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Cindy

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Cindy

(excerpted from *The Freedom of the Will*)

Ken Clatterbaugh

Cindy Norton sang loud in slightly accented Spanish. The song was “*Perfidia*” (“Wicked Woman”). She remembered the melody, and the Spanish language radio reminded her of the lyrics, although she could hardly hear the radio or herself above the grinding, popping, and rattling of her Volkswagen Rabbit. Her radio picked up only one station.

The day was cool for east Texas, for which she was thankful. She was alarmed, however, by the fact that the unseasonably cool temperature was due to the large, dark—indeed black—cloud mass that was gaining on her from the south. She pushed the Rabbit to its max, fifty-five miles an hour, which increased the noise and the engine’s tendency to miss. Ending the day north of Dallas was her goal. News of her father’s ill health had precipitated quitting her job and this flight home. Old feelings and memories slithered unwelcome into her mind as she fought fatigue and drove doggedly on.

What a change of circumstances she had endured over the past three years. Here she was—a kid from Ohio, an A-student, a high school homecoming queen, and, she reminded herself, a rebellious daughter—now driving from Mexico to Ohio. In Mexico, she had been an assistant manager at La Inspiracion, a Gulf Coast resort that catered to wealthy writers and artists. Indeed, she had effectively run the business for the past year and a half, since the manager spent all his time hobnobbing with the distinguished artists who came to work, play, and drink. It had been a good job and well suited to her quick mind, integrity, and easy grasp of Spanish. The absentee owners of the resort loved her and expressed appreciation for her proficiency. In spite of their rare visits to the facility, they knew her value and planned to make her manager within the year. Now that was history.

Mexico was not at all like Ohio, a fact for which Cindy was eternally grateful. She had grown up as Cynthia Norton in Oldstown, Ohio, a conservative community that had proudly cast 132 percent of its votes for George W. Bush in 2004. At that time, Cindy, who was still in high school, had irritated her family by her dedicated effort to see John Kerry elected president. Her mother disliked Kerry, because, as she said often, “I don’t trust a smart man.” Cindy smiled as she recalled that her mother never said this in front of her father.

Cindy's father was an extremely conservative pastor of a local evangelical church, which was losing membership due largely to a poor economy that had driven people out of the area. It was a stressful position with constant concerns about the budget and declining membership. Cindy had not helped the situation by attending the Unitarian Church and working in their food bank. According to her father, Unitarians were atheists.

Cindy's total alienation from her family came during her senior year. Her high school boyfriend, Jack Williams, was the star quarterback on the football team. He became fervently religious at one of Coach Winsome's pre-game chapels. The coach had brought in a charismatic young youth minister whose performance so impacted Jack that he came away ready to dedicate his life to Jesus. Jack also started going on a bit about how he expected to be swept up to heaven anytime now, but hopefully not until after the conference championship. Cindy had serious doubts about the likelihood of that event.

One passionate night in the spring of her senior year, she let Jack seduce her, something he had been trying persistently and clumsily to do since their first date. The whole delightful experience might have made her senior year, except that the backup quarterback, to whom Jack had boasted of his tryst, ratted them out in the spring. Word spread quickly throughout the community. In hindsight, Cindy thought her behavior had been childish and driven by a deeply adolescent curiosity about sex—something that was never discussed in her home.

The revelation of their contumacious behavior had devastating results, especially for Cindy. The patriarchal, conservative community of Oldstown reserved its real condemnation for the one who obviously corrupted "that fine young man." The other girls at school called Cindy a slut, as did her father, who felt she had humiliated him publicly. He declared her "dead" to him and refused to speak to her. The day he found out about her liaison, he attacked her and tried to throw her out of the house. Only her mother's intervention stopped his physical assault and allowed her to stay in her room until graduation.

At the end of the year Jack received a full athletic scholarship to the University of Florida. Cindy, based on her excellent academic record, received a small scholarship—not nearly enough to cover her expenses—to Ohio State. Of course, she could expect no help from her family. Cindy left Oldstown on the night of graduation, took a bus to Mexico, found a job at La Inspiracion, and worked her way from cleaning maid to assistant manager. Until recently, she had had no communication from her family, although she checked in regularly and let her mother know where she could be reached.

Now her father was seriously ill, heart attack. She needed to get home as soon as possible. The car that she had purchased from Reliable Ralph's was barely running, and her finances had taken a loss when the manager, out of spite, had refused to pay the salary she was owed, because she had to leave suddenly and he might actually have to work. Even though her father had treated her horribly, she wanted to be home to support her mother. A lot of forgiveness, especially toward her mother, had grown in her as the ugly memories of her high school days faded.

As Cindy raced northeast, Will was just checking out of the motel. Ham was relatively perky that first morning. Will realized he had to get a cage if Ham was to accompany him; he could hardly be allowed to run around in the truck's cab. The local pet store did not open until ten, so Will ate breakfast, wrote a letter to his aunt and uncle, and debated as to whether he should leave some of his precious money for the thoroughly decimated Gideon Bible he had secreted under the driver's seat. He was going to leave ten dollars until God spoke up.

"These bibles are donated, and it's a crummy edition in any case."

By late morning he was ready to travel west. Ham was ensconced happily in his cage, which was equipped with a water bottle, an exercise wheel, a dish of hamster food, and the remains of the Gideon Bible.

"Who says the good book doesn't have the power to heal?" God quipped.

Ham was feeling well enough that he even used his three legs to turn the exercise wheel.

Will charted his route going west; he hoped to avoid the freeway with its heavy traffic and giant trucks. The weather did not look promising, but Will was committed to getting to the theme park on time.

As Will skirted Dallas, the sky to the north looked reasonably clear. He had always enjoyed driving through the countryside. Cities made him uncomfortable. He was just starting to emerge to the west beyond the Dallas area when the wind picked up enough to buffet the S-10. The sky continued to darken. At that point, Will had no choice but to keep going, since the storm was developing all around him.

Less than a mile down the road, he realized he had made a mistake as darkness seized him, and a twister came down practically in front of him. He glimpsed swirling debris just before veering into the shallow ditch beside the highway.

"Get as low as you can!" God shouted.

Will turned off the engine, and started to open the door so he could lie down in the ditch when something struck him hard on the left temple. He was never able to recall just what happened over the next few minutes.

Cindy never saw the tornado that picked up her VW. Part of her rearview mirror was missing, and she was focused on finding the road with only one headlight. Being airborne and upside down in a compact car over the Lone Star State is a rare experience, and Cindy could just as well have skipped it in her lifetime. She thought briefly that maybe her high school lover was right and the Rapture was upon her, until she realized that God would never want a junker like her car. Then the tornado did one of those strange things that twisters do: it set her down as gently as a butterfly on a willow. Except for being upside down, missing the driver's door, and having her suitcase resting against her back, all seemed well.

Cindy looked down and saw that her car was situated upside down on top of the extended cab of a small pickup. A young man lay on the ground beside the truck. He had some blood on his forehead, and he was moving a little.

"Hey, you!" Cindy shouted over the heavy rain that came in the wake of the tornado. "Are you okay?"

Her question got no response.

Will's head hurt, and his vision was lousy. He felt a bruise above his eyebrow and considerable nausea. And there was a voice from somewhere, above him. He thought it might be an angel, but angels didn't drive Rabbits and hang upside down struggling with a suitcase pressing on their backs.

"Could you give me a hand?" the angel asked as she wiggled violently. "I can't get out of this damned seatbelt."

Will's vision began to clear as the rain washed his face. "Just a moment, I'm not certain I can stand." He was sure his legs would not support him as he tried to gather them under himself.

The angel continued to flail about. Will managed to push clear of the door of the S-10 and was still trying to get to his feet when the seatbelt came loose, and the angel shot out of the car and landed right on top of him.

"Oops!"

Stunned, Will and the angel lay entangled on the ground for a few minutes. Then the angel spoke in a voice far too perky for Will's state of mind.

"Hi, I'm Cindy."

"Will," he managed to croak.

"Are we lucky or what?"

Will didn't feel so lucky at the moment. The rain was letting up, and the storm clouds had moved off to the northeast. Will knew that things were not quite right, but he had no

idea what to do about it. His head hurt horribly, and his new acquaintance, Cindy, was scurrying about far too quickly. He glanced around but could not figure out where he was.

Cindy realized that Will could not focus, because he was disoriented. She also recognized that the Rabbit was in bad shape—the left rear wheel, a bumper, and a door were missing. The S-10 was relatively undamaged though, except for a slight concavity in the roof.

Cindy helped Will to stand and half dragged him around to the passenger side of the pickup. The possibility that the Rabbit might slide off onto them was a worry; it was tilting that way. Despite the fact he was a big man, Cindy managed to get him into the passenger seat, after putting the little rodent and his cage behind the seats. Then she closed the door, came around to the driver's side, threw her bag into the bed of the pickup, and started the engine. Taking a deep breath, she pulled the S-10 onto the freeway, hoping that the momentum would dislodge the Rabbit, which it did, leaving the little car to crash into the ditch behind them.

“We need to have a doctor check you out,” Cindy said as she headed east toward what she hoped was the nearest hospital.

The emergency care clinic they found was busy with other storm casualties, but Will's head injury got them a nurse, who examined Will, asked him a bunch of questions, and then declared he had a serious concussion and needed to rest, not sleep, but rest. A couple of butterfly bandages and a \$75 fee later, they were registered at a Motel 8, having split the cost. The motel was filled with storm refugees.

By early afternoon Will, Cindy, and Ham were relaxing in air-conditioned comfort. Will was not yet ready for food, although Cindy was ravenous. She had been sacrificing food for gas over the past few days. Will promised not to go to sleep if she would run out for pizza.

An hour later, they were sitting on the king-sized bed with a pizza box, plastic glasses filled with cola, and paper plates. Will was feeling better, although he still could not remember much of the event. He realized he had been in real danger of wandering disoriented down the highway. Cindy tried to cheer him up by telling funny stories about the eccentric writers who stayed at La Inspiracion. Will, whose head was much clearer, regaled her with his uncle's experiment into the funeral business. Each also revealed a good bit about their past, Will noting that he was raised by his aunt and uncle near Shreveport, and Cindy mentioning, without explaining why, that she was estranged from her family. Both hoped to go to college.

The weather had calmed down considerably. When they noticed that fact, the conversation returned to the incident in the ditch. Cindy knew that Will was getting better

focus, but the nurse had also told her not to let him sleep until he was steady on his feet, which he was not.

“As long as I live, I will never forget being upside down over Texas.” Cindy shuddered. “I’ve never been so frightened, so surprised, so . . .” Cindy was at a loss for words.

“I’ve seen some twisters from a distance,” Will said. “But that one just seemed to pounce on me. We’re both fortunate to survive. Do you think that was a miracle?” Will knew Aunt Rita would say it was.

Cindy had not thought in those terms. “I don’t know. What is a miracle anyway? And how would we know if we experienced one?”

“I guess a miracle would be a vary rare, possibly unique, event. I doubt that many folks have flown upside down over Texas in a Rabbit,” Will replied with a smile.

“Yeah, but tornadoes do lots of odd things. I saw a picture of a piece of straw driven through a telephone pole in an old *Life* magazine,” Cindy said. “I doubt that that happened more than once, but that doesn’t make it a miracle. And don’t Catholics think a miracle occurs every time someone takes communion? So, miracles can be frequent as well.”

“That’s true,” Will said. “And when I visited a Pentecostal church once, they had miracles every time a worshipper was seized with the spirit, had a fit, or talked in tongues.”

“Maybe a miracle is something that goes against nature, a violation of a law of nature.” Cindy was ready to move on to another definition. “And does a miracle have to be a good thing, a benefit to someone?”

Will, who was enjoying the conversation, wondered how to think about a law of nature. “If a law of nature is a regularity that never varies, then there can’t be miracles. By definition, any violation would only show that the purported law is not a law. On the other hand, if a law of nature is just a regularity that occurs under normal circumstances, then God’s stepping in would mean that circumstances were not normal. So once again, there would be no violation of the law.”

Cindy, whose mouth was full of pizza, nodded her assent. “Does a miracle have to be a good thing?” she asked after she swallowed. “I thought so until I remembered that in the Bible, the devil often brought about visions and miraculous events that were not beneficial, Job’s boils for instance. So I think we have to throw out beneficial along with violation of a law of nature. A miracle,” Cindy speculated, “is an event brought about by a magical being. It may be rare, common, in accord with nature or not, and beneficial or not.”

Will liked this definition and admired Cindy's ability to state it clearly and succinctly. He had no idea God was listening until he laid back on the bed to ease his head, which was beginning to throb.

"I was wondering if you would get there," God announced. "Congratulations. You know, the way some people think about miracles makes being a god easy. You get thanked for every good thing that happens and every bad thing that happens is blamed on someone else."

Will thought their last definition was right, but Cindy was not done with the inquiry.

"And how would we know when we have a miracle?" she asked.

Will was impressed. So was God.

"Good question," Will said. "Perhaps we have a miracle when God, or the supernatural being, tells us it's a miracle. But no, God telling us it's a miracle would itself seem to count as a miracle, and by this method we could not know that God was speaking to us unless God told us he was telling us and so on forever."

When Cindy got up to get some Aspirin for Will, God chuckled. "Even a presumably infinite being could never complete an infinite series, and *you* are merely finite. So I guess you never can know whether something is a miracle or not."

"It makes me doubt that there's any reliable way to tell if something is a miracle," Cindy continued after returning with the Aspirin. "People disagree about what counts as a miracle. They like to claim miracles that suit their religious agenda. I don't recall hearing about a grilled cheese sandwich that displayed the face of Allah, probably because grilled cheese is a part of the American diet and not something served in Saudi Arabia."

"As for human testimony," Will added, "the temptation to claim access to God's plans seems to be too much for many. Besides, we're way too inclined to believe amazing events and urban myths." Will was including himself in those so tempted.

Both Cindy and Will had enjoyed matching wits. However, Cindy looked alarmed suddenly. "Will, have you seen Ham? His cage door is open, and I don't see him anywhere near it."

They both searched the room, but Ham was nowhere to be found.

"Let's just sit quietly and listen," Will said. Cindy sat on the edge of the bed while Will rested his head. Soon, they both heard a grinding noise. Cindy opened the bedside table drawer, and there was Ham, well on his way to demolishing a second Gideon Bible. Cindy put Ham back in his cage with his new trophy.

Settling in on the bed, Cindy's face took on a serious affect. "Will, I have a big, big favor to ask of you. Think carefully about what I'm about to say. I hate to do this when you've been injured, but I think your mind is back enough for you to make a decision."

She paused and took a deep breath. "I called home when I went out for pizza. No one answered, so I called the hospital. They told me that my mom is also hospitalized now and in and out of consciousness. I'm a little low on funds, but I have gas money. I've checked on buses, trains, and planes. They're either too slow or too expensive. My car is a wreck, I'm out of time, and I need to make a beeline for Ohio. So, what I am asking is . . . can I borrow your truck and drive straight through? I will take good care of it and return it to you. You've only known me a few hours, so I know it's a lot to ask."

As Cindy sat there looking miserable, Will thought about his own resources. He also thought Cindy might well have saved his life when he was so disoriented on the highway. "I could give you the truck and what cash I can spare so you can drive to Ohio. I can still get to my job on time."

"I hate being so constrained by events," Cindy said.

"But it's clearly the best plan for you at this point," Will replied. He thought for a minute. "Maybe I should drive you and call the theme park to say I'll be late for work." Somehow, it felt wrong to be late for his first real job though.

"Absolutely not," Cindy said. "You have time to take a bus across Texas and begin work. It's a sweet offer, but no. Besides, I really feel like it's my duty to take care of this if I can just get there. I've been dealing with this mess at home off and on for years. You and I might have something if we had more time. But I don't want to start a relationship—if we're going to have one—by plunging you into my dysfunctional family."

Cindy told Will in more detail what had happened in her senior year. She thought it was only fair to provide that information before he decided whether or not to loan her his truck. What Will saw in Cindy's confession was her determination and strength. He thought she had been treated unfairly, to say the least. Girls in his high school had gotten pregnant and not been thrown out because of it. He knew that Uncle John had cautioned the parents of some of these girls against acting rashly and destroying a family. Will had never met anyone so close to his own age who was so self-assured and capable of taking control of her life.

"Take the truck, and take care of yourself, too," Will said with feeling.

Cindy's eyes filled with tears. "Will, I'll take good care of your truck, and I'll pay back every dime. I need to be on the road—now." She paused. "How was I so lucky to land on you?"

She leaned against his chest, and he wrapped her in his arms. They remained that way for some time. The afternoon came and went, and the first coolness of evening found them still entwined in bed. Both had slept briefly. Will had never experienced such a feeling of intimacy; he wanted the afternoon to last forever.

Cindy felt secure with Will. She thought he was handsome and gentle. “Will, I want you to know that I like you and . . . dammit, I want a rain check with you. I promise I won’t hold your truck for ransom. But can we promise to reconnect in the future, spend some time together, and keep in touch in the meantime? I will see you again, even if I have to track you down in west Texas.”

Will was feeling unfamiliar emotions; Cindy had already found a place in his heart. He held her tighter. “I must see you again, I . . .” Will hesitated, worried about getting the hiccups at this precious moment. “I really want to have more time with you.”

Since neither really had words for what was happening, and because of the urgency of Cindy’s mission, they said no more. Cindy collected her things and prepared to leave.

Cindy made Will walk around the room a few times to test his strength. When she was satisfied, Will called the bus line to get prices and connections. They divided their money, and Cindy left in Will’s truck. Each carefully stashed addresses and phone numbers. Will had a cell phone, but Cindy had lost her recharger in the tornado, so she would be out of touch until she could recharge. She had to save what battery was left to call home. Will never wanted to stay with anyone so badly in his life. And Cindy, whose concern for her parents had increased along with her affection for Will, wanted to tuck him into the cab with her.

As Cindy drove away, Will felt very alone; he was stranded, almost broke, and far from his destination. He wanted to call home but feared he would start to cry and his aunt and uncle would decide to come pick him up.

“I was wrong,” God said, trying for humor. “You kept your wallet and lost the truck.”

After an interval of talking to Ham and feeling sorry for himself, Will decided to call his future employer to see if someone could pick him up at the bus station in Amarillo. He was able to connect directly with Reverend Shister. After a stumbling explanation of his situation, the Reverend interrupted.

“Will, don’t worry about getting here right away. We have a labor dispute going on, and I doubt we will open until mid to late summer. Give me a call in a month, and let’s see where we are then.”

“What happened to cause the delay?”

“It’s a long story. I only hire Christian workers, actually, Protestant Christians who’ve been born again. I have a right to hire only true believers under the faith-based initiative that is indirectly funding this project through the Texas Commission on Tourism. I also use a lot of prison labor out here, but I saw these two guys cross themselves when the scaffolding they were on almost collapsed, so I fired them for being Catholic. The problem is, the other workers walked off the job, because the two Catholics are in the same union as them. That was a week ago. I’m negotiating with a prison right now for some new workers. So hang in there, and I will see you in four to six weeks.”

Now Will’s predicament was much worse. He was not only stranded, nearly broke, and a long way from his destination, there was no job in his immediate future. Shister’s story about the Catholic workers torpedoed Will’s excitement about his future employment. He thought of calling Cindy back, but she had been on the road for a couple of hours. That’s when he saw a flier in the window of the motel. “Christian Lifestyle Fair – Hiring Workers.” He called the number on the poster right away.

God chuckled. “Let’s hope for a miracle.”

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