

The Little Forest

"I remember being a young girl, chasing my friends at the beach, teaching my 5-year-old brother how to fly a kite, and helping my mom cook and clean around the house. Life was simple, life was beautiful. It was a time of learning, laughter, and belonging. Yet as you grow, you eventually become more aware of the world. You learn things that were beyond your sight before. Like that moment you realize that not everyone's life is all cupcakes and rainbows. Others have it harder, and some have it easier; that's just how life works. As you grow up you understand things more, you see the world a bit differently. At least that's how it was for me". I pause to see if my eight-year-old granddaughter is listening. She is and I continue.

"My parents were well educated. My mother worked 16-hour shifts as a surgeon in our local hospital, and often slept at her office for days at a time. I barely saw her and was forced to learn things like how to make my lunches and do my hair at a very young age. I didn't mind it though. Being independent made me feel powerful and confident; two wonderful traits according to my dad. He worked as a professor at the university. He was a very joyful, intelligent man. Nothing could ever put him down! It didn't matter if he was just eating dinner with the family, or suffering from the flu, my father was always laughing. Whenever he walked into a room people would smile. He just had a way of making people feel happy about themselves. I have always envied this about him. A part of me wished I could do what he does. I mean wouldn't everyone?! Ever since I was a little girl, I'd watch him laugh with the neighbors, buy me ice cream, and teach me things no other person could teach me. He showed me the joys of life - the games, the adventures, the friends. I loved my Dad dearly. There is a flip side to that story though: my dad was a protector, and he did everything he could to protect me from the unpleasant realities of life... So, I grew up thinking everything was great! I didn't think about others and their lives, I just enjoyed my own".

"When I stop to think of it, maybe my life has really been about correcting that oversight. Once I started to dive into the realities of life around me, I was hooked." I can smell my lasagna cooking in the oven, which is my granddaughter's favorite dish, so I always make it for her when she visits. I look at my granddaughter, staring at me with wide and vivid eyes, filled with curiosity. I want her to remember me, my legacy. I want her to stare into the forests and remember *me*, me and my love. My love for the trees, my love for the beings within the forest, and my love for her. A love that will never die.

"Wait Nona!" she exclaims as she runs to the kitchen. "I'd really prefer some hot chocolate if it's going to be a long story!" she says earnestly.

I laugh and stand up and walk towards the kitchen. I put the milk in a small pot and wait for it to heat up. I put in the chocolate powder and stir it with a small spoon. I pour it into Lilly's 'special' cup and hand it to her.

"Careful it's hot," I say as she takes it from my hands and walks toward the table. We sit back down together. "Are you ready now?" I ask.

"Yes!" She says, smiling.

"Ok....as a little girl, I always wanted to be independent, like many young children do. I wanted to have my own money, use the TV by myself, but most of all, I wanted to walk home from school by myself. My house was only a block away from the school, so it didn't seem like a big deal to me... it just seemed that way to my parents. So, I begged my parents, and I begged... and begged... and begged. I begged so much that my father finally responded with: I'll think about it!" I look at Lilly, who is still drinking out of her cup. I smile to myself and continue with the story...

"One day, when I was in 4th grade, my parents finally gave in, and I was allowed to walk home by myself. My dad drove me in the morning before heading to the university. I worked through the day like I always did, learning how to add, and subtract. And then the time came, the glorious time where I would walk home from school for the very first time ever. I was so excited! When the bell rang, I left the school and walked along the same path my parents had taught me. I crossed through a small forest which connected to the back of my house. I still remember the smell of the pine needles and the feeling of the hot sun across my face. It was a wonderful forest. One I miss very dearly."

"What happened to it!?", asks Lilly, all her attention on me.

"I'll get to that in a second." I respond, Lilly doesn't look very pleased but does not argue and allows me to continue.

"I kept taking that route every single day. I'd sometimes stop to climb a tree or lie down in the dirt and stare up at the sky. I'd lie down so long that sometimes my father would come looking for me, calling my name. The first few times this happened my father was very annoyed, but after a while he just accepted it and gave me a new time to be home by. I was living in the perfect world my father had crafted for me, never expecting that anything would ever change."

“Can you guess what happened Lilly?” I inquired of my granddaughter whose attention seemed to be waning.

“Something bad happened?” she guesses correctly.

“Yes... something very bad. The city made the decision to cut down that forest I loved so dearly.” I still feel the sadness I felt all those years ago.

Lilly gasps “But why!?”

“It’s complicated,” I explain. “By tearing down the forest it gave the city and housing developers more space to build houses and make a profit from it.”

“The next time I walked down that path, my beloved forest had disappeared. Nothing left, not even one tree.”

“But that’s so sad!” Lilly says.

“Yes, it was. I was devastated.

“In fact, I was so upset I cried to my father and begged him to do something. He was upset too but told me there was nothing he could do. My father told me it was just the way things were, and that nothing would ever change that. I looked up to my dad, and in that moment I felt like he had let me down for the first time. I still remember anger bubbling up inside myself as I ran to my room and cried myself to sleep. It wasn’t my Dad’s fault. He did believe there was nothing he could do. But I suspected he was wrong; that in fact, there was something we could do. From that day on I changed. I became more aware of the things happening around me. I watched the news and learned about the climate crisis. I learned about things like petitions and protests. I tried to do something about it too. Later on, when I was older, I protested with some of my classmates who had my same passion about environmental issues as me. And we didn’t just protest, we offered some ideas and solutions too! We did as much as we could, and eventually people did listen. Over time, our small community grew, and together we did make a difference.”

“But what did you do?” Lilly asks me.

“Well,” I respond, “let’s take a walk and I’ll show you.” Lilly smiles and follows me out the door. We walk down the stairs of my apartment in downtown Kingston and walk out the door. We pass a lot of people walking or riding on electric bikes.

“You see how everybody here is walking or riding a bike?” I ask my little granddaughter.

“Yes,” she responds, “just like every day.” I chuckle and look at her sweet innocent face.

“Well, it wasn’t before” I say. “When I was a child, most people would drive their cars in these areas.”

“What!?” Exclaims Lilly, “But this is a ‘no drive’ zone!”

“There was no such thing when I was young. See, most people lived in small neighborhoods that were safer for children and less crowded. But that also meant that we had to drive more, which polluted our air.”

“We still drive cars!” Lilly says to me.

“You’re right. But we have evolved enough that only a very small percent of the population’s cars run on gas. The rest use electric vehicles. And most people around the world don’t use cars at all!”

“Oh...” says Lilly. We continue walking through the neighborhood, passing stores and restaurants. We continue walking until we stop at a huge garden the size of an Olympic size swimming pool covered by a huge glass dome.

“See this!?” I say to Lilly, “this is where we grow fresh produce for the whole town! Before we didn’t do that. When I was a child, we would ship vegetables and fruits from halfway around the world and then sell them at grocery stores. Now we just sell them here.” Lilly smiles at me as people pass each other, entering the dome to get fresh vegetables.

“Let’s keep going.” I say to her, and we turn back towards the neighborhood. Kids run around their yards laughing, teasing and yelling - you know, kids’ stuff. Their parents watch them as they scroll on their phone or take pictures. We pass a man installing solar panels onto a newly designed home. I wave and he waves back at me.

We approach a small forest a couple blocks away from my apartment.

“Look!” I exclaim. “Look how beautiful that is!” Lilly looks up, uninterested, like many young children would be.

“You may not find this all that special,” I say, “but I do. We have forests like these everywhere! It is beautiful! They were always here, they just got destroyed over time. Luckily, we got them back.”

“So, we fixed everything!?” Ask Lilly.

“We made a difference. A big one too. But the amount of destruction that was caused was too much to even comprehend. We made innocent animals suffer and hurt our ecosystems, all in an attempt to gain money or power. Which is why you can understand it takes a lot of effort to fix *everything*. Right?”

“Yes.” Lilly says.

“Some places have not changed as much as I would hope. Some people do not have the resources or enough money to make such a big change as we did here. I have grown up watching people make a difference. Even if it was a small one. And look what we achieved! That is why, dear Lilly, when I die, I know my memory will live in the forests. The ones we saved.”