

The Last Willow Stick on the River

Nora's husband, Earl, hollered before she even got out of the car.

"What did we talk about? 'No more basket weaving materials. Not even one bag.'" He shook his newspaper in the air to make sure she knew he meant it.

He was right but she wasn't going to let that stop her. Nora went around to the passenger seat and fought to get the stuff out. She'd scored not one, but two giant bags, the kind used to tote clothes home from the department store.

"Settle down," she hollered back.

"That shed is so jammed we can't get inside," he said when he saw her come up the steps with the bulging bags. Bundles of hazel and willow sticks poked out.

A wad of something, moss?, rolled out and fell to the ground. Nora lowered one bag. "Throw that back in, will you?"

Earl groaned as he bent down to gather the feathery clump.

"Those knees of yours is noisy," Nora said with a laugh. "Maybe we rub a little bear grease on you to keep 'em quiet."

"You keep your hands off my knees." Earl shoved the moss in the bag. "Even you said you had enough."

"But this is good stuff," she said.

"It's always good stuff," he said.

Nora set the bags down. "Old Auntie died and Nelson, that's the nephew, remember that kid that brought us a salmon last year? He didn't know what to do with it so he called me." She pulled out neatly bound coils of willow root stacked on a wooden dowel.

"I know a weaver who would kill for this. Like angel hair. Remember when I took the high schoolers to the river last spring? They grab the first plant they see and yank it out of the ground. Thick, stumpy roots. You can't weave with that. Then they throw sand at each other and say they're bored. They all want to talk about their cultural activities when they're applying for college, but get them outside to do something and they fart around."

The memory cheesed Nora all over again. She held out a bundle of hazel sticks and sighed. "Look. So long and straight. What do you think her source was?" Nora threw them back in the bag and dug around the other treasures. "That fire a few years back got down near her place. Remember? Afterward Tribe said no one should drive in there because of spotted owls or some malarkey."

"That didn't stop you, as I recall," Earl said.

"Fire makes better sticks. I didn't want them to hog all the good ones."

"Well, you got plenty now," Earl said, reaching for the bags. "These go in your shed?"

Nora gave him a dirty look. "This stuff's too good."

She went to the back of the house and tried to open the door to the spare room. Something was tangled up under the door. She pushed harder then worked the door back and forth until she got it open a crack. She turned sideways and squeezed inside.

"Good thing I didn't eat that second plate of waffles this morning," she said.

"I watched you eat a second plate of waffles," Earl said.

"I meant, finish. I didn't finish those waffles."

A quilt had fallen to the floor and partially blocked the door. Nora rolled it up and pressed it back on top of the pile on her old easy chair. The chair was piled high with three other quilt projects plus two large garbage bags filled with scraps she had to go through as soon as she got a chance.

Earl had followed her. "That girl from the Tribe called again. She really wants you to teach that class." The light from the living room lit him from behind highlighting the terribly uneven job Nora had done when she'd cut his hair. The lumpy tufts tugged at her heart in a way that interfered with making her point.

"Teach one class and they'll never leave me alone," Nora said. "You're supposed to scare them off." She stepped around a box holding a shriveled porcupine carcass that she was hoping to salvage a few quills from. She accidentally kicked her Hobby Craft SuperOrganizer System™ that Earl had bought to help her clean up this room. The four coffee cans filled with dentalium and abalone bits that were stacked on the organizer tilted precariously but she caught the thing before it went over.

"Smart girl," Earl said. "She said you're the best weaver on the river."

"If she's so smart why is she blowing smoke up *your* ass?" Nora jammed the new bags onto her work table which was the old dining room table. It had always been too small, barely big enough to hold four placemats and the butter dish. Now the surface was scratched and dotted with glue. Half was cluttered with basket starts and the white tub that she used for soaking her projects when she was weaving regularly. The other half had a pile of Maidenhair fern stems that needed to be peeled and prepped. She needed an apprentice or something.

"Not enough room to get my work started." Nora turned to look at Earl.
"What about me setting up for a few hours on the new dining room table?"

"Nope." Earl shook his head. He pulled the door closed. From outside the closed door he said. "You have so much you can't get anything done. When was the last time you made something?"

"That's what I'm telling you," Nora said. "I get some extra space and I could get going."

"This place is going to collapse under the weight," Earl said, "and we're going to fall clear to China."

Nora laughed. "I'll use all of it. You know I will. I need to stretch out. Temporary. I promise."

"The Tribe needs a teacher like you," Earl said. "Teach those kids right."

Now Earl was blowing smoke but she didn't mind hearing it.

"Maybe someone can get some use out of this stuff." Earl tapped the door.

"You still in there?"

"No Earl, I jumped out the window." Nora looked at the window and laughed at the image of her squeezing her tired old butt out that tiny opening.

"I'm serious," Earl said. "We can't live like this."

"You always say that," Nora said.

"I mean it this time." Earl moved away from the door.

Nora twitched at the thought of giving her stuff away. She went from bag to bag, as if Earl were watching, to explain the importance of each item. She had willow sticks and alder bark. She had a giant bag stuffed with easy-to-work-with raffia that one of the elementary school teachers had given her. The kids could braid raffia into long strands for practice. She had a couple of good pieces of deerskin to make the grandkids dance dresses. She better hurry on that one. Those girls wouldn't be maidens forever. Wasn't the oldest one driving? It might already be too late.

A wadded-up bag stuck out from a drawer that didn't close all the way.

"And this," Nora said, pulling the bag open, "is . . . disgusting." She couldn't even tell what the old mildewy thing was. She hoped it wasn't the spruce root that Maisie had brought over before she died. When was that, four years ago?

Nora gulped. She moved the grocery bag filled with bear grass that needed to be processed off her stool and sat down. Much as it pained her, Earl was right. She had to do something with this stuff.



That girl was the Tribe's cultural resource specialist. She'd just finished college and came from a family Nora didn't care for. Her people thought they were fancy. This girl, Carly, was polite enough but Nora could tell she thought she shit tulips.

"Most of your pay is going to come out of a federal grant for cultural resources preservation." Carly's smooth clean hands pointed to different pages from the stack on the desk. "But we're doing a 20 percent match from another funding source so we'll need you to do two timesheets."

"Can I add the time it takes to fill out two timesheets?" Nora asked.

"No," Carly said.

Nora wondered what sort of creature had lodged up this gal's ass. Maybe a little soap root would make it easier to remove.

"So it's true." Chairman Bickley stepped in. "I heard Carly convinced you to teach for us. Didn't think it could be done."

The Chairman had the same perfectly round face and funny smile that was mostly lower teeth that he'd had the day his mom brought him home from the hospital. He'd weathered around the eyes and spread out in the belly but he had the bearing of a proper leader. Hard to believe these kids were running things now.

"Still might not, Ozzie," Nora said, using his childhood nickname. "Your girl's killing me with paperwork."

"She knows how to get the job done," the Chairman said. "Do what she asks. If this program succeeds, we can get money to expand other cultural programs."

"You expect me to teach more classes?" Nora said.

"If you're offering." The Chairman laughed when Nora snorted. He patted her shoulder before he backed out of the room. "Thanks Nora. We're glad to have you."

"This is the roster of participants," Carly said. "We've got seven now but we're trying to get at least three more."

"Ten? You people know anything about basket weaving?" Nora asked. "I can't teach ten people. I'd go crazy."

Carly gave her a patient smile. "I understand the circumstances might not be optimal. We have to make it worthwhile to operate the program."

"It's not worthwhile if I got nine people counting their eyelashes while I'm holding a basket start for some kid."

"I'm sure you'll work it out as you get more experienced," Carly said. "These are the evaluations. You create one for each student and chart her progress after each class."

Nora gathered herself up in a huff. She couldn't imagine a bigger pile of bullshit.

"I'm almost finished." Carly pulled out another packet. "We'll need an inventory the materials you're donating with an estimated value."

"Value?" Nora said. "How would I know?"

Carly shook her head. "You'll have to come up with something." She smiled in a way to discourage further discussion. "Don't be nervous. I'll be there the first day to make sure everything goes smoothly."

"Yahoo," Nora said.

"That's it." Carly put half the papers on top of a stack on her desk. The rest she stuck in a big envelope. "For you."

"Great." Even the floor had towers of paper lined up in a row. "Looks like you enjoy flapping all this paper around."

"Oh sure," Carly said. "It was my college major."

"Didn't know you could study that," Nora said, even though she recognized what the girl really meant.

Carly gave her a look that could have dried string beans. "Don't forgot your key." She held up a single key on a long beaded lanyard.

Nora was about to snip that beading wasn't traditional but Carly's expression made her decide it wasn't worth the trouble.



"You coming in?" Nora asked.

Earl brought Nora to the Tribe's community center early so she could prepare.

"Nah, I'm going to say out here." Earl said. "See if I can get some business done." That meant he hoped some of his buddies would come by and he could catch up on the gossip.

The classroom was in the same building as the big room/basketball court and the kitchen. A half dozen high school boys played basketball. They nodded when she walked in.

The classroom was a small rectangle with a low ceiling and a flickering fluorescent light. It smelled musty and of something burnt, pizza or coffee. The classroom had four tables and eight chairs. A couple of kids played a board game.

"You kids can help me set-up the stuff," she said.

"What stuff?" one of the kids said without looking.

"For the class," Nora said. She clapped her hands. "Let's move."

"What class?" the other kid said.

"Shiftless turds," Nora muttered. Louder she said. "Move along. This space is for cultural studies."

They picked up their game and left.

The classroom had two extra doors, storage closets, Nora guessed. She couldn't find out for herself because both were locked and the key didn't work. She was feeling around the door frames for a hidden key when Carly walked in. "About time," Nora said.

"You getting set up?" Carly asked. She had a clipboard and more papers in her hand.

"Damn key don't work," Nora said.

"That's for the coffee supplies," Carly said. "Someone from the Tribe will open the supply closet before each class so you can sign-out what you need."

"So I can sign out what I need?" Nora said, certain she misunderstood. "You gonna keep track of *my* materials?"

Carly stared at Nora, her face frozen into one of those coldly polite customer service expressions that showed no fear and gave away nothing. "You donated the materials. The Tribe will keep track of them."

"Now hold on a minute. This was not the deal." The idea of the girl doling her own stuff out to her was enough to make her hair catch fire. "You can store it all you want, but you give me a key."

"You're welcome to keep the things that you need for your personal work," Carly said.

"Hand it over now," Nora said. She held her hand out for the key.

"I'll open the closet today," Carly said. Her key ring attached to a leather strap. She made a show of wrapping the strap around her wrist.

"Oh for goodness sakes." Nora lunged for the keys.

Carly jumped back, clutching the key to her chest.

"Quit that," Nora said. She got a grip on Carly's wrist.

"What are you doing?" Carly's voice screeched up an octave. "Help!"

"I'm getting my stuff back," Nora said.

The boys from the basketball court peeked in.

"Everything's fine," Nora told them, still tugging at the strap.

"Get help," Carly shouted. "She's crazy."

"Don't mind her," Nora said, gasping a little. She had about 30 pounds on Carly and maybe an inch of height but she wasn't accustomed to this sort of commotion.

The boys ran off.

"I said I'd open the door," Carly said. "Let go." She jerked her hand back but Nora wasn't about to give up. She pulled Carly toward the cabinet.

"Nora!" Earl's voice came from the door. The boys stood at his side.

"Make her stop," Carly said.

Nora hoped that the distraction would work in her favor. She yanked again and Carly stumbled.

"OW!" Carly said.

"Stop whining and give me the key," Nora said. "Earl! We got boxes in the car? Bring 'em in. You kids help."

"Are you wrestling the cultural resources girl?" Earl said. He carried the open newspaper as if he'd been too rushed to set it aside.

"Specialist," Carly said. "I'm a cultural resources specialist."

Nora snorted and let go. "Fine!" she said, "Unlock the door." To Earl she said, "We're going take our stuff back."

"We're going to what?" Earl asked.

Carly squeezed her wrist where the strap had dug into it. "If you wanted your stupid sticks, why did you donate them?" Nora had sense enough to feel a twinge of shame. Carly's hand was streaked pink.

"You said you'd open the door," Nora said.

"I am." Carly's hands shook and it took a couple of tries before she could get the door unlocked. She yanked it open and clicked on the light.

"Oh," Nora said. The closet was lined with shelves filled with shoeboxes and transparent containers and small plastic drawers like her neglected SuperOrganizer System™ at home. There were also jars and bins, everything neatly tucked away and labeled with swirly girl writing on white labels. Nora stood back and admired it. She tried to imagine having a closet like this at home.

"We could do this," she said to Earl.

"Do what?" Earl asked.

"This," Nora said. She swept her arm up and down. This was just the punch in the arm she needed. "We can get more boxes. We can organize it better. This is perfect."

Earl sat down as if he'd never been so tired in his life. "But it's already done."

"And it's locked up!" Nora said.

"You don't lock it, it disappears," Carly said. "Folks grab up the good stuff and take it home. They want it for themselves."

"If we take it back it's going to be piled up in the spare room," Earl said. "No one gets it."

Nora gave him a disgusted look. A narrow box perfect for storing willow sticks sat on the shelf. She pulled it out and popped the top off. The willow was clean and smelled like sunshine on dried grass. "This is a nice box," she said. She snapped top back and put it away.

The display was the work of a pro, must as it pained her to admit it. Earl was right again.

"I'll live with it," Nora said at last, nodding at the key in Carly's hand. "If I get my own key."

"Forget it," Carly said. "You attacked me. Might as well leave now."

"No one attacked you," Nora said. She waited for Earl to back her up.

Earl opened his mouth as if he were going to say something but thought the better of it and left the room.

"Earl?" Nora said.

"Go on," Carly said. "I won't call the police but I'm telling Council."

Nora stifled a snicker. One of the tribal police officers was her nephew, the other, a neighbor who used her lawn mower.

Two women entered the room. "Is this the class?"

"Sorry. No class," Carly said.

"Sure there is," Nora said. "This is an important cultural program." She handed them one of the boxes. "Make piles of eight sticks. We'll practice starts today."

"Don't listen to her," Carly said. "We'll reschedule."

Nora smiled like this was a family joke. She grabbed a plastic tub and held it out. "Could you put some water in here so we can soak our stuff?"

"I don't take orders from you." Carly stood in her spot, fuming. "The Chairman will back me on this."

"The Chairman will back you on what?" Ozzie came in with his daughter, a pretty teenager with the same round face. "The class going okay?" Two more girls came in after him. The chairs were filling up fast.

Nora waited to see what Carly would say but the girl just stood there rubbing the pink mark on her hand. For the first time she seemed unsure what to do.

"You need to take eight sticks," one of the women said and slid the box over.

"Don't worry about them being the same size," Nora said.

The Chairman picked up a stick. "Hey, this willow or hazel?"

"Willow. Maybe during a harvest month I can show you how to dig them."

"See?" Ozzie said to no one in particular, "I already learned something."

Carly went to stand at the head of the table and cleared her throat.

"I thought men didn't weave in our tradition," someone said.

"It's true," Nora said, although she didn't mind. She could show Ozzie how to knot a dipnet if he was serious.

"You Indian women and your rules," Ozzie said. "You have something to say Carly?"

Carly rolled her tongue around in her mouth for at least ten seconds. "We're waiting for four more people."

"Them that's late can catch up," Nora said, easing the key out of Carly's hand. "You take these roots and have a seat. I think there's a lot you can learn here."

First appeared in Yellow Medicine Review, Spring 2012, guest editor: Steve Pacheco