Flair

NOT GRIZZLY C4
The cuddly history of the teddy bear

SONG OF THE WIND

A Fantasy Christmas Story

BY LEE GRAVES
TIMES-DISPATCH

"It's that time of year," whispered Frohsia. Don't be frightened."

"I won't," answered Lolla. But she was, and her only hope was that the wind would be still and not sing of her fear.

It was a lonely, quiet time of year. The wind carried little news, for the other trees had lost their voices and slipped into sleep. It was peaceful in a way, but Lolla sometimes missed the lively chorus of spring, when all the trees limbered and stretched and filled the wind with song. Old Man Oak's barrel bass would drone from across the meadow; Pardieu Poplar's brittle chattering would rustle from the grove; Austa Willow's slow, sweeping waves would wash up from the lake; and Nesteena Dogwood's fluttery warble would drift down from the crest of the hill.

But all were silent now. The wind was cold and hollow, save for the steady, feathery whisper of her own kind. Among all the trees, Lolla and her family were the sole keepers of the song in winter. They kept their lendils, green and bristling, after the rest of the forest stood brown and barren. Lendils were the trees' lifeline to each other and to the world. Every tree's lendils were different — some short and sharp like a baby porcupine's quills, some flat and fanned like a hawk's tail — but every lendil stood at branches' end. So vital were they that long ago lendils had earned this special name, shared among all trees. Just as their roots spread into the ground in a thousand shoots to clutch the earth and drink its goodness, so their lendils reached into the air to feel the wind, sense its message. And as every gust moved through its branches, each tree added its own voice to the song.

Now that all the other lendils were shed, it was up to Lolla and her kind to keep watch over the grove and lake, to keep the forest's memory alive. Their vigil saved the wind from emptiness, and their voices gave Lolla comfort against the gnawing fear.

"Bewaaaaare the gnaasherrrrrs," Old Man Oak had groaned deeply just before the last of his lendils had withered and floated to earth. "Bewaaaaaaaare."

The gnashers. Yes, the rootless ones had felled many a tree with their gnashers. The rootless ones would scutter across the ground, restless and prattling. They would move from tree to tree, chattering excitedly until they gathered around one of Lolla's kind; then the gnasher would roar its horrible noise. And another voice would be stilled.

KNIGHT-RIDDER TRIBUNE

There was a time, Old Man Oak had told Lolla, when the wind was filled only with the songs of living things, and chief among them were the rooted ones. Each had its place, its one place, to stay and stand and live and die, to bear witness as time passed and the earth turned and the wind blew. Each had its voice, its one voice, to raise to the wind and grow the song until the air was filled with the melody of life. And from this, the tale of the world could be told, both in its past and its present.

Of all living things, though, these rootless ones were different. They brought into the world sounds the wind had never heard.

"Looong, looong ago, the rootless ones listened to the wind," Old Man Oak would say, if the day was sunny and calm and suited him to tell a tale. "Their song was strooong and beauuutiful, yet saaad and lonely. They ached with the love."

"Tell us about the love, about the great singer," prodded Nesteena Dogwood. She wanted to hear the part about her family.

"There have been maaaaany great singers," Old Man Oak rumbled, "but one I remember well. A rootless one, yessss, yessss, but unlike all others. He loved the trees, and loved making things with our wood. Even at his end, it was a tree — yes, a dogwooood, Nesteena — that shared his last breath.

"His song was all songs in one. Beauuuuutiful. He sang of the love that rides on the wind and fills the earth and never dies. Beauuuuutiful. Some daaays you can hear it still, but not so clear, now that, that . . ." He let out a long, deep sigh and was silent.

The others knew. Now the rootless ones filled the wind with sounds that were harsh and grating, clanking and banging, ever louder. Some, like the gnasher, struck fear down into their roots.

Suddenly, Lolla's lendils stiffened. She could hear the gnasher now, its muffled whine, first far off, then closer.

"They're coming!" Frohsia said. Sure enough, the rustling of the rootless ones became stronger, and soon they were scurrying and chittering all around in Lolla's family grove. Her lendils tingled as one brushed against her, then several gathered, pulling and pawing as their prattling pitched higher and higher.

"Frohsia! They want me!"

"Oh my," Frohsia said. "Oh dear!"

"What do I do?" The rattle and clang of made things sent a chill through her sap. Any minute, the gnasher would shred the grove's peace and end her life.

"WHAT DO I DO?" Lolla cried again.

Frohsia paused. When she replied, her voice was quieter. "Be calm," she said. "Stand tall, as if Old Man Oak were awake and watching." She paused again. "And remember what he always told us — to live is to sing, and the wind never forgets a song."

The clanking stopped, replaced by a clunky thud. Lolla didn't understand. Where was the gnasher? Pain suddenly shot up from her roots. Again and again. She tried to stay straight but felt herself tilt; then the rootless ones pulled at her, lifting and twisting.

"Oh Frohsia, goodbye." Her lendils went numb and she slid into darkness.

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Lolla awoke to a stillness she had never known. It was as if the air itself had died, with no wind breathing through her lendils. She felt half-dead herself and oh so unsettled. What can be harder for a rooted one than to be uprooted?

She understood that she

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