

Willow's Roses

The orphan had started out well enough despite losing both her mother in childbirth and her soldier father in Iraq on the day of her birth. Her Ho-Chunk grandmother had named her for the strength, flexibility, and beauty of the willow tree, able to withstand life's storms by bending and not breaking. Her grandmother cherished and loved her from infancy through six years old, but then she died of a stroke while doing the dishes in the small walk-up apartment they shared.

Social Services placed her in a happy foster family with four of their own kids ranging from two to fourteen. They had a big, yellow Lab named Trailblazer, or "trailer" for short, whose primary job was to give pony rides to joyful cries and giggles happily wagging his tail and cantering around the coffee table. But only eight months after her arrival a drunk speeding in his pick-up crossed a highway median and instantly killed himself, her kindly foster parents, the two youngest children, and the dog. Willow, now an unlucky seven, gazed absently at passing clouds en route to placement at her third home, thinking to herself, "Grandmother, where will the wind blow me now? Can I bend without breaking in this wind, too?"

The next foster family wasn't as nice. Believing rigidly that desired character traits, like obedience and diligence, came only through disciplined practice, they exerted strict command and control with sustained, severe drilling. Slovenly and lazy themselves, they ruled arbitrarily over their new child with a sharp tongue and a harsh hand. Callously expected and closely inspected, the foster couple demanded that Willow perform a long list of daily duties including all the laundry, dishwashing, sweeping, mopping, scrubbing toilets, emptying trash and wheeling the heavy bins to curbside, and a myriad other odd jobs. She existed only to serve.

In this humorless, uncaring home, her strength and spirit were soon exhausted and her school performance suffered. This led to a vicious cycle of more work piled on to teach unlearned lessons of obedience and diligence. Despite repeated inquiries and notices from school counselors,

her academic progress, which was the least of her foster parents' concern, declined such that she was retained in primary one for the next school year. The summer was filled with additional demands of yard work, attic cleaning, car washing, and more in addition to her usual chores. Thus passed the following year also, without any advancement at school or in learning obedience and diligence at home, according to Willow's guardians.

With another bleak summer of drudgery ahead, she was somewhat hopeful of company when another orphan-a big brother-was stationed there. Arthur, a hardened fourteen-year-old, disliked his given name and much preferred the tough-sounding nickname of "Sarge". Derogatorily, older boys at the orphanage had tagged him with this moniker in ridicule for the in-your-face attitude he attempted with hollow effect on them and the orphanage staff. Willow learned quickly, however, to address her new bully by this military rank followed by a crisp "Sir, Yes, Sir"! Instead of having someone to confide in, to commiserate with, and find consolation, the teen commando piled his assigned duties on top her own, and slapped her to tears when his tasks were deemed lacking by the their foster parents. Under her mother guardian's withering gale, Willow was entirely smothered rather than mothered. Subjected to her father guardian's glaring storm, Willow was completely flattened, never flattered. Nearing a breaking point in her young life, she felt totally helpless and desolate. Crying herself to sleep alone in the small, bare alcove within the utility room, she dared not make a sound, as any disturbance would bring quick retribution. She ran the clothes dryer to drown out her sobs, as the hot mechanical wind swirled the clothes dry within the machine, it could not dry her tears. The wind blew fiercely in her misery. Willow prayed for her grandmother to somehow provide relief or comfort.

Several months later in the dark winter, an eventful confrontation occurred. After his stealing money from atop the bureau in "off limits" master bedroom, gorging himself from the pantry and refrigerator without authorization, protesting his confinement to the barracks and

compound without liberty on any evening or weekend, looking the foster father in the eye defiantly with a scowl, and finally snapping with a furious push and shriek that sent the tyrant father backwards over a sofa leaving him unconscious on the floor, Sarge went AWOL. She never saw him again, which was a welcomed outcome, but due to Sarge's insurgency Social Services deemed the foster couple unsatisfactory and removed her to the orphanage. Willow was bent low. Most of the wonder and hope of her youth had dissipated in tarnished, cloudy confusion. "Grandmother, what's to become of me?" she whispered frighteningly on her cot, insensible to a sudden rainsquall pelting the dormitory windows.

Yet another much darker episode at the end of her tenth year left Willow deeply scarred, if not broken. Labeled as a slow learner as she had not yet advanced beyond the first grade, through no fault of her own or lack of aptitude, she was again placed into a foster home and assigned to a remedial special education facility, which required busing of more than an hour and a half each way daily. Wayne and Shelby, her foster guardians, seemed nice in appearance. They kept a clean, tidy home with comfortable furnishings, with ample, even tasty meals, and apparent interest in helping Willow catch up with her reading and other lessons. She learned from them that they had fostered a pair of twin girls previously, who had grown up and were now living independently "on the coast." They decorated the house for holidays and enjoyed traditional meals and festivities for the first half of the year. Willow was beginning to feel a sense of normalcy and belonging that she longed for, but something about these foster parents that she couldn't quite conceptualize, at least consciously, kept her at a distance. Somehow an unnamed insincerity or other emotion lay below the surface within the walls of the home.

Over time, innocent pats on the back of encouragement for reading a sentence correctly or gentle caresses at leaving to catch the bus or upon arrival back home after school became more frequent. Always administered with a smile, the physical touching increased in the form of back

rubs to help her sleep, or gentle massage of her temples to avoid headaches of “too much study” administered with lingering hugs and compliments. The twins never called and never visited, which Willow wondered in passing as peculiar. Within the next horrific six months, however, she would learn why. Spiking her milk or juice with a “Special K”, a date-rape drug that induced a sedative, hypnotic, dissociative, and amnesiac effect, Wayne and Shelby sexually assaulted the unknowing Willow repeatedly on Friday and Saturday nights for four years. Because they continued to help her with schoolwork at home during the week, her studies were not affected, as she had no knowledge or recollection of the weekend perversions perpetrated upon her.

When she shyly asked, “Shelby, I’m having some pain I’ve never had before inside, both front and back,” her stepmother sweetly answered with a gentle reassurance, “Oh, that’s just your time of month, it’ll pass, Sweetie, not to worry. That happens to all of us women.” As the weeks and months passed, Willow noticed that the pain occurred more frequently than once a month and that it persisted into the week. She was constantly sore and was having difficulty sometimes in walking. Then, one day on the way to school she threw up in the bus. The school nurse called for Shelby to come pick her up and take her home. While she had no fever, the nausea continued each morning. As this condition persisted for several weeks, in addition to Willow’s complaining of feeling bloated, unusually tired, and queasy, the foster parents concealed from her that she was pregnant. That would never do.

The following weekend, they drugged her without her knowledge as usual; only this time Andy performed a clumsy abortion. It went badly. Having perforated her uterus during the bungled procedure in a bloody mess, they decided that they had no choice but to take Willow to the emergency room. After four days in intensive care and another week in a private room convalescing, Willow was saved. The attending physician and nurses reported the life-threatening incident to local police. Shortly thereafter, Andy and Shelby were charged and booked for sex

crimes against a minor and attempted murder, then prosecuted and locked away with thirty-five-year sentences. Willow returned to the orphanage, weak and shattered. Entombed in an introverted shell and staring vacuously, Willow whispered despairingly to the window, “Grandmother, I’m broken. I’m not sure if I can be mended.” A black and blue butterfly fluttered past the window, but in her trance-like sorrow and weakened condition Willow had not noticed it.

More years passed uneventfully and at eighteen, she left the orphanage and managed to get an entry-level job in a local greenhouse. Working alone most of the time, she prepared flats with growing media, sowed seed, watered the trays, transplanted the shoots into pots, checked for mites and aphids, and treated any affected plants back to health. She moved the sale-ready plants to the display tables, and re-stocked as needed. A panoply of vibrantly blossoming flowers splashing yellow, orange, fuchsia, and indigo inflorescences with dark green, healthy leaves with purplish stalks as well as beautiful hanging baskets of variegated scarlet and white bouquets festooned the establishment. The serene, peaceful work filled her days and provided a modest, yet sufficient income to meet her meager living expenses. As the last sale of asters signaled the end of the season, Willow helped prepare the now empty shop for winter, cashed her last paycheck, turned in the keys of her studio apartment to her landlord, and bought a bus ticket to Santa Fe. She had heard that New Mexico was nice. Daydreaming of what her new life would hold in “the land of enchantment”, Willow closed her eyes and thought, “Grandmother, will you come with me?”

With some job experience in horticulture and greenhouse operations, Willow sought employment for this kind of work in the Santa Fe area. However, as winter occurred there, too, she found that plant nurseries and floral shops had no need for even temporary help at the time of year. Serendipitously, one of the plant nursery managers, a soft-spoken local, Tewa-speaking elder, asked about the origin of her name. After relating her story, he suggested that she might consider volunteer work on one or more Indian pueblos or reservations and gave her some names to contact.

As a result, Willow spent the next eight months volunteering in various Pueblo, Diné (Navajo), Zuni, Hopi, and Apache communities. In a series of three to eight-week internships working side-by-side kind, easygoing residents and other volunteers seeking meaning and hope, she helped gather and prepare clay for pottery making and reeds or barks for basketry, propagated native plants for landscaping installations, collected heirloom seed for traditional foods and medicinal herbs, learned how to cook delicious and nutritious meals with locally grown ingredients, spices, and thanks to the Creator, or other meaningful tasks pertinent to daily indigenous lifestyles and occasional ceremony. Fortunately, they all provided room and board, but much more importantly, she felt whole again, reconnecting with her indigenous roots that her grandmother used to share with her through story telling.

Through these healing experiences, Willow felt happy for the first time in years. At Tesuque Pueblo during a quiet work break, she sat relaxed on a small wooden bench by a pink-blossomed desert willow tree under a beautiful sky. As she reflected serenely in private thought, with a warm and comfortable feeling as though her spirit was washed clean, Willow observed a small, red-dust whirlwind materialize in front of her not twenty feet away first spinning stationary, then wispily moving softly yet distinctly from southeast to northwest. She followed it with her eyes. A few seconds later, the gentle vortex dissipated and vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. In a conscious and physical response, a lump formed in her throat and she beamed wide-eyed with awareness, “Oh, Grandmother, thank you for being here and helping me find my way.”

Later that evening at a kindly old woman's adobe home where Willow had been invited to stay the last several weeks, she related this experience and her perception as a sign. The elder listened knowingly, simply nodding her understanding with compassion and gently smiling her approval without speaking. In the trusting comfort of the wise old woman's presence and home, Willow felt the grace of her own grandmother. Filled with the moment's inner peace and happiness,

she arrived at deciding next steps on her life's pathway—west, following the discerning whirlwind and her heart. With appreciation and renewed hope as well as with a backpack full of homemade tamales wrapped in corn husks, fry bread cakes, and dried fruits from her host family, she again bought a bus ticket, this time to Portland.

As the wheels rolled onward, so did Willow's mind with wonder of what she would find up the road. When a young couple with a baby seated across from her in the bus pleasantly struck up a conversation with her, Willow surprised herself by stating with a growing sense of confidence, "I don't know exactly what I'll do, but I'm enjoying the ride and something will turn up." Just a year ago, she would never have made such an optimistic assertion, let alone voice it to strangers. Rolling down the highway on a silver and black ribbon through the enormity of the red and yellow countryside she thought eagerly, "Grandmother, let's see what happens together in Oregon, I think we're going to like it there."

Moving westward mile after mile with her thoughts, Willow had wandered up many cul-de-sacs and other dead ends in an artificial universe devoid of nature and loving connection with others and its healing power. She had been filled with doubt and increasing anxiety, and had felt estranged and missing. Before New Mexico, she had almost lost her own identity and finding it seemed increasingly difficult to start up yet another path, mostly because she couldn't focus on where she wanted to go or who she wanted to be. Before, she had tried to discern her calling, but with so many failed attempts, her confidence had soured and she felt frightened. Aimlessly, she seemed to be clutching blindly at straws devoid of meaning and with empty results.

In this fog that obscured her view of which way forward and to what destination, somehow she had lurched onto yet another vague possibility. A tiny glimmer shone through the thicket of her mind in New Mexico, and she felt the aperture of hope and expectation opening wider as she continued west. She welcomed her renewed optimism as the golden pink sunrise promised outside

the bus window. Would she encounter the light of perception to her calling; could this door in Oregon open to allow some clarity of purpose and re-discovery, or would it lead to further obtuse distraction? Could Portland's fog actually serve as nurturing mist for stimulating growth and clarity?

The driver's announcement of the Portland bus terminal awoke her, and Willow noticed the nice young family who had been her travel companions had disembarked and gone without a word. And so had her backpack with all of her belongings. After a thorough and unsuccessful check for the missing bag with the driver, Willow simply said, "never mind," and stepped off the bus. Again to her surprise, she took this setback in stride, which normally would have been devastating. She was less certain about her immediate future in the City of Roses than she had daydreamed en route on the bus, but was comforted in telling herself that the recent loss consisted of only material things, and that somehow she had not lost her new inner strength and determination. She seemed to be recovering from life's bruises, but for what purpose she had yet to discover.

As it happened, a rose nursery job turned up at the fourth business she visited. They hired her on the spot. She noticed a clap of thunder outside as she completed the interview and signed employment papers. A gentle rain fell, which she knew was not uncommon in her new hometown, and was good for keeping everything fresh and alive. That night, she slept at a cheap youth hostel. Listening to the nourishing rain, Willow, warm and cozy in her bed, said, "Grandmother, what will we find in this wet, green place?" She started working at the commercial rose garden the next morning.

Willow tenderly pruned and shaped the rose bushes. Happily engaged amongst the roses, she contemplated their thorns capable of inflicting pain on covetous admirers of their intoxicating fragrance and exquisite beauty of delicately budding petals who would otherwise do harm. Willow had grown a thicker bark and trunk to protect against the burns, pestilence, droughts, diseases, and hackings of life. These protective features of "tension wood" imparted both strength and rigidity.

The strength was necessary to endure assaults sure to happen again and again as is inevitable in life, like the recent disappearance of her backpack. The accompanying rigidity was, however, a potential liability, as hardened resistance in high wind can more likely result in breakage. The key, she determined, is to maintain a healthy, green, flexible core that readily bends and adapts to variable conditions and challenges. Willow observed these characteristics in the plants she lovingly tended and cherished. “Grandmother, these healthy green rose bushes have learned both to protect themselves and to live giving joy to their beholders. You have shown me that I, Willow, can become a rose. I will try.”

Rolling up the valley, the Thunder Beings loudly applauded their approval. She glanced skyward at the passing elders as great grey and silver-lined clouds whose strong indigenous voices filled her with respect, awe, and exhilaration. Deeply inhaling the fresh and crisply charged air, she smiled with a warm inner glow and thanked them in profound appreciation, drawing in the strength of their words filling her ears and lungs. At last she recognized and embraced her calling as the Grandfather Sky Elders acknowledged with spectacular kettle drumming across Turtle Island. Humbly, she felt buoyed up with an invigorating joy of purpose and gratitude.

“Willow, my granddaughter, you have experienced life’s thorns of pain, suffering, and sorrow, which developed an inner strength, a tension wood so you can bend and bear up without breaking. Now you will blossom like a rose with graceful beauty and fragrance,” her grandmother breathed admiringly as a moist zephyr gently caressed the green branches of the towering trees, and the roses, and Willow’s face. Humming and smiling, Willow bent over and gently lifted a small, budding pink rose bush growing vibrant and healthy in a celadon pot, “Thank you, Grandmother,” she said, as she tipped her watering can’s spout over the lip of the pot.

In the sunlight a tall, handsome, and somewhat shy repeat customer approached as Willow turned with the water can. It was Rory Fisher, whom she liked for his kind and gentle smile and

natural intelligence, perhaps stemming from the fact that he had some Nez Percé heritage. Blushing in the midst of all the flowers on display, she asked, "Can I help you, Rory?" Catching his breath filled with her fragrant words with his eyes cast upon her singular beauty attracting him completely, he replied, "yes, Willow," and softly helped her up. Together in the nursery garden they walked hand-in-hand amidst rows and rows of lovely roses towards a pergola festooned white with western morning glories. Looking back over her shoulder at the special rose in the celadon pot, Willow saw that a bud had just opened fully into a beautiful, bright pink blossom. A distant, singular peal of thunder reverberated in the charged air. "Do you hear that?" Willow asked looking happily into Rory's eyes. "Yes, that's my heart, Willow, sounding my love for you so all can hear," he replied tenderly as she felt her heart fill with joy. Amongst Willow's roses, her Grandmother smiled.