

TENT CITY

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The First Spring

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Not a single one of the major natural or manmade features drawn so distinctly on an 1872 map of the town of Willing, in Remington County, remains visible. The Tong River that once ran like a crooked seam through the town, cleaving it in two, was dammed and paved over by 1910. The saw mills and textile mills hugging the Tong's shores were gone before that. Gone also are the smoke-stacked candy factory, the spice factory, and the smelly tannery that rose up in fits of fevered industry as the town's borders expanded. All the jobs generated by the organized dismantling of all these large commercial properties also dried up ages ago—the bricks carted off to begin life anew in service to less grand enterprises. Willing itself has begun to resemble the hordes of unemployed workers it has cast aside over the years: shopworn, careworn, and thoroughly down at the heels. It is not clear what Willing's next act will look like—or whether there will be a next act. It seems that Willing is just about used up. But whether the people living in Willing proper, and Greater Willing in general, would agree, is an open question. Perhaps the changes we notice least are those unspooling closest to us.

Sylvia Bird King has never studied an 1872 map of Willing. She believes the past should stay in the past. Life is about the future—not a “woe is me” future, not a “hedge your bets” future—but a future where life just keep getting better because you make good things happen and you get what you deserve, and especially what you work for. On this, Sylvia and her husband Carson King agree 100 percent, and that principle

serves as the glue in their marriage. So when Sylvia and Carson were ready to buy their first house, Willing's industrial history was not just irrelevant, it wasn't even in the picture. Sylvia never forgets it was the astonishing backyard that sealed the deal. It was the yard that convinced her and Carson to buy their otherwise standard-issue center hall colonial house 15 years ago, when Sylvia was pregnant with Jeannie and Zeke.

The yard is the undeniable star of the show: three acres of undivided land, the largest undeveloped plot of residentially zoned land in all of Willing—nearly the length of three football fields. There is so much of it, it seems almost like too much of a good thing, a big green thing, and there's no obvious reason why all of it is intact, but it is. History and nature combined to create an enormous, level carpet of grass that runs the full width of the rear of the Kings' house and then many hundreds of yards beyond the back deck, stopping only at a dense stand of pin oak trees, which in turn lead down to a narrow, much forgotten stream that was once a tributary to the Tong. The yard once held row after row of squash, peppers, potatoes, tomatoes, and other vegetables belonging to a long-raised farm, from back in the day when industrious local agriculture kept thousands of hard-working laborers fed. The soil remains fertile, but now all that energy—with chemical assistance diligently applied by Carson himself—supports a vast, uncluttered, and almost weed-free lawn. No Adirondack chairs. No children's swing set or climbing castle. No garden gnomes or rose bushes. The yard is adorned simply by virtue of its own sweeping green expanse.

Shortly after settling in, Sylvia and Carson gave the yard a series of affection nicknames. The *acreage*. The *back forty*. The *inheritance*. The *greensward*. The *manor grounds*. It's this yard that will keep the house marketable, Sylvia is convinced, if and when it's time to sell. Large and pristine, the yard seems fully capable of selling itself, showing off its intrinsic value proposition. There may as well be signs planted every few feet, blaring "THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE HERE ARE SO SUCCESSFUL THEY MAINTAIN THIS HUGE OPEN EMPTY SPACE JUST BECAUSE THEY CAN." Sylvia imagines they could sell off a portion and let someone build another house on it. Or two. It's that big.

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