

THE REBEL *WITH* A CAUSE

By Norma Welty

**A short story spin-off from her novel
THE DIRTY DAYS**

My youngest brother, Wilson, recently put it wryly when he said, “Almost from the start, our brother Tilley was an intriguing child to our parents, and he remained so throughout their lives. They never knew what he’d do next.”

Wilson and I agreed it was exceedingly sad that Tilley’s energetic mind and its fleeting attention to assigned tasks at home and school often had not been understood. And, at that point in my conversation with Wilson, my inner voice told me to write about Tilley—not a biography, but a character sketch based on what I, his older sister, knew of his life and how he ultimately managed to create a niche for himself, regardless of what fate or society might have handed him.

At best, life was stressful on the southwest plains in the 1930s, and Tilley’s antics both at school and home didn’t help the situation. For example, one time Daddy assigned him the task of herding the cows from the pasture to the barn lot for the evening milking. Later, when Daddy arrived at the lot, he found the boy riding bareback on a husky yearling who was frightened crazy by the invasion on itself.

Fearing Tilley would fall off and be kicked or trampled, Daddy instantly chased after the yearling and was able to whisk Tilley off its back. Then he promptly gave the child a whipping with a calf rope, right there in the cow lot. The disturbance upset the cows, and they *couldn’t let down their milk very good*, as Daddy put it, with a swear word or two added for emphasis.

Rather than physical punishment, Mother meted out mini lectures and Tilley gave her cause for many.

I remember rare occasions when Mother had pinched pennies so she could buy two or three bananas to be cut into slices and enjoyed by all of us at the supper

table. But she quickly learned that the bananas were not safe from being stolen before they could be shared.

No matter where she hid the bananas, whether under a bed or inside the potbellied stove during summertime or in Daddy's socks and underwear drawer, Tilley always found them and devoured them behind the barn or chicken coop.

Besides her lectures, Mother tried other methods of discipline. For example, she asked him to imagine how his siblings felt about being deprived of the special treat. Nothing worked. Once I felt so cheated I pretended to be teasing and said, "Why didn't you eat the peelings, too?" He answered, "I buried them."

Being a sister to Tilley was a constant challenge in many ways. In one instance, when he was about eleven, Daddy brought home an old bicycle he had bought for him for a quarter. He and Tilley spent a lot of time repairing it, and when it was ready, Tilley, a very long-legged boy for his age, was riding it within minutes.

I had wished to own a bicycle for a long time, and I asked Tilley one day if I could ride his bike. He pondered the matter for a while before I saw light come to his eyes and he said, "Yeah, well, you don't know how to ride a bike, but I'll give you ten minutes to learn to ride it good." I couldn't believe my luck.

"But," he quickly added, "you have to give me that nickel you got hid somewhere."

"What nickel?" I asked, feigning innocence but surprised he knew about the nickel and hadn't found it. He answered, "The nickel Mr. Williams gave you one time for shoveling the dust out of his truck bed after a dust storm. Remember, while he was talking to Daddy out in the cow lot?"

Although keenly aware it was costing me a lot of money plus giving up that nickel for something I wanted very much to buy with it, I said, "It's a deal."

"Hold it. I've got another rule," he said. "If you don't learn to ride in ten minutes, you can never ask to ride the bike again. Never, you hear?"

I nodded my agreement, and he added, “And you have to pay me the nickel, first.” I nodded again while thinking he may hate school, but there’s nothing wrong with the scheming side of this rascal’s brain! Then, without another word he raced into the house, and right before he came back with the alarm clock for timing me, I had fished my nickel from the tin can I had hidden underneath the back door step.

I hadn’t mentioned that only the day before I had almost mastered the skill of bike riding on a bike that belonged to my friend’s brother. So, once astride the bike, I thought, *last ditch chance, focus, focus*. And it worked! In my opinion, I rode across the yard as skillfully as a veteran circus performer on a high wire. Then, just as I was about to peddle onto the road, he yelled, “Hey! Come back here, your time’s up.”

I wheeled back and reminded him as patiently as I could muster that I still had about seven minutes left to ride. He argued that the deal had been that I could have ten minutes only to learn to ride, not to practice riding after I had learned. I got firm, he got mad. Fists flew, arms pushed and shoved, but truthfully I could only push or shove. In spite of my anger, I didn’t want to hit him. Blood trickled from my nose, however, and I wished desperately Tilley would have some tender space in his heart for me, too.

At seventeen Tilley dropped out of school and ran away to join the army. He either lied about his age or had false credentials. No one except him ever knew for sure. After only a few weeks of training he was sent to the Philippines where he fought in the jungle and suffered a skin infection called *jungle rot*—from his toes up to his face. He binged on bad whiskey to ease his misery, which made him desperately ill. So ill in fact that it nearly cost him his life before he was put on a ship back to the states. Ironically while he was in a sick stupor, he revealed his true age and how he had fooled the military. Apparently his craftiness didn’t impress

the military. He was discharged as soon as he was stateside and well enough to go home.

Tilley never changed. If anything, he became even more crafty. When he left home the second time, his chosen line of work called for craftiness. We dubbed him the traveling salesman. One of his jobs required travel from place to place repossessing cars for loan companies. Dressed in the spirit of the Southwest at that time, he wore a Western hat, belt, boots and perhaps a concealed weapon. At least Tilley said that he always feared he would be shot in the doorway before he had finished stating the purpose of his visit. Tilley would have been prepared for that. But before long, he moved on to other work.

So it went, from one job to another, usually involving travel. In his retirement years, he always owned a good car, and enjoyed impromptu excursions throughout the US in his pickup camper. Preplanning and allowing his hosts along the way to know he was on his way to their door simply wasn't compatible with his impulsive nature. I never knew, for example, whether he would appear on my doorstep two summers in a row or in five-year intervals.

Tilley remained free-wheeling. Impulsive. For instance, I might have been close to putting a six-course dinner of his favorites on the table, and he would come into the kitchen with a pie or half of a big watermelon he had purchased and eat the entire pie or all of the melon half, right before the meal was on the table. Naturally, he barely touched his dinner but within two hours was scrounging the refrigerator for leftovers from his favorite meal he had chosen to skip. To me, it was almost like *déjà vu* of the times long ago when he'd stuff himself with the stolen bananas right before a meal. To my children, he was their little-bit weird uncle getting away with more stuff than they ever could.

My unique brother's health deteriorated in his later years. But he ignored all the signs and would never see a doctor, even when his hip joints pained him so severely he was nearly disabled and his eyesight was obviously failing. Since he

was all right financially and certainly could afford health insurance, his attitude regarding his health was worrisome to his siblings.

More time went by and he was blind and in a wheelchair. Except for those two or so friends he compensated with cash for favors such as taking him to the bank or the grocery store, he had little human interface. But at least our sister Leah, who lived only four hundred miles from him, had been able to visit him once or twice a year; and he finally appointed her as his advocate. After that, he made a brief call to her every night. In time, Leah, her own health an issue, decided to alert his county's Social Services about his health and living conditions.

The Social Service personnel moved fast, and he was taken to a hospital and from there to a nursing facility several days later, where he was expected to regain a state of health good enough to undergo prostate surgery and to heal from that before a hip replacement. Following that recovery, he would undergo replacement of the other hip.

In the nursing home, he put his ability to make witty, but often sardonic, comments to good use. It worked quite well, as far as getting him a tad of friendship and some extras in cheerfully administered healthcare. At last he was doing something to promote his well being, and his siblings living in another state felt a sense of relief. But in spite of the good care, he died a few weeks ago at age 84. Mercifully, his final hours were in a hospital where he was sedated comfortably for a gentle trip.

While the siblings were making the funeral arrangements with a staff member, they were asked what should be done with Tilley's obviously new wristwatch. "Let him wear his new wristwatch," we siblings agreed in unison out of respect for our brother. After all, since he was blind, the watch must have been to him a fine ornament that *made a statement*, a boost to his self-esteem.

A notice was published in Tilley's community paper announcing the visitation just prior to his funeral service at 3 PM, the following day. Quick, no

fuss, as Tilley would have liked it. His three local friends came to pay their respects and three came from the nursing home, one of them his favorite nurse. Our brother, Wilson, who would conduct the funeral service, was both surprised and pleased to see as many as six friends able to come.

Tilley was dressed casually in a crisp, new dress shirt, minus the tie, as he would have liked. The long-time friends said Tilley looked very nice and reminisced that he had, in his younger days, looked like the actor, James Dean who starred in movies like *Rebel Without a Cause*. But conversation soon slowed and everyone sat down to wait the two or so minutes for the 3 PM funeral service to begin.

The attendants stepped forward and closed the casket lid, and all eyes remained focused on the casket. Wilson stood up, buttoned his suit jacket and took a deep breath in preparation for his eulogy for our brother. But before a word could come from him, from inside the casket there came a perfunctory voice saying, “It is 3 PM.”

More than adequately audible in the quiet, small room, the voice startled all for a moment before we suppressed snickers. In the meantime, Wilson stood frozen for the second it took the nurse who was sitting next to him to quickly stand and whisper something in his ear. Wilson then smiled and announced, “If you're like me, you were not aware there was such a thing as a talking wristwatch to keep a blind person informed hourly of the time. So folks, my brother's treasured watch has spoken for him. He could be an impatient fellow who was sometimes known to defy decorum. Now it seems he has said, ‘Enough of this business, let's get this show on the road.’”

Wilson had put it well. It had been a defining moment, and for me it brought a measure of closure. I forgave Daddy and the teachers of bygone years for not fully understanding boys like Tilley, whose behavioral problems might have been caused by their brain's inability to sustain attention throughout a learning task, or,

to always follow rules of etiquette. Then I credited myself for the times I had nurtured him, loved him, and I forgave myself for the times I had not.

Happy trails, dear Tilley.

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