Once Upon a Memory

by Marah Herreid

I sat on his lap feeling safe. I was six when my Granddad told me the tale of the Grand Willow. The light was dull and I felt dizzy with tiredness. I sat on that warm haven feeling drowsy when he asked me "How about a story, Maddie?" I looked at him expectantly, a glint in my hazel eyes. "What kind of story?" I said warily. "A true one?" He nodded. "If you wish." My face lit up. He took my hand and began . . .

My Aunt Loretta Gummory had said to me, "Boris, don't that park look barren?" There was a park across the street. Drought had dried the river and stripped the grass. The trees were no longer. "It's always been that way," I said to

her. She stared at me with those big, brown eyes and how glossy they looked. How sad the whole scene was."

"And you know what she told me?" "What?" I insisted. "Get your shovel." I giggled. "But now for the real story."

We got our shovels and my forehead was moist. I wiped it with the back of my hand. She tossed her hair back, sipping water from a plastic bottle. I couldn't take my eyes off it. And I scolded her. "Auntie!" She looked at my small, red face and handed over the bottle. I'd never forget the taste. So delectable and fresh that my tongue sizzled. I gulped it down and was still scorching on the spot. We took those shovels to the ground. I never imagined the ground could be so hard! That was the only thing that came to my mind as I drove in my shovel– painfully. A very strange exhilaration. We dug and dug for what seemed like days. You'd never believe all of those holes, and I swear the place looked like a full out prairie dog habitat.

The very next day we took many seeds to the park. And as we put the seeds in their holes I always understood what was really going into the ground--a child. I used great care, gently covering each seed with a fine layer of dry soil. My hands were red and covered in blisters but I soon found out that it was worth it. For the following days my aunt and I would come to the park with seeds and water. We would go through the same process each time, plant five seeds from roses to oak trees, water the plants, (a process that took much longer with each of our comings) and cool our feet and hands in the brisk waters of the pond a few blocks down.

My aunt would sit there and tell me about her life in Olympia and how much different it was in North Dakota. She told me about her childhood, walking along the shore, picking up shells and wading into the ocean. I had never been anywhere else but my home and her stories were fascinating. And as the years passed we came to daffodils, sunflowers, tomatoes, asparagus, celery, corn, wheat, lilies,

roses, cherry blossom trees, oak trees, and everything you could imagine in our garden.

But there was one, the very first one we had planted, one that I took great pride in: The Grand Willow. The willow tree was big and leafy. It was so strong standing over the whole garden, like a green waterfall reaching down to the sea of plants, of life. Everything was budding and blooming. Everything was in harmony. Then we added another step to our list: we would sit under the willow with our heads against its trunk. It was always so peaceful there. It had taken so long to grow.

Though my aunt only came for one week each month I cherished it and took the garden into my own hands. I went every day and my record did not break. Once we got the garden I was so pleased, I hardly cared about the past or future, just the glorious present under the Grand Willow. People came from far and wide to see our garden. We had changed the world of North Dakota. One day my aunt became very ill. She wrote me a letter. She told me... to care for the garden before she died. I was closer to my aunt than anyone else and it– it was hard. Her funeral was at the garden. I pleaded for it to be held there and I got my wish. I wanted to be able to care for the garden with her... even if we were only together in spirit, we'd still be together. The funeral was held underneath the Grand Willow. I came every day and put a flower on her grave. I am proud to say that I changed the world even if it was a very small part of it.

I wasn't asleep then. And it was from that moment forward that I made the decision to change the world in my image. The image of hope and belief and the Grand Willow. I would make a garden and care for it properly, just like my Granddad. My beliefs began there, sitting on his lap and I've had faith in his story ever since. In fact, I still do to this very day...

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