

1979

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Recommended Citation

Richards, Cindy (1979) "The Pond," *Amaranthus*: Vol. 1979: Iss. 1, Article 33.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus/vol1979/iss1/33>

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THE POND

By Cindy Richards

Across the street from our house was the town park. It was a big, wild, woodsy place with a duck pond in the middle. At the edge of the park, in a house of sorts, lived Crazy Willie, the thinnest, grayest man I ever saw. He was, I heard my mother say in a tone that conjured up all manner of evil, "on relief." Since I didn't know what that meant and was certainly unaware that we were on the brink of such a fate ourselves much of the time, I imagined Crazy Willie to be part of some strange portion of human beings who periodically transformed into werewolves or worse. We were to steer clear of Crazy Willie no matter what.

It occurred to me to ask my mother why everybody in town called him Crazy Willie.

"Because he had to be locked up once," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because he went crazy."

"But why?" I persisted.

"Goodness, I don't know!" she said. "It was a long time ago."

"Oh. Well, what is 'crazy' anyway?" I asked. "Like a mad scientist or something?"

"Just never you mind," she said. "Go tell your sister to wash up for supper."

My sister Fran had inherited my father's stride and my mother's ability to endure. She seemed to have an Indian burn grip on life and never lost it. An Indian burn grip is when you take somebody's wrist and twist the skin in opposite directions until your victim will do what ever you want him to. Another thing about Fran was that she never got in trouble. At least I never caught her. When the subject of Crazy Willie came up, it was always directed at me.

"You stay away from that dirty old man, you hear?" my mother would say, because Fran had tattled that I had

said "hello" to Crazy Willie, which I only did to aggravate Fran.

Then my father would roar into his newspaper, "For Lordsake! Can't all of you just leave that poor old coot be? For two cents, I'd trade places with him!"

My mother would sniff and sigh in the tone she usually reserved for wishing her way through the Sears Roebuck catalogue. Fran would fold her arms and lump her face up, until it looked about as friendly as a bag of rocks, and post off with a flip of her braids.

My father had a worm farm under the front porch steps. It was an old wooden box with a hinged lid, sunk in the ground and filled with dirt and fat red fishing worms. It was a dark, wet, spidery place: perfect for feeling sorry for oneself and planning one's funeral or hiding while pretending to have run away. When I felt bad I would go sit on the worm farm and think about being dead and showing everybody. Then I would cry for me and for them crying for me, and feel better.

It was September and raining, the end of my ninth summer, with school just days away. The rain had stopped for a while in the afternoon, and Frances and I declared a temporary truce to take some green bread over to the park and feed the ducks. With foresight, my mother had given us separate bags, so we didn't have anything to fight about.

But there was Crazy Willie sitting on a bench near the duck pond, and all the ducks were crowded around him, waiting for a handout. Frances gave me her I'll-tell-Mama look, so I went right over by Crazy Willie and started to feed the ducks.

He looked at me and cleared his throat and my heart stopped. He said, "I tell you what, little lady. If you give me a piece of that bread, I'll give you the biggest apple you ever seen."

I thought, Boy, he must be starved if he wants to eat some of this hairy green stuff! I looked back at Fran, who was chewing her braid ends and looking as though she might faint.

"Sure. Okay," I said, and held out some bread to him. Well he didn't plunge his teeth into my arm or anything. He just took the bread and handed me an enormous red apple.

Then he began to feed the bread to the ducks.

I was just about to bite into the apple when all at once I was aware of Fran. She was bellowing, "You'll get worms!" and galloping with all her might for home and mother.

Willie said, "You'd think them ducks was starved, the way they gobble that bread."

"Mm-hm," I said, my mouth full of apple.

Within seconds my mother's voice was calling me on what sounded like the edge of hysteria.

"I gotta go", I said. "You can have the rest of my bread if you want."

"Sure thing, little lady," he said. "See ya."

"Yeh, see ya!" I said. "And thanks for the apple!"

My mother sent me to our room, so I couldn't even go to the worm farm and sulk. Of course Fran had to sit in her half of the bedroom and gloat, the way she always did when she'd ratted on me. It was raining again, and there was a medium sized pocket of water under the wallpaper on the ceiling from where the roof leaked in the attic. I took one look at it and then back at the bag-of-rocks expression on Fran's face and I couldn't stand it. I grabbed her copy of King of the Wind, with full color illustrations, and flung it with all my strength at the udder of rain water. Both book and wallpaper broke nicely. Fran went berserk. She whinnied something that sounded like "bleahahah!" which brought both my mother and father running and saved me from one heck of an Indian burn. I took my licking like a champ and even felt sort of heroic, almost. At least relieved.

Water continued leaking through the ceiling all night. I could hear my father muttering and storming around the house.

"Damn Kids! A man works hard all his life...."

The next day was pretty clear, and there was talk in the neighborhood of summer's last kick-the-can game after supper. Frances and I were just hanging around on the sidewalk waiting to be called to eat when Crazy Willie showed up.

"Hello there, little lady," he said to me.

"Hi," I said.

"Here you go," he said, and handed me not one but two

chocolate bars! Fran didn't say a word. Her mouth just fell open. I must have looked like someone had just told me I was going to Hollywood to be made into a movie star. I took the chocolate bars and began to thank him. At that instant my mother, who had been watching us from the window, shrieked my name at a pitch she might use if she thought I was in absolute mortal danger. The warning—never take candy from strangers—went off in my head like a fire alarm.

Willie had walked on a little way, and I don't know why I didn't run after him and give the candy bars back, but I didn't. And I don't know what made Willie turn around just at that moment, but he did. He saw me throw the two wonderful, dime-apiece chocolate bars into the bushes. For a terrible instant our eyes met, his like two pieces of polished gravel and mine filling with tears. Tears not for the loss of the chocolate bars, but for knowing at that moment and forever what it's like to hurt someone, someone you care about and wouldn't have hurt for all the world. Tears also because there's no way to take it back, or make up for it, or make it not have happened at all.

If the story of Crazy Willie and the chocolate bars had ended there, maybe my life would have been simpler. However something else happened that showed me my life would never be simple. It began with that night, which was awful. I lay in bed in the dark and thought about Willie and how I could make it up to him about those chocolate bars out in the bushes. Long before Fran came in and went to bed, I had devised a plan.

The next morning I woke up late. Fran had already gone out to play. I could hardly get through my hair-braiding and cereal, I was in such a frenzy to get those chocolate bars from the bushes. But I tried to act casual so I could get them without anyone's noticing.

When I got to the bushes, in case my mother was spying on me, I pretended to be tying my tennis shoe. But I lost all pretense when, after a couple of minutes of furtive groping, I couldn't find them. An all-out search showed me they were gone! Crazy Willie? Naw, he wouldn't. Fran! She was the only other person who had seen where I threw them.

I didn't think twice before I headed for the Hide-out. There she was, sitting in the doorway, hands behind her and chocolate smudges the size of quarters at the corners of her mouth.

"Both of them?", I screamed at her. She fled, and the brown and white scrunched papers in the doorway told me I was right.

Rage and sadness and a peculiar gladness were all running inside me at once. Like the times under the porch on the worm farm when I'd be dead, then alive; lost, then found; hated, then loved; hating, then loving; until I'd give up trying to sort it all out and would crawl back into the house, numb and pain-ridden as a slept-on leg.

There was no sense in killing Fran. As a matter of fact, now that I had something on her, she was at my mercy. I could hardly wait to begin turning the screws. It was a relief not to have all of Fran's wonderful goodness to live up to.

But before I could come up with a plan, Fran came leaping out of the bushes. She went straight for my arm and started twisting the skin.

"I'm gonna tell mother about those chocolate bars, ya big phoney baloney!" I shouted between sobs, "I'm gonna tell Willie you stole 'em, and he's gonna eat you alive!"

"You're not gonna tell nobody!" she shouted back at me.

"Oh, yes I am, and then you're gonna get the licking of your life."

"Oh, no, you're not!" she snorted triumphantly. "Cause if you do, I'm gonna tell about a certain something you stole out of a certain someone's purse. Betcha bought chocolate with it too!"

I fell back against the Hide-out, thunderstruck. That ghastly winter day collapsed on my head. That Godawful, dreadful, gray-rainy day when the craving was on me worse than ever, so I snatched a dime out of my mother's purse, sick at heart, but sure a chocolate bar would set me right. I was ashamed of what I had done and had shoved the incident far back in my mind and slammed the door on it.

"Okay", I said, struggling to get hold of my wits. "If you know so much, how come you never told?"

"I've been saving it!" she shrieked mercilessly, prancing

around like a fiend.

I was done for. Snitching apples off a tree, or even copping candy out of bushes was one thing, but stealing money from your own mother? Well, that was criminal. That was one thing mother could never forgive. She'd banish me forever.

Fran stuck to me like glue the rest of the day. I slipped down to the duck pond, and there she was, tight on me as a tick on a dog's ear. And there he was, too. Crazy Willie, sitting on his bench, in his old gray coat with the greasy blotches on the back that reminded me of the rain-water stains on our wallpaper, looking at nothing, until he saw me. Then it seemed as though his face broke and fell apart into about eight hundred pieces. I knew what I'd done to him was killing him. But what could I do with Fran so close, like a hangman ready to finish me off if I even looked his way with an I'm-sorry expression on my face?

Then suddenly my mother's voice broke in like a shot.

"Girls!" She was storming down the pathway that led through the park to our house. She stopped a house-length away and stood with her hands on her hips.

"Your father's waiting lunch! I've been calling and calling you!" she said sternly.

I had only to run to her, crying, "Mama! Mama! Fran ate Willie's chocolate bar!" and they both would know. Mama would know that Fran wasn't so good after all, and Willie might somehow know how much I grieved for the loss of his gift. But Mama saw Willie, and something urgent, final, and terrible was in her face.

"What's going on here?" she demanded of me, her glare crushing me with accusation.

I looked desperately from one to another. I was caught in the awful triangle of Mama, Willie and Fran, all of them against me. Fran's white teeth came together precisely and with a snap, as if in warning. She would tell, and Mama would be lost to me forever.

Then, all at once, like a revelation, it came to me. It was Willie's fault. It was all Willie's fault. Willie and his crummy apples and chocolate bars were making me bad when what I really wanted was to be good and loved and cared about. It was all his fault.

A great boulder of hatred and terror rolled up my throat. I screamed, "You leave me alone! You leave me alone, you-you dirty-dummy—Crazy Willie!" Then I ran.

I ran as if the black hand of the devil were after me; as if all the bad me's that ever were had it in for me. I ran to the worm farm. There I cried until my head swelled up like a pumpkin. Finally my Father dragged me out and buried me in my bed.

When I woke, my father was beside me, holding both my hands. My mother was standing beyond reach in the shadows of the room with a cold, wet towel, meant for me, pressed to her cheek.

"What could he have done to her?" she kept saying. "He must have done something to her. You can see how upset she is. He ought to be locked up, a man like that."

And my father kept asking, "What did the man do to you? Tell Papa. What did he do to you?"

At last I said, in a voice thick as paste, "Nothing. He didn't do nothing. Send me to reform school. I took a dime from Mama's purse."

"Ooooh!" my father said. "Oh! Well no one's going to send you to reform school." He hugged me very hard, in a way that made me feel he had somehow been afraid.

Fran sat like a rock on her bed.

From the shadows my mother's voice said, "She stole. She ought to be punished."

My father cleared his throat enormously. Then he said, "No. . .no. Let it go. She's been through enough."

My mother sniffed dryly, as if pronouncing both Papa and me incorrigible. Then she folded the wet towel into a neat rectangle, hung it over her arm, and went out of the room, the door shutting behind her, like the closing of a gaping mouth.