

A Broken Heart

The island mourned.

She had hibernated while ice caps grew and shrank, snoozed as giant squids propelled through her waters, tossed as a saber-toothed tiger raised his hind leg and marked her cliffs as his own, and turned over as the last glacier scoured a divot, burping forth a boulder.

Rain and ice-melt filled the marooned divot. Willows sprouted along its edge and grew. Tides came and went, and year by year by year the pond's shore shifted from earthquakes, remnant typhoons, and torrential winter storms. Rotting leaves, storm-downed limbs, and silt slowly filled the hollow until sedges, reeds, and cattails thickened its shallows.

Eelgrass spread along her seashore. Salmon cycled up and down her streams. Tides nibbled at cliffs. Trees tumbled. Seas gobbled sand. Dunes grew. A spit formed. The island did not mind shrinking and rearranging. The change refreshing.

The burped rock, once far from pounding surf, became a bulwark against high tides. Badgers grubbed and ducks waddled, their fat bottoms shimmying along the marsh's shore and around the rock. At its base, deer scattered pellets chock-full of thimbleberry seeds. Mussels grew thick over its ramparts. Clams dug deep under its base.

Bored, the land rolled sand from deep under the waves onto her northern point and back again. Forward and back. Forward and back. Forward and—

Until one morning.

Sand particles twinkled in dawn's light. A sparkle here, a wink there.

Magnificent!

With shadows and highlights, she painted a semicircle. Shifting and dredging, she scoured the

shallows, crafted a basin as smooth as wave-washed pebbles, with a shore as iridescent as a hummingbird's gorget. Each sunrise, she paused to gauge what further refinement her masterpiece warranted. When rearranging diminished her vision, she judged her effort done and sought her next canvas. The spit lent itself to her vision. She transformed the jutting narrow landmass in half the time. Gazing at the luminous shore, she noticed a pine sapling growing nearly a third of the way out.

What a cheeky tree busting loose from the forest's confines.

As its monochromatic greenness fought her neutral palate, she would obviate the tree with the next typhoon surge. Watching a storm build at the horizon, she noted how much the pine had grown and how its asymmetrical position within the spit had become a bold focal point. She bid the ocean spare the tree. Sometimes though, she wished she had not. For the tree developed into an obnoxious critic.

Too garish. Not your best. No meaning. Too saturated. Boring. Over the top. Insipid. You must be out of your mind.

The big rock and pond gave the land pause when a vision failed to manifest. Willows, sedges, and rock were already in contemplative harmony with one another as well as with spouting whales and agile sea nymphs. Anticipating the tree would taunt her if she botched it—*I have to look at that? You're kidding me. I could do better than that*—she would wait for an inspirational muse and move on.

The bluff turned out to be frustratingly tricky. Chalky, easily fragmented, with hemlock roots jutting from the precipice, the slope required her complete attention. At times, when the surface twisted into something less than her desires, she nearly blasted the hillside to smithereens. Yet when she polished the patina into a high gloss and the patter of rain plinked

just so against its surface, it spoke to her. Engrossed in a most delicate carve on the rocky slope, she ignored canoes as they paddled into her northern semicircle and tracked onto the opalescent sands.

When the men approached her canvas, she eyed them momentarily but her intricate operation could not be interrupted. She had art to create. The men pried mussels from the big rock. Hunted the pond's duck, deer, and badger. Named big rock Big Rock.

When she had buffed the cliff's veneer, for possibly the last time, she stood back and studied her work.

Bravo. Well done. Jolly good.

Positive comments from the pine?

Don't touch one more pebble.

Emboldened, she enmeshed herself in her southern point. Dusting, glazing, etching, she toiled. Decade after decade after decade.

Has anything told you you're manic?

The land beamed. Creativity required focus. Art, especially art that resonated, art only she could fabricate required complete and utter attention. There was no room for distractions.

Your frenzy of erosion, freezing, and expanding, is, well, toxic.

She scrubbed, swirled, layered, textured, abraded. Sensed the pine passing judgment.

Practice stillness or you'll wear yourself—us—out.

She ignored the tree. Ignored all but her canvas. But when ships with flapping sails chased whales and her waters churned red, she took notice.

Red would not do. As a frame, the color's garishness fought her work. Ruined her composition.

She pelted ships with waves and rain. A few hardy men washed ashore. They built docks and shelters along her sandy northern semi-circle, crafted homes with glass windows, second stories, wrap-around porches. Obliterated her twinkling sands.

She whipped water into raging tides. It flooded structures and toppled some of her lesser work. But men returned with a vengeance. Three and four storied mansions burst like boils from her hilltops, oozing balconies, widow-walks, slate-roofed turrets. She shook, tried to shed these poxes, but the men's gilded cages held fast.

One gargantuan blemish irked her the most. Raised atop the high bluff overlooking the pond, the pustule spilled onto the beach with a tram tacked onto her Magnus Opus. She pelted the eyesore with hail, hurled winds and rain against its railway and boathouse. Besides losing a roof shingle or two, the detested mansion stood firm.

The whales vanished but not the men. They bushwhacked into her interior, into the boreal forest that she had been saving. Saving because a vision of the final product had failed to materialize, vegetation so different than rocks and soil. And, of course there was the pine. Contending with the tree's bellyaching, sure to turn caustic once she started on its own kind, required fortitude, inner strength she had spent turning her waters from red to grayish-green.

Thickets fell. Soil furlled into rows. Twigs sprouted.
Pushy buggers.

This once she agreed with the pine, these men were a scourge. While she gathered herself together to shake the living daylight from them, their planted twigs glowed with pinkish-white flowers that burned cinnabar at the tip of each branch.

Not bad. Not bad at all.

Here, in the interior, red worked. Perhaps she could learn from these men. So she watched.

A girl discovered the pond. The mosquitoes and gnats didn't pester her. She swam with the ducks, trailed the deer, rubbed the badger's chin, climbed Big Rock and stared out at the surrounding sea. Sometimes she sang.

The island cooed, her tides shifting and swaying in tune with Willow's mesmerizing voice.

Why name her at all? And if you must, why not quartz, crystal, or gypsum? Why Willow?

The pond inhabitants, typically spineless bystanders to the pine's whimsy, took a stand. *She is one of us. Call her Willow.*

Willow moved into the detested boil high above the pond and tried to make it her own. Apple trees replaced box elder mazes, windows shrugged off brocade draperies, wood plank flooring breathed after oriental rugs loosened their suffocating grip.

A baby was born. Then another. A boy and a girl. Apple People from the land's interior visited the detested house. Picnics and fetes were held on the lawn, and the girl, a woman now, danced and sang and chattered. She twirled her babies. The husband sometimes joined her circle, sometimes laughed, sometimes rolled down the grassy knoll with Willow and their children.

The town's buildings boasted new roofs, siding, flower boxes. The husband slapped the backs of shop-owners, cut a ribbon hanging across the schoolhouse door, and rang the church bell. Apple People hugged the husband, shook his hand, grinned.

The land forgave the detested house. It couldn't help being built upon her crowning showpiece. Deep inside, the building was kind, or its people wouldn't act so.

Willow and her son often raced to cliff's edge, hopped on the tram, rode the steep slope down to the beach and back, the cacophonous clanking and banging enough to wake the dead. Seldom the daughter or husband. Willow taught the boy to chase fireflies flitting at pond's edge. To dig for clams. To pop seaweed bladders. To puff dandelion heads. To climb Big Rock.

"Come Charlie, snug close to me. I'll keep you from falling." Willow pointed a finger out to sea. "Be still and

watch the waves. See? That spray means whales. They've come to say hello. Let's tell them we're friends." With a high sweet voice, Willow sang a sinuous aria.

Gigantic whales breached, smacked their flukes in time. Willow patted Charlie's knee and sang. A smaller, slender iridescent tail broke the water's surface. A female with long flowing hair crested a wave. She joined her voice to Willow's and together they sang in harmony. When the song ended, the sea nymph flapped her tail on a wave then plunged downward with the whales.

Willow hugged the little boy. "One day this will all be yours, Charlie." Willow swept her hand in the direction of the bluff, pond, rock, beach, and sea. "Never let anyone change it. For it's wonderful the way it is."

Charlie nodded.

The island glowed. This is what the pine meant.

The land practiced stillness. She ran alongside as Willow and Charlie galloped to Big Rock, climbed hand-over-hand up a rope, and sat just behind, staring at the nearby cliff and eastern shore. She marveled at her creation and was lulled by Willow and the boy's singing.

See, you're happy.

For a second time the land agreed with the pine.

Until one afternoon. Willow ran across the lawn. The husband, too, catching up to her at bluff's edge. Waving arms flushed eagles. Angry words scattered seagulls. And before the land could act, Willow fell, tumbled down down down the land's jewel to the rocky beach. Or, had the man pushed her? It was hard to tell between fluttering eagle and seagull wings. As darkness rolled in, the man dragged Willow into the turning tide.

The land roared. Shook. Trembled. Pounded. Houses toppled, slid down cliffs. Apple People huddled in their root cellars. Flower Box Tending People slapped up For Sale signs and scampered to the ferry. But not a roof shingle fell from the detested house. Alone, the husband

sat behind his desk, staring blankly at the rusting tram's seat parked at cliff's edge.

The land lashed with rain and wind, cackled as more buildings crumbled. Until the trees' intertwined roots pulsed with distress.

Please, oh please, be still. You cannot bring back Willow.

Why do you have to be right?

The land gave up. Let what will be be.

More houses sprang up along her cliffs, these closer to the edge, their owners and engineers cockier than those who built before. Ferries came and went, clogged during warm spells. Swaths of trees tumbled, the understory burned, and homes bloomed where once hummingbirds fed from yellow columbine blossoms.

Red stakes looped the pond, notations etched Big Rock, crimson flagging circled the lone pine's thick girth. Ducks exploded skyward. As men surveyed the marsh, deer ran across the road. Some did not reach the other side. Mosquitoes died from poison. There was talk of moving Big Rock. It was in the way.

Way?

No way. She needed an ally. She could not fight alone.

Why do you expect them to be kind to us, when they are not kind to each other?

The island searched among the Cocky People, Apple People, Flower Box Tending People, but none had Willow's heart. None contained the gift to sing to sea creatures. The land cast her eye to the husband, but his heart had withered. To the daughter's, but her heart cared only for herself. To Charlie. For surely Charlie had inherited Willow's heart. He could sing the old songs. But Charlie's heart ached.

Ached as badly as hers.

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