

Ebbing Tide

-Lori Forrest

The library was a musty old building beginning to crumble away with time. Even so, I couldn't help but love it. It had been in the center of town a long time ago, but as the newer buildings crept up to the south, the downtown moved with them. Now, it was in an old dingy neighborhood where the tiny houses creaked in the wind and the paint was visibly chipping off. The old library itself had been made with brick with the prestigious name of the donating family inscribed over the main entrance.



It was Monday, the day I took my granddaughter, Emily, to the old library. When my daughter had gotten a divorce, she moved back to town so I could watch Emily after school. She loved books and our weekly visit to the library soon became a ritual. The children's section was in the basement of the library. It was a cozy room with a child size yellow table and matching chairs. A few adult chairs had been shoved into the corner, and upon sitting, I could feel the springs through the worn-down cushions. The basement room always smelled of musty books, slightly damp from the moisture carried in the air. This day was hotter than usual for June and as Emily sat looking at five of the books she had picked out, I could see her squirming in the small plastic chair.

"Granny? Can we go to the park?" Emily pleaded.

I nodded. "Did you pick out what you want?"

She proudly presented me with a brightly illustrated version of Peter Pan. The corners of the book were worn and a few of the pages had been slightly torn by frequent use.

"We just returned that book. Are you sure you want to read it again?"

She clutched the book to her, as if it was her most prized possession and nodded her head.

"OK, let's go upstairs." We walked up to the front desk to check out the book. Elena, a longtime friend from church, was working at the counter.

"Hello, Marla, and hello, Emily," she smiled. "Peter Pan is it today? By the way Marla, did you hear what they're going to do?"

I shook my head and sighed. My muscles lightly tensed as I prepared myself for the gossip I was about to hear. Elena was always caught up on the latest news.

"Well, Winnie told me that they're building a new library downtown on Oaks Street. Three stories high."

“Really? That’s going to be far from my house,” I said.

“That’s not the worse part!” She exclaimed. “The city is going to tear down this one to develop.”

I stared at her as if she was some sort of demon messenger telling me my soul was now going to the devil. Tear down my library? Elena prattled on about potlucks and city events unaware of what a strange blow she had just dealt me.

“Marla? Marla, are listening to me?” She finally asked.

I nodded dumbly in response.

“Hm. Anyway, I was asking if you were going to the church potluck tonight.”

I nodded again and grabbed Peter Pan with a sudden feeling that I needed to leave this place. Elena barked out, “See you tonight!” as we dashed out the door.

I took Emily to Pioneer Park on the edge of the waterfront. Even though this park was in the older part of town, the city had kept it up. The grass was fresh and green, and when you walked through it the little bugs fluttered around your ankles. We walked down to the water’s edge. A cool breeze came in from the ocean and helped to clear my dense head. Anxious to be active, Emily removed her sandals and waded out into the water. I watched as the tide slowly crept up past her feet, folding lightly around her oblivious to her standing in its way. As long as the town could develop farther and farther away from my house, I could ignore the times changing. This was different. Time was now right on my front porch asking to come in.

As we walked back to my house, I looked at the old homes surrounding the library. Almost all of the houses were in complete disrepair. Many of the people that lived here were not able to maintain the houses anymore or had passed away and left the house to children who never came by. Decks, once standing mightily against playing children, had now begun to grow weak and cave in. Old storm windows were cracked with age. Paint chipping away was beginning to expose rotten wood underneath. I was lucky. My house, thanks to a son-in-law who had insisted on helping, stayed in good condition. Now he was gone, and my house might soon join its sisters.

School ended. Emily began to spend the entire day under my care. We continued to make our weekly walk to the library. One day, Emily was telling me about the new library, since her friend, Josie, had just gone to the opening.

“Josie said that the new library is huge, and the picture books aren’t in the basement like the old library. They’re on the first floor and there is a whole section set aside where the librarian has story time. Granny, can we please go to the new library today instead of the old one? I want to see it,” Emily begged.

I felt betrayed. My own granddaughter didn’t even realize what this meant – that our old building would soon be gone. I looked into her deep blue eyes holding all the innocence of childhood and finally agreed.

We took my car into downtown. There were many buildings I didn’t recognize. Larger businesses I had never seen before had taken the place of old stores. We now even had a six-story office building for a national bank of some kind. The library parking lot was on two levels, and I knew I wouldn’t be able

to find my car again. We entered the main floor where the children's section took an entire corner. The sofas were new, and the carpet was plush but smelled of plastic. Emily dashed up and down the rows trying to take in all the brightly colored books. There were so many! At first, I decided to walk around and see the mystery section, but everything was laid out so strange even the most familiar books seemed foreign to me. They even had a complete section for true crime. What type of books fit in that section, I wouldn't know. I gave up looking and walked to the window, waiting for Emily to pick out her books. The view was impressive. Cars were everywhere, trying to make it down the tight one-way streets. Beyond the tall bank building, I could see the ocean and a small beach. The tide was coming close to its peak and looked to be threatening the town. I turned away and sat down on one of the stiff sofas, barely sinking into the cushion. Emily rushed up to me and presented a book. The hard back was glossy on top and reflected the fluorescent lights from the high ceiling. It was Peter Pan. A brand-new version but it was the same book. I could smell the crispness of the book. Its illustrations were bright, and the new pages stuck together some.

"Come on, let's go," I said.

We walked out to my car. A light breeze from the ocean blew in, chilling me. I felt like a traitor. The red bricks of the old library stuck in my mind. It hadn't even been demolished yet, and here I was. We slowly made our way back to my house. Emily's cheerful voice chatted away echoing in my numb brain as she read from her new Peter Pan book.

Over the course of the next few weeks, I frequented the old library as I always had. Each day, books I wanted were removed from the shelves, and the shelves got barer and barer. Elena constantly reminded me that the books had to be returned by August tenth because that was the last day the library would be opened. A week before the doors of the library were to be closed forever, I returned every book that I had borrowed and checked out just one book, Peter Pan. I held the book close to my chest, cradling it like one would a baby, absentmindedly caressing the frayed edges. I nodded to Elena when she reminded me that the book was due in a week and left the beautiful library, knowing I would never enter the old building again.