

Years 9 & 10

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### **The Treasures I Once Held**

*Years ago . . .*

The sun shines on the lake, shattering its surface and making it reflect like tiny shards of glass. Today is the first day of February and summer has truly sunk in. I wade out into the lake, bypassing long reeds and cattails. Tiny fish no longer than my pinkie finger dart in all directions; the lake is lively and serene all at once. On weekends and in my spare time, I come out here to find treasure. Bottle caps and jewellery lost by the residents of this neighbourhood long ago; I make it sound grander than it really is. Finding rubbish or lost items in the lake is like finding gold, a rare feat. I'm sure that in a few months I will have found every piece of treasure. I lift my skirt up when I get to the deep water and stick my hands in. I sift through stones and sand but come up with nothing. I potter around like a duck with my arms elbow deep in the water. Something rough brushes my thumb and I try to grab at it. I pull out a rusted chain with a shiny pendant. I wash off the dirt and examine it closely. The chain is tarnished, and the clasp doesn't open. The pendant looks to be some kind of fake diamond, cubic zirconia perhaps. Nothing valuable to the average person but special to me. I wonder what I could turn it into. An ornament or part of a wind chime. My house is full of objects made from what seems like junk. I spend another hour or so enjoying the sun and finding random items. At the end of it all, I feel calm. The air is sweet and the water clear. I think I could stay out here forever.

*The present*

Yellow and orange leaves are scattered along the shore of the lake. The sky is overcast and threatens rain. I pull my cardigan tighter and roll up my pants ready to begin my regular hunt. The icy lake shocks me and sends shivers down my spine. The lake has changed. The cattails have been broken open; their fluff strewn everywhere carelessly. The soft grass has long winding tracks etched into it, probably from a motorcycle. I force myself to look away and focus on my task. I use a long stick to feel for irregular items sitting idly at the bottom of the lake. A thin piece of material catches on my stick and the excitement spreads across my face. I yank the stick to the surface and what comes with it is a white plastic bag dripping murky water. The bag sags from the stick, like it wants the earth to swallow it whole. I put it in my bag because I can't let it stay residing where it shouldn't be.

I look around me. At the broken cattails, the bottles, and the identical plastic bags. These items weren't lost or misplaced. They were tossed to the ground with neglect. I feel sorry for them. They don't mean to invade the lake or disrupt the serenity. The people who once owned them have made them intruders. The lake is changing. Where there once was ducklings and dragonflies there is only shiny foil wrappers and plastic straws. I notice a billboard with a smiling man on it. He advertises new housing developments like there weren't enough already. His white smile and charismatic personality are what will kill this place. I go home feeling empty with a white plastic bag dripping by my side.

*Years later . . .*

I move like a zombie as I trail up and down the shore of some lake. I am not at *my* lake; they drained that one years ago. The tool I'm holding clasps floating rubbish easily. Still, it takes me an hour to clear one section of the shore. The water is thick and gooey. Not with healthy algae but with run off from the sewers and other chemicals. All the buttons of my jacket are done up, but the cold wind still gets to me. I tremble as I pick up another can. I can't see the floor of the lake. The thick layer of plastic bags, bottles, and packaging creates a barrier. This lake looks like a wasteland and the stench burns my nostrils. I don't take my small bag with me anymore; I've stopped looking for treasure. Instead, I take a roll of large black garbage bags to pile the rubbish into. That's all it is to me now. Rubbish. Everything special is gone.

A heron sits atop a floating shopping trolley. Its wings are stained brown. My heart and hands are stained with the same filth. I look around me at the shopping centre billboards. The apartment buildings I see are not as beautiful as the ones on the signs. I stare at people in high-visibility vests felling trees older than this neighbourhood. I know that everything comes to an end but not in the blink of an eye. How did this world rot so fast? How?