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# Willy and the Cyclone

*B. Carter Pittman*

Back in '69, my family lived in an old, rambling farmhouse about a mile outside of Olton, Texas. My memories of that time period are rather idyllic: playing in the forest of corn stalks surrounding our house, the sweet (and often sour) notes heard during my sisters' piano lessons, homemade ice cream, and catching horned toads. It was a time when Life's paint was still fresh, and the world was a more mysterious, wondrous place for me, when my only major problem came in the form of a Rhode Island Red rooster I had dubbed Willy.

I was small for my age, and Willy, a large, fierce bird, had me fairly cowed. Whenever he spotted me crossing the barnyard, he'd come pelting after me, head down and feathers ruffled. I would invariably run rather than stand my ground, at which times my sisters, Dianne and Debbie, would laugh hysterically and call me the "chicken of chickens." Other than a few scratches and pecks, Willy never really hurt me, though my pride certainly took a beating. I thought I was pretty brave about most things; did I not punch Wayne DuPreast in the belly when he called me "Shorty"? He was a whole head taller than me! Willy, though…I couldn't reason with nor intimidate him; he was an animal, pure and simple, and he kept coming at me, no matter what I did. That made him a formidable opponent in my eyes.

My father once advised: "If you'll face that rooster down instead of run, he'll leave you alone." As a testament to my trust in Dad, I stood my ground…right up to the moment Willy made me trip and fall down, at which point he jumped on my back and furiously pecked my head until I regained my feet and took off. To this day, I can clearly see Dad shaking his head, an expression of disappointment stamped on his face as I ran past with Willy in hot pursuit. Perhaps he never forgot the look of betrayal on mine, either.



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I wisely began carrying a long stick with me whenever I went into the barnyard, and with it I held Willy at bay most of the time, but every once in a while he would slip through my defenses and put me to flight. It became a war of attrition between us. Other than having my own personal harpy, life was blissfully ordinary for me.

Early one June afternoon, I found my mother and father standing on the back porch, looking worriedly at the bank of thunderheads rolling majestically in from the East. The clouds wouldn't reach us for another hour or two, but I could already smell rain on the cool breeze that preceded them.

"That looks like a tornado rack, Bill." Mom's brows were knitted in worry as she looked up in his face. A gusting breeze tugged fretfully at the ties and tail of her gauze headscarf.

My father nodded. "It is. Look over yonder." He pointed at a section of the still-distant cloudbank where what looked like a puppy's tail at dropped from beneath the bank, squiggled briefly, and then receded back into the clouds. "A funnel," Dad explained. "None of them have touched ground yet, but we'd better listen to the weather reports from here on out, and get ready to go to the cellar." He took another sip of his coffee, peering over the rim of his cup at the approaching storm.

"Guess I'd better get supper cooked before the stove's blown away," quipped my mother darkly as she went back into the house.

I remained on the porch with Dad, watching the dazzling display of far-off lightning. Worry shadowed his bronzed, weathered features as he silently scanned the darkening sky from horizon to horizon. After a while, he glanced down at me doing my best impersonation of him. He grinned and reached down to muss my constantly ruffled hair. "Well, guess I'd better round up some candles and blankets for the storm cellar—looks like we might be needing 'em. You'd better come in too." I looked in the direction he nodded his head, "I noticed that rooster's been edging closer and closer since we've stood here."

"I ain't 'fraid a' him!"

Dad shrugged, throwing the remainder of his coffee on the ground. "Suit yourself." His mouth quirked up on one side as he turned away.

He's laughing at me! The realization stung. I'll show him! I stayed rooted to the spot. As he'd said, Willy was gradually getting closer, scratching and pecking the ground as if looking for delectable bugs and other tidbits, but keeping one beady eye locked on me all the while. When he was close enough by his estimation, he dropped the charade and charged, feathers unfurled.

In a pathetic show of defiance, I stepped behind the safety of the screen door as nonchalantly as expedience would allow. Willy danced his usual small victory circle—with one wing dipped and dragging—on the opposite side of the screen.

In a sudden burst of spite, I shoved the door open and knocked him squawking off

the porch, shouting "Get back, you stupid HEN!" Surprised, Willy left off his little dance, made an offended "Puh-PUH-puh-puh-puh!" noise, and then high-stepped it back to the chicken house.

I felt a little better about myself for my cruelty.

I found Dad in the storage room, taking a dusty kerosene lamp down from the top shelf and setting it beside a collection of candles, a jug of water, a transistor radio, spare batteries, and old blankets.

"Here, Carter—grab those candles for me, will you? Can you carry the radio too? Good! We might be able to take it all down in one shot."

"Dianne says there're Black Widders in the cellar, Dad."

"Your sisters say a lot of things to scare you, and you just make it too easy for them." He sighed, then added, "I put some bug poison down there a few days ago…you'll be all right."

I lapsed into a sullen silence, frustrated by how everything I said and did lately called to question my courage.

When Dad and I tramped outside with our burdens, the wind had picked up, and the sky had grown considerably darker as clouds obscured the sun. I could hear an almost constant roll of thunder, muffled by the distance. Willy had apparently retired to the chicken house for the day. In the corral, the calves were frisking around, energized by the approaching storm. Little Bit, our dog, was already cowering from the thunder. He watched our goings-on from the sanctuary of his mat in the well house, occasionally giving voice to his despair with a mournful howl.

"Oh, it's just terrible, isn't it?" Dad called to the dog. "Silly ol' mutt," he murmured, chuckling as he pulled open the heavy cellar door.

"Are we gonna bring Little Bit down with us if we hafta go to the cellar?"

"Not unless you want to get nipped, like the last time you tried to drag him in there. I think he'd rather take his chances where he is." Dad then clicked on the flashlight and descended into the cellar's inky, musty depths, where a multitude of insects scuttled for cover from the sudden light. So much for the bug poison, I thought. Little Bit had a point.

Dad set his bundle down on an old, dusty table, and then relieved me of mine as well. He surveyed our surroundings with a critical eye. Fruit jars with nameless contents sat exactly where they had been placed on shelves years ago by previous tenants, gnarled roots and tubers hung from the roof beams on wires, a rusty sprocket lay on the floor next to a dented metal bucket. A coil of rope hung on a nail driven in one of the support posts.

"Run and get the broom and dustpan for me, would you?"

I fetched the two items for him, but it was me who ended up on the business end of



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them. Still, the cellar was small, and I was more than happy to sweep spiders, centipedes, and scorpions from their havens to end up squished beneath our shoes.

"Don't step on the stink bugs," Dad instructed. Those we gingerly swept up whole into the pan, and dumped them outside with their squashed compatriots.

Several minutes of furious sweeping and stomping later, Dad squeezed my shoulder and said, "That's most of them." Winking, he added, "Save a couple of bugs to crawl up your sisters' legs." I laughed hysterically, picturing what would happen. Grinning, he stooped and picked up the dustpan. "Let's go wash up and eat."

The wind was blowing fiercely when we emerged from the cellar, and a few fat drops of rain accompanied it.

"D'ya think we'll be staying in the cellar tonight, Dad?"

"Maybe. We'll listen to the weather reports."

When we got inside, Mom had the table set. "There you are," she sighed. "Thank God I didn't have to go out in that to get you."

"What's the weather report, hon?"

"There's a tornado watch, but no alerts so far. Hopefully, this will blow over without dropping a twister."

Dad looked dubious. "Lord willing, but there were plenty of bubbles in that rack, last time I looked. If not," Dad clapped me on the shoulder, "Well, that cellar needed a good cleaning, anyway."

Supper consisted of chicken-fried steak, spinach, mashed potatoes, gravy, and a salad. After Dad's ritual mealtime prayer, the five of us fell-to with gusto, all but ignoring the wind howling outside and the occasional, tooth-rattling boom of thunder. Rain drummed our roof in such a constant barrage that it sounded like a waterfall was pouring on the house. The crackling radio sat on the nearby kitchen counter, pulling sentry duty against possible tornados by keeping us posted with the latest reports.

We were barely into our meal when Dad suddenly held up his hand, shushing us all into motionless silence as he listened intently to the tinny voice on the radio:

"...repeat, this is a tornado alert for the areas of Earth, Dimmit, and Olton, Texas, and surrounding communities. Listeners are advised to immediately go to the nearest emergency shelters and remain there until further notice."

Dad hastily wiped his mouth with a napkin, pushed back from the table and said, around a mouthful of food, "Let's go."

With Dad leading the way and Mom hustling us kids in front of her, we grabbed our raincoats from their hooks in the hallway as we filed past. The sudden blast of wind and rain as I stepped out of the door would have knocked me off of my feet, had Mom not had a firm grip on my arm. Bending into the gale, we eventually traversed the distance to the cellar and descended the steps. Fighting the wind, Dad struggled to shut the heavy

door behind us and latched it in place as Mom lit some candles. Shadows danced on the cellar walls in the flickering light. My sisters and I immediately took the opportunity to make shadow creatures with our hands. I managed to make a fairly decent rabbit, but Debbie could make a horse's head, and Dianne could do several animals.

"Look out, Carter," Dianne taunted, "I made a chicken! Run!"

I shoved her hard in the back, causing her to lurch forward and knock over a candle.

"You kids better settle down right now," Mom growled. "A tornado's nothing compared to what I can do to you!"

Having secured the door, Dad clambered down the steps to join us. "Bonnie, why are you lighting those candles? Why didn't you light the coal oil lamp?"

"Because that dang thing is dangerous and it makes me nervous to mess with it." She cocked an obstinate eyebrow at him. "You light it."

Dad obligingly struck a match, lifted the globe slightly, and lit the wick. It cast a dim flicker until he raised the wick slightly by turning a small wheel, after which the cellar was flooded with light. The lamp smelled bad and had a menacing hiss, but the added light made the cellar less dismal, plus it helped keep the remaining creepy-crawlies at bay. Mom blew out the candles; pungent smoke writhed up from the extinguished wicks.

How can mere words describe what it was like in that cellar, that feeling of safety derived from being in a hole in the ground, all the while knowing that everything above ground could be getting destroyed at that very moment? I can clearly recall everything about our small, humble sanctuary, as if it weren't a lifetime ago. My mind's eye yet follows lurid shadows dancing on the walls; the smells of must, candle wax, and kerosene assail my nostrils with the slightest conjuring of memory. The most vivid impression of all, however, is the constant, terrible roar of the storm; its echoes continue to rage after almost forty years.

Were we there for an hour? Four hours? I couldn't really say—time loses substance in a confined space, where minutes are like hours, and an hour is an eternity. It seems as if a small piece of my soul was abandoned in time to haunt that cellar, remaining extant by occasionally broadcasting impressions to the future.

"An all-clear has been given for the areas surrounding Earth, Dimmit, and Olton, Texas. Once again, the National Weather Service has issued an all-clear for the areas…" the announcer droned on amidst the static. Elated, it didn't take us long to grab our few items and emerge from our stygian cell.

The bulk of the storm seemed to have passed, leaving behind large mud puddles, which we carefully skirted after a sharp word from Mom. Little Bit was there to greet us, tail wagging furiously. The house and outbuildings were still standing.

"Well, if there actually was a twister, it must've missed us," said Dad unnecessarily.

We slogged through the mire to the house, shedding our muddy shoes at the door at



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Mom's insistence. We immediately returned to our interrupted supper, cold but edible, and continued with gusto. Afterwards, we all retired to the den to watch an episode of Mission: Impossible.

I can't remember which one of us noticed it first, but we heard what sounded like a blast of a horn of a truck or freight train that was continuous and growing louder. Dad lunged out of his chair and bolted into the adjacent laundry room to look out of the window.

"Bonnie, come here!" There was a quality to his voice I had never heard before, and it caused my insides to turn to ice when I recognized it: fear. Mom hurried to the laundry room, us kids in tow. I looked out the window to see an impossibly immense, undulating pillar, stretching up into infinity. It was mostly black, but glowed red down the center, each side looked like a sheet of blue ice. It was the finger of a malevolent god, sketching a line through the corn stalks directly towards us, promising certain death with its touch. It was a mangler with the voice of a thousand jet engines.

It was far too late to run for the cellar, situated as it was between the cyclone and us. Had we attempted to seek its shelter, we would have most likely been swept up into the twister's maw. I couldn't hear Mom's scream over the cacophony of the tornado, but I could see it on her face, and feel it in her vice-like grip as she hauled the three of us into the long entrance hallway where we sat on the floor, huddled like fugitives. Meanwhile, Dad ran throughout the house slamming open several windows. Although his actions were mystifying at the time, I later understood that he was wisely attempting to equalize the pressure inside the house with the outside so that it wouldn't be blown apart like matchsticks. He soon joined the rest of us in the hall, adding his death grip to my mother's. All we could do at that point was wait for nature's verdict. My thoughts were many in those frantic moments, but among them was the irrational, irreverent wish: I hope it gets ol' Willy! I didn't even have the decency to feel ashamed of myself.

We could hear nails protesting as the massive den roof was being pulled from the walls. The noise had reached its crescendo when we heard—and felt—a tremendous slam that shook the entire house. We trembled in our family knot for a long time before we noticed that the noise had abated. We all wore the same look of wonder as we slowly eased our grips on one another. Dad got up to investigate, but when we kids tried to follow, Mom pulled us back down to the floor. After a while, Dad came back and announced that the tornado had passed; the slamming we had heard had been the den roof settling back into place after the tornado had released it from its grip. Crying, Mom rocked us in her arms and said a prayer of thanks before releasing us.

We all filed outside and looked up into a clear, starry sky; the storm had moved past us. A short while later, spotlights briefly shined on our house from the highway as emergency workers searched for damaged homes. Dad waved his arms to indicate that we

were OK, and they moved on to see if others needed help. We all piled into the car and went to check on our neighbors. Our nearest ones, less than a quarter-mile away from us, had been watching television when their living room roof had been pulled off over their heads. Their large farm truck had been twisted in such a way that the front tires were resting on the ground, but the back tires were sticking up in the air. The massive elm tree in their front yard had been snapped in half. I noticed a flimsy piece of board impossibly going in one side of the stump and out the other. Miraculously, the couple had been unharmed. A few days later, my sisters and I would find their roof in a stock tank about half a mile away from their house. Fortunately, other than some minor roof damage here and there, our other neighbors had weathered the storm in one piece. When we returned home, Little Bit emerged from the well house to greet us, his tail a blur of movement.

Things returned to normal quickly. The next morning, as if privy to the dark thought that had raced through my mind the previous night, an angry, very much alive Willy was waiting for me. With little preamble he, all feathers and fury, made his usual, obligatory attack. Things were different that morning though; I had gone through more terror the previous night than most people would experience in a lifetime. I did not run, nor did I brandish my stick that time; after he hit my leg full-force, I simply nudged him aside and kept on walking.



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