

Green Magic

Stories of Hope and Power



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To all those who use their words and lives to build a better world.

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At the Industrial Food Museum

Regina Rae Weiss

The gentle light wakened the warblers first. As the sun's orb ascended over the long line of trees at the eastern horizon, an enormous flock of weavers rose from a stream bed running way out beyond Maritza's sight, a river of wings skimming billows of bluestem and switchgrass, birds and grassland incandescent with the new day.

Across a dirt lot, pipits foraged for insects among seedlings of winter squash, sweet corn, and pole beans interspersed with buckwheat, dill, and coriander.

Maritza's great grandparents were ghosts. At least, that's how Grandma Akilah spoke of them. But Maritza often felt them here with her in these early hours, along with the other ancestors stolen from her.

The day's visitors were already emerging from the Cleanway. She'd take charge of the adults, leading them through the grasslands as other docents shepherded the teens and children through the farm and the wetlands.

She always began with the same question. "Who can tell us what brought you here today?" She waited out the shuffling hesitation. Finally, a young muscular woman with clear gray eyes and direct gaze spoke up.

"I love to cook," she said. "I plan to become a chef and I wanted to see the crop system here because I want to start a free meal service where we grow our own food."

"Great plan!" Maritza smiled. "You're welcome to explore the farm and visit our kitchen later. Our food storage system will interest you. In fact, before I forget, all of you are most welcome to wander the museum grounds after the tour. We're open until dusk. There's so much to see here and we love to show it off."

"Does the staff live here?" asked a tall, copper-haired man whose young daughter had clung to him for a moment before heading off with the other kids.

"Yes, about half of us," Maritza nodded. "So, who else would like to say what brought you here?"

The redhead put his arm around a slender, freckled woman beside him. "My wife and I are birders. We heard there are sharp-tailed grouse in the grasslands here. We're hoping to catch sight of one."

"Ah, yes," Maritza smiled. "It's nesting season, as I'm sure you know, so they're a bit shy right now, but you may well spot a male."

A slight, stooped man with a deeply wrinkled face spoke up. "I've been here before. A few times. I'm always amazed by how different it is from when I was young. I brought my grandkids today, two boys. I think they'll learn something."

"Thank you," Maritza said. "That's great to hear. You know, this museum was created because some of the people who started the land restoration believed that the world had suffered deeply for lack of human memory, from the systemic disruption of the passage of intergenerational knowledge in the modern era. They wanted to help change that."

* * *

A half-hour later, Maritza's group emerged from a path running through the tall grasses onto a small rise that the docents privately referred to as Purgatory. The spring morning was already uncomfortably warm. She waited as water bottles, binoculars and cameras were pulled from packs. The group splintered about the circle of low buffalo grass, taking in the soft expanse of prairie

embracing the land and sky for miles around. She gazed out over the tall, graceful grasses and wildflowers with gratitude for this still-new land, restored in small part thanks to the ferocious grit of the women who'd raised her.

Maritza's grandmother Akilah had arrived in the United States early in the 21st century carrying her infant daughter Haya, Maritza's mother. Then, as now, Akilah knew nothing of her own parents' fate, or that of her little sister, so when baby Haya grew into a teenager seized by a passion for democracy, Akilah had been frantic. In Syria, she'd seen such passions quenched with bullets. But Akilah was never able to tame the force that impelled her daughter to seek justice, to speak the truth when others could not find their way to do so.

Long before Maritza was born, as the world learned that engineered wheat, soy and corn had been used for a century to pacify the citizenry, Haya, who'd spent years knocking on doors all over Minneapolis on behalf the state's democracy defense brigade, was already one of the state's most visible organizers. She'd been an obvious choice to represent Minnesotans at the 2049 constitutional convention where, that October, delegates from throughout the land gathered in Hartville, Missouri to ensure that the nation's elected officials would answer, henceforth, to their constituents, rather than to the compulsions of avarice and wealth.

Maritza knew she'd been conceived in the joyous flood of hope that bloomed in Hartville, but she didn't know that it was her conception, her birth as a U.S. citizen, that finally loosened her Grandmother Akilah's tongue, allowing her to recall her own childhood: the long afternoons of play in Syria's still-standing forests; the beauty of the family farm twenty kilometers west of A'zaz.

So, unlike her mother Haya, Maritza grew up on her grandmother's earliest memories, as after a lifetime of mourning the ancient woman gifted her granddaughter with the ability to see her ancestors through seasons of harvesting olives, barley and lentils in the years leading up to the terror.

* * *

Wrestling with her reluctance to get on with the tour, Maritza gave the visitors time to relax in their surroundings. She always enjoyed watching the birders, seeing how pride in their detailed knowledge of species slowly gave way to joy in the abundance of winged life on this wide-open, rewilding land.

Finally, she moved to the eastern edge of the knoll, motioning for the others to gather round. Facing the visitors, she noticed how calm their faces were. The long walk through narrow corridors of tall, fragrant vegetation never failed to have this effect, even on the most curmudgeonly. It always made her regret what came next.

"See that?" Maritza projected her voice over the rustle of wind and the crazed synchronicity of morning peepers chirping out their blissful lust. She pointed to a wide ribbon of crop-planted acreage in the distance, running alongside the railway for as far as the eye could see. "Anyone have a guess how wide that border farm is over there, running along the Cleanway?"

A young man with an oversized backpack ventured a guess. "An acre? Maybe an acre wide all along the travel line."

Maritza nodded. "Anyone else?"

"You know," a tall woman with curly silver hair mused, "I grew up in a house that sat on an acre, and I think it's wider than that. Maybe twice as wide."

Maritza smiled, nodding again. "Yes, you are quite right, ma'am. That ribbon of cropland is two acres wide. It runs for ten miles, right along the Cleanway, so it's just over five hundred acres altogether. From March through December, those acres produce

more than fifteen million pounds of vegetables, fruit, beans and nuts, feeding us and all of Colfax County. More than ten thousand of our neighbors are sustained by this one ribbon farm.

"Honestly, though, that band could produce way more, but it's a demonstration farm and part of the museum, so some space gets taken up with visitor activities. We're seeing even higher yields in the other ribbon farms along the edges of the land restorations. So far, they're feeding more than fifty million people just twenty years after the first ones were planted. The ribbon farm idea was conceived in the early 2050s, when prairie restoration was in its infancy, but it took more than a decade for them to take hold because the land was on life-support and needed to recover."

She spun in a slow circle, arm outstretched toward an all-but-invisible high wall of gauze surrounding the rise just below where they'd gathered. "Now, can you all see that fabric?"

The cloth was so fine that the sunlight almost obliterated it from sight.

The visitors craned their necks.

"Oh yes, there it is," the silver-haired woman exclaimed. "I can just barely make it out."

"Good." Maritza nodded. "This prairie surrounding us may look like it's always been here, but it was planted, not by nature, but by people, about thirty-five years ago. It's part of the mid-world restoration.

"Before that, for more than a century, there was no life here to speak of. This land had been stripped and strafed and left for dead." She paused to let her words sink in.

"It started mid-twentieth century," she went on. "Mono-cropping nothing but corn and soybeans for hundreds of thousands of square miles destroyed the living soil thousands of years of vegetative diversity and evolution had given us.

"Once the land was dead, the only way to grow those crops was to drench them with fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides that poisoned the ground and surface water, killed off most of the wildlife and sickened even the people inflicting the damage."

"Look," she said, her voice catching. "Look behind you."

The group turned. Gasps and low murmurs devolving into stunned silence. Uniform rows of bushy green plants lay before them, spread to the horizon, replacing the waving meadow that had been there a moment before.

As they watched, trying to grasp what had happened, an enormous autonomous combine appeared at the far end of the planted field, crawling toward them with a menacing hum that grew into a deafening mechanical shriek as it neared, spewing dust and black smoke, leaving a dry wide strip of clumped brown dirt in its wake where a row of soybean plants had been. Stopping a few yards short of the knoll where they cowered together, the machine mercifully turned about, moving away, cutting a second swath through the field.

They watched in fascination at the combine harvesting the enormous crop of soybeans, strip after strip. Just as it finished clearing the field, a dog, a black lab perhaps, bounded across the empty dirt plane, stopping every few yards to bark at a small girl toddling after it. The child threw a stick wide. The dog ran after it gleefully, returning to nuzzle the girl until she threw the stick again. Thick snowflakes began to fall. The clump-encrusted field, the combine, the dog and the child faded away. They gazed once again over prairie land, returned to bird call and the rustle of tall grasses in a gentle wind.

The first to speak was a delicate-looking woman Maritza had noticed earlier because she seemed so deeply attentive to her surroundings, stopping often to closely examine a leaf, to breathe in the sharp, pungent scent of a wildflower.

"Wow," the woman murmured. "What was that?"

"Holography," Maritza explained. "That's what the circle of gauze is for. It allows us to show you the past."

She went on, "Thirty-five years ago, in 2048, we had 250 million acres planted with corn and soy." She smiled wanly. "A third of the corn went to animal feed. Another third to fuel. The rest went into food additives, those sweeteners and fillers they used to pacify the electorate."

“What about the soybeans?” This from a slight young man who’d been silent throughout the tour. She’d noticed him because every minute or so he seemed to be pushing his long lanky hair out of his eyes.

“Almost all of that went to animal feed,” Maritza told him. “By that point, most of the world was eating meat from concentrated animal feeding operations. Of course, no one really knew the health effects then. Researchers who tried to study that were blackballed and couldn’t get funding.”

She motioned behind the group now, bidding them to turn again.

It was hard to focus on the grotesque, surreal scene. As always, Maritza forced herself to watch along with the rest, despite the sickening hypnogogic effect it had on her every single time.

A vast expanse of hogs lay before them, arranged in a metal grid. The air vibrated with a deafening distress. Nearby, a smallish sow chewed the tail of a hog in an adjacent crate that appeared to be dead, blood and flies crusting its face. Another lay with a front leg stretched through bars, gazing into her neighbor’s face.

A few of the men turned away, Maritza noticed. The women never did.

There was quiet as the scene mercifully faded. Maritza’s charges cast about for relief, gazing at the ground, the sky, the open prairie in vain.

She motioned, gathering them together.

“Eating the product of all that suffering did so much damage,” she said quietly. “We’re still working to understand it today.

“We’ll go visit the farm now. Walking back through the grasses will help us all feel better.”

* * *

As they emerged from the meadow near the Cleanway, she led her group through the central path of the ribbon farm, pointing out rain catching and composting systems. She hoped her next assignment would be the farm. She longed to know every plant.

They gathered near an ancient basswood tree.

“Our diverse intensive crop management,” she told them, “not only restores the land; it sequesters carbon. But the real climate benefit is in the grasslands.

“Our restored prairie here is a tiny part of 225 million acres throughout the middle states that have been returned to their ancestral condition, or as close as possible, given species loss.

“Today, a single acre of our meadow pulls about five tons of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, storing it permanently in the ground. So those hundreds of millions of acres that have been restored over the past thirty-five years sequester more than a billion tons of carbon.

“Of course, this wouldn’t matter if we still had mono-cropping and CAFOs, because that created almost a billion tons of greenhouse gases here every year. But between the land restoration and the cessation of those practices, scientists are seeing a slight slowing in warming trends and a bit more stability in wind and precipitation patterns, especially over the past decade since the changes adopted by the other climate survival work group member nations.”

Mato, the farm docent, walked toward them, herding the visiting children into the deep shade of the basswood. Turning to watch, Maritza noticed that the tree’s flower-laden branches were swarming with bees.

Mato, whose ancestors had lived on this high plain for thousands of years, referred to the basswood, one of the few to have survived the ravage of centuries, as his Unci. He always made sure the children gathered here for a story at the end of each tour.

Today’s storyteller, a gangling man with a luxurious gray Afro, was seated on a bale of oat hay near the tree’s deeply ridged trunk, his long legs stretched out before him. He looked to be in his eighties, Maritza thought, and despite the heat wore full

length pants of a light, patterned fabric, tapered and buttoned at the ankles. She could tell he was enjoying watching the kids, who scattered themselves on the ground, jiggling and laughing and then finally, as Mato motioned to them gently, settling and growing quiet.

"Listen up, everyone," Mato said, his voice sounding like a big grin.

"Today we have a special visitor and he's going to tell us a seed story." "Hi Mato," the older man said. "Good morning, everyone." "Morning," a few of the older children called out.

"So, you've all been trekking through the farm. What do you think?"

"Good!"

"It's pretty."

"I like the way it smells," a tiny girl in a plaid jumper added.

The man laughed. "It does smell good," he agreed. "Well, it's great to see you all here on this beautiful day. My name is Kamal and today I'm going to tell you my favorite story, which is all about the power of plants and seeds.

"Anyone know any seed stories?" He paused. "No? Okay. Well, then, this will be your first."

Holding out a woven grass bowl filled with something deeply crimson, Kamal said, "See this? This is some of my family's okra, which we grow on our farm in New York."

He tilted the vessel and Maritza could see that yes, those were okra, but deep red rather than the usual green.

"Now," Kamal said, standing up, "I'm going to show you the okra's seeds."

Moving with ease despite his apparent age, he reached into a pants pocket, squatted and gestured to the children to come look. They surrounded him, peering into his hand.

"These are the seeds of that special okra," he pointed at the bowl he'd placed on the ground. "People come to my family's farm from all over just to get some because when it's cooked just right, this okra is like eating something so beautiful and fresh you can feel it nourishing every part of you—your body, your spirit, even your brain."

He paused, looked around the circle of shade and, glancing back, met Maritza's smiling eyes.

"Hey, you adults back there," he called out. "You don't have to stand.

Come join us.

"Well, okay then," he nodded his approval as Maritza and her group moved into the shade to settle down behind the circle of children.

"This okra," Kamal went on, "is my family's. In fact, I have always felt it is the only thing that truly belongs to us. It's very special because it's the descendant of okra that my mother's ancestors had with them hundreds of years ago when they were hunted down in West Africa and enslaved."

Rising from his squat, Kamal placed the seeds back in his pocket and resettled himself on the bale of hay, gazing at the circle of children, making sure he had their attention.

"I often speak with these ancestors of mine," he told them. "I thank them in the morning when I look out over the fields of our farm. I think of them as I fall into my dreams at night. I imagine them walking with baskets of this okra that we continue growing today, thanks to their brilliance and their foresight. Thanks to their thoughts of the future. Of me, and my children and grandchildren.

"Now, these ancestors of mine, I do not know who they were. I don't know their ages, genders, names, or even their tribe. I don't know whether it was one ancestor who was stolen that day, or many taken together. Still, I wonder about these things as I lie in my bed, as I eat with my family. Were these relations of mine attacked on the coast, or overtaken and imprisoned inland? I try to imagine their fear. Their rage. To see their faces. I wonder, were they kept imprisoned in our homeland for weeks or for

months before enduring the hell of a slave ship's journey? What were their stories? But," he shook his head, "it's impossible to know.

He paused to observe the children's rapt faces, then smiled. "I know that's very sad, but I also know this. My grandmother grew this okra in her garden in Princeville, North Carolina, back in the twentieth century. My mother grew this okra in Brooklyn, New York, and I grew up eating it there. I always knew I would grow this plant some day and when my wife asked me to move out of Brooklyn and learn how to farm, she knew that was the reason I would say yes.

"Most people eat okra in the summer when it is harvested. My family eats it all year long, fresh in summer and dried in winter, sometimes frozen or canned, but mostly dried because we know that is how it got here.

"No one knows the whole story. It's impossible to know. But my grandmother told my mother what her grandmother told her. Our ancestors had this okra with them when they were stolen from our homeland. The okra had been dried, our family story goes, and because of that they were able to use it to stay alive. It seems incredible, but some part of this must be true. Our family story says that my ancestors hid the dried okra in their hair, weaving the pods into their locks, eating all but the last of it to keep themselves alive as so many died around them in the slave ship's bowels.

"Now, that is impossible, we say. Our rational minds tell us so, because everyone knows that the devils took their hair. Chopped off the glorious crowns of hair and shaved the heads of every person they stole to enslave. So how did my ancestors escape that horrid act? Did the devils lose their blades? Were my ancestors especially fierce or especially beautiful? No one knows. But what we do know of this story must be true because here I am and here is my family's okra."

He held up the bowl, blowing softly over the luminous crimson pods as if blessing them.

"Okra, it is known, has many strengthening properties, many protective and medicinal traits. And our family believes that knowing this to be true, our ancestors kept the last of the okra, rather than eating it, saving the seeds for their future, and for ours, and for you and your families as well. Today my family's okra is grown here and in ribbon farms all over the country. This plant that sustained my ancestors and my family is now helping heal and sustain all of us and the world we share."

Kamal fell silent. No one spoke. Even the children held still for a long breath, letting the warm late morning breeze contain them. Finally, the red-haired birder from Maritza's group broke into their thoughts.

"What an amazing story," the man said. "Thank you for telling it, and for the gift of your family's okra."

Kamal's smile, Maritza thought, was like the sun itself. She noticed that the teens had joined them with Celeste, the wetlands docent, and were standing together beyond where the children and adults sat in the shaded grass. Had the teens heard the whole story? She hoped so.

Standing slowly, Maritza walked to the edge of the circle of shade, motioning Mato and Celeste to join her. The visitors gathered themselves, the children and teens rejoining their parents. As thanks were exchanged and goodbyes said, Maritza felt weary but satisfied.

Now, where was Kamal? Making her way back through a field of young squash seedlings she spotted him, still under the basswood, looking up at the branches full of bees.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Of course not, miss. Happy to have your company."

"My name is Maritza," she told him. "I'm a docent in training here."

He nodded, a bit absently. She followed his gaze up into the flowering tree.

"These bees," she said thoughtfully, "the honey they make from the basswood flowers is so delicious."

"I bet."

"We have some in the kitchen. Before you leave, please come have some lunch."

“Why thank you. That’s very kind.”

She leaned back to get a better look at the buzzing throng.

“My grandmother Akilah just turned one hundred and four,” she told Kamal. “She claims she’s lived so long because she loves honey.”

His laugh was deep and sonorous. “I’m sure your grandmother is right,” he said. “You know, I’ll be ninety-eight myself next month. I’m still in pretty good health and I *love* honey.”

“Well then, you are in for a treat. Come. We’ll have some basswood flower honey on toast with our lunch.”

As they moved out from the tree’s shade into the midday sun, she pointed the way toward the kitchen. “It’s just up here, through the sunflower field.”

She reached for his hand. “Please tell me about your grandmother. The one who grew your family’s okra down south in the twentieth century. What was her name? What else did she grow? What else do you remember about her?”