



*We had an apartment
in Quebec City,*

on avenue Saint-Geneviève, near the grand hotel Chateau Frontenac. The window at which I wrote every day faced a small park, and it became my habit at lunchtime to take my sandwiches outside and eat them beneath the trees, in dappled sunshine.

One particular day the park greeted me with music. It drifted happily through the treetops, mingling with the rattle-clip-clop of the old city's horse drawn carriages. Banners were being hung, stages were being built, and beyond the park along the boardwalk that looks to the river, juggling clowns practiced their funny faces. The great summer party was about to begin. Preparations were under way for the annual Festival d'été de Québec.

When I arrived at my usual spot with my lunch, there was a well-dressed, grey-haired woman sitting there. She was watching a small boy at play. The woman and I smiled and began talking. She told me proudly that she had been a schoolteacher and had lived within the fortified walls of Old Quebec all her life. I told her with equal pride that I had been raised in the Rocky Mountains, in the town of Jasper, in Jasper National Park.

“Ah, les Rocheuses!” she said. “They are beautiful. I have been to Jasper twice. But I am sad to say I stayed only for one hour each time.” She smiled at the child playing in the grass. “But the Rockies, they have been with me ever since.”

“One hour?” I said, offering her a sandwich. “Why only one hour?”

“Merci.” Her eyes sparkled as she gave half of the sandwich to the little boy. “Because of the train. That was more than 40 years ago, but I remember it so very clearly. I was a young girl – my final year at university. I made a summer visit to my aunt in Vancouver and took the train on my own both ways across our beautiful country, from Québec to British Columbia. Going west, the train stopped at Jasper in the middle of the night. The lights of the station were all I could see and I spoke to only one person, on the platform. But something about Jasper touched me that night. When I took the train back several weeks later, the journey was beautiful. It was a late summer afternoon – the last Saturday of the summer. I wanted to stay in the mountains forever, but I had to return to my classes at Laval. Since that day, I have never been back to Jasper.”

“What do you recall from your short visit?” I asked.

“There was a beautiful pointed mountain standing guard above the town.” The woman smiled. “I wanted to reach out and touch it.”

“Pyramid Mountain.”

“And the buildings were made of stone, smooth round stones, and I wanted to reach out and touch them, as well. And I remember the totem pole, painted with all the colors of the rainbow and carved with animals that reached up and touched the sky.”

She looked down again at the child. “But so strange – I have

another memory of Jasper. There were two children, a little boy and a little girl. They were playing at the foot of the totem pole, chasing each other round and round. The girl had a bandage on her forehead.”

“They were playing tag?”

“Ah, oui. When I was a child we called it jouer á l'ours, playing at bears.”

“At bears?”

“They were like little bears, those children, so natural and free. I sat on the stone wall that bordered the platform and watched them until the conductor shouted ‘All aboard,’ and then I stepped back onto the train and continued my journey home to Québec.”

I stared at the woman. “1954,” I said.

“Yes, ’54. It was the last Saturday of the summer, a beautiful afternoon.”

“The totem pole....” I looked up to the window of the apartment on avenue Saint-Geneviève to make certain I was not still sitting there at my typewriter and that this lunch and this woman were not just a dream. I touched the woman’s hand. “Madame, you will not believe this, but I am certain – absolutely certain, that I was that little boy! I remember the day. Jenny and I, the last Saturday of the summer. The last train of the day, and someone else got on that train – someone else, made that journey.”

“Someone of note,” she said. “Yes. There was a crowd. It was only a matter of weeks before I read of that famous person’s destination.”

The woman opened her purse and took out a clean white handkerchief. “Because someone is famous does not always mean you think kindly of them. Over the years my thoughts have softened. I wish now I had said hello.”

She wiped the little boy’s face. “I have spent more than 40 years in the classroom. I have always impressed upon my students the importance of remembering significant dates and time periods. But children find this so exceedingly dull.”

Just then the music in the park grew louder, and a black and white harlequin clown staggered by on stilts, laughing and waving a long, red,



streaming strip of ribbon.

The retired schoolteacher continued to lecture in her soft thoughtful way.

“But as children travel through life they come in contact with the past; they meet people, they read, they watch movies and television. The dates they have been disciplined to remember become bench marks in their minds, and soon they start to cluster historic things around them; an era, a decade, a century – even a specific day. Those benchmarks become foundations upon which to build an understanding of life.”

She placed the handkerchief back into her purse, and the clasp gave a soft click as she closed it. Then, to my amazement, she said, “I believe the journey, of which you speak, starting by train from Jasper, on that afternoon in 1954, led to an event that gave shape to the world we know today.”

"I...I'm sure you're right," I said. "That event left an extraordinary image in many people's minds, an image that granted a lot."

She smiled. "You were lucky, my friend, to have lived in such a beautiful spot as Jasper National Park."

I gestured around me. "Vous aussi, Madame. Ville du Québec est l'une des plus belles cités du monde. C'est le coeur de l'histoire Canadienne."

"Ah, oui. L'histoire! History is also a journey." She stood and took the little boy's hand.

"And now, my grandson and I must continue our journey. Au revoir, mon ami. I have enjoyed talking with you."

I started to speak, but the woman and her grandson turned and walked away through the trees of the park.

For the next several weeks, I sat at my window on avenue Saint-Geneviève, and every day I took my sandwiches to the park, and every day I looked for the woman. As I did, my mind carried me back to the summer of 1954, when Jenny and I played tag beneath the totem pole and flew the kite from the top of Old Fort Point. That was the summer we searched for Henry House – the summer we found the battered tin box.

I did not see the woman again, but by the time the leaves in the small park had turned and the city of Québec was preparing once more for winter, I realized who she was.

With that, we gave up the apartment on Saint-Geneviève, and came home to the mountains. It was time to write of things that happened a long time ago. Time to search the corners of my mind for that last Saturday of the summer.



So, I am here again, looking down from this high spot, among these snow-capped peaks. I sit, as I do every year on this beautiful morning, and breathe in the fresh mountain air. Across the valley, I hear

the whistle of a train, and I look towards my hometown, Jasper. The town is nestled against the hill, and above the hill stands Pyramid Mountain, a 9,000-foot stone giant, brown and black, and dusted in snow.

Come to this spot.

Climb the cliff and walk the dusty trail.

Stay in the sunshine, and watch for all the other living things.

When you reach the top, stand and look around. There are places we see every day and think nothing of, but to come here once, you'll recall it for a lifetime. The mountains, the river, the railway and the town, the people, the history, the blue sky itself – they all blend together into one beautiful watercolor softness. Jasper, beautiful Jasper.

Hans Christian Andersen once told a group of small children that to him mountains were the great folded wings of the earth. It's a lovely thought. But as we grow older, we examine the science of how the mountains were formed. Some say that hundreds of millions of years ago, during the gradual cooling of our planet, the outer crust became too large, and, in shrinking, certain parts folded to form the great highlands of the world.

But today on this high plateau, when the sky is blue and the air is scented with pine, at this spot where giant fingers can walk right up, step-by-step, to the sky, maybe these mountains really are the great folded wings of the earth, and maybe we can go back to that last Saturday of the summer. So, on this perfect morning, I let the great folded wings unfurl, and fly back to when I was a boy.