

Turtle at Farmhouse Meadow

A Children's Story by Deborah T. Kilday

The morning dew was just starting to dissipate as the sun was starting to warm the earth. My daily routine was to sleep in the tall grasses in the meadow at night. By morning my shell was covered with slugs, an easy meal for me being I am on the slow side. If it wasn't for the slugs being slower than slow, I would have no chance at all to eat. I had lived in the meadow by people terms for the last 80 years. I had seen many changes throughout the years and many families had taken up residence in the aging farmhouse that stood on top of the hill overlooking my meadow home. Many different animals' families lived in the meadow and in the surrounding areas I called my home. One of the oldest residents nearby were the two woodchucks, Whistler and his wife Millie. They had been my neighbors for the last twelve years. Whistler and Millie kept to themselves for the most part eating the bulbs of flowers and the alfalfa that the farmer grew. They were good neighbors to have because when one of them would sense any danger they would stand up and let out a sound that all the rest of us could hear. Whistler and Millie had saved my life on more than a few occasions. One time a rogue raccoon was passing through the meadow looking for an easy meal and I was it. Whistler stood up and let out a yell telling me to go inside my shell for cover. That old raccoon didn't know who he was dealing with when he tried to use me for his meal. Once I would pull into my shell and batten down the hatches I was a solid suit of armor. I guess that was why I had lived so long. I might be slow but I am tough.

Every day was pretty much the same until one day something changed. A car had driven up to the farmhouse and a stranger had gotten out of a car and pounded a sign into the ground and then left. The people that lived in the farmhouse came outside, read the sign and looked upset. The woman and one of the kids started crying after reading the sign. Whistler ran over to me and said that he sensed danger but wasn't sure what it was. There were no animal predators in the area but he knew something was wrong. The fur on his back was standing on end. He told Millie to go into the burrow and make sure all the escape routes were clear just in case.

A few weeks later nothing seemed different in the meadow but up at the farmhouse the people were gathering their belongings and putting them into boxes. They were putting the boxes into their car, going somewhere, then when they would return they would get more boxes and leave again. Millie said, "I don't like what the people are doing because they haven't lived in the farmhouse that long. There would be no reason for them to want to move away." She added, "Whistler's feeling of danger must have something to do with the people and that sign in the ground." Being I was the oldest and wisest Whistler asked me if in all my years of living had I ever learned how to understand the human's language. "Of course!", I replied. There wasn't much I hadn't learned in all my years living in the meadow. Whistler continued, "if that is true, then why don't you know what is happening now?" "I never saw this situation before with the people packing up looking like they were ready to move away and not being happy about it", I replied. I was pretty sure it had something to do with that sign. Whistler and Millie and I had to find out what the sign had written on it and what it meant. It was not a "for sale" sign or a "sold" sign

because I had seen many of those in years past when old families would move out of the farmhouse and new families would move in. Millie was right about the fact that the family looked sad every day since that sign was pounded into the ground in front of the farmhouse.

Since the suspense was killing us, we devised a plan to read that sign. Whistler would carry me in his jaw up the hill to the sign so I could read it, since I was the only one that could understand the human language. Millie would follow along just in case Whistler was to drop me and I would go tumbling down the hill. This was something new. I never rode in the mouth of a woodchuck before. Whistler advised me to go inside my shell so his teeth would not harm me, then when we got to the top of the hill he would put me down on the ground. I could look at what the sign said and maybe even overhear the people inside the farmhouse talking.

Once we got up the hill Whistler gently took me out of his mouth and put me down. I looked up at the sign and the letters on it were nothing I had seen put together in that fashion before. The sign read: EMINENT DOMAIN in big black letters. Whistler was very impatient. "What does the sign say?" "It says Eminent Domain, but I'm not sure what that means. I never read that before in all my years." As luck would have it some of the boxes with the people's belongings in them were near their car. I pointed at the boxes. "Go look in the boxes to see if there are any books in there." Whistler and Millie looked at me with funny faces. "What are books?", they asked. "Look for pieces of paper bound together that have a hard cover. Humans call it a book." The first box didn't have books in it, but the second did. There was one large book in there. On the cover it said DICTIONARY. I said, "yes, that's the one." It took me a long time to get to the page with Eminent Domain written on it being I am slow and my legs are short. I did find the words in there though.

It read: Eminent domain. The right of a government to take private property for public use. As I read those words I felt sadness come over me. "What is wrong?", Whistler asked when he noticed a tear in my eye. "Now you look like the people in the farmhouse and I can feel the hair on my back stand on end." Then he turned to Millie and declared, "there is great danger here I can feel it." They both gazed at me pleading, "Why do the words sadden you so?" Without answering them, I insisted, "We had better get back down to the meadow before it gets dark." I assured him, "when we all got back to our home I will explain what the danger is." Whistler picked me up and put me in his mouth again and Millie ran behind as we all headed back down the hill to our meadow home.

Once back in the meadow Whistler spit me out impatiently. I rolled on the ground before coming out of my shell and grabbing hold of the ground with my small feet. "Well, what does it all mean?", they asked in unison. "It means that the people are losing their home forever and that no other family will be moving into the farmhouse ever again. I am not sure where the people are going to go to live but they are sad because they do not want to leave and are being pushed out of their home", I answered. Then Millie asked, "who would live in the farmhouse?" I replied, "No one. The farmhouse will be torn down and never be rebuilt again." Then in my sadness I looked up at both of them and taking a deep breath said, "We will be pushed out of our home too. The meadow will be destroyed for all time as well." Whistler stamped his feet angrily and Millie started to cry. They were hoping my words were not true but Whistler's fur was standing straight up off his back and Millie was looking very nervous now. "Where will we all go to

live?", asked Millie. "This has been our home ever since we were cubs." I had to prepare them and myself as well. "We will have to leave our home immediately and hope to find a new place to live before the big machines come and dig up all the earth. If we stay here we will be killed by the machines." I had seen this type of thing happen in the past during my travels when I was younger. So many of my friends had been crushed or buried alive as the machines came in to lay down pavement for a new highway or government building. Was this our fate I wondered? Whistler and Millie looked at me trying to understand why but they trusted I was speaking the truth. They were grateful for the knowledge but also realizing the urgency of the situation. I told them the fact that the people are still in the farmhouse gave us some time to get as far away as we could before the machines would come to destroy our homes. I was always one to still have hope in the face of adversity. If I had not I would not have survived this long. No matter what I was a survivor.

I told Whistler and Millie to get some rest that night and be up as early as possible in the morning and to eat as many bulbs and grasses as they could fill themselves up with. I would eat as many slugs as I could catch because we would be leaving the next day to travel for as long as we could before dark in search of a new home. Two days later we were on our way. Whistler and Millie were nervous creatures and Whistler would let out a cry every so often just to scare any potential predators away. At times Whistler would carry me in his mouth because he would get impatient waiting for me to catch up. While on our way I heard machines in the distance and knew the destruction was beginning. Days went by but we all trudged on only stopping to eat a few clovers or blades of grass.

We were all tired and almost ready to give up finding a new home when I saw and recognized the words on a sign up ahead. It read: ANIMAL SANCTUARY.

I yelled out, "straight ahead Whistler and Millie. Our new home is just ahead." Whistler's hair stood up on his back and he let out a yell. "How do you know?", Millie asked. Then Whistler said he did not want to live where there were people signs because that was how we got into this situation of leaving our homes behind in the first place. I assured Whistler not to be afraid but to embrace it as a chance at a new beginning. Whistler asked, "what does the sign say?" I explained to Whistler and Millie, "It says this is a place we animals can call home."