

The Weakness of Willows

One hundred acres of mud and snow separated our farmhouse from Grand-mère's tiny cabin in the bush. It stood on the edge of the farm, rough-hewn by my father years ago, and hidden from the road by scrubby pine trees and thick undergrowth. A wobbly old outhouse sagged into a patch of dogwood. Inside, there were sparse furnishings - a wood stove, a rocking chair in a corner and a tiny bedroom. Grand-mère's bed, rich with quilts that her ancestors had made sat snug to the wall closest to the woodstove.

Grand-mère was so happy to see us when we visited that she would grab our hands and twirl us around the room. The Red River jig, she called it. Right toe in, right toe out. She would forget to put wood in the stove when we danced and the fire would flicker down to a few embers. To keep out the cold, she'd cinch the sash around her waist even tighter, the shades of red as bright as the fire when it blazed in the woodstove. We whirled around the room until Grand-mère was winded and had to sit down, cursing in French.

"Oh merde! Je suis epuise," she would say and collapse on the worn-out sofa. "I'm used up."

The furnishings in the cabin were used up too - the rusty tea kettle, the old wooden table Grand-pere had made, the braided rug on the floor.

What is it Grand-mere? You used to dance with us half the night, then we had milk tea and biscuits. Things aren't the same. Why is one shoulder higher than the other? And one of your eyelids droops.

"Valentine," Grand-mere would say to me, "Someday all of this will be yours," and she would sweep her hand around the cabin, laughing so hard that we could see the few remaining teeth she had in her mouth. We didn't want to hear about sad things then. By the time Danny and I were old enough to go by ourselves to Grand-mere's cabin, we had experienced dying and death and didn't want any part of it. Our old dog, Brownie, Grand-pere, and Uncle Raymond had all ascended into heaven. Mother said that it was nice to think that's where they were, whether they had earned it or not.

Sometime during the fall of 1965, Grand-mere started to cough so hard she was sick in the old washtub. I watched her choking and gasping and a pervasive fear crept over me.

"Are you all right?"

Faintly, she'd answer, "Yes."

"Why do you cough so much?" Danny had said to Grand-mere once after I pointed out her illness to him. I was scared and wanted Danny to stop playing and be scared too. Grand-mere continued stirring the soup on the stove. Maybe she was thinking about the right answer to give Danny. She pointed to a picture of a willow tree hanging on the wall. It was crudely sketched and painted with short green and brown strokes. Grand-mere told us that the leaves of the willow are actually green and silver, but she hadn't any silver paint.

"That tree," said Grand-mere. "Stood in our yard on the farm where your father grew up. It lived so long but eventually it started to weaken. Some of the branches fell off, the trunk developed curious scabs. Your Grand-pere said he'd cut it down but he never got around to it." She caught her breath and continued. "One night during a fierce rain storm, lightning struck the tree. We watched from our living room window. There were a few cracks, then the old girl bloomed bright with fire. After the rain put the flames out, we saw that the tree had turned black."

Grand-mere plunked down on the old sofa where I sat. She smelled like the earth in the fall when the leaves cover it and the rain soaks in. I held her withered hand in mine. There was a

mist in her eyes like delicate dew-drops on the grass in summer.
Just the kind you can barely see.

Why are you crying Grand-mere? You gave me so many memories. Remember, we used to sit by the fire and you would read from the 'Wizards' book. We could hear the coyotes outside but we weren't afraid.

"Will you go on fire like the willow?" Danny asked.

I sent him outside to look for the last of the season's berries, then I asked Grand-mere if she had missed the willow tree once it had burned. She shook her head and gazed out the window. "I was fond of it but that didn't matter back then."

The last of the autumn sunlight beamed weakly through the windows and long shadows played on the wooden floor. Grand-mere's hazel eyes connected with mine and I could feel her sadness.

I wish I could help but your sorrow is a mystery to me, Grand-mere. I have one foot in the adult world and the other clinging to the innocence of a child. Remember we used to play hide-and-go-seek in the woods and you once hid in a hollow log? And then you got stuck and we couldn't get you out.

I laid my head in Grand-mere's lap, and found that one strand of my hair that I loved the best, then slowly wound it

around my index finger. And then I sucked as if I were a baby again.

Sometime later, a fierce gale sprung up, tossing the trees and swirling the last of the dead leaves against the cabin. Soon it would be winter and we wouldn't see Grand-mere as much, only the few times Dad took us on the snowmobile to bring Grand-mere's groceries.

"C'mon, Danny," I said. "We have to go." We kissed Grand-mere's cheek and raced out the door, the wind pushing us over the straggly mounds of soil from Dad's ploughing earlier in the fall.

Grand-mere crossed over one winter's morning. I came home from school and there were strange vehicles in the farmyard. In the house Dad's sister, Genevieve sat at the kitchen table, looking chic in a black pantsuit with a scarf tied around her neck. Father Francis was there too, and I knew that wasn't good. We usually went to him, not him to see us. The house lapsed into quiet while the adults whispered about the funeral arrangements and the kettle boiled unnoticed on the stove.

Few people came to Grand-mere's funeral. At the cemetery later, Dad held my mittened hand as we stood looking at the family plot where Grand-pere already rested, waiting for his wife. It seemed that none of us felt like moving away from the gravesite, as if that one action would purge Grand-mere from our memories.

Genevieve sobbed into a tissue, then turned to Dad. "You must have known she was sick. Why didn't you take her to the doctor?"

I could feel Dad's hand tightening around mine, and I saw the anger flash in his red-rimmed eyes.

"So I'm to blame? She has a winter cold like the rest of us have had and I'm supposed to have known it would finish her?" He dropped my hand. "You-" he snapped at his sister - "never helped out at all. Who are you to say what should have been done?"

Genevieve sniffled and looked directly at me. "I think it's time you knew, Val. Did you ever wonder why your Grand-mere lived in that old cabin at the back of your farm? Why didn't she live with you and the rest of your family in the big farmhouse? The cabin was a terrible place for her to spend her last years - uneven wood heat, surrounded by snow and mud and wild animals."

That had never occurred to me before. I had always thought Grand-mere preferred her cabin.

"Dad?" I said, meeting his eyes, hoping he could explain and make it all seem right.

Genevieve glared at Dad and then she said to me, "Your Grand-mere was doing penance back there in her little cabin, for allowing Grand-pere to be so cruel to her while we had to watch."

Dad ordered me back to the car but I couldn't go. My legs wouldn't move and there was a huge knot in the pit of my stomach.

I'm sorry Grand-mere. Remember all those pictures in your album, the photos of you and Grand-pere, how I insisted you look at each one and tell me who the people were in my family? You could have done without looking at him again.

Genevieve sobbed. "We saw Grand-pere beat her. Once he dislocated her shoulder. You -"she stabbed a finger at Dad, "always blamed Grand-mere for not taking us away from all of that."

Then I noticed the stoop in my father's shoulders and back, from years of hard luck as a child and hard work as a man. He

walked to a nearby tree and slumped against it, then softly began to cry. I'd never seen him like this before.

"I'm sorry, John," Genevieve whispered.

And then all of us, sheltering under that big tree, sat in the snow and wept quietly for Grand-mere while Mother and Danny huddled in the car.

Sometime later, we walked back through the cemetery to our cars.

"Cherie," Genevieve said. "Is there a restaurant in town? Maybe you'd like to come with me for some hot chocolate?"

Dad nodded permission so I opened Genevieve's sporty car door and hopped inside. It wasn't just that I wanted to spend extra time with my aunt, I had something else in mind. And this was likely my only chance to get it.

We headed into the center of town, and then I said, "Do you mind if we go back to the cabin? There's something there I want to rescue before the raccoons and skunks sneak in. Before it falls down."

"I've never been there," Genevieve said. "Show me the way." She pulled the car over to the shoulder and made a wide U-turn, heading out into the blustery countryside, the roads going from

wet pavement to hardtop, and finally, to gravel. We'd have to hike through snow to get there, a difficult journey that I'd seldom attempted. Genevieve in her high-heeled boots and royal blue wool coat, me in my sloppy galoshes and a dress as short as my mother would allow. I went first to blaze a trail. We struggled through, our clothing catching on prickly bushes until we reached the clearing and the cabin stood before us. I wasn't sure I could go inside. The cabin had become a haunting shelter of reproach, a vessel for bitter old memories.

I felt Genevieve's hand on my shoulder as I opened the door. Inside the cabin the willow tree painting still hung from the wall. I took it down and sat on the sofa, tracing my finger over the trunk, and up into the leaves.

You were young when you painted this, Grand-mere. I picture you sitting at the kitchen table after all of the children are in bed and you are dipping your paint brush into the water and then filling in the drawings with fine brush strokes. Grand-pere is in the living room shouting about something and you are just concentrating on the picture, trying to drown him out.

Genevieve looked around, shaking her head at the narrow bed, the pots on the stove - scrubbed but dull and warped. She peered out the cracked windowpane in the kitchen, and curled up her nose, then came to sit beside me on the sofa.

I cleared my throat. "Why did Grand-mere stay on the farm with Grand-pere? Why didn't she leave?"

"It wasn't so easy to pack up 4 kids and leave," Genevieve said. "She didn't have her own money or a job. Maybe it was scarier to think of leaving than staying put." She fingered the worn fringe of a throw blanket.

"Your father tried to shelter us younger kids from the fights our parents had. We'd hide in the basement huddled under a quilt or out in the barn if we could get there. John - your father - talked about being terrified as a child and having to try to keep some peace between us all, as much as he could."

We were silent for a minute and then I shivered. There was frost on the inside of the windows and a skiff of snow had settled by the back door.

Genevieve patted my knee. "It's all in the past now. You found the willow tree painting." I handed her the picture that I had been so eager to retrieve.

"She was very creative, your Grand-mere. She learned to weave branches into baskets and sell them in town." She laughed. "I remember trying to have a bath in the old washtub and there would be boughs from the willow trees soaking in water in there, to make them pliable and ready for weaving."

I smiled to think of Grand-mere bending those branches with her crooked fingers, cursing in French when they didn't cooperate.

"There's nothing left of her but this painting."

"Oh no, Cherie, there is much more."

"What then?"

Genevieve smiled. "You and Danny. You wouldn't be you if not for your Grand-mere."

She rose and ran her fingers across the kitchen table that her father had made. "Willows are also healing agents. Your Grand-mere passed the promise of hope on to me. My sister and brothers wanted to lay blame and shame. But I saw her differently than they did."

"Like a teacher that most of the kids didn't like, but I did. She stood up to the boys when they stuck gum to her chair or put a mouse in her desk drawer."

"Eek," Genevieve squealed. "A mouse in my drawer, I could never survive! 'Une souris dans mon tiroir' as Grand-mere would have said." She fumbled with her purse, then flung the strap over her shoulder. "I need a cigarette, Cheri. Let's go."

I wrapped the painting in one of the hand-made quilts on Grand-mere's bed. The reel of a jig played through my head, as if Grand-mere were here, kicking up her heels, twirling Danny and me around the room, the echo of rhythmic clapping and tapping ringing in my ears. I had to believe that Grand-mere had found some peace in this cabin, and that the times Dad went back to drop off her groceries, when he was gone a long time and Mother wondered if he was okay, maybe they found a way to try to forgive each other.

I pulled the cabin door shut and noticed for the first time a woven basket full of crabapples and pine cones near the doorway.

"Grand-mere's basket," I whispered, trailing my fingers softly across the handle, then followed Genevieve out into the snow.

