

Not so, Willie Joe

“They called him Willie Joe; that’s all most folks ever knew, just Willie Joe. But his full name was Willie Joe Dicer. Oh no doubt, that boy was a wing dang doodle all right!”

“Mr. Frank, they say you was his close friend. Is that right?” asked Robert’s cousin. I can’t remember his name right now, but he’s down visiting Robert, and I guess someone has told him a little about Willie Joe.

“Maybe. I liked Willie Joe, and he liked me too, but I was probably more fascinated by him than anything else. I guess if I’d-a been a true friend, I would have stopped him that night. Fifteen minutes after he left, he was dead. I was really upset when he got killed, but a little bit relieved too. It’s hard being close to someone who lived the way Willie Joe lived, just too dangerous if you know what I mean. If he had lived, he probably would’ve gotten both of us killed sooner or later.”

“How did he get killed, Mr. Frank?”

“Oh, he died a violent death, to be shore. But, out of respect for the kind of man Willie Joe was, I never tell his ending until folks get a good grasp on how special he was. You just can’t appreciate him the way he deserves, if you go straight to how he died. Believe me, how he lived is more important.”

Almost everywhere I go, people ask me about Willie Joe. They just can’t seem to get enough. He’s been dead over thirty years, and yet people still have a burning to know more. In some ways he’s a lot more popular now than when he was alive . . . like a Billy the Kid or a John Dillinger. But I don’t think he had the meanness deep down inside of him like they did. ’Course he could be one more ruthless sonofabitch if he had to be.

“Mr. Frank, what did he look like? How big a man was he?” asked the cousin.

“Oh, just a little more’n average size I’d say. Maybe six feet, might possibly get another inch out of him when he stood straight and tall. And as far as weight and build, he wasn’t skinny, but a little on the slender side. You remember Jimmy Stewart, the actor? ’Bout his build.

“But I tell you one thing, he was a clothes hoss! He could go to the Goodwill, not that he ever would, and pick out the worst hand-me-downs on the rack, and walk out looking like a million dollars. Most men could spend a fortune on clothes at Rich’s in Atlanta, and yet never even come close to ole Willie Joe. He was just blessed in that way, you know?”

“I’ve heard he would fight any man no matter their size, and how...”

“Excuse me friend, but Robert told me your name, and I can’t ...”

“Oh, I’m JL, Mr. Frank, JL Sapp. I’m from Homerville. I’m Robert’s second cousin, just over visiting him for a few days. And this is my nephew here with me. He’s my sister Bonnie’s boy . . . name’s Ernie. My sister’s going thru a divorce right now, and Ernie’s staying with me for a-while.”

“Yeah, those divorces can be rough on the kids. I’ve handled hundreds of ’em, but things will eventually settle back down.” Ernie had a blank look on his face; I couldn’t help but wonder if he was a normal kid, looked to be about 14 or so...just seemed to act a little strange. “So now, JL, what was you asking before I interrupted?”

“I heard he weren’t scared of anybody, and would fight any man, no matter how big he was, and that Willie Joe never got beat!”

“No, JL, that’s not exactly right. Willie Joe got scared just like anybody else gets scared, but he could master it probably better than anybody I ever met. He could conquer his fears and go ahead without hesitation and do what he thought he needed to do. And yes, he got his ass whupped, but it wouldn’t stay whupped. He would come back, and come back again, whatever it took, and however long it took, until he bested you. And when he did, he would collect the pound of flesh owed him, in other words, beat the dogmess out of you, and then collect a pile of interest before he was done. He told me one time about taking a mop handle to an old boy up in Atlanta. He said he knew he broke both of his arms, and may have broken his leg.

“I didn’t want to hit him in the head and knock him out with just one lick, not after what he had done to me! I decided once I had him down, I would just beat him all a-round the mulberry bush!” Willie Joe laughed.

“Mulberry bush?” JL repeated.

“Yeah, JL, don’t you remember the little song we sang in grammar school, something like ‘here we go a-round the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush’. What Willie Joe meant by that was, he went round and round beating the man with that mop handle after the man was down. ‘Round and round the mulberry bush’ . . . get it? Yes, sir, if you were ever going to cross Willie Joe, you needed to know that sooner or later he was going to walk all over you.”

“I remember that song,” said the young man with JL.

“Well,” I thought, “the young man is paying attention, and at least he can talk.”

“I was told a man cut Willie Joe to death one time, and he come back alive in the hospital. That’s hard to believe,” JL winced.

“No, he didn’t come back alive. Ain’t been but one who ever done that. But I know the story, and as Paul Harvey used to say, I know the rest of the story, too. I heard it from Willie Joe’s own mouth. But it’s sorta a long story,” I warned.

“Mr. Frank, we ain’t got nothing but time.”

I knew what JL was referring to; I was in law school in Macon when I read about it in the Rauley Gazette. The headline read, “Local Man Knifed at Poker Game” and the subheading indicated Willie Joe was in serious condition at Martin Hospital. When I read the story, the newspaper was already three days old, so I called my uncle who was friends with Willie Joe. Uncle Junior told me he had just visited Willie Joe in the hospital and that he was out of intensive care and was going to make it.

“OK, then, here goes. A fellow named Doodie almost shut down Willie Joe’s parade. The heck of it was that Doodie and Willie Joe were lifelong friends, and the best friend Willie Joe had in this world was Carl, Doodie’s older brother. But anyway, Willie Joe, Doodie and several more were playing two dollar poker up at what we called the yellow house behind the truck stop, just outside Rauley. Everybody was drinking and Willie Joe was winning and most of the rest of ’em were losing. Everybody knew Willie Joe was a card shark, but nobody was sharp enough to catch him cheating. Hell, that’s how Willie Joe was able to carry around a good bankroll most of the time . . . card sharking.”

“Why did they play with Willie Joe if everybody knew he cheated?”

“The short answer? Most everybody just plain enjoyed Willie Joe’s company. He was smart, he was funny as hell, he was exciting, and he had personality out the wazoo! I told him one time he was like a

dangerous river, everybody sees still water on top, but when they waded out in it, they might get swept away!”

“Oh,” Willie Joe had laughed, “you mean like Merle’s ‘Kern River’? How does the line go . . . ‘it’s not deep nor wide, but a mean piece of water my friend’ . . . ”

“Yeah, I told Willie Joe, the Sheriff should make him wear a sign around his neck, DANGER, STAY BACK,” I laughed.

“Well, I guess . . . ”

“And another thing, all those old boys cheated, or tried to! But they were clumsy and not nearly as good at it as Willie Joe. Willie Joe taught me how to false cut, to stack the deck and the hat trick, but you have to practice it, and you to have a certain amount of finesse to go with it. Willie Joe was good, said he learned how while he was serving time in Reidsville. I never could get it down, but he got where he could do ’most anything he wanted with a deck of cards, even with several sets of eyes staring at his every move.”

Robert arrived about that time, brought in a 30 pack of Miller Lite and a 6 pack of red Buds for me. I never got used to the watered-down stuff.

“What y’all doing? Y’all not aggravating Mr. Frank, are you?”

“Oh no,” I says. “I’m telling them about Willie Joe. You know, the night Doodie cut him so bad.”

“Well go ahead, don’t let me stop you,” Robert replied.

“What you got in the bag, Robert?” I asked.

“I stopped by and picked up a bag of Freddie’s wings; they’re nice and hot, too. I’ll put ’em here on the table for anybody who wants some.”

“Anyway, Willie Joe told me everybody got pretty drunk, and around midnight Doodie started getting real bullish. He had lost all of his money, and no one would loan him more money to continue playing. Doodie got real mad when Willie Joe turned him down, but Willie Joe was just trying to keep Doodie from losing even more money. The truth is, Doodie was just an awful poker player; you could read him like a book.

“Willie Joe got up from the table, intending to mix himself another drink and socialize with the guys before leaving. He said while he was at the counter mixing himself a drink, he felt a sharp pain in his left side, just below the ribs. He said he spun around, and it was then he realized Doodie had stuck him.

“Willie Joe told me years later, and he told me this in a kinda laughing way, ‘When somebody sticks a knife in your back, don’t turn around! Doodie’s knife stayed in me and when I whirled around, it opened my belly up like a can opener’ he said.”

“Well sir, Doodie knew Willie Joe very well. He knew he had to kill him or face the consequences. So, he set in to finish him off and would have too, but he was so drunk, he could barely stand up. Willie Joe told me he knew he had to stay on his feet; if he fell down, Doodie would be on top of him butchering him like he was a hog. Willie Joe managed to get out thru the screen door and onto the porch, but he could see Doodie staggering towards him.

“Frank, he told me one time, you never been in a tight spot until you find yourself standing there holding a screen door shut with one hand, and holding your guts in with the other, all the while a drunk with a knife dripping yore blood is trying his best to get at you again. Your boots are filling with blood, and you are growing weak, just a minute or maybe just a few more seconds, and you knew you are gonna pass out.”

“No one tried to help Willie Joe? What about the other men playing poker?” JL asked.

“Those men were drunk, and everything happened so fast, but finally they did manage to figure out what was going on, and that’s what saved Willie Joe. They got a-hold of Doodie and kept him from going out onto the porch. Willie Joe did pass out, and somebody managed to call an ambulance. I always heard it was an old cookman who lived next door who happened to see what was going on. By the time they got him over to the hospital, Willie Joe had just about bled out . . . just about, but not quite. They got to pumping him full of new blood and brought him back. No, he never actually died like some people say, but he came about as close to it as you can get.”

“Y’all don’t want anything to eat?” asked Robert. “These wings from Freddie’s; they mighty hot, but got a good flavor . . . makes a cold beer taste good, too.”

I stopped talking about Willie Joe for a while. I wanted JL and the boy with him to chew on what I had told them. You know, you eat too fast, you can’t enjoy a meal, and it’s the same way about a story. You just can’t tell it too fast. Willie Joe was special; I won’t ever see another of his kind in this life, and I want to tell his story in such a way as people will understand just how different he was from most people. No, not most . . . different from everybody! After all, maybe the biggest gift I’ve ever gotten in this life, was my close friendship with Willie Joe.

“Mr. Frank, what did the law do to Doodie for cutting Willie Joe so bad?”

“Well, let me ask you this, JL, what would you have done if you’d been in Willie Joe’s shoes?”

“I would have wanted Doodie put away for attempted murder! I would want him to spend a long time in prison, be an old man when he got out, if he ever got out. That’s what I’d a-pushed for!”

“Robert, hand me over a couple of them wings, please sir, and one of those red beers . . . excuse me JL, I want to eat a wing or too before they get cold. Y’all help yourself, there’s plenty enough for everybody. Son, are you hungry?” I asked the young man with JL.

I had thought the boy may have had some issues, so I hadn’t paid too much mind to him the whole time. I had noticed, though, that he had focused in on me like a cottonmouth trancing a bullfrog. He hadn’t taken his eyes off me while I talked about Willie Joe. I am now convinced that he understands everything I’m saying; he is hanging on every word.

“JL, who’d you say your sidekick is, I can’t remember?”

“Oh, this is Ernie, my nephew, my sister’s boy.”

“Ernie, you ought to try these wings. Freddie’s wings are the best in town, and there’s something in the fridge besides beer to drink. Help yourself.”

“Mr. Frank, you asked me what I would have done, if...”

“Oh, yeah! Well, that’s what most people would have done, too. But Willie Joe was not most people. Sheriff Gene Taylor investigated the case, talked to the men at the poker game, but nobody had seen

anything . . . you know how that goes. When the Sheriff was finally able to see Willie Joe, he asked him what had happened. Willie Joe said he never saw his assailant, couldn't identify him. Well, Sheriff Taylor knew that to be a lie.

"I talked to Gene one time about it, you know, Gene and I were always good friends. Gene told me Willie Joe told him, "Sheriff, I'll take care of it in my own way. I can promise you, justice will be served and it won't cost the taxpayers one penny."

"I'd kill him like he tried to kill me!" suddenly burst from the quiet young man sitting beside JL.

"Doodie is a coward for stabbing Willie Joe in the back! Willie Joe ain't done nothing to Doodie!"

"You are absolutely right, son. There are cowards in this world who will kill their own friends for little to no reason. They'll kill a friend quicker than they'll kill a stranger who done the same thing. Don't make sense, does it?"

"Ernie, they's three wings left," said Robert, "and I found a cold Pepsi Cola in the Frigidaire. If you want something to eat, you'd better speak up . . . may be your last chance to eat something tonight."

"No sir, Mr. Robert, thank you. I just wanna see what Willie Joe does next."

I must confess, it crossed my mind that this story might leave a mark on this young man. Boys Ernie's age are impressionable; they're trying to figure out how to be a man. You certainly wouldn't want your son growing up to be a Willie Joe, yet, deep down inside, if he did, you'd be proud. You couldn't help but be!"

"Ernie, let me tell you, even before Willie Joe got out of the hospital, there was a steady stream of people coming to him, asking him to forgive Doodie. I happened to be visiting Willie Joe at the hospital when Carl came to see him. Remember now, Carl is Doodie's older brother, and Willie Joe's best friend since childhood. They had grown up together in the cotton mill section of town."

"Willie Joe, it was an awful thing my brother done. You know, if I'd-a been there, I'd-a shot him myself if I had to, to stop him from cutting you. Buddy, he made a big mistake, and he's begging you to forgive him. Willie Joe, you know, he's my brother; we got the same ma, and she's worried to death that you gonna kill Doodie. I'm not asking for Doodie, really, I'm more asking for our ma. Somehow, someway, I know Doodie will make this up to you if you can cut him some slack . . . just this one time. Willie Joe, here's a note Doodie wanted me to give you."

"Frank, read it to me, will ya?" asked Willie Joe.

"God, Willy Joe, I am so so sorry. I was drunk out of my mind. I don't remember a thing. You know I would never do such a thing in my right head. I couldn't believe Lester and them when they told me what I done. I would have kilt any of them fellers if they had jumped on you. I was just crazy, that's all, CRAZY. If you forgive me, I'll make this up to you, somehow, someway. Please give me the chance to do that. I'll show you. Doodie."

"What did Willie Joe do?" asked Ernie impatiently.

"Hold on, Ernie," said JL, "let Mr. Frank go at his own chosen speed. What happened next, Mr. Frank?"

"Damn, Robert, these wings are really hot tonight! Did you put any extra hot sauce on 'em?"

"No, they just like always. Frank, you just getting older and can't take the hot like you could one time. Here, have another Budweiser; it'll put the fire out."

I took several long draws off the beer. Robert was right, it cooled down things a little. Maybe I need to pour some cold water on this story, too. Looks to me, that Ernie and JL both, are trying to overheat on me. Not sure I'm doing the right thing here, but I'm in too deep now.

“Let me try to explain it this way. Believe it or not, after a few weeks had passed, Willie Joe was not mad at Doodie any more. He told me one time he just couldn't stay mad at anyone for very long, no matter what they did. Now, it's not that Willie Joe would forget and forgive . . . oh hell no, he didn't do that! And, he wouldn't kiss and make up with somebody who had done him wrong, either. But, somehow or another, he just couldn't stay mad.”

“Frank,” he said to me about six months later . . . he had come to my office, I could tell something was worrying him bad . . . “I got a problem. Doodie almost killed me that night. I am not gonna give Doodie a pass on this.”

“You can still file charges,” I suggested.

“No, that won't change things. It was me who Doodie cut up, and it's gonna be me who holds him to account. But Frank, I'm not mad at Doodie; I have always like Doodie. I don't want to kill him. Hell, his brother is my best friend! I have eaten a' many meal at his ma's table; she's such a sweet woman. Doodie has put this monkey on my back, and I don't know but one way to get it off.”

“Willie Joe, don't tell me anymore. You know, I'm a lawyer and an officer of the Court. There are just some things you can't tell me, understand?”

“I don't understand,” Ernie interrupted. “Why ain't Willie Joe mad?”

“Ernie, son, I am not sure I can explain it to you. I have spent half my lifetime trying to figure out Willie Joe. The closest I can come, is that Willie Joe had just one rule in this life, and that was to not let anyone disrespect him. He didn't want people to be afraid of him and he didn't want anyone to put him up on some kind of pedestal. Willie Joe wasn't impressed by money, or social position, or power that somebody thought they had over other people. No, none of that mattered; it was a thing called ‘self-respect’ or ‘pride’, some folks may say.

“You know there are some rich and famous men who were very successful in this life, but then, when they are gone, they are gone. Most of them are quickly forgotten no matter how successful they were. And then there's Willie Joe. He was none of those things, yet here we are talking about him instead of those pillars of the community who are now obsolete and irrelevant. But not so, Willie Joe.

“It's like that client, Herbert, I had one time. He killed a man up in Blairsville and was sent to Reidsville to serve 20 years for manslaughter. Then he killed his cellmate over a pack of cigarettes. I went to see Herbert and asked him why he would kill a man over a pack of Winstons.

“It weren't over cigarettes,” Herbert told me, “he stole from me! What he stole, whether it was a million dollars or a toothpick, don't matter. I killed him because he stole from ME!

“Son, if you live long enough, someone is going to disrespect you. And in that moment, you will show the whole world who you are. You know, the good book says to forgive, to turn the other cheek. I reminded Willie Joe of that one time.”

“What did he say?” said Ernie.

“He told me, “Frank, I made up my mind a long time ago, what other people think about me was not nearly as important as what I thought about myself. Even if you gain the respect of other people, but lose it for yourself, what’s that gonna buy you?”

“So, Mr. Frank, whatever happened?” asked JL.

“Now, I can tell you what the Rauley Gazette reported, and then I’ll tell you the truth. The headlines of the paper read, ‘Local Man Shot in Driveway’ and the story went on to say that Doodie McEachern pulled up in his driveway one afternoon, and as he got out of his car, a blue Buick pulled up behind him, a car unknown to McEachern. The victim told authorities two black men, both short and fat, exited their vehicle and began shooting at him. The newspaper story said McEachern was wounded in the side, but was able to get inside his house without receiving a second wound. The article reported the victim was ambulated to a local hospital and remains in serious but stable condition.”

“Did the Sheriff look into the shooting,” asked JL.

“Oh, Gene knew who shot Doodie from the git-go; he knew Willie Joe had shot him, but what could he do? Doodie claimed it was two black men he had never seen before, so that was that!

“Willie Joe did tell me later, that Gene went to him and pretended to arrest him for attempted murder, claiming Doodie had identified him as the shooter. He told Gene, “Go ahead! Handcuff me and lock me up, Gene. You know you’re lying and that Doodie has not said any such a thing. What’s it called? Malicious prosecution, or bad faith arrest? My money-hungry lawyer will know the right name for it.”

I paused. I was concerned about Ernie and the effect the story was having on him. I don’t know Ernie’s background, but it appeared to me that my story was breaking new ground. This tale has loaded his wagon, about as much as a young man could pull at one time. No doubt he will feed on it for quite some time, I guess, just like most people.

“Tell them the rest of the story, Frank,” called Robert who knew it almost as well as I did.

“Willie Joe told me what really happened, maybe a year or so after the fact. He borrowed a friend’s old ugly pickup truck and an old sweat-stained cowboy hat. Under normal circumstances Willie Joe wouldn’t be caught dead driving such a truck or wearing a hat. He said he parked the truck on the side of the road up from Doodie’s house about fifteen minutes before Doodie got in from work. Willie Joe raised the hood like the truck was broke down. Before long, he saw Doodie’s car coming down the road towards him. He said he pulled the brim of the hat down low over his eyes and waved for the car to stop. Doodie did stop, apparently to help the man, and Willie Joe managed to get up to his window and draw his .38 before Doodie saw who was under the hat.”

“LORD GOD, NO!” Doodie screamed, knowing his life was over.

“Just hold on, Doodie, I want to talk to you,” said Willie Joe. “How’s your ma doing? I heard she’s been sick . . . hope she’s better. She’s such a sweetheart,” I’m pretty sure those words must have confused Doodie; who asks about your mama’s welfare before they shoot you? I would think no one, and I’m sure Doodie must have thought so, too.”

“He was just baiting ole Doodie, don’t ya think, Frank?” asked Robert.

“I’m not sure. I prefer to believe he was taking one more moment to make sure this is what he wanted to do. But nothing Doodie said, changed Willie Joe’s mind. Willie Joe said Doodie begged him not to kill him, and this is what he told Doodie: ‘Doodie, I don’t want to kill you, but I got to shoot you.’ And with

that, he pulled the trigger and shot Doodie. Oh, he didn't shoot to wing him; he shot him in his heart side, the bullet went thru his ribs, punctured a lung, and nicked his liver. Willie Joe told me he just put it in God's hands whether Doodie lived or died, the same way Doodie had done him.

"But anyway, Willie Joe had told Doodie if he ratted him out . . . that is if he lived to rat him out . . . that he would hunt Doodie down and kill him the day he got out of prison. Apparently, Doodie believed him strong enough to make up that cock and bull story about being ambushed in his driveway."

"Mr. Frank," said Ernie, "at least Willie Joe did what he thought he had to do; did what he thought was the right thing!"

"Yes, he did Ernie."

"Frank, who was the famous person who said something like, be true to yourself, and you can't be false to any man? Was it Abraham Lincoln?" asked Robert.