

True North

by Brenda Chapman

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I grew up in a pulp-and-paper town in Northern Ontario - a mill town of 2,000 souls, 14 kilometres from another town and about 200 kilometres from the shopping malls of Thunder Bay, Ontario. Our town was enclosed by coniferous forests, starkly outlined against the sky, on a glacial terrace high above the pounding waves along the Lake Superior shore.

I remember walking down a deserted street in that town; I was 12 years old, alone, on a clear 20-below night. My boots settled into a tire rut and I leaned my hooded head way back to see a hemisphere of stars. My breath caught in the air like a white wreath. My mittened hands held borrowed books that led me away from the cold North and into the lives of children who did not hear the snow crunching underfoot as they trudged the one kilometre toward the lights of the library. That night I made a wish: "Star light, star bright, let me have this wish tonight. If I can and if I may, I wish to see the world someday." Teetering at the edge of adolescence, I desperately wanted something I couldn't define. I knew I would leave; Highway 17 unwound like a dark ribbon into towns and cities and lives that I would see. One day I would pack up, say goodbye to my family and leave the endless miles of conifers and grey rock - and the North.

Another night, while I walked home from high school, I watched the darkness sifting into crevices and chimneys and saw the sun - a red ball striped in layers of pink and orange - as the blackness slowly devoured the colours in a patient embrace. I looked past the tree line to the flat horizon of Lake Superior and up to the burning night sky above and I felt, all at once, a peace and an exhilaration that surely Wordsworth must have felt in the wildness of his youth. The world was a living, breathing, unfathomable being, and I was part of it. Me, walking home through the darkened streets to my supper, kept warm in the oven, and my bed, tucked safely next to my sister's. I felt my smallness, my aloneness, as the shadows turned to inky blackness, but my body was filled with indescribable joy at the beauty of the sun's disappearing flame.

Those moments do not come to me so easily now at home in the west end of Ottawa. I regret that my daughters cannot see the stars as clearly above the streetlights and the brightness of the city. The woods do not start at their backyard and weave a backdrop of uninhabited wilderness around their psyches. They do not dream of wolves circling their home while they sleep or hear the wind howling through the spruce tops. I cannot imagine that they have seen a sunset so vivid it makes their breath catch in their throats like a gasp.

My children are growing up so far from my northern home. But do they somehow feel the enormity of the sky and the beckoning of the wind in the trees as I did? Can they sense a spirit that circles and elevates, a frisson of the soul?

The answer came to me as I sat in our backyard, watching my daughters run and tumble as the shadows darkened into night. I closed my eyes for a moment and inhaled the sweetness of the honeysuckle that climbed the fence and listened to a persistent cricket chirping from under an umbrella of phlox. Patio stones warmed my bare feet, and the sounds of jazz languidly sifted through the evening air. The girls alighted next to me, laughing and showing me a caterpillar they had found in the grass. They giggled as it crawled across their hands and tickled their arms. Their tousled heads leaned together in concentration and, as I reached for the caterpillar, they danced away to play hide-and-go-seek before it got too dark to see.

They belonged to the world in those books that I had clutched in my arms that snowy night, I thought. I heard them call to each other, and then silence as they lay on their backs in the grass, their rapt faces turned up toward the night sky. Their arms and legs were spread wide as though they were making angels in imagined snow. They lay so still that they seemed part of the earth. I smiled and knew then that, just like me, my children would have their own moments of wonder to sustain them through the lengthening shadows and the day's soft settling into night.