

Iris

I did not want to go back inside that dreadful school full of cranky old teachers that delighted in punishing children, so I decided to not pass through those doors just yet. Instead I walked over to the old willow tree next to the pond. Some people said the willow sometimes spoke, and at the exact moment I touched its bark it whispered something to me. I was spooked but I listened when it said, "It's okay child I don't bite. Come, sit, and listen to my story." I was hesitant when I sat down, but listening to the willow was better than going back to any class.

The Willow

I sat dormant in darkness for years. I didn't know where I was, and hadn't seen the light of day since that fateful moment when I got separated from everything I knew. It was an endless night full of nothing, and I wanted it to end. While I knew I wanted to escape the shadowy prison. What I didn't know was that something magical was brewing beneath my surface just waiting to get out, and although it tried to, it did not have the energy to do so. That is until I saw the light.

It was just a small opening towards the top of the void, and with that tiny speck of light I felt a tiny shred of hope inside me. Then suddenly, I was being lifted up, up, up... until I was surrounded by that stunning, glorious light. I saw a face. I heard a voice say, "Okay Lily, now put it in the pot," I didn't know what a pot was, so I didn't really care.

I surveyed my surroundings, and saw pale green walls and long low tables lining them. The person who was holding me who I assumed was Lily turned toward one of the many terracotta bowls, and put me into the dirt. I wanted to scream, but I didn't have lungs. I wanted to get out of the eternal darkness, and leave it behind me forever, but I didn't know that I would soon leave the temporary body, and turn into something new.

It was dark outside when I finally pushed through the dirt. For the past few days I gained enough energy to grow into something new. Something with enough power to get past the pitch black walls that kept me imprisoned. I didn't have enough energy however to push myself fully into the world. I was just barely peeking out through the darkness like a child peering through a window that they could barely reach. So, my true journey had begun.

I don't know how much time had passed because I had no sense of time, but I soon learned that when the sun came up so did my caretaker. My caretaker was a little girl named Lily, you know, the girl from before. She gave me water and always put me somewhere with sunlight. She always had her hair up in pigtails, and her eyes always shone bright with life. She even spoke to me, and told me stories of her classmates and her teacher.

One day she told me that Ms. White, her teacher, was getting married to a young fellow who visited Ms. White at the school in the mornings, and he always brought some flowers for her. Until last Tuesday when Ivan, her classmate who she said was very irritating, grabbed the flowers from the young man's hands, and smashed them! Today as I look back I'm glad I had never seen Ivan because at the time he sounded quite mean, and probably would have torn me to shreds.

I always looked forward to my days with Lily. She was getting taller, and I saw a sharp glen of intelligence growing in her eyes, but she wasn't the only one growing. I myself had been

shooting up, and Lily with the help of Ms. White had moved me into four different pots by now. I overheard Ms. White said one day that I was nearly six and a half feet tall! I also had learned that I was in something called a greenhouse, and the greenhouse was located next to the school that Lily went to.

I had made myself a home in the greenhouse. I considered Lily my family, and I had even made a few friendships with the other plants of the greenhouse. I was happy, and cared for. Unfortunately, almost everything comes to an end. I could tell that change was coming, it was in the sunlight, the air, the ground. Lily also started acting differently, more rushed. Then came the afternoon when she finally told me what was going on.

She said that I would have to be replanted again, but this time it would be the last. For I was getting planted outside because I had grown too big to be in the greenhouse. She also said I wouldn't see her anymore because she was moving to another town, and just like that the home I had built myself came crashing down once again. I wondered, is there such a thing as true happiness? Happiness that can't be taken away, couldn't be crushed into a million pieces. I truly didn't know if there was at the time, but when another chapter of our lives ends another always begins.

I felt numb when I was planted outside. I stopped hearing, stopped listening, and stopped feeling. On the outside I would appear undisturbed, calm, peaceful, but that was the exact opposite of the inside. Since Lily had moved I had nothing to do except think. Think about all my problems, my worries, and my disappointments. I stopped having expectations for the world. So I decided to go into a hibernation so deep that I slept for about thirteen years.

I woke to a world that had been changed, evolved, and even though I wasn't there to see it happen, time still chugged on without me. I would've gone straight back to sleep, but I heard something coming from the base of my trunk. When I looked down I was quite surprised to see a young boy sitting amongst my roots that were sticking out of the ground. He looked very bookish, and had thick-rimmed glasses. I couldn't fully see his face though because his floppy, brown hair was a little too long.

The boy was reading what Lily called a book. I myself couldn't actually read, but I could barely make out him murmuring the words to himself. A voice called out, "Hey Ryan you have to get back to class before Mrs. Toggen finds you out here,"

"Okay, thanks Jude," Ryan said, and he got up to leave.

I whisper, "Please don't leave me alone again," and he whips around. He looks around for a moment, and then slowly makes his way toward the school. I was left alone to think about what happened. I could speak, I realized, really speak to people and stuff. What could this mean for me? Maybe I will be able to make friends, friends like Lily because I would be able to communicate. Someone gave me a voice in this world, and I intended to use it. So, I waited until Ryan came back, and when he did I would be ready.

I don't know how much later, but I sensed when Ryan sat down next to me. I was a little nervous, but I said, "Hello, I am the Willow," in what I hoped was an upbeat voice.

"Who's there?" he said looking around.

I responded, "It's me the Willow speaking to you." He slowly turned around, "Yes Ryan, a tree is speaking to you, and that probably doesn't happen everyday,"

"Am I hallucinating?" he said in a shaky voice.

"No, I am here and I am alive," I say gently.

“Really?”

“Yes,”

“How old are you?” he asked me.

“I don’t know my age,” I say, wondering why I had never thought of it before.

“Why haven’t you said anything to me before?”

“I was sleeping because I didn’t think that there was anything left for me to live for,” I say truthfully.

“Why?” a single simple question, and I came undone telling him everything. He just sat there, and listened, not interrupting, not even once.

When I was done he sat there for a moment before he said, “When my mom died of cancer a few years ago I wondered the exact same thing, but when she was on her deathbed she told me this: When I’m gone don’t think of my death. When you go to my funeral don’t think of me as sick. They will only give you sadness. Instead think of those happy moments we had together. They will fill you with joy.”

“But happiness isn’t real,” I say.

“Happiness isn’t something you can see or touch, Willow. It’s something you feel, an emotion. You might never see Lily again, but instead of thinking about her absence. Think about the happy memories you made.”

He stood up, and left me with my thoughts. I think about Lily, and everything she told me. Then I turned over Ryan’s words in my head. I had come to a realization that even with Lily gone the happiness still remained. Maybe because I was drowning in a sea of loneliness and grief that I didn’t see the good things that surrounded me anymore. Maybe I completely lost control that I thought there was only sadness in this world.

When he came back he asked, "Want me to read you a story?"

"You don't have to," I say.

"I don't mind. Reading out loud helps me comprehend the story better anyway,"

"Well,...okay," and he did read to me. On some days he even taught me how to read a little. I would also watch him skip rocks on the small pond that he told me was built a few years ago. He would talk about his family, and friends at school. He even told me about a few boys who bullied him. When he wasn't there I would talk to the wind. Who was either full of energy, or bone tired, and when the sun set I would listen to the crickets and toads. I think that lasted for a few months, but I'm not entirely sure. Because one day when Ryan was sitting in my branches deciding to try something new. I heard something that wasn't normal.

I heard someone whistling, and I was pretty sure that the whistling was getting closer. I told Ryan, "Shhh, be quiet I think someone is coming," he did as he was told. I whispered to the wind, "Wind can you move my leaves just right in order to hide the boy from all sides,"

"What if I don't want to," the wind said in a sleepy voice, "What if I'm too tired."

"I thought you liked games," I said, "well this game is called: Hide Ryan so he doesn't get caught, and I will be in the winner's debt,"

"Okay I guess I can," the wind had said, feigning boredom when I really knew she was excited about the prospect of me owing her something. I listened, whistling had stopped. I looked around trying to find the source of the whistling. That's when I saw a boy at the base of my trunk peering up into the leaves. I needed to get rid of him now otherwise Ryan would have gotten into trouble.

"Wind, can you turn into a howling gale?" I ask.

"Fine, but you'll owe me big for this," she says.

I told Ryan, "Hang on, and try to be quiet," he just nodded. I studied his face, it was deathly pale, and his eyes were glued to the person below us. The only reason he would be scared of someone is if... if that was his bully. I watch as the kid runs to the school, and the wind dies down.

"That was the person who has been bullying you wasn't it," I asked softly.

"Yeah, his name is Ivan," he pauses, "After today I don't think you'll see me anymore because I've been cutting too much of class that the teachers are starting to notice,"

"Why?"

"Because if they are sending Ivan out to look for me that means he's been bugging them enough to not let them forget,"

"So I guess this is goodbye then," I said.

"Yeah I guess it is," after that I never saw Ryan again, but I didn't stop living.

The Present Time

I ask the child, "So Iris tell me why have you come to me in your time of need?"

"I didn't, I just didn't want to go back to school," she said.

"My child, what you don't understand is that anyone who has come to me, needs me. Just like I needed Lily and Ryan oh so long ago,"

"Well, to tell you the truth I just don't fit in here. Never have never will," she says with great sadness coating her voice.

"Don't worry you will find a friend, but until then I will be your friend," I paused, and added, "I haven't been able to talk to anyone for a great while."

“Okay, I guess I could do that until I find somewhere where I fit in,” she says hesitantly.

“But child you should never want to fit in, you should want to stand out instead,” I looked down at Iris as she stood up pondering my words. I wonder if I will be able to help this child,... I think so. I have many lessons to teach yet in my lifetime, and yet still many lessons to learn, but in the meantime I think I’ll keep on living life to its fullest.

Iris

“Sweetie, how was your day?” my mom, Lily, asked.

“Just,... just fine I think, but I have to ask. When you were little did you have a willow tree?”

“Yes, I did. My teacher was Ms. White, and I remember raising it,” she pauses, “why do you ask?”

“Oh no reason, I was just curious that’s all,” I say.

“What’s this about a willow tree,” my father, Ryan, says coming into the kitchen, “I remember hanging out around a willow when I was in middle school,”

I smile to myself thinking about what the Willow said. I think I might prefer to stand out than fit in.