

The Willow and the Elm

by

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Jessica raced from the car to the front door, and rang the bell. When Carl Bradley appeared at the door, he greeted his granddaughter with a wide smile.

“Well, hello, honey.”

“Hi, Grandpa!” sparkled eight year old Jessica.

“How’s my favorite granddaughter?”

“Grandpa, you always say that. I’m your only granddaughter.”

Carl’s daughter Kate chuckled at their exchange. “Thanks again for offering to watch Jessica.

“Oh, no problem, Kate. We always have such a great time together,” he said, as he looked at Jessica and asked, “Would you like to go to the park today?”

Jessica nodded heartily.

“Give mommy a kiss, honey,” said Kate, as she leaned down. Jessica kissed her mom goodbye and gave her a big hug. “You have a good time, and be a good girl for grandpa.”

Jessica nodded. “I will.”

Carl and Jessica waved goodbye and after Kate drove away Carl turned to his granddaughter and said, “Want to ride on the swings?”

Jessica nodded eagerly.

Earlier that morning, a gentle April rain had fallen and the smell of spring freshness filled the air as Jessica and her grandfather headed toward the park, as bright sunshine now glimmered across a powder blue sky. It was one of those first days of spring in Chicago that brings everyone out after a

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long winter's confinement.

When they arrived at the park, Jessica raced toward the swings and soon realized that her grandfather had stopped a good distance behind her. He was standing in front of a Willow tree and she ran back to him.

“Come on grandpa. Swing me on the swings.”

But her grandfather didn't hear her, as he stared at the tree, and as Jessica gazed upward, she asked, “What are you looking at, grandpa?”

“Hmmm?” he responded without turning his gaze from the tree.

“What are you looking at, grandpa?”

“Oh, the Weeping Willow,” he said in a far away voice. “I'm sorry, sweetheart. You wanted to go swinging.”

Carl Bradley started to walk in the direction of the swings but Jessica didn't move, and asked, “Grandpa, why do they call it a *Weeping Willow*?”

“Well, that's a rather long story, Jessica.”

“Oh, please, grandpa, please tell me the story!” pleaded Jessica.

Aware of how much Jessica loved his stories he relented. “All right, but let's go sit on the bench. We'll have a good view of the willow, and I can also rest my weary old legs while I tell you the story.”

“Okay, okay!” screeched Jessica, her excitement rising in anticipation of hearing another story from her grand dad.

As they sat down, her grandfather began, “First, Jessica, I want you to take a look at the Weeping Willow, and tell me if you see anything different from other trees.

Jessica nodded, as she began to study the tree, and quickly answered, “It's a real big tree, grandpa.”

“Yes, but there are lots of big trees. What else do you notice?”

Jessica looked again at the Weeping Willow. “I know! I know, grandpa!” she yelled

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excitedly, “It’s the branches! They hang down!”

“My, you are very observant.”

“What does obser, bint mean, grandpa?”

“It means that you’re a very smart girl. And you’re right it’s the branches that make the Weeping Willow different from other trees.”

Jessica beamed proudly that her grandpa thought she was smart.

“But the branches of the Weeping Willow were not always the way you see them today. Once, a long time ago, long before you were born, it was known simply as a Willow, not a *Weeping* Willow. You see, way back when the very first Willow tree appeared, the branches were much different.”

“How were they different grandpa?”

“Well, many years ago, the first Willow grew into a very vigorous tree. It was full of life, and its branches grew strong and sturdy and upright. They reached out in splendor and strength just as the branches of other trees do today. One morning when the sun arose, a lovely young Elm tree was suddenly standing beside the Willow no more than an arm’s length away, and it wasn’t long before everyone learned it was not an ordinary elm tree. It had an extraordinary beauty never seen before in a tree. The elm was slender, and it had a very thin covering, so thin that its gentleness showed through. It amazed the town’s people because they felt the young Elm possessed an almost human quality of warmth and kindness.”

“Really, grandpa?”

“That’s what they say, Jessica, and, though no one knew why the Elm had been placed so close to the Willow, it became an almost magical time.”

Jessica’s eyes sparkled at the mention of that word, “Magical how, grandpa?”

“The story goes that whenever it rained the Willow would extend its branches out and over the young Elm to protect it from the cold and wet. And whenever the northerly winds blew, the Willow would wrap its branches around the young Elm and hold the Elm to shield it from the harmful, harsh

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winds because the Willow understood how very fragile and gentle the young Elm was.

“Really, grandpa?”

“Well, that’s how legend tells it, Jessica.”

“What else, grandpa?”

“The townspeople were amazed two trees could flourish so close together, and some folks who saw the Willow and the Elm for the first time thought there was just one tree growing there. Those two trees were that close! They were almost inseparable, and some people said during sunsets the sun’s rays would fall across the Willow and the Elm in such a way that it looked as if the Willow were giving the Elm a hug. Imagine that, Jessica, a tree giving another tree a hug!”

Jessica’s eyes beamed in delight.

“Others said when the air carried a gentle breeze the branches of the Willow intertwined with those of the Elm and it looked as if they were holding hands.”

“Wow!” Jessica’s eyes glowed in awe, “What else grandpa?”

“Well, as time passed, the Elm grew taller, more mature, more beautiful each day.”

“It sounds like the Willow and the Elm were happy, grandpa.”

“Yes it does sound that way, doesn’t it?”

“What happened next?”

“Something very sad, Jessica.”

Jessica frowned. “What, grandpa?”

“One day, when the sun arose, the young Elm was gone. Just as mysteriously and suddenly as it had appeared, it had vanished.”

“Where did it go?”

“To this day, no one knows what became of the young Elm. All we can do is guess where it went, and if it’s well. But we do know what happened to the Willow.”

“What, grandpa?”

“The Willow became very depressed after the Elm disappeared. The townspeople who saw

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the sad Willow tried to help it. They planted a young maple tree beside it, but that didn't bring happiness to the Willow. So, they removed the maple, and planted a young oak next to the Willow in hopes of restoring its vigor. But that didn't work either. Finally, realizing it was an elm tree the Willow had grown so fond of, they planted a new elm tree, and just as they finished, a light rain began to fall. The rain fell upon both the new elm and the Willow, but the Willow did not extend its branches out and over the new elm as it had done in the past with that special Elm. Rather, the Willow's branches slumped downward. The rain fell upon the Willow and from the top of the tree ran down its entire length, down along the ends of its branches and onto the ground. When the people saw the light rain flowing down the length of the Willow, they removed that new elm, and never again planted another tree beside it. That was the day, Jessica, that the Weeping Willow got its name."

Jessica gazed in silent awe at the large Willow tree immersed in her thoughts, and finally when she looked back at her grandfather, she saw the moisture in his eyes, and asked, "Grandpa, does it always make you sad when you see a Willow?"

Jessica's grandfather hesitated, pulled out a handkerchief, and dabbed a bit of misty moisture from his eyes. When he answered, his voice quivered ever so slightly with emotion, "No, Jessica, I don't get sad when I see a Willow---only when I think about that young Elm."

The End