

THE WILLOWS

BY
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Amy was a child when Congress passed the Edmunds Bill, assuring the end of polygamous living in Utah, but she was old enough to know that Aunt Edna was not her aunt at all but Will's mother and that Will was her favorite brother even though he was three years younger than she was and therefore not quite an equal. And when the heavy snows of 1884 had melted up north allowing the U.S. marshals through to do their duty in the south, when fear hung around their hunted mothers and father like weeping willows, she and Will still had to bundle their dolls and dishes in the green scarf and head for the orchard.

As they walked, Amy poked Will hard.

"I looked already," he growled.

"Did not!"

Amy knew he liked to watch his toes nuzzle the dust but she also knew that looking up was a lot more exciting than looking down because red hills wiggle under hot sun. Besides, God probably watched over from up there. Probably he did. That high he could even see Pa and the secret place.

Will followed Amy in and out the young trees that grew down the middle of town. They saw a woman out on the porch bending over her big wooden tub. Of course they did not stop. You could tell when a mother pretended to look but did not really look at what she was doing that it was not a good day to visit. The children walked slowly past and Amy poked Will every time he forgot to look up.

The cooper shop was still empty. Amy ran toward the closed door and slid her fingers along four new churns. Every day they felt smoother, rounder,

newer. Oh, she hoped they would sit there forever! But the wish was a stone in her stomach and she tugged at Will to hurry.

By the time Amy and Will got to the orchard, the Sevy boys were up a plum tree. Amy frowned in their direction and let go a long groan. This had been a perfect place, private and perfect. She and Will had cleared away rocks and bee weeds. They had even dug themselves their own pile of dirt. The trees spread shade big enough to sit in and nearby was City Creek for mud-making. Amy made up her mind that she would not leave and she would pay no notice to the Sevys.

Amy and Will crouched side by side over a dirt house, their small hands shaping, smoothing, caressing. Their real houses were just alike but Will's ma had planted sweet peas along each side of her broad plank walk. In Amy's dooryard, there was only violet tamarisk.

Amy was pushing a twig into her tiny yard when a green plum struck the dirt house. She glared upward at four dangling legs.

"Damn, that was a fine one!" shouted Fred Sevy.

"Damn, this is a fine one, too!" yelled Phil.

Amy couldn't stand it. Not only did the Sevy boys have a pa who walked down the street in broad day but they said swear words in a painless way that made Amy shudder and tingle at the same time. Clamping a hand tight over each ear, she threw back her head and stuck out her tongue.

"Gentiles!"

Then she looked at Will. He had become worshipful. He bent toward her and put his mouth against her ear. "I hate them Sevys," he whispered.

Amy cupped her hand around his ear and whispered back. "They are gentiles, Will. Both of them."

"We hate gentiles," he said. "We hate 'em."

Amy nodded twice, long and slow, looking Will right in the eyes the whole time. Then she sat up straight and began to pat and mold the dirt house as if nothing had happened.

"I forgot, Pa said we don't hate anybody. Not even the Sevys. Now let's play." Sometimes Amy got tired explaining, but there were some things even a five-year-old ought to know. Of course, there were big folks' secrets they were too little to know, like why John Saunders disappeared into Red Canyon every afternoon with a lunch basket and a water keg, or why the brethren took lookout turns on top of the canyon wall. At first sight of the marshal's buggy a boulder would come crashing down. Of course little children like Will were too young to know that.

But he still leaned toward her, whispering, waiting. "The Sevys swear, huh."

"Gentiles don't know better," Amy said.

"Why don't they?"

"Because they're Gentiles." Amy had heard Brother Swenson tell Pa when the Sevys moved in that Mr. Sevy was one, so likely it had to do with not going to meeting or building uneven fences or letting your beard go.

"What is a gentile?" asked Will, his voice way above a whisper now.

"Something going to hell!" yelled Phil Sevy. "Something going right down to hell, dammit!" A splatter of wet pits hit Will square in the face and he was instantly on his feet, red faced and funny looking because the knees of his

overalls caked into bends even though he stretched on tip-toe. He did not wait for Amy to come up with another of her wonderful words that wasn't swearing.

"You—you muh-gar-ries you!" he screamed. "You mean old muh-gar-ries!"

Amy caught herself or she would have fallen right over at the sound of that word. She could not have heard what she thought she heard! Not said aloud, shouted even. And not from Will! Why, he was a child! She had been almost eight when she was told about McGary.

"They are muh-gar-ries, aren't they, Amy?"

But she had heard. There he went again.

"Shhh," she said. "Shhh!"

She could not think what to do and there was nobody to ask. Aunt Edna would probably scold Will good.

"Will Taylor," she said, "What do you know? You tell me right now what you know."

"He's bad."

"You never saw him, I bet!"

"I didn't see him, but Ma said she'd tie knots in his beard and yank it out." Will leaned so close to Amy that his mouth made her ear wet. "You seen him?"

Amy stiffened and rubbed her ear. "Course I have, almost. And I bet Aunt Edna didn't say that either." Amy had heard her own mother say she would like to put epsom salts in the marshal's mush, but somehow Aunt Edna's threat was better. Did she really want to hurt him? Was he wicked? Maybe he was a gentile like the Sevys. She could see Aunt Edna stretching on her tip-toes, reaching but unable to reach the bigness with just the tip of its huge beard showing.

"Aunt Edna wouldn't say that so you could hear."

"She did, though. She did honest, Amy," pleaded Will.

Amy still doubted it, but she was weary with envy and disappointment and her voice fell. "You're too little to talk about McGary, Will, let alone see him. Besides, if you saw him you might have to lie, and you can't even lie yet."

"Could you lie?"

Amy felt old and wise again as she watched Will's eyes grow big and his mouth slowly come open. "Sure I could. Most of the big kids can. But Abbie Smith can't, and she's ten. One day she almost told."

"What did she tell?"

"Where her pa was, of course. Anyway, she sure got it, too." Amy handed Will two small tin cups and wrapped the wooden dolls in her green scarf. She could suddenly think of nothing but Pa. He was somewhere for sure, somewhere high, and he missed her too probably. He—

"We shouldn't talk about it, Will," she said. "Come on, let's play Salt Lake City."

Will obeyed, as always, and with a few quick stamps of his bare feet the house was flattened. He ran to the creek with cups and then watched in awe as Amy molded mud into disks the exact size of the tin saucers. As always happened when Will was delighted with her, he giggled as he watched. She handed one saucer to Will and took the other between small hands red with dirt.

"We better play or it will be supper time and we'll have to go. You be the pa and I'll be the ma."

"Where's the other ma?" yelled Phil Sevy. "Mormons can't have just one ma!"

"This is only play, Phil Sevy, so you shut up!"

"You shut up," echoed Will bravely.

"Shhh, Will," said Amy. "Remember what I told you."

The magic of mud pies and the frown with which Will played the papa withdrew Amy completely from thoughts of McGary and the swearing Sevys. She lifted her cup with her fingers instead of her whole hand and she talked fine. Soon she was in Salt Lake City and, in her finest cape and manners, chatting over store pastries.

The warning sound broke Amy's make believe into a million pieces. There was the sudden clap of rock against rock, of something hurling its way down the mountain. It was not a loud sound but it might as well have broken the earth right in two. Amy sat motionless, staring down the road past the trees and the silent shops and the empty porches and knowing there was nobody in the world except her and Will.

"Here comes McGary," yelled the Sevy boys as they leaped from their tree and sped laughing up the road. "Run, Mormons, run! Run from the black buggy, ya woman lovers! Run to Arizona!"

Amy did not move.

"They're just foolin', aren't they, Amy? Who is muh-gar-rie, huh?" whispered Will.

Amy tried hard to enjoy being eight and knowing. Her whole self hurt to tell Will all about it. But of course she must not, and she must hide, and hide Will, too, and not tell. They ought to hide somewhere right now!

"He's coming, Will. He's coming around the east bend right now." She thought about Pa and about Abbie Smith almost telling and she wished she was with her mother at the mill. But Mama would not be at the mill. By now she would be hid. If she had heard the boulder she would be safe by now. *If she heard the boulder—*

Suddenly Amy was on her feet and running. "Ma's at the mill! She's tending the mill and she won't hear," Amy shouted back. You better go somewhere so McGary won't ask you things." Amy's bare feet sank in the soft earth along the ditchbank like wooden spoons in new butter and the tall grass sliced at her legs. The wooden plank slapped against her feet where she crossed Lund's dooryard and she stumbled over a hoe in the ploughed field where she had dropped potatoes that very morning. Without slowing, she ran the long trail up to the mill, the trail that no amount of walking could pack. Here and there rocks had been bared and rounded, but the earth had remained sand soft.

"Ma!" Amy screamed as she ran through the mill. "Ma!" Her voice sounded hollow in the empty room. She found Lee Robertson out back waiting for flour. "Where's Ma?"

"She's hid, thank God."

God! Of course! He could help! He had brought them Aunt Edna, and he had saved Pa's life when he got poisoned with sheep dip.

"Where did God hide her?"



But Lee didn't say. Instead he stiffened and looked past Amy. At the sound of a boot against the wood floor, she whirled, almost backing into the water wheel. The boot belonged to a body that filled the doorway. It was in Sunday clothes, nice ones, and behind it at the end of the path was a black-topped buggy. Across the road stood the Sevy boys, half smiling, pale.

"Where's the miller?" The marshal looked at Lee, then at Amy. She swallowed hard two times and tried to stand tall. She tried to see the knives and pistols big kids said were hidden in the beard that lay on McGary's black vest. But the beard was no bigger than Pa's and it was combed.

"You're a pretty little thing, aren't you."

Amy backed up another step.

"How old are you?"

"Pa's gone."

The big man squatted and smiled. His voice was gentle. His eyes, almost buried in bushes of eyebrow, were kind. "I just want to talk to him," he said.

"Pa isn't around," Amy said. Maybe she wouldn't get to lie. Pa hadn't been home since the night Zephyr was born and the only way she had known he was home then was by going outside and peeking through a tear in the blind.

"Where is he?"

"Pa's been gone a long time. I don't know where."

"Who runs the mill?"

Amy hesitated. "Ma."

McGary's face brightened. "Well, I'd like to see your mother. Where is she?"

"I don't know."

The eyes turned. They looked slowly around the room and Amy wondered as McGary stood how Aunt Edna could even think of hurting anyone so big. He hurried through the mill, looking everywhere. Suddenly he seized a sack of grist and threw it against the wall. "Damn cohabs," he muttered. "*Damn smart cohabs.*"

Amy moved behind Lee. Cohabs! A new word! A new word that might not be swearing!

"Your bird has flown," said Lee. Amy felt brave behind him, and she thought the way he said things exactly right.

McGary's face was dark and worried as he came toward Amy again. He squatted once more and looked into her eyes. "Are you sure you don't want to tell me where your folks are?"

Amy shook her head. "I don't know where."

McGary stood up and looked across at Lee before hurrying out the door. "This is a hell of a mill to run without a miller, young man." He ran down the path.

Lee laughed as he took his full sack of flour from the mill. "You sure got spunk, Amy Taylor. Weren't you scared?"

Amy could not answer. She sat in the doorway and watched the buggy go. By the time it was out of sight her insides ached and she noticed that her legs were shaking.

"Your ma's at the willows. She's safe enough," said Lee. "McGary won't likely be back today now he knows we've outsmarted him again."

Amy knew that Lee meant she might as well go home, and she started down

the trail. Slivers from the mill floor stung as her feet spread the warm sand and she did not know why but her eyes suddenly stung too and made tears that tasted sandy and salty, and then she was running again, through her own mother's dooryard and garden spot, past the tithing house, along Swenson's fence and under it. Across the wide field lay a sea of green willows, taller than tamarisk and almost as thick where their clumps began. Long ago when Pa broke his leg she had gathered the long saplings and sat for hours watching him weave baskets. The firmest and greenest willows he kept out to slit and tap into whistles.

As Amy slid into them, the willows gave way, falling wide. Amy moved quickly, tearfully among the tiny clearings. In each, two or three women sat, their knees drawn up to make an arm rest or to make room for someone else. Mary Swenson was crying, her head back, eyes shut as if she were at prayers. One old woman stitched on patches. Aunt Edna was looking straight ahead as if she were thinking about her sweet peas. The black curls on her forehead were wet.

Amy stopped. There were so many women. But when she finally saw her mother seated alone among the thickest willows she ran and fell into her lap.

"Ma! Ma!" The tears were gone and Amy's heart leaped. "I saw him, and I almost lied, and he's got a combed—"

"Amy!" The single word and her mother's strong arms jerked Amy to her feet and then two coarse hands held her face tight between them. Strands of her mother's long hair, usually piled smooth and shiny, hung loose around the browned cheekbones that looked to Amy like fists.

"Amy Taylor, you ought to be whipped!" The hands were too tight against Amy's face. "How old are you, Amy?" The hands shook her and the eyes in which Amy had read so many nice things were different than she had ever seen them. "Are you five years old?"

"I'm eight. Will's five."

"Then go right home, and don't ever, ever look for me again!" The hands turned her but held on. "What would we do if Pa had to go away and not come back? What if Aunt Edna and her children all went?" Then the hands pushed.

Amy slipped from the willows. Will could not go away. Some of the children and mothers had disappeared, but Will would not. Pa might go to jail though if she did not remember she was eight. How would it be different for Pa to be away in jail instead of away hiding? Some way it would be different. Amy slid slowly under the fence. Her tears made pebbles in the dry earth as she tried to fit the woman in the willows inside the mother who talked about Pa as if he were God. She tried to remember the excitement and the new word, but her cheeks still burned and her head was fuzzy inside. When Pa got angry, he thumped her head with his big thumbnail. Ma did not get angry.

As Amy turned the corner of the tithing house, she heard a noise behind her and looking back saw her mother in the shadow of the building. "There's bread and milk in the coolroom, Amy. Maggie is at Aunt Edna's so you put the babies to bed."

It was black outside by the time Amy had set the milk and bread back in the coolroom and convinced Ben that Ma would be in bed with him when he woke up. She rocked Zephyr until she slept, then climbed into the corner bunk that

hung suspended by big ropes laced through holes in the wall. She sank deep into the mattress to wait for Maggie. The moon stared through a knot hole just like the eyes of a coyote, and she wished Maggie would hurry up.

Amy wasn't sure what woke her, whether it was the talking or the quickly moving feet or the light ridging the door, but her father's voice, low and flowing, became suddenly clear. She slid from the bunk, opened the kitchen door, and slipped inside. Aunt Edna was rushing back and forth and so was Ma, like they did when they bottled or got ready for a picnic. The table was piled high with things Amy barely saw because there, sitting in front of the fireplace with his back to her, was Pa. She stared at the big bent shoulders, wanting to climb right over them into the lap. But her mother's voice came anxiously.

"Get into bed, Amy. Please."

Pa turned so fast that Amy fell against the door, startled. He smiled at her and before she could even smile back he reached out and picked her up. He drew her tight against the big buttons, the rough shirt, and held her. The chair began to tip back and forth, to the edge of a squeak but not full on it. Warm in the fire, unbearably happy, Amy did not say anything for a long time. Then she started wishing Will was there, too. It was wrong, him not knowing. Amy curled there, remembering Will and McGary. She could hardly stand it. She must not talk. She must act her age.

But the squirms could not be helped finally and she was sitting up, pushing herself loose and looking into Pa's face. His hair was not as black as it had been and the beard that had shamed all other beards in town when Pa babied it was too long. But the eyes were the same.

"You're every bit as big as McGary, I bet," Amy said.

"Bigger," said Pa. "With the Lord, I'm bigger." He spoke softly and squeezed her again and Amy laughed and was bubbly inside at the sound of Pa's voice.

"I saw McGary today," said Amy. "And I didn't tell him anything." She waited for Pa to reply but he just pulled her tight against him. "Will and me were at the orchard alone when the rock fell." Pa didn't seem to be listening. He lifted her high and carried her back toward her bunk. "McGary begged me to tell, Papa, but I remembered."

When Papa laid her down, she felt the big hands with their softening callouses slip back over her forehead to the tips of her braids. He kissed her cheek. She must not ask questions. She must not. But she touched his sleeve. "Will you be here when I wake up?"

"Not this time. I've got to play hide and seek with Brother McGary a little longer." Pa stood for a long time looking about him, then stepped over to Zephyr's crib and straightened the quilt.

"Go back to sleep, Amy." Pa shut the door behind him.

Amy lay for a long time hearing the voices and trying to see Pa move through the light around the door. Why had Pa come and why didn't Aunt Edna and Mama act happier about it? If he was *Brother McGary*, was he good? How could that be? He had to be bad. But there were no knives and pistols in his beard. She was sure of that.

Daylight usually teased Amy awake, but morning was full on her face before she woke. She and Will might not have time for a single make believe before she had to drop potatoes! As she dressed she listened for Will outside. He would

be calling her. Then suddenly there were footsteps moving along the porch. Good. Mama was home. As Amy pulled on her dress she could hardly wait to see Will's eyes grow big and his mouth flop open when she told him the new word that McGary had said. It didn't sound like swearing. Probably it wasn't.

She stepped out the door into the shade of the tamarisk at the foot of the rise separating Aunt Edna's house from her mother's. "Will!" She waited. When he didn't run out the door and toward her, she climbed on, calling again, much louder than she had intended. She stepped to the porch. "Will!" Aunt Edna would scold her for sure for being unladylike.

The door of the house was ajar. Amy stepped inside. The rooms were empty. Except for the wash bench and a table and the black stove, the house was bare. Even the corn husk beds were gone and the ladder to the garret where Will slept lay on the floor. Beside it, bundled around the dolls and dishes, was the green scarf. Amy's heart pounded. Will didn't know hardly anything! But he was gone and so was Aunt Edna and Emma and baby Seth. And so was the oval mirror from Salt Lake City.

Amy wanted to run down the hill to Ma. She would know all about it. Mama!

But she must not ask. She thought about Pa's shirt that scratched and tickled her face. She must help. She must lie and she mustn't ask Mama questions, no matter what. She must remember she was eight.

Picking up the scarf of toys, she walked outside and sat on the edge of the porch, pushing her toes into the dust the way Will did and feeling as if she would burst with things about Pa and McGary and cohabers. Slowly and tenderly she undid the chain of knots Will had tied around their toys and laid the dolls and dishes in a neat row. She tried to make believe, but she kept hearing the Sevys laughing from the tree and she kept seeing Ma in the willows and feeling her strong hands. Damn Sevys. The words pushed to come out but could not. "I guess I won't play," she said aloud, as if she hoped the dolls and dishes would not care. "I don't have a pa anyhow." She looked up and then she saw the shadow. McGary was standing in the back doorway of her mother's house, his face dark and worried again. Then he saw Amy and the face was not as dark and the legs moved toward her. Your bird has flown, McGary. As he came rapidly up the rise, his enormous silver belt buckle gathered light. Amy stood. The marshal's beard was combed but the marshal was a gentile. He had to be. She arched her back against the porch post and waited.