READING PASSAGE

Kester and Lucy are going to search for fossils. Fossils are animals and plants so old that they have turned to stone. Ammonites are a sort of fossil shell.

Waiting at the bus stop Kester barely nodded to her, leaning over the wall and chucking stones into the stream, while Lucy stood in the bus shelter wondering what she had done wrong. But later, sitting together in the back seat of the bus, he explained. 'I don't want any trouble with the other boys, see.'

'Oh, because I'm a girl.'

'That's right. Not that I care that much, really. But they're always getting at me.'

The bus wound along the narrow lanes, brushing the hedges on either side, plunging into green tunnels. Lucy, staring out of the window, had the feeling that the countryside was drowning in growth, leaves pouring from the trees and hedges, gradually choking lanes and ditches. It was almost sinister. A pink cottage, lifting its roof above the hedges, looked to her like a Noah's Ark.

At last, as the bus climbed a steep hill, Kester stood up. 'We'll get off at the top. There's not a stop but he'll let us off. Otherwise we go down to the village and have to climb the hill again.'

Deposited at the roadside, Lucy could smell the sea. Somewhere near, there was the cry of gulls, infinitely mournful. They climbed a gate and in front of them a field rolled down to the top of steep cliffs.

'Do we have to climb down there?' she asked.

'There's a path and you have to slide a bit here and there. Otherwise it's through the caravan site.'

They descended steeply through a wood which clung to the hillside, the trees growing at an angle of forty-five degrees. It was cool, full of foxgloves and willow-herb, skeins of midges hanging in the shafts of light. They slithered on the stones. Below them the beach was grey, empty.

'I thought it was sand,' said Lucy.

'That's further on, nearer the town. Ice lollies and a million people. This is where the fossils are.'

The last bit was perpendicular. Lucy slid on her bottom and came to a ledge above a six-foot drop.

'Now jump.'

'I can't.'

'Don't be a nit!'

They landed together in a heap, clattering on the pebbles. The beach was like a vast cobbled street. The smooth stones bit into their feet, sliding and shifting with every step. The cliffs rose up behind them, grey, veined here and there with pink.

'Alabaster,' said Kester, picking up a lump.

Lucy took it from him; it was rose-coloured, dappled. She put it in her pocket.

'Where are the fossils, then?'

'Everywhere. You just have to look.'

They scrunched among the stones, eyes to the ground. Presently Kester stooped. ‘Here’s one.’

It was like a little grey wheel, ridged, winding into itself.

‘Gosh! What is it?’

‘Ignorant! It’s an ammonite. Middle Liassic, I should think. Don’t you know anything?’

Presently Lucy found a section of another. ‘I say! This one must have been about a yard big!’

They found things like delicate stone snails, scallop shells embedded in blocks of stone, and innumerable sections of ammonites, perfect in their symmetry. They filled their pockets. The hunt became obsessive; they moved over the beach like sleepwalkers, greedily gathering.

At last Kester said, ‘That’ll do. I’m lumbered.’ His pockets sagged, clattering.

They sat down on a shoulder of rock, staring across the still water.

‘You know,’ said Kester, ‘I did remember you – that time at Uncle Tom’s. But I wasn’t letting on. I thought you were a mate of those two girls.’

‘I felt awful,’ said Lucy, ‘as if I’d waved to someone in the street and they’d turned their back on me.’

‘Sorry; I really am.’

‘I know. It’s all right now.’

Kester talked slowly, remembering. ‘It’s just I can’t stand those two. Or their mum. So if you were one of them I just didn’t want to know you.’

‘Well, I’m not.’

‘No. You’re not quite so thick. Though, I must say, someone who’s never heard of Middle Liassic …’ He squinted sideways at her, grinning.

‘I bet you hadn’t until you started your project or whatever it is,’ said Lucy indignantly. ‘As a matter of fact I’m rather well-informed. Stop laughing or I’ll – I’ll …’

‘Go on. You’ll what?’

‘I’ll tell those boys you brought me here. The ones you’re always squabbling with.’

‘You wouldn’t, you know.’

‘No,’ said Lucy, subsiding. ‘You’re quite right. I wouldn’t.’

There was a pause. ‘We’re a bit the same, you and me,’ Kester went on. ‘We can’t talk to people. We’re kind of all shut up inside ourselves.’

‘My father says I’m gloomy.’

‘No. It’s just that you know you’re on your own, see? We all are, really. But some people never seem to know it – or else they’re not bothered. I’ve had a thought – you’re all by yourself at your auntie’s. Why isn’t your mum here?’

Lucy took one of the stone snails from her pocket. It curled into her palm, cool and smooth. ‘She doesn’t live with us any more. She married someone else. My dad’ll be coming later, when he gets his holiday.’

‘Oh, I see.’ Kester scowled at the sea for a moment. He put his hand in his pocket, tipped the fossils on to a flat stone, and looked them over carefully. Then he picked out the one perfect ammonite.

‘Here, you can have this one.’

‘Oh, Kester, it’s the best.’

‘I know. Take it.’