

Spotted Castles

By Beatrice Bischoff

The crisp autumn air bites into my skin as I run between the branches of the willow tree outside my house. I know today is going to be a great day because I'm wearing my favorite dress. My mom told me it's made of gingham, but she also said I look like Dorothy from The Wizard of Oz when I wear it, but that's not why I like it. I hate it when she says I'm like something else. I suppose I *dislike* it, ladies aren't supposed to say hate. I mean think about it, everything is different, so how could I look like her? I'm seven; I don't know how old she is. I braided my hair by myself too, but just because it's pretty, not because I want to look like her. I like my dress because it's soft on my skin even when I run, and it's not too pretty that my mom will get mad if I get it dirty.

My willow is beautiful, her branches go up, but then far out, before they drape back down and touch the ground like the curtains in my room. She is better than my room; she is my castle. Her thick curtain of branches blocks most sunlight, preventing anything from growing inside her embrace. The enchanting spot within her branches, where the elements can't easily reach, is my favorite spot to play because there I can be anything I want, and do anything I can imagine; and all she does is support me. At the heart of her embrace is her trunk; it seems to reach upward forever. I've never been able to climb up her rough bark, but maybe this time it will be different. My hands are still too small, and unable to grasp her I slip, scraping my palms. It hurts a little but I know I'll still try again tomorrow.

My willow is right by my mom's kitchen window, and all around my willow is a green lush carpet of grass, covered with the dew of early morning. She is on the east side

of my house, and since I've come outside the sun has been gradually rising. As I look at the pattern the dappled light that penetrates my willow's defenses casts, I find animals in the shadows. I can see a rabbit on the north side and a small... was it, screech owl? On the south. Inside my willow my imagination can run rampant, and create an entirely new kingdom, with a feud between the owls and the rabbits. I can't decide who would win, so I resolve to find out more about them, and then maybe it will be clearer.

The smell of pancakes wafts through the air, and it breaks my daydream. It must not be long until breakfast. I taste the stale mourning breath in my mouth, which is really bad because when I'm forced to come into contact with my family at breakfast, mother will surely notice and scold me for not brushing my teeth. How can she expect me to brush my teeth when I could be outside? I look around and find some of the wild mint I saw earlier in the yard. There is a patch not far away so I run over. Crushing its leaves in my mouth, the new mint taste spreads. I don't think mother will notice my lack of teeth brushing now, but with her uncanny ability to find all my faults, I can't be sure.

Leaving the mint plant, I run back to the comfort of my tree, but I skid to a halt right before darting between her branches. There is something wrong, my always-regal castle looks sick. There are black dots all over her leaves; do willows get the chicken pox? I shudder thinking about the days of kindergarten I had to miss because of them. I step closer and see this is not the chicken pox; there are many individual small armored beetles walking around and eating her leaves.

I approach one of the beetles cautiously, but intensely curious in a way I can't seem to help, my hand moves as if by some other force and I pick one up. I examine the bug and how it walks across my hand with all its tiny feet in unison. Should I show it to

mom? I want to share this with someone and it's clear these invading bugs are eating my willow.

As I run through the house to the kitchen while shouting, "Mommy!" I realize she might not care, but I push the thought away, moms are supposed to care about anything their kids do.

I reach her and tug on her sleeve to make her notice me. "Mom look!" She's leaning against the kitchen counter, head in her hands. The weird cup of black coffee she's started drinking ever since dad began coming home late and sleeping in the guest room, in front of her.

"Not now sweetie, mommy's busy." She stands up straight and brushes me off, turning towards the pancakes she's making. The smell of her coffee hits me and I want to gag. It smells like nail-polish remover.

"Mom just real quick can you look at this? It's important to me..." There's only so much rejection I can take.

"Wow honey that's great," mom says looking at me and feigning interest, but she just wants to get me to go away, she doesn't actually see what I'm holding. She's still expectantly looking at me, so when I don't budge she sighs. "Okay, what is it?"

"See this bug?" I thrust it under her nose. "I found it on my willow and there are thousands of them! They're all eating her, I think. Mom what do we do?"

"Darling there's nothing to worry about, I'm sure there aren't that many. A few bugs never killed a tree. Now run along so I can finish breakfast." With that she turned away from me, I am clearly dismissed.

I walk back to my willow, bug in hand. We should be friends, me and the bug, or wait, the bug and *I*, as mom always corrects, because she doesn't care about either of us. I remember a few nights ago when my parents thought I was asleep. As I lay there listening to their now always raised voices and pretending it wasn't *my* parents fighting, I heard one phrase clearly: "I feel like I'm doing the single mother thing and I don't like it, if you care so much you take her! I can't deal with her incessant questioning anymore." Mom was talking about me.

I sit down, my back against the trunk of my willow. Cradling the bug in my now clammy palm. It feels like my stomach is in my throat and I've lost my appetite. What do I do? What *can* I do? I wish my parents would help, because alone, I can't figure out what's happening to my tree. But they're parents, I guess they have more important things to do. My willow will just have to deal without their attention, but I'll be there for her. We'll be there for each other. Spotted or not, she'll always be my castle.