

The Will

By Niles Reddick

The last thing I said to my brother-in-law before I threw the phone across the living room, busting it into pieces against the bookcase, was, "It's not a damned wheel. It's a WILL." My frustration at his country accent that makes one syllable words into two is only a symptom of my frustration for him in general. I understood stupidity when it comes to attempting to manage the estate of a deceased parent because it's something we normally only do once or twice in a lifetime, and there's bound to be a great deal of emotions in doing so. The gamut of emotions is difficult to explain for a son-in-law who never quite fit the mold, though I believe I came to be more accepted after twenty years of marriage. I wasn't the good-old-boy sports and hunting-loving Baptist Southerner they had hoped for. I was the smoking-drinking-cursing-educated artist-dreamer who lived mostly in the moment, and while I enjoyed a good college football game, I had only played the game in elementary school, where I quickly learned that my mind-body coordination didn't lend itself to success in sports. I hadn't hunted either. I had been fishing many times and enjoyed it, except for the bugs, but I didn't own a gun for fear I'd shoot myself or someone else in one of my alcohol-induced states. I had, in fact, drank and smoked so much one night that when a co-worker's daughter called me at midnight and told me she had a dream that the man her mother was on a date with was going to kill her, I jumped in the car, borrowed a gun from my roommate, and convinced him to go with me to rescue her. I banged on the doors and windows with the barrel of the gun until they came to the door wrapped in blankets. They were furious with me for having interrupted their intimate evening.

After a few years of marriage, I straightened up---quit smoking and drinking, went to church. I don't know if that helped or not because my teaching position didn't provide the lifestyle my father-in-law expected for his daughter, but we paid our debts, and I think he enjoyed my frugality---dumpster pulls refurbished, antique garage sale items, or flea market finds were our furnishings. There were three things that really sealed his perceptual shift of me.

The first story I had published had him in it, and he was my largest promoter, taking it to his daily lunch table to share with his political friends, his old college buddies, his business partners. The second thing that really shifted his perception of me was my wife and I finally having a child after about ten years of marriage. He was proud to finally be a grandfather, and we made him a grandfather again with the birth of our son two years later. Too, I became even more serious about life, about writing, and about work, moving from teaching to administration and finally bringing home a salary that in lean years must have been higher than his own.

Five years later, he was dying of a cancer he had had for at least a year that his doctors hadn't caught and should have, and I stood by and watched. I tried to help with research about the cancer and talked with him, but he didn't open up and talk about a lot. Within a month, he declined and before we knew it, he was gone. I thought the news, the fight, the dying process, and the funeral were bad, but those didn't compare to the cancers of the living who gather in self-interest to take.

The insight about humanity after a death about what is left behind can only be compared to vultures hovering on the edge of a highway or in a tree in the median waiting for cars to pass, so they can swoop down and get a pick. For them, it's about survival. For humans, however, it's not; it's a "me" game, like a tug-of-war between two children over a toy.

"What in the world?" my wife asks, having come into the room after hearing the phone crash.

"Sorry about the phone," I say. "It was time for a new one anyway."

"I agree, but what made you so mad?"

"Your brother."

"Oh, what is it now?"

"First of all, he wants to ask my opinion, my advice, but then he doesn't want to take any of it. He just wants someone to agree with his position, and I'm not going to. Not now. Not ever. He's trying to rationalize his interpretations about how your dad wanted something when it wasn't clearly spelled out. I'm telling you that this is just a mess. First, your step mother takes

Writing Raw

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him to a lawyer two weeks before he died. He could barely walk. The will gets changed. Prest-o-change-o, she gets a lump sum and his military retirement, which in their prenuptial clearly notes your sister should get it given she's disabled. Then, he gives the step-children a lump sum each. Of course, the one who is taking over his business and owes the estate for the business still got his lump sum up front and isn't paying the estate what he owes, except over time, which is interesting because I'll bet if you could find the original agreement they had instead of the one he had your dad sign two weeks before he died, you'd find it worded differently. Even when your step-great grandmother died, and you all inherited that little bit of money, he deducted what we owed him from it before we got our little share. But the latest, and what tops it all the most, is that he found another insurance policy for \$400,000, and guess what?"

"What?"

"Half of it goes to his second wife. They've been divorced thirty years and he never had it changed, and the damned investor never bothered to do it in the 'annual review' with him. So, there's another \$70,000 loss, which would probably pay both kids' tuition in college. What do you think of that?"

"I don't know. I don't want to think about it. I don't understand why he did what he did. I'm mad at him and I'm also extremely sad. But he didn't intend for her to get that money. He just didn't get all his affairs in order."

"I know. I always thought he had it together, and he talked about things every once in a while, too, but I guess legally it doesn't matter what you say. It matters what is in that will."

"That's right. Now, we can go to court and contest it."

"True, but then lawyers get most of the money and you still don't end up with it. It's really a no win situation."

I can see my father-in-law in my imagination, shaking his head back and forth, cigar in his mouth, looking far-off in the distance and commenting, "I should have had it changed." I can hear him telling his fourth wife, "Now, you know that's not the way I wanted it." I can hear him telling his son, "You ought to know I wouldn't have done it this way. I did this thinking you

might finally grow up.”

My knowing what he would say, that he would do things differently, doesn't ease my anger, my sadness. And my knowing this doesn't erase the facts because legal and what should be are often not congruent. What I do know is that the anger and hurt are displaced toward the living, and while the wounds might heal over time, no amount of plastic surgery can erase the scars. I think he knew that because he believed in doing what was right, in standing behind his word, even if it meant it wasn't beneficial to him. He wasn't self-centered and greedy. He was fair and honest. What may have killed him finally was the cancer of disappointment, the cancer that none of his four wives, most of his children, all of the step-children ever quite lived up to his standards. I hope he knows I certainly tried. I'd gladly give it all up to have him back for my wife and children.

The End

Niles Reddick bio: Niles Reddick's collection Road Kill Art and Other Oddities was a finalist for an Eppie award, his novel Lead Me Home was a national finalist for a ForeWord Award, a finalist in the Georgia Author of the Year award in the fiction category, and a nominee for an IPPY award. His work has appeared in anthologies Southern Voices in Every Direction and Unusual Circumstances and has been featured in many journals including "The Arkansas Review: a Journal of Delta Studies", "Southern Reader", "Like the Dew", "The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature", "The Pomanok Review", "Corner Club Press", "Slice of Life", "Deep South Review", "The Red Dirt Review", "Faircloth Review", "New Southerner", and many others. He works for the University of Memphis at Lambuth in Jackson, Tennessee, where he lives with his wife Michelle, two children, Audrey and Nicholas. His new novel, Drifting too far from the Shore, is forthcoming in 2015. His website is www.nilesreddick.com