

# EXCERPT NO. 3

## OF COTTONWOODS, A NOVEL

### SEVEN

#### “WILL’S THOUGHTS ABOUT COTTONWOOD TREES”

FINISHED SETTING THE BARE little trees in the ground, Rolf poured a bucket of water into the loose soil around the roots of each one. He was putting his shovel and bucket onto the hayrack when Will came over.

“Rolf, I’m glad we did this today.”

“ *Ja*, maybe we learned a little something,” Rolf ventured. “For a while, I wondered if we were all through. I feel a lot better now.”

“Me, too, partner,” Will agreed heartily, reaching and giving Rolf’s callused hand a pump. “Me, too.”

After Rolf drove away with the hayrack, Will reached down and touched the tip of one of the saplings between his thumb and index finger, instinctively feeling its being alive.

*Cottonwoods, he thought, are the most common tree around here. If you look, they’ll show you something about life on the plains. Like people, they live only where there’s water, so any decent stream will be flanked by cottonwoods. And ranches. And a town or two. As trees go, cottonwoods are sociable; seldom do you see one alone. Instead, two or three or a whole grove live together.*

*When young, their bark is smooth like birch, but as they gain size and age, their gray-brown hide becomes darker and deeply furrowed, like a crudely plowed field. An old cottonwood is a gnarled thing, tough and coarse. Even though it has a massive trunk and thick branches, an aged tree usually has scars from big limbs being torn off by the wind.*

*Their big, floppy leaves are bright green and shiny with a waxy coating. In the chill of autumn, the leaves turn a glorious yellow before letting go and tumbling finally to earth. They flutter in the slightest breeze. I suppose that's to spill the wind so they and the tree itself won't blow off. The wind is the major event in the day of a tree, the only bringer of surprises. Some days, the wind never comes up; but most days, it never goes down wholly. Either way, cottonwood leaves turn to every motion of the air.*

*They say cottonwoods chatter about water all day. Close your eyes and listen to the fluttering leaves; what you hear is patter of rain. In early summer, the mother trees bear seed in stringy bunches called catkins. They look like puny, green grapes. When ripe, these little pods burst, spilling tiny seeds covered with fluff, giving it a sail to find its own place in the world. This cotton gives the tree its name.*

*Come winter, the cottonwood is the nakedest of trees. Even the newest branches look bony. In a moment of whimsy, it struck Will that cottonwoods should wear their leaves in winter so they wouldn't look so cold and shed them in summer to stay cool. Fortunately, nature is more sensible than that.*

*The wood is light and stringy. Cut into boards, it twists and warps badly, showing the cottonwood was never meant to be tamed. Of our trees, it is tallest and the most populous. It must have more grit than the others. Maybe that's why people choose it as the main shade tree on so many ranches. The cottonwood isn't handsome, but it is full of hope. And a stubbornness to stick where others don't.*

Will was surprised by his own poetic thoughts. He had lived with cottonwoods all the way from Wisconsin to Oklahoma to Wyoming and now finally here in Dakota. But never before had he realized how much these trees had touched his life.

**End of Excerpt No. 3 of Cottonwoods.**

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