

LORI VOS

THE VILLAGE AT LAKESIDE

I AM AT THE BEACH, sitting on a large rock at the shoreline. The old willow shading me has been dropping fuzzy brown corkscrews. Their sharp smell drifts on the breeze and fills my nostrils with the memory of Grandma and Grandpa's cottage several miles west along the old Lakeshore Road. The water is clearer now than when I was a child; I can see through the shallows the regular ridges of soft sand, tufts of seaweed floating above, veins of light shifting with the incoming waves. Ducks are playing on the surface of the lake, squawking and flapping at each other. Sometimes a graceful pair glides by, the male's head a brilliant bottle green.

And always there is the plashing, gulping sound of water hitting stone, the rhythmic shush of waves fanning the sand where the rocks end and the beach begins. The sound of the waves was the music of my childhood, the lake wind its breath. My sight was formed by the vast stretch of the horizon, the limitless vault of blue above it. Here at the shore I learned to look, to discover in the beauty and solitude a presence, immutable as the great lake itself, watching, listening, waiting.

My sister's house is the place I stay when I return to the village. In the mornings, I hear the back door slam and the van's engine hum as she and her partner leave for work. Then I am alone. Sometimes I lie reading in bed, enjoying a silence broken only by the chatter of birds or the sound of a passing car. Sometimes I look out the window at branches and blue sky that make me feel I am living in the treetops.

I dress and pad downstairs, out to the backyard. It is mid-May; the new spring growth is a promise of the coming Niagara lushness. The Japanese pear is white with blossoms that send a peculiar pungency into the air. Around the perimeter of the yard, a grey wooden fence supports climbing hydrangea behind beds of violets, bleeding hearts, and forget-me-nots. I stand on the deck and gaze down at tender green blades of grass, hesitant to crush them with my feet.

I turn and pick my way over the pebbled driveway to the front of the house. As I lift my head and look before me, I feel my chest expand with the openness of the view. I am standing at the top of a steep embankment that leads to the edge of the river, a wide river that wears its history in various scenes. To my left is the old red brick factory, a former mill; near it the stone locks that used to open to the canal and the great lake beyond. Now the heavy gates are still. Over the water, a new bridge curves up toward the city. But the river is unconstrained in front of me by fetters of stone and cement; it is a wide, flat stretch of silver. Today it is gently sparkling in the sunlight, its surface lined occasionally by geese trailing their webbed feet as they land. I let my gaze rest in the stillness. Then I look right and up the rowing course, where buoys bob in the waves, to the distant island with its boathouse and sweeping willows. Not many rowers are on the course, just a few scullers steadily dipping and pulling their oars. This simple waterscape gives up its beauty so quietly, asking nothing from me but to receive what I can in that moment.

As I walk the wide streets of the village, I visit trees as old friends. One stands at the curve in the road where Ann Street turns into Bayview Avenue. I sit on the bench beside the tree and look out over the water. Here the shoreline rises in a sharp slope to the street; there are no houses, so the view is broad, open. This tree sees far, knows the moods of the lake, silently watches those who cross its surface. I watch with it as the lake shifts and rolls, blue-grey, under the weight of a lowering sky.

I move from the tree and the view and walk several blocks along Dalhousie Avenue. As a child, I couldn't identify these trees, apart from the familiar maples; now I know there is chestnut and oak, fir and spruce, the occasional willow, and some I still can't name. I knew and still know these trees as towering giants whose leaves are so high above me I can barely make out their shapes except when they shed them in autumn. They are all wide trunks and thick branches reaching up to splay and leaf, meeting over the shaded streets below. Where sunlight falls through this canopy it brightens lawns, houses, and sidewalks with soft, moving patches of illumination.

I reach what used to be the Jowetts' house and the biggest tree in the village. I tell people that its trunk is so huge I can't put my arms halfway around it. I look at that great trunk now, its ridges and thick ropes of gray

bark, the way its roots pool at its base before submerging in the earth. I step up onto a ledge of root and stretch my arms around the tree, hoping no one will drive or walk by and see me. As I stand there, fingers locked in grooves of rough skin, I am warmed by the light this tree has absorbed, soothed by the strength that rises from deep roots to new branches smaller than my fingertips.

Nearby, around two street corners, I reach the tall straight maple that shades my childhood home. The rounded shelves of the tree's roots were just right to stand or sit on when I was small. They are still just right. As I lean my body against the trunk, I think about what this tree has seen. Many years ago, it watched a woman and two small pajama-clad girls run from a man too drunk to catch them, run three blocks to a phone booth on the village's main street. This tree is a guardian. It stands strong, absorbing sorrow like sunlight. I am grateful; I know it stood guard over me.

When I grew up here, Port, as the village was called, was rough. Then, as now, the hotel bars were dingy, giving off a sour smell of smoke, stale beer, and urine. Reminders of Port's past as a canal and shipbuilding town with its transient workers and sailors frequenting the local grog shops.

At McArthur, the local public school, some of the kids were like me—poor, from broken homes. And not like me—many were already hard and hopeless. Still, the school was a good home. Built in the late nineteenth century, it was a tall red-brick building with a bell tower and narrow windows that reached to the top of high-ceilinged classrooms. Inside, there was dark wood everywhere—staircases, banisters, doors, baseboards, and floors that creaked under our feet as we made our way to our rooms and desks every morning.

I remember every classroom, each past configuration of desks, doors, chalkboards, and windows, and I remember my teachers. Mrs. Thomas was my favourite. Slight, sprightly, middle-aged, with a head of chestnut curls and bright hazel eyes, she moved quickly and saw everything. I was fortunate to have her as my teacher in grades five and six. Every day, she would read to us from the Bible, from Farley Mowat, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and other wonderful writers who opened my imagination to fantastical worlds and endless possibilities. Mrs. Thomas, like all good teachers, tried to push us to our best, made learning an adventure. She saw me in ways I had never been seen before, a recognition that gave me hope.

McArthur School is gone now, more than a decade ago. I saw it for the last time the day before it was reduced to a pile of splintered wood and broken bricks. A former owner of my sister's home salvaged the piece of the belltower that reads 1877–1977. It sits on her front lawn and reminds us of the stories, faces, and classrooms, the new worlds and new selves, that still flow through our veins.

More than the school will be demolished soon. Most of the old buildings lining Lock Street and Lakeport Road will be razed by a developer's will, pocketbook, and heavy machinery. The rough edges of Port will be gone. The two lighthouses that have stood watch on the far pier for over a century will be dwarfed by a towering condominium, a beacon of progress and commerce. Will the carefully coiffed, high-heeled shoppers of the future feel the ghostly disdain of the towmen and canal labourers of the past?

This time, the destruction won't come without protest. The voice of the community, seeking to preserve its heritage, has been strong. But the judge who heard the case saw only the promise of new business; Goliath stood firm against the sharp sting of David's stones. Now the village stands at the cusp of another shift in its history, uneasy with its new, imposed face.

As I walk the quiet, midday streets, I slow at the old captain's house. A two-storey, square wooden structure, painted white and green, it sits solidly on its corner lot, as stalwart as I imagine a ship's captain would have been. I come to this place in my daydreams. When I am troubled or anxious, I return to this spot in my mind and it always looks as it does now—dressed in the garb of spring. Before the square front windows, the magnolia drops its petals. Tulips and daffodils are dabs of bright colour bordering the lawn.

What is it about this place that draws me when I am far away? I stand and breathe the lake wind, feel it toss my hair against my face. I watch sunlight play across the grass and touch the heads of flowers. Immovable, the house stands against time, its only shifting shapes the glinting reflections in its windows.

I have never lived in this house, or on the streets that border it, but here I am home. I stand at the corner, the site of the old school behind me, the lake visible on the horizon ahead. My feet have grown roots that have cracked the sidewalk, thrust deep into the earth. This soil, this house, these trees, this lake, this body, these eyes, this life. This life.