

AMANDA PETERS

RECLAMATION

THE CHANGE CAME UPON THEM SO SLOWLY and so naturally that they didn't even notice it—until the children disappeared.

The factory, where men lined up to work twelve-hour days and different men lined up to work twelve-hour nights, still blew grey smoke from the two large stacks. The smell of trade-secret chemicals still rotted the night air and the lungs of the workers. The waste still spilled into the lake and then into the reservoir, as it had for so long that none of the people remembered when it hadn't.

The wind still blew, and the tides still rose—higher each year. The summer air warmed, and snows still came—less each winter. The farmers still farmed and brought food to the town—sprayed and modified. The baker still rose at four and baked breads, cupcakes, and eclairs with chocolate and cream. The musicians still played violins, and the mechanics still fixed cars. The doctors still prodded and poked, and the artists still slapped paint on objects and made them something entirely different. Beautiful. Things went on.

The girls were still cruel to their mothers, and the boys were still cruel to the girls. The fathers still drank beer on Saturday nights and stood proud over charred meat on a grill in the summer. The mothers still baked sour-dough bread and complained about *sagging this* and *wrinkled that* at the salon or at book club over bottles of red wine, chilled. The single people still met at the bar on a random Tuesday to find relief with strangers who became lovers and then strangers again. On Saturdays they went for hikes and shopped for greens at the farmers' market. And it seemed like everything was just as it always was.

Country clubs lay empty with the exception of the very old, who wandered the grassy fields unchanged. They swung clubs, hit balls, and rode little white carts holding cylindrical bottles of beer, which were considered old-fashioned now. They mumbled and groaned about sore knees and in-

effectual bowels and about the time before the change. They hugged willow granddaughters and bumpy grandsons and yearned for simpler times. Ahhh, simpler times.

The little girls still danced, although ballet, jazz, tap, and hip hop were replaced by swaying. And sway they did, dressed in brown and green, the acorns that grew along their hairlines decorated with glitter and wrapped in individual bows. At the spring recital the bows were various shades of green with little pink plastic buds attached. At the fall recital the ribbons were red, yellow, and orange. At the Christmas recital small sprigs of holly sat between the acorns dusted with green and red glitter. Their nylon leggings were shades of brown, and their tops were green and billowing. The mothers drove the girls to swaying class and watched with pride as their daughters lined up facing the mirrored wall, lifted their arms above their heads, and swayed to the stereo as it played the sounds of the wind. And the little girls closed their eyes, moved slowly with a breeze, and shuddered violently with the sound of a hurricane. And so it went, season after season.

The boys took to swimming. Baseballs were left abandoned in yards and fields to be stepped on and cursed. Fathers broke hockey sticks into smaller pieces and used them for kindling in December, and mothers cut footballs in half and used them as planters in April. Plastic guns and toy cars were piled into garbage bags and hauled off to the dump. In the spring, when the peepers cried out for mates and the air began to warm, the boys flocked to the river's edge and the lake side. They sat on rocks or sandy shores and stared into the water, their tongues out. When the summer came, and the air was warmer still, they swam from sunup to sundown until frantic mothers called out names from back porches, and worried fathers drove pick-up trucks to collect them. The boys swam until the webbing between their fingers and toes started to wrinkle and numb. Then, in winter, the boys slept while the girls swayed. The mothers fed them strong coffee and flies for breakfast to keep them awake for school. The boys wiped their bulging eyes and croaked their discontent at being made to learn. The town built three extra buildings to house three extra swimming pools, complete with algae. In the stands, the girls decorated their acorns with glitter in school colours and cheered for their favourite boys as they swam from one end of the pool to the other and back—again and again and again.

Life continued on, the tides rose higher, and the forests burned. The storms grew stronger, and the earth quaked and fractured. The ice melted,

the rivers rose, and still they went about their lives.

The tools at the factory were gradually adapted, and menus at the diner—and even at the Italian fine dining restaurant with checkered tablecloths and long stem wine glasses—were altered to include dried grasshopper and fresh flies, which became a favourite. The jeweller made rings that fit tiny twig fingers and watches that would pass over the webbed hands of an outstretched boy.

Then a girl went missing. And a boy. And then another boy. And another girl.

When their voices broke, and there was blood on the bedsheets, they began to disappear.

“Order,” cried the mayor. He lifted the gavel, which has never been lifted since, as there has never been a reason, and brought it down hard on the stand. Pens rattled, water spilled, and voices quieted. Mothers and fathers gathered, holding coffee cups and pictures of lost children. Mothers dabbed their eyes with cloth handkerchiefs, tiny flowers embroidered in the corners. Fathers cursed anyone they could, demanding the return of their children. Young mothers, their delicate twig fingers softened at the end into leafy nails, sat sobbing and clutching their tiny brown daughters or their pale green sons.

“Order!” cried the mayor a second time, his unwebbed hand raised to calm the crowd. The father, whose little girl won each swaying recital, spoke first and demanded that his daughter—his champion offspring—be returned. The mother whose son was the fastest in the pool yelled incoherently until the father of the same son took her outside. The mothers, fathers, grandfathers, grandmothers, mechanics, bakers, factory owners, artists, and farmers all demanded their children back, but no one knew where they were. They yelled and pointed long twiggy fingers or croaked curse words at one another, and the mayor gave up using the gavel. There was no order to be had.

Then a girl of fourteen stood on a table and swayed, as all girls did. The crowd bent their heads to their shoulders and quieted. They looked at the girl, her acorns aglow in the dim light of the town office. The mothers stopped their wailing, the fathers stopped their raging, and she stepped down from the table and whispered, “We tried to warn you.” She walked past the sobbing mothers and into the evening air made loud by the croaking of frogs and the rustling of leaves.

They followed her, walking in a line two-by-two to the banks of the river where magnificent oak trees had sprung up overnight and a multitude of frogs had begun to nest. In the thick trunk of an oak they found a bracelet, gold and delicate. The clasp was still clasped, and the tiny birthstone glinted in the setting sun, the name etched in cursive, the “i” dotted with a star. The oak swayed, creaked, and sang with the wind. The mothers became sad, and the fathers’ rage returned. The men took an axe and cut the oak, slamming the sharpened steel into the base until it fell with a great thud. The mothers dug with their hands until blood stained the bark and their manicured nails were chipped and broken. But the bracelet stayed, encased in wood. The frogs gathered at the base and croaked in mourning for the tree, and the fathers kicked at them, stepped on them, and shooed them into the water.

The girl cried out, and they turned and watched her bury her toes in the sand, her legs pressed firmly together, her arms raised. Her head swayed back and forth and back and forth until the acorns fell from her hairline and landed on the ground with a gentle thump. They watched as her body hardened and turned to wood. Leaves sprung from her fingertips and the ends of her hair. The frogs gathered at her base and welcomed her in joyful chorus.