

Lee M. Whitehead

Rooted

The people of the island knew him only as a sturdy, taciturn old man who occasionally appeared at the Fernwood store to buy oddments of groceries. He did not speak to Parker, the store owner, or to Parker's wife, or to any of the lingering customers who might have clung to their few moments in the store as to a life-preserver, anxious to see or hear something of the world other than their own four walls and two or three bratty children. It was their secret delight to be present when he bought his groceries; it broke whatever chill might have settled between them and they could gossip for fifteen or twenty minutes after he had gone about the crazy old man.

His entry was always abrupt and sudden: the rusty hinges of the screen door squealed and the spring groaned as he jerked the door open and stepped through with hardly a pause. He looked at no one. He passed along the shelves, muttering "Some of this. And this. That, too." He would deposit his hoard on the counter and stare at Mr. Parker, who, invariably unnerved by the stare, guiltily rang up the purchases and furtively made change, the exact amount of which the old man always double-checked. When the screen door slammed behind him, Mr. Parker was always the first to laugh. "Crazy old bastard; you'd think I was trying to cheat him out of his last cent!"

"He talks to himself," Mrs. Showalter said, from the corner where she was leafing through dress patterns. "I don't think he's right in his head."

Mrs. Hamilton, adding a can of tomato soup to her shopping basket and looking judiciously through the collection of canned fruit, said "My Francie saw him from the school bus th'other day, stomping along the north road, swinging his arms around and yelling. And no one around. He oughta be locked up, *I* think."

Mrs. Parker slipped into her husband's place behind the counter and leaned back against the shelf of candy bars and gum so that she could see, through the window, the broad, square back of the old man

retreating with purposeful energy up the middle of the gravel coast road toward the bend at the Showalter's place where he would disappear behind the trees. "I expect he's lonely," she said.

D. J. Arrington lived in a house he had built many years ago just above his own private beach at the head of a small cove near the north end of the island. It was four miles from the Fernwood store and in all those four miles there were only three other houses, two of which were merely summer habitations. Only the Showalters occupied their house year around; Claude Showalter ran a small sawmill and did odd jobs for the summer residents; the two Showalter children were picked up at 7:20 each morning by a school bus that circled the whole northern half of the island before depositing them at their school in Ganges. At 4:05 the bus stopped again at the Fernwood store to unload the Showalter children as well as the Hamilton children and the Smith children, who lived a mile and a mile and a half respectively along the dirt coast road to the south of the Fernwood store. None of these children had ever seen Mr. Arrington's house. They were not adventuresome children; while they might, in their wanderings, occasionally venture as far up the coast road as the imposing but severely weathered summer residence of Judge J. H. Johns, none cared to brave the overgrown track that wandered beyond the Johns place through gloomy, moss-hung fir and gnarled arbutus to the Arrington house. No vehicle had been driven over this track for ten years or more; it was almost wholly overgrown here and there by alder and bush-high nettles. Also, they were terrified of Mr. Arrington, who never spoke to them or even acknowledged their presence if by chance he passed them on the road or encountered them at the store. In their lively, if island-stunted, imaginations, he was an ogre who might do terrible things to children who got lost in his woods; like the witch in Hansel and Gretel, he might roast them alive.

But the house. It was a large house that he had built over many long summers for his wife and the large family they would have. Every vacation, every long weekend, he had labored upon the house; whenever he could get away from his job in the city, he drove an old truck loaded with boards, cement, nails, piping—whatever was necessary at the time—to the ferry and made the crossing to the island. For several years his wife accompanied him, roughed it with him in a tent, cooked for him, held a board for him now and then. He made rooms for at least four children. Only two came, however: a sickly boy and a fierce, angry little girl who spent her days tormenting her brother or calling loudly for her mother from the beach. Long before the house was finished, his wife stopped coming with him. He came alone or some-

times with the reluctant children, hammering and sawing more furiously each holiday than the last, as if he were becoming more and more frenziedly desperate to finish the house.

When it was finished, it was a magnificent house, solidly built to withstand lonely winters, covered with rough cedar shakes he had hewn with his own hands. There were five bedrooms, a large living room, a dining room, a kitchen. In the living room was a monstrous fireplace he had built with stones hauled up laboriously from the beach; one could roast a whole sheep in it. He had cleared a half-acre of the forest around the house, sparing only one monumental arbutus near the roadway. He had planted grass. Before the house he had cemented in an immense verandah of local flagstone, down from which, to the beach, he had erected a solid concrete stairway that would last fifty years against the storms and surging seas of winter. It was an ideal place to be alone, to get away from the busy world of the city, to rest, to put down roots, to commune with one's family and with one's soul. And no one came. The years passed. The house, shuttered and snug, endured as it had been built to endure. It aged slightly: the cedar shakes turned silver-gray, the odd board warped, but the roof did not leak and the tightly caulked windows withstood the worst onslaughts of storm and sun.

The wife died. The son, it was said, drifted away or took drugs or committed suicide. No one knew for certain. Mr. Arrington gave up his position and came to live in the house he had built many years before. With him came his daughter, an unsmiling, unhappy woman who stayed a few months. She was last seen waiting sourly for the ferry with a few possessions, alone and unapproachable. After that, no one. Nothing. Mr. Arrington might have been seen once a month at the post office in Ganges, or at the bank, or perhaps once a week at the Fernwood store, rarely elsewhere, unless and, as the years went on, more frequently, marching alone along one of the roads, his feet shod in heavy, well-made hiking boots, a woolen cap on his head, and, if the weather were inclement, a long, old-fashioned leather coat encasing his sturdy shoulders. Efforts to extend island friendliness to him were met with a silent, ferocious stare. As diligent, as hard-skinned, and as curious as some of the islanders were, no one was ever able to discover how he spent his time apart from his rare public appearances or what his opinions were about anything whatsoever.

She was as graceful and as noiseless, moving through the brush of the overgrown road, as one of the small island deer. She had come to the island in the company of a friend, but he had made himself obnoxious, so she went her own way. She was looking for a deserted cabin on the

island's coast where she could be alone, read, meditate, and, as she would have put it, "Get her stuff together." The gloomy fir trees and the twisted arbutus did not frighten her; she was exhilarated by them. The forest floor was carpeted with moss and ground-hugging evergreens; fallen trees here and there sprouted sudden wings of brilliant orange or yellow lichen; mushrooms and tiny, red-tipped fungi pushed up through the duff of needles and leaves. She was quite delighted. "It's a magic place," she murmured to herself.

She had just emerged from the forest and had paused to observe the large house when she heard a voice from above her.

"Once more! Listen!"

It was an angry command and it startled her. She looked up. On top of a steep mound, a huge and ancient arbutus grew, its bare surface, smooth as human skin, rising straight, vertical, and limbless for twelve or fifteen feet before it began to branch and twist in the normal manner of arbutus trees. It stood by itself on the crest of the mound, a patriarch of a tree, grander and more imposing than any she had seen.

"Hear me!" the voice thundered again.

She saw first the high boots, then the heavy woolen socks folded carefully around their tops, above those pair of muscular, reddened calves, then thick woolen hiking shorts and a red hunting shirt. Above this an old man's rapt, inflamed face surrounded by wild, flowing white hair. The old man was embracing the tree, staring upwards, muttering, and from time to time impatiently clutching it as if trying to merge with it. The tree was so huge and so immovable that his fiercest efforts did not cause even a leaf to sway.

She couldn't imagine what he was doing, but she thought he looked distressed; her heart went out to him impulsively.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

At first he seemed not to hear her, then, as if coming back from a long ways away, his eyes focussed on the tree in front of him, then turned down to her. He stared at her fixedly, his feet still firmly planted, his hands still grasping the smooth trunk of the tree.

Getting no answer, she repeated with a little quaver, "I said, 'Can I help you?'"

It was as if he had not heard her. Then his lips parted; he moistened them. "I wasn't talking to you."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'll just go sit down."

She walked on into the clearing and sat on a bench by the back door of the house. She shrugged off her pack and let it rest against the back of the bench. She shook her hair free and turned her face up to the sun. Then she examined the clearing. She could see that the track she had been following stopped here. But what a lovely place! On three sides it

was surrounded by the dense, magic forest; the great open space was covered with roughly cut grass and out to the seaward side she had a magnificent view of the ocean and some small islands between two rocky, moss-covered headlands. It would be, she felt, the ideal, the perfect place to stay. She was not very old yet, but she had been on her own now for nearly a year, ever since she had run away from a father and mother who did not understand her, who yelled and swore at her, and who were, themselves, living a deathly, horrifying, confined life. With them she had felt like a changeling: she did not belong; she did not fit; she felt nothing, nothing at all except contempt and loathing, for the people who said they were her mother and father. But here she felt inexplicably as if she had come home at last.

She heard heavy footsteps behind her.

"I knew you'd come back," the old man said, brushing past her and pushing open the kitchen door. "This is where you belong. Well, don't expect it to be any different."

After the door slammed shut, she sat stunned for a moment. She understood clearly that he was mad, but she liked his face. The door opened again and he stood there, not at all belligerently, almost penitently, in fact. "I expect you're hungry. Come have some lunch."

Her name was Elaine, but he called her Elizabeth and treated her as he must have treated his daughter. When something was misplaced, he would bellow "Elizabeth! Where did you put my hammer?" or the saltshaker, or a pair of woolen socks. He liked cleanliness and insisted that things be kept in their places. The room she took for her bedroom was often a mess and he might stand in the doorway and yell "Why don't you clean this place up? How can you live in a mess like this?"—but he did this very seldom and never came back to see whether she had in fact cleaned it up. Sometimes he ignored her for days, not even speaking to her. On the other hand, some evenings, more often as the weather grew colder, he might build a great fire in the fireplace and read to her or just talk. He had many books; he would select one and begin to read while she did some sewing or nodded contentedly in a big chair before the fire. He seemed to enjoy reading aloud and read very well; occasionally, however, he would clap the book shut in mid-sentence and stalk off to his bedroom. Often she played the recorder while he, his face softened, stared into the fire; it was a tiny, graceful fluting that seemed to please him. "Thank you, Elizabeth," he would say. "You get your music from your mother." He might reminisce about his dead wife: "Your mother would have liked this, I think, if she could have seen it like it is now. She used to enjoy coming here when I was building the house. We wanted to put down roots and be perma-

ment. But she was impatient. It took too long." One night he startled her by saying "I'll give her a call. They must have a phone at that store. I'll call her and get her to come over." Another time he said "Why don't you write to her? She'd come if you asked."

For her part, Elaine drifted along in the security of the old man's madness. She found an obituary notice about his wife in a collection of yellowed papers on the mantel: died of cancer, survived by her husband and her daughter Elizabeth. Elaine was not troubled by the old man's outbursts or his silences. Indeed, she was comforted by his gruff presence and the odd respect he yielded her. If he came suddenly out on the verandah while she was meditating, cross-legged, for instance, he would suddenly stop and retreat quietly into the house. If she cooked an unusual dish of lentils and exotic spices, he would eat his share heartily and praise her as if she were a child whose first efforts must be encouraged.

Sometimes he cooked; sometimes she did. Occasionally, she did the shopping at the Fernwood store, where, to the unsubtle inquiries, she let it be known that he was her grandfather, whom she had come to look after. Otherwise, his life must have been little changed by her presence. He chopped enormous quantities of wood, he scythed the grass, he did odd repairs around the house, he disappeared for hours—or whole days from sunup to sunset—walking the roads or tramping in the forest, and he read. She meditated, she sewed, she read, she played her recorder, she wandered in the woods or swam at the beach.

As time went on, she felt as if layers and layers of something tight and confining were peeling off her. Sad or terrifying memories of her parents came to her less often. As she said her mantra over and over, it seemed as if a golden light burst from her navel and blossomed over the world; everything was transformed. She was a butterfly, a bird; everything was lovely and beloved. The world was beautiful; life was beautiful. However, with this release, she began to feel an odd restlessness. She could not define it and it rarely troubled her definitely until spring came. A flight of northbound brant which had stopped to rest and feed in the cove for a few days unsettled her.

"Grandpa," she found herself saying one day at lunch, "I must be going soon. I've got to be going." She had not thought about it at all. The truth of it just suddenly overwhelmed her: she must go; she did not know where, but she must go.

His jaws stopped working. He stared at her, swallowed.

"You must get married," he said, finally. "Have children. We need children."

"Oh, I'll never marry! Never! Never! I've just got to go!"

He stood abruptly, his face purple. The upset chair clattered on the floor. Without another word, he went out.

What am I doing? she thought wildly. Why must I go? "Grandpa!" she called and ran after him. He was beside the giant arbutus; when she came out he came down to her.

"I'm sorry, Grandpa! I didn't mean it. I won't go at all."

"You can't stay," he said bitterly. "You don't belong. Your mother couldn't stay. Your brother went. You, too, you had to go somewhere else. None of you ever belonged!" He spat in disgust. "But me—I'm like this tree: I've got roots!" He was shouting.

Later, when she had stuffed her meagre belongings once more into her pack and was preparing to go, he put his arm in a fatherly gesture across her shoulder. "You are like your mother," he said, "restless, wanting change, never happy in one place. When you came back, I thought that perhaps.... No. You aren't like me. I can't move. I can't change. I've put down roots, deep, solid...solid...I can't move...."