absence. A hole, to be talked around, not to fall into. Crouch solid, be steady, like the stone quoit, stone on earth and stone on stone, the hollow not under but within. "Wrong opposites bother me," she said, sitting down in her chair, finding that she was stiff-legged and weary. "All the pedantry I couldn't use when I was teaching takes its revenge on me. Non-opposites are even worse. When there isn't one. Like what would it be, *masculism*? *Hominism*?"

"Sounds like something you'd get for breakfast in Alabama."

"And a good thing too," Shirley replied darkly.

They were silent while Jen studied the funnies with the same aggressive intensity she brought to the front page. "Hah!" she said once, scornful, but did not explain.

Since she had her long-distance glasses on, Shirley tried to read Ann Landers on the back sheet of the paper as Jen held it up only the width of Barbara's little Bokhara away; but she

couldn't quite get it into focus. It looked like one of those terrible poems that people were always, or so Ann Landers claimed, begging her to reprint, instead of something interesting, anyway.

"Friday," Jen said from the city desk of a newspaper in California, only it was on the edge of a forest in the twilight, something about owls.

"What?"

Jen was gazing at her over the downfolded newspaper with clear, piercing, light brown eyes. Shirley was ashamed of falling asleep and could not rid herself of the owls that stared at her through Jen's eyes.

"I said I thought I'd go back to Salem on Friday. Unless you'd like me to stay longer. Senator Bombast says I can have all next week if I want it. Or unless you want me to go sooner. I can go tomorrow." The stare continued.

"No, no," Shirley said feebly. "Whatever."

"One day will be enough to clear up whatever it is you wanted to do?"

"Oh, yes. Everything's really done. Both of you being lawyers."

"Mother had everything in order," Jen said, dry.

"It's only some little things."

"What things?"

"If you wanted them."

"Everything is yours, Shirley."

"The jewelry. And oh, this rug. And anything else—"

"She left it to you," Jen said, and Shirley felt accused, not of greed, but of cowardice.

"You ought to have some things of hers. And I can't—" Shirley held out her hand. The heavy silver ring Barbara had bought her in New Mexico was twisted on her thin, large-knuckled finger; she straightened it. "I can't wear her pieces. This, yes."

"Sell them."

"Only if you won't take them. I don't want to."

Jen drew in her breath and nodded.

"Shoes," Shirley said. "You wear eights."

Jen nodded again, morose. "I'll look at them."

"Clothes."

"I'll help you pack them up."

"What for?"

"The Women's Shelter in Portland, if you haven't got somebody here you want to give them to. I've done pro bono for them. They're effective."

Good for you! Shirley thought, seeing Jen's amber stare now as hawk not owl, the decisiveness of the daylight predator.

"Good," she said aloud.

"Anything else like that?"

"Well, anything of hers you might want. It was just that I couldn't do it while Angus was here. I was afraid he would think it was heartless—dividing the spoils—you know?"

Jen shifted her angular, spare body restlessly on the sofa. "Women should do deaths," she said. "Undertakers ought to be women. Just like midwives. Men have too many hormones and attitudes. I hated for men to touch Mother's body. Even as little as they did. I could only bear it because they were strangers. Paid. But if we could have done it, you and me—that would have been right. Appropriate. But not Angus. That wouldn't. It should be women's hands."

Shirley was taken aback. She felt an immediate agreement with Jen's idea, what Barbara called a visceral yes. But she did not like her saying *I hated for men to touch Mother's body*—it sounded glib, theatrical. Some things were truly better left unsaid, which was maybe why women should be the undertakers; or maybe not. A vague image from Dickens was in her mind, old women around a corpse, gambling—for Scrooge's bed sheets, was it? or his winding sheets, his cerements? Bed curtains, dark, wrinkled, like the weathered granite, sheltering. Old women cackling, gambling, heartless, appropriate.

"Another thing," Jen said, and Shirley found herself shrinking a little, the rabbit from the hawk—"I *hated* the thing in the paper."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I thought—"

"No, no, what you told them was fine. But what they did with it! The 'survived by' business—'Survived by a son in Portland, a daughter in Salem, and two grandsons.' Jesus H! Come *on*!"

Shirley stalled, trying to see what was tasteless or aberrant.

"What about you?" Jen demanded. "Why can't they say it?"

"Say what?"

"'Survived by her lover, Shirley Bauer.'"

"Because I'm not. I never was."

Now Jen was the daylight owl, round eyes staring unfocused.

Shirley stood up, feeling the awful electricity gather in her veins. "I wasn't her lover. She wasn't my lover. I hate, we hated, we hated that—that stupid word—'My lover!'" she crooned. "It doesn't mean love. It only means sex, an 'affair,' a liaison, it's a dirty, sniggering, sniveling word. I never was Barbara's 'lover.' Spare me that!"

After a pause Jen said gamely, though in a small, questioning tone, "Friend?"

"Spare me the euphemisms, too," Shirley said with some grandeur.

"Well," Jen said, and found no word to say, though evidently she was running through a series of them, discarding one after the other. Shirley watched her, sardonic.

"You see?" she said. "There aren't any words that mean anything. For us. For any of us. We can't say who we are. Even men can't any more. Did the paper say she was survived by her ex-husband? What about the man she lived with before she met your father, what's his label? We don't have words for what we do! Wife, husband, lover, ex, post, step, it's all leftovers, words from some other civilization, nothing to do with us. Nothing means anything but the proper names. You can say Barbara was survived by Shirley. That's all you can say."

She strode around the small room, setting items straight on table and bookcase, lightning still flowing through her, buzzing in her fingertips.

"Daughter can mean something," she said, snapping off a wilted chrysanthemum from the flowers Mrs. Inman had sent. "Son. Brother, sister. They're still worth saying. Sometimes."

"Mother," Jen said, in a voice so soft and uncertain that Shirley thought for a moment Jen was addressing her, before she understood and nodded. She was wondering if Jen would add father, when Jen cleared her throat and spoke again: "I thought at first you were saying that you and Mother, that you weren't—and I thought, I'll never forgive them!"

"Why not?" Shirley demanded, with her last unused scrap of indignation. "What's wrong with friendship?"

"Come on," Jen said, contemptuous. "You said yourself. Anyhow, what about me? Reading *Off Our Backs* and everything? All that enlightenment wasted?"

Shirley stood looking at her, and laughed. "Why, you are like her!"

Jen shook her head. "Angus is."

"All right, then, tell me," Shirley said, knowing she might transgress, but reckless, "do you know what Angus thinks, what he thought about it, about us?"

Jen went the least bit guarded. She was, after all, a lawyer. "He saw that Mother was happy," she said slowly but without apparent effort to select or invent, "and that you were nice. And respectable. Respectability matters to him."

"It did to Barbara."

"He borrowed my Adrienne Rich. But he gave it back. He said it worried him. But you didn't."

"Yes and no, maybe?"

Jen did not reject the qualification. After thinking, she added, "Angus doesn't seem to need to name things, the way I do. I wish I didn't, but I do."

"It's a hard habit to quit," Shirley said, and was suddenly so tired that she had to sit down, flop down, thump down in the armchair, all lightning spent, the respect and liking she felt for Jen puddling into sodden weariness. "Oh, what shall we do for dinner?" she said wretchedly, and thin Jen said, as she feared she would say, "I'm not hungry." She never was.

At seven-thirty, after a glass of red wine, Jen fixed them bacon and eggs.

The next day, Thursday, they "went through" Barbara's jewelry, shoes, clothes, and few pieces of furniture: the rug, the two carved chairs, the old typewriter and the new lap-computer, the immobile Volvo. Shirley had "gone through" her father's and her mother's things and knew how poor the belongings of the dead are, how little worth. She knew what Jen felt handling the odd, old, ill-kept bits of Navajo silver and Baltic amber and Florentine filigree that she had believed to be, and that had been, so long as Barbara wore them, fine and desirable. She thought of thieves rifling the hollow quoits as the earth slipped away from the granite, letting in sunlight on entangled bones,

a necklace of broken amber, a twist of Cornish tin, poor gauds. She thought of the strangers in the hollow place.

On Friday at noon Jen left, fierce and tearful.

On Friday evening at last Shirley walked down Cedar Street and across Searoad to the beach, for the first walk without Barbara. Not the first alone, of course. Often each had walked alone, sometimes in a fury with the other, mostly because the other was busy or lazy or not in a walking mood. But the first walk for seven years without Barbara.

Her dinner was on the stove ready to be heated up. While setting it out she had drunk a small glass of the red wine Jen had opened, but she would eat after the walk, for sunset now in mid-October was about six-thirty, and she did not want to miss it. The wine helped a bit, but she had worked herself up for too long about the walk, and was shaky and grim as she went through the dunes. The path through them from the end of Cedar Street was almost a tunnel, the harsh dune grass meeting overhead, then opening suddenly onto the light above the sea. A fogbank on the horizon and the long clouds lying above it were a color she had never seen in the thousand or so sunsets she had watched from this beach: a greyish mauve or lilac, dull, a heavy color, but immensely quiet and splendid between the pale green of the sky and the shining, colorless water.

She trudged down to the breakers, a long way, for the tide was out. Long waves ran easily up the dun sand, and running back down left a wide rippled stretch of wet that picked up the color of the sky and intensified it to a clear jade streaked with dark lilac: colors so beautiful Shirley could not take her eyes from them. She stood with her shoes sinking in the wet sand, the color all around her, and tried to gaze her fill. She was eating the color, devouring it; she craved it, even while she was thinking that they would call such a craving soft, fanciful, unreal, denying that grief was a hollow that must be filled with the food that came to hand. They don't know what people live on! she thought. And I don't even know who they are, she thought; but she did know; they were the givers of wrong names.

She turned, the colors sliding and shining about her on the sand, and started south. She walked only half a mile or so. Wreck Point stood grey above the moving waters; the colors

had gone without her noticing. She stood a minute looking back north. Fog was blurring out Breton Head and tangling in the dark hills above the small lights of town. Nobody was on the beach. There had been a young couple with a dog, she thought, while the colors were there, but they were gone. The light was lessening in the sky, and the sand lay dim. She held herself straight, planted on the sand, knowing who she was, the shape, crouched and hollow to hold the wind. The wind blew through her. Her feet were cold in their damp socks and wet shoes, and she was hungry.