

The Thing with Willie

Karen Sagstetter

Galveston 1932

On a fishing trip with her father, Anna faced her first authentic test of faith. It was 1890, near Galveston, and the boat had skimmed over the water, out to sea, and his tanned face rocked toward her and away as he pulled oars forward and back, forward and back in a hard, sure rhythm. She later recalled sounds of waves slapping the boat, and his voice, telling her facts about the ocean; for instance, how a flounder lies flat on the bottom, two eyes on the same side of his head like a person, not like a fish.

They dropped lines; right away there was a yank on hers, and he helped her manage a snappy little trout. He'd packed sandwiches and cold tea, and he fed them to his child, talking about everything under the sun. When it got hot, he steered toward home, saying that the coast stretched like a lazy cat all the way to Mexico.

Twenty yards from shore, her father reached over the side of the boat and plunged his hand into the water; his sleeve was dark and wet, soaked to the shoulder. He pulled it out, sand dribbling down

his arm in rivulets, and unwound his fingers to show her: a craggy, pear-shaped shell. He rinsed it well in the sea water, taking his time, pushing mud from the crevices with his thumb, and with the force of his knife pried it open fast, like a man who knew what to do about things.

Inside the shell was a pecan-sized gray blob. Grinning, he caught it up in his fingers. "Sugar, open your mouth!" She opened up and a fat oyster swam down her throat, tasting like salt water. It was her first completely fresh morsel of seafood.

But in the 1930s people were fishing not for fun but for their lives. So many jobs had disappeared in Galveston, everywhere in the country. When the thing with Willie happened, Anna remembered her father's oyster. Probably that was the moment when she had first become so extremely particular about her seafood.

Willie, clean me a half-dozen flounder, three or four croakers, and a couple of dozen crabs, will you?

Yes ma'am.

How's your wife? Okay?

Yes ma'am.

Your children? Gettin' big I'll bet.

My little boy Raymond isn't too good.

Oh sorry to hear that. What's wrong?

He don't walk yet. Doctor don't know what to do.

How old is he?

He's four, ma'am.

That must be a worry. Sometimes they take their time. How about the others?

Oh they're mostly fine. Taller every day. Eat plenty.

Don't I know it.

Your boy okay, ma'am? Your girl?

Yes, fine, okay. Lucy's fine. All grown up. Louie's a mess sometimes.

She almost said, Can't stay still, but didn't so not to hurt his

feelings about his own boy.

Willie was the colored man who worked at John's Seafood. He had a bunch of kids, and his wife Patty kept chickens and a vegetable garden to help out. Because he was a true professional, he and Anna got along, but her husband Howard didn't like him.

What's your problem with Willie?

He's slow.

He's not slow. He's fast when he cleans a crab.

Doesn't answer sometimes. I don't like that. Not polite.

He's busy. Tired.

I couldn't do what he does. I hate fish guts.

I don't mind. I'm thinking of what I'll make later.

It's a good thing you have work to like, isn't it?

Howard had lost his job; his car dealership had folded. He wasn't all that prejudiced but he disliked the idea of a black man having work when he didn't. It came back to his wife making the money for the family, too. Willie was part of that. Anna Clinton was a very good cook, and she was a hit with farmers and fishermen, who paid to enjoy her thick sauces with the red pepper and garlic.

Scales and shells didn't bother her at all. She liked to watch Willie clean fish because she was looking forward to the money she'd make cooking those fish for the hospital or church. Willie tended his knives so they were sharp and shiny; a gleam ricocheted off the ceiling while he worked, his fish heads scuttled to the edge of the counter; scales showered upward, and you had a beautiful fillet in thirty seconds. The same with oysters—he shucked to beat the band. Where he paused was right at first, to prod the edges of the shell and find exactly the right spot for the oyster knife to go in. Then he pushed it hard and quick, the shell opened with the sound of a small belch, like a secret getting out, followed by a scrape of the knife that made her mouth water as the oyster tumbled into a jar.

Still, she could see Willie was exhausted. He was six feet tall, with short-cropped inky hair and a sweet expression. Bent over, like

his shoulders were not carrying just him, but invisible weight, too. Sometimes he'd be moving a chaos of entrails into a heap, and he'd stop to prop himself with the broomstick and yawn. Sometimes he forgot to answer and would only nod, which a black man normally would never do in relation to a white lady. Unless he was swaying at the brink.

Anna had a big order coming up—the Valentine's benefit at the firehouse was two weeks away. As if she needed trouble, the teacher stopped by to discuss her son Louis. She commented that he had a decent mind. Could read well, so what was the problem with his math?

Howard talked with him man-to-man on the front porch. The end of that week was bingo night at St. Aloysius, the Catholic church, a new client. Meaning they needed to progress from mounds of okra, crabs, shrimp, onions, tomatoes, and rice, by virtue of elbow grease and correct calculations, nevermind inspiration, to gumbo. Anna said, Here's a recipe for twelve, and Howard said, You specify how much okra, how many crabs, how many onions we need to prepare dinner for forty salivating people who have Friday night appetites and want to win the jackpot, and write it down for your mother.

Louis reacted by looking bored and rolling his eyes, a very dangerous thing to do because that bored look always caused Howard's forehead to turn red and he wasn't going to put up with it for an instant. *Now!* he shouted.

Louis scrambled, leaping away like a hound, over the ottoman in the living room and around the side table with the recipe squashed inside his pants pocket. While his mother planted twenty caladiums in the front flower bed and ironed four shirts, Louis toiled in his room. When he emerged clutching a large sheet of lined paper, the sass had subsided. He'd been stuck on okra because no one knew how many pods were in a bushel. But he'd written:

Gumbo for Forty

1. Okra: $\frac{2}{3}$ of a bushel basket
2. Crabs: 4.95 dozen
3. Oysters: 33
4. Onions: 19 and $\frac{4}{5}$ @ 4 inches in diameter
5. Chopped parsley: 16 and $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons

Of course, Anna had never in her life used a precise recipe for stews. For her famous cakes, yes, and she had to be fussy about whether to add one teaspoon of vanilla or one and a half. But gumbo came about after an evening at the kitchen table chopping okra while you were sipping iced tea. The idea of 19 and $\frac{4}{5}$ onions was amusing, but in the spirit of the math lesson, Anna followed it faithfully.

At John's Seafood, she and Louis shopped together. Anna told Willie that her son figured she needed thirty-three oysters and 59.4 crabs.

That right, Mr. Louis?

Yes, Willie, the way I calculate it.

Well, you got it. You watch me.

I'd like for Louis to practice his timekeeping, Anna added.

Yes ma'am.

You're so fast with the oyster knife, could he practice with the stopwatch right here?

All right, Miz Clinton.

Louis observed that Willie shucked thirty-three oysters in four minutes and fifty-seven seconds flat. He made a note of this. Instead of 0.4 of a crab, Willie suggested they take half of a giant blue crab's body.

The rest of the week, Willie wouldn't prepare Anna's fish without asking: did your boy figure this for you, ma'am? If she said no, he'd say, well ma'am, won't he be disappointed if you don't check with him?

Before the '29 crash, Anna had been a professional baker. Now her business wasn't weddings and birthdays but Easter lunch at the hospital or fried fish for the city plumbers' late shift. She usually prepared extra because in Galveston, like all over, there were people who if they didn't hook a flounder that day, they did not eat—regulars at her back porch who would sweep or rake in exchange for a bowl of soup.

After a long day cooking, she liked to go walking on the beach. Anna had never seen a mountain or even a hill. She'd never seen snow. But she'd been born to the Gulf of Mexico, and when she was young, all she wanted to be was wet. On the island, summer heat was treacherous, and her mother didn't object even back in the nineties when she waded into the surf in an old dress. She liked the mush of sand between her toes—hot sand on the beach, wet sand at the water's edge, cool water inching over her feet to her ankles—and she'd push at the tide as it was grabbing her stomach, her breasts, and rising up and over her back while she moved against the friendly resistance of the ocean, like roughhousing with her uncles, wild and safe at once, deeper and deeper until the water surmounted her shoulders, swells were nipping her cheeks, and her skirts were billowing to her hips. She walked slowly, savoring, and didn't mind the fish nibbling her ankles; they made her smile to herself. She'd plunge her face under, shaking her head from side to side and snorting out the salty water like a dog in a bath. Dogfish, her mother called her. And she'd swim and trot along, riding the current back, taking a long time for it. She wanted her hair soaked, dripping, wanted water to sink clear through her scalp, and whatever slab of worry was weighing on her chest, well, it dissolved.

No denying it was a nice break to be getting business from the firehouse—fifty chicken and dumplings suppers for the annual Valentine's benefit. Louis studied the situation and constructed the shopping list. This led to Anna's visiting a chicken farm to select

thirteen and two-thirds pullets which, since she was purchasing them live, was going to be difficult. (Louis' fractions were the current family joke.) She'd arranged to have them dressed, so she left the birds squawking and scratching at the butcher's, and stopped in at John's. Anna and Johnny chatted about the mild February weather and the price of flounder, and then he mentioned that Willie's wife Patty was pregnant with her seventh baby and that Willie hadn't shown up for work for two days. What's wrong, she thought. He needs the money. And who'll clean my fish for me? That was Wednesday morning.

Thursday was the day before the benefit. In the evening the whole family—Howard, Anna, Louis, and sister Lucy—were hacking chickens into stew-sized pieces and tossing skin, bones, and fat to the center of the kitchen table, when Willie knocked on the back door, a child in his arms.

The child had to be Raymond. He was small. Cocker spaniel sized. Not malnourished—his skin was a strong coffee color and he wasn't skinny—but he was limp. A bag of limbs. Bones bundled together, but not holding him up. His head rolled around on his neck, and he was drooling.

Evening, Miz Clinton, ma'am. Don't mean to intrude. This here's my boy Raymond.

Why hello Willie. We're cutting all these chickens up. There's a big mess in here and an awful smell.

Can't be as bad as fish.

I don't mind the fish smell.

Really she didn't. To see trout and redfish laid out fat and glistening on ice, begging her for butter, garlic, and lemon, was a pleasure.

The young son Raymond wasn't just slow or sick. He had something terribly wrong with him. He made a constant noise, whimpering and howling, and Willie couldn't shift him around frequently enough to quiet him. Raymond was four years old and had never

uttered a single word. He was wearing a diaper.

How is your wife, Willie?

She's all right. Expecting her seventh. We just found out.

Oh, well, that's nice.

Yeah. I suppose. Listen Miz Clinton, I was wondering. It's Raymond's fifth birthday on Saturday. Patty ain't feeling so good right now, and I want a cake for my little boy here.

As Anna talked with Willie, she kept turning her ear toward her family. The kids and Howard were still at the chickens in the kitchen; the hammer of the cleaver and their chatter created a comforting stir in the background. She had a queasy feeling, watching the idiot child. Willie's shoulder was soaked, and she produced a towel.

What sort of cake, Willie?

I'd like to buy one of your great cakes I've heard about. Chocolate icing. And I want you to write Raymond's name on it. With icing.

Why sure, Willie. Of course, I'll make it. What color icing?

You decide. You can make it pretty. I've heard.

Howard didn't like the interruption and snapped, How did she think she was going to get everything done? Things were on his nerves.

Getting that cake baked in the midst of the chicken bones and biscuit dough with the fire chief's wife stopping in every hour to check on things—the idea got on Anna's nerves, too. But she determined to do it.

She labored over her broth, intensifying it with more and more bones, extra onions and green peppers, boiling it down, and down again. She and Lucy sautéed the chicken pieces, set them aside in bowls, kneaded biscuit dough for the dumplings, and around eleven, they put the house back together. With the big mop, Louis washed the kitchen, living room, and hall floors, and Lucy swept the back porch, where they'd been throwing chicken skin, onion peel, and celery ends onto spread-out newspapers. That is, when she wasn't

leaning on the broom yawning. Anna was going to assemble and simmer the stews Friday morning and afternoon, and the event was at seven p.m., so the only time for the cake was that very Thursday night, late, after the kids and Howard went to bed. Without exactly lying, she gave Howard the impression that she was contriving a treat for the fire chief.

What's the cake for?

I'll give some to people who help us get our dinners together or maybe to the fire chief, since he's trusting us with the job.

Not a bad idea.

Since the crash, Anna had been working with chicken guts and fish parts and hadn't made many beautiful desserts. "Weddings by Anna" had become known because of a particular specialty: her four-layer spice cake with buttery almond frosting and on top, a burst of white sugar calla lilies with yellow stamens and pistils in a surround of blue asters. But now people who had been wealthy in the twenties were driving old Fords and dispatching their children to the justice of the peace to get married. So her longing for the finest lately was expressed with extra spices and sensational gravies.

In the good solitude of the dim kitchen, Anna sifted her best white cake flour twice, so it would be silky and light. She had always known, as if angels were whispering how, about creaming the butter and sugar thoroughly. About using sweet Ware's Dairy butter in the first place. About superior Mexican vanilla and fresh eggs. She still possessed a few bars of premium Swiss chocolate, which she grated and swirled into the batter for a marble effect. She whipped six egg whites and folded them in quickly so the cake would be airy, divine.

At two in the morning, aroma flowering from the oven, she took the risen cake out to cool. The frosting came easy. For that she used regular baker's chocolate, melted in the top of a double boiler and then mixed into the already combined confectioner's sugar and butter. She spread the cake with the chocolate icing and divided the reserved, not-chocolate icing into three mounds, adding green

coloring to one, pink to one, yellow to the other. With her French cake decorator she dripped pink sugar roses, the size of a baby's puckered mouth, in a circle on top of the chocolate frosting, and in the center she wrote, in looping script, *Raymond*. She crafted perfect green stems and leaves and added yellow centers to the roses. Then she removed her sapphire ring (her birthstone), licked the frosting from it, carefully rinsed and dried it, and put it back onto her right ring finger. She believed that something pretty could usually make you feel better and she felt inspired by its confident beauty, its perfection. "Clear minded" was what the sapphire stood for, and she always wore it while she worked.

Her fourth apron of the day was splattered with god knows what, and she smelled like ground-up animals and plants. As she ran a dishrag around the drainboards, her arms cramped; she was dead on her feet; her feet were somewhere below, far away from the rest of her body.

Really, she thought, one more rose would make it look better but she stopped at six because it was the boy's fifth birthday: five and one to grow on. Finally, she arranged the cake in a covered cooler so the roses wouldn't subside. At three-thirty a.m. she fell into bed.

Late Friday afternoon, Anna and Lucy were packing serving utensils for the last run to the firehouse hall when Willie rapped at the back door, crumpling a dollar bill in his fist. He was alone.

But Anna had decided that this cake was not for sale. She told Willie that her husband was very strict about how she disposed of her cakes, and he had given her instructions that because Willie had helped so often when they needed a rush order of shrimp or oysters, the cake was to be a birthday gift to Willie and his family. Well, Willie would not have it.

No ma'am. No way. I have the money right here and you have to take it.

But you gave me a chance to show my stuff, Willie. Nobody's asking for pretty cakes these days. You did me a favor.

Your cake is just beautiful. Beautiful. His name and all. I don't know how you do it, but it's just right.

Anna couldn't take cash from such a poor man. But there was no arguing with him (My feet are planted here till you take it), and she didn't have time for a prolonged discussion. He insisted. Okay, she said, I'll take a nickel, and held out her jar of change. He kept dropping coins in until she retracted the jar, so he must've deposited two or three. For a long time after, the clink of his nickels stayed with her, like a deep shiver.

With the cake in the bakery box, Willie disappeared into the alley, and they got busy with the firehouse supper. Some time during the evening, Anna told Howard the cake had gone to Willie. She wanted to clear that up; she didn't like unfinished business. Howard was enjoying the cheer in the firehouse hall, so all he said was, Why'd you give him the whole thing?—to show he could still question her decisions.

By ten o'clock they must have wiped their hands on their aprons a hundred times, splashed gravy onto the floor fifty times, and said you're welcome two hundred times. But they would surely be hired to supply more benefit dinners; the fire chief's wife all but said so, and with four of them working, tidying the mess wouldn't be that bad.

Very early Saturday morning, while Anna and Howard, Lucy and Louis, were sleeping hard, Willie carried the pretty cake and his little boy Raymond to a pier. There, tied to a piling, was an old but spacious rowboat, belonging to someone, he didn't know who. The weather was perfect: cool, clear, blue sky blooming with pink and orange clouds.

Willie tied his son's legs to the seat so he wouldn't be tossed over in a swell and joined him in the center of the boat. He rowed east toward the sunrise, passing shrimp boats, cotton ships, and fuel barges, and on and on they went straddling waves, jumping waves,

bouncing, riding all the way with the Gulf. After they were beyond sight of the beaches, he aimed a pistol at Raymond's head, pulled the trigger, and then pointed it at himself.

By late Saturday afternoon, the boat had drifted back to shore. The cake was still in the bakery box, secured with ropes in the hold between the two bodies. It was intact—fragrant and colorful—except that it had been neatly cut. Two large slices were missing. All the pink sugar roses, with the perfect green leaves and yellow centers, were gone too.

Soon it grew hot again, and hotter still, March to July, and so on. Anna started going to the beach in the early mornings, walking ankle deep in the small waves. Howard found a job selling typewriters, and he and Louis were the ones who on Sundays delivered Anna's *étouffées* to Patty. She had a baby girl at the end of the summer.