

## Terry P. Rizzuti

### Willis

**W**illis Cleaver was my friend. He didn't have no legs nor wheelchair, just a short set of old wooden crutches that he had taught himself to get around on like they was extensions of his arms. He could balance and spin and work all sorts of ways to be mobil. Sometimes, like when he was workin his way down the street, it looked like Tarzan swingin from trees, one limb to another. Just watchin, you had to respect the man.

I seen ol' Willis on the streets since my rookie days, mor'n twenty-five years. He's pleasant enough was my impression, minds his own business. But that changed this past summer. I got the call of a disturbance down at Charlie's Pub in Bricktown. Willis, he'd been scootin along the bar top, pitchin bottles, glasses and ashtrays at everybody and cursin in a language only he understood. He stopped when I got there and glared at my uniform, then resumed throwin. I had to rush at him, pin his arms back and hold on tight. I remember thinkin he's really strong for somethin so small, and that he stunk of alcohol, tobacco and real bad sweat. Then I hauled him off to jail.

Another time I got a disturbance call at Tyler's Clothing store on Rodeo Street. When I finally worked my way through the crowd at the door to the trouble, Willis had aholt of Mr. Tyler by the neck and was swingin on his back, beatin him all about the ears and head. Mr. Tyler was crashin around the store tryin to free himself, and yellin somethin about no filthy little street urchin gettin to try on clean pants in his store. I grabbed Willis hard in a headlock and hauled him off to jail. That was last summer, too.

Three, maybe four more times like this, and me and Willis got on a first-name basis. "Hey Buckaroo," he called me, "you still picking on cripples, putting them in jail?" "Willis," I answered, "what's got into you?" but he didn't say nothin. Another time he said, "Hey Buckaroo, do I count as a whole arrest or just half?" That's when I told him we cops get a bonus for cripples cuz they can fit more in the jails and save all the taxpayers. He seemed to get a kick outta that cuz it was the only time I saw him laugh.

Here lately, seems like Willis got to be about the angriest man I ever run onto, and the ornriest, and when he got to drinkin whiskey, well that'd bring out the boogymen in him, the absolute devil. I bet if you check, I arrested him twenty

times last summer. One time I found him sittin in the sidewalk shoutin and swingin his crutches at everybody walkin by. People was havin to sidestep into the street to get around him. I asked him, "What I gotta do, Willis, get my shotgun out the trunk, blow you here to kingdom come?" I was just kiddin but he took it serious. "Fuck you Buckaroo," he said, and swung a crutch at me. And then somehow in one quick motion he was up on them crutches and swingin on down the street. It surprised me so, I liked to never caught up with him. Once again, I hauled him on in, but it got to where it was harder and harder, cuz he put up a hell of a fight. And it's not easy whuppin a man that's got no legs. It bothers you in the gut, know what I'm sayin, specially when you know the man and where he's comin from.

You see, I'm a Vietnam Veteran, and word on the street was Willis lost his legs in Vietnam back in '66. That's when I was there, too, so me and him's samie-same, sorta. Word was he's a medic with the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne, and one time they got choppered into a hot LZ and a boobytrap took his legs out from under him. They say he sat in his own blood insistin they bring the wounded to him so he could do his thing, and that they gave him a Silver Star for his action. I believe he earned every ounce of that medal. He's a hero to me.

Anyway, my name is Roo, Officer Johnny Roo. I spose I shoul da said so earlier. I'm 46 years old and work for the Oklahoma City Police Department, as you know. When the call come in and the suspect described as havin no legs, they dispatch me, even page me off duty cuz Willis say he won't come peaceable less'n it's me that arrests him. Not that he ever come peaceable for me either, you understand. And every time I put him in back of the unit he'd disrespect me the whole ride. I reckon Willis was my cross to bare, probbly cuz I bucked the system all these years and understand his anger. Maybe I never made sergeant, but I have legs so it's easier to keep the lid on.

Like I said, I bet I arrested Willis twenty times last summer, and that was in about forty days stretch. I was gettin tired of it and told him so, told him he needed to straighten up or we'd put him away, just throw him in lockup and not let him out. He looked me in the eye, right in this here cell, and said, "Do it, Buckaroo, do it," like he was darin me. You'd have to know Willis good as me to know he was sayin to figure a way out of his misery.

One time he cracked a crutch over a bank manager's head. He was tryin to cash his VA check at Bank of America down on Sheridan Avenue and they wouldn't. That didn't make sense to Willis, drunk as he was bein one reason, but also by his way of thinkin he had a right to every penny in that check and no bank manager was gonna dispute that, no way no how. To my way of thinkin too, but that manager kept statin bank policy. Now it's true Willis didn't have no account there, or anywhere else, but any fool could see it was a good government check and everybody downtown knowed Willis by sight. I hauled him off

to jail again, and Willis put up a fight, but his heart didn't seem in it. I could tell by the way he pleaded in his eyes. That was this past fall.

And I remember the time I fished Willis up out of the dumpster in the alley behind the Town Tavern by the bus station. It was bad. Somebody had beat him to pulp. His shoulder was dislocated, and his face looked like some horror film. I put him in the ambulance myself and met him at Mercy Hospital. When the one eye that could open opened, he said "Damn you, Buckaroo, damn you to hell." It sounded like his last breath.

I think there were three or four more incidents like this last fall, maybe two, three more arrests this month. I reckon Willis was cryin for help, and the only help any of us knowed to give him was to keep puttin him back on the street. As though freedom was the only thanks we could think to give him for what he'd done when we was kids.

It was Christmas Eve the other night that I got the call of a disturbance and traffic jam at the corner of Reno and Walker. It was dark and bitter cold with the wind blowin the way it does come December. I knowed right off it was Willis sittin in the middle of the street with no coat on. "I'm just a cop, Willis," I said, "it ain't no life neither, whadda you want from me?" "Well Merry Fucking Christmas to you too, Buckaroo," he said, "I bet it's a real big bonus you get tonight." I was so mad right then, but sad, too. There he sat aside his crutches, flailin around and cursin in that foreign language. He was all bloody and shivverin, and looked maybe seventy years old in a baby's body.

I ran back to the unit and flung open the trunk. I don't know what ran in my head exactly. I pushed all the gear aside and spread out the emergency blanket. Then I rushed back over to Willis and grabbed him up by his shirt and belt like a bale of hay. Hell, he weren't but about three foot long, and I just hurried him over and flung him in that trunk and slammed the lid down. "Don't say another word," I shouted, "don't say one fuckin word." And he never did, the whole time. I guess he figured that shotgun back there could do his talkin for him. When I got the trunk open, there weren't much in there but a torso.

And that's my statement. Like I said, Willis Cleaver was my friend. He called me Buckaroo. I shouldn't have locked him in that trunk. I'm sorry about that and I'll take what's comin, but I swear I didn't mean for nothin bad to happen to him. He was a hero to me.

**Terry P. Rizzuti** is a writer living in Norman, Oklahoma. He served with the 26<sup>th</sup> Marines in Vietnam and received the Purple Heart award in 1967. He has appeared previously in **WLA**, and has co-authored *Veterans' Benefits: A Guide to State Programs*, Greenwood Publishing Group.