

A LARGE, BEARDED MAN

By David C. Williams

"Willy!" exclaimed Samantha, happily, to no one in particular, responding to a scene on the TV. She sat in the easy chair in the living room of her parent's home, at two o'clock in the afternoon, watching "Duddle's Friends", a children's show. She was all alone in the house.

Samantha spent this afternoon, like all her afternoons, watching TV. Originally she tried to watch soap operas, but somehow the badly acted drama, adventure and love had irritated her in a way that she couldn't explain. So long ago she had switched to children's shows whose contents she found perfectly safe. She now planned her afternoon around them.

Duddle's friends featured puppets, adults, and guest children in short skits. Willy was a furry, blue-orange puppet and was Samantha's favorite character. Willy was presented on the show as a child who was always doing

something fun and getting into trouble. Unlike the other puppets on the show, he would never talk down to the children. He would present even the usual boring spelling and math lessons with a totally silly, yet carefree, style.

Willy had just made his appearance, about ten minutes into the show. "Ha Ha! Hi Everyone!" he cried, in his squeaky voice, to the TV camera.

"Hello Willy!" replied Samantha, with a smile.

"Let's play a counting game," said Willy, with a type of bizarre enthusiasm, as he pointed to the pictures that now just appeared on the screen.

"One, two, and three!" Samantha counted along, absentmindedly. As Willy continued his lesson, Samantha's mind wandered. She began to dream about her senior year in high school.

Thinking back, Samantha knew that she was not a bad student, but not a great one either. She found most of the lessons tedious, and even more boring than the afternoon she spent these days watching TV. What she did miss from school was her friends Jane and Rachel. After classes the three of them would go to the downtown mall, walk up and down looking in the store windows, chat about the clothes people wore, what other students were doing in school, or their parent's latest complaints.

Now Jane and Rachel are gone. They had both left to join separate universities. She rarely heard from either.

Thinking about her old friends made Samantha restless, and after the Dudley's friends show, she went up to her room to check her e-mail. As she opened the door to enter, she felt the musty smell from her bed and laundry escape out the doorway. Inside, she walked on a path through the clothes tossed carelessly on the floor to reach her desk. She took a moment to

straighten out a Willy dolly on her dresser, ignoring the faded rock star poster nearby whose corner has partially peeled from the wall.

"Oh God!" she thought, looking at the mess of her room, remembering that she promised her mother last week that she would clean it up. She lifted a finger and slowly poked the Willy doll on the nose. "Maybe I can clean up tomorrow?" she asked. Willy declined to reply. "Well, maybe," she said, with a sullen voice, now to no one in particular. Turning toward her desk, she sat down and faced the computer.

Samantha hit the keyboard and heard the familiar whine as the machine woke up. She usually waited until after dinner to check her mail, but she sent a message to Jane last week and was anxious to hear a reply. She pressed the "check mail" button and waited patiently while the computer dialed in.

"Dong!" came the familiar noise. "No messages" she read on the screen. She sighed.

After surfing around a little on the web without finding anything interesting, Samantha came back downstairs to play a video game in the living room. She continued playing even when she heard the familiar grinding sound behind the wall from the garage door opening, only glancing up quickly at the clock to check the time. Twenty past five. Her mother was exactly on time, as usual.

She heard the thump of a car door closing, and soon after, the squeak from the kitchen door swinging open and close. "Hello!" cried her mother, quite unnecessarily, since the clonk-clonk of her foot steps on the kitchen's vinyl floor made her presence very clear. Samantha didn't reply, choosing instead to concentrate on her video game.

Twenty minutes later, after losing a round in her game, she stopped to pause, sighed, and put the game controller down. She turned the TV off, and the living room went very quiet. The only sound from the house was the drone of the TV from the kitchen where she knew her mother was making dinner. She got up and walked over. Her mother, dressed in a sweat pants and a tee shirt, was reaching over the sink, peeling potatoes.

"What's for dinner?" Samantha asked, giving her mother a quick hug from behind.

"Hello Sam. We're having ham casserole. Did anyone call?"

"No," Samantha answered. No one ever calls, she thought. She reached up into the cabinet to get a glass, then filled it with milk from the fridge. Sitting down at the kitchen table to finish her drink, she watched her mother cook, studying her figure, which was a thin and shapely as Samantha always remembered since she was a little girl, despite all of the time that has passed, and even after the divorce five years earlier.

Samantha finished her milk, licking her lips automatically. She mused about her mother for a moment more while staring at the small white film at the bottom of the glass, turning the cup around in her hands. Suddenly and impulsively, dismissing her thoughts, she got up, placed the glass in the dishwasher, and made her way back up to her room.

She checked her computer, only to be disappointed again. She got up to check herself in the mirror, studying her face intently, as if searching for something in her eyes. Her face reminded her of her mother downstairs. With a sigh, she picked up a few pieces of clothes on the floor, bringing them one by one up to her nose to smell, and carried what she thought were the dirty

ones out to the hamper in the bathroom. She then returned to her room, and satisfied with the incremental improvement in its condition, she turned on the radio, lied down on her bed, and stared at the ceiling.

Her mother called her down for dinner forty minutes later. They ate together as usual at the small table in the kitchen. The meal started in silence.

After taking a few bites, Samantha asked. "How was work?"

A sudden scowl appeared on her mother's face. "Oh, you wouldn't believe it! It drives me crazy!"

"What?"

"My Boss, Mr. Cramer. He makes me so mad." She shook her head and looked down at her plate. After a short pause, she looked back up at Samantha.

Samantha raised her eyebrows, urging her mother to continue.

After a moment, her mother relented. "Tomorrow the monthly reports were due," she said, "and so I asked Cramer if he had finished. He looked surprised, the idiot. I told him last week they were due."

"So what?" Samantha answered.

"Well, last month they were late and he told Flaughter that it was \*my\* fault, the jerk. So I made \*sure\* he knew this time. And he still wasn't ready! And now I will probably have to work through lunch tomorrow to type it up. Jerk."

"Mr. Cramer is such a dolt. He's always doing this stuff. Why don't you just tell Mr. Flaughter?"

"What?" Her mother looked at Samantha like she was dumb. "Oh, I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"You don't. Look. Flaughter is the CEO. My boss's boss. If I went over his head, well."

"Well, what?"

She signed. "You don't understand. This is business. You don't do that kind of thing."

"It doesn't sound fair."

"No." And then, after a short pause, "But enough about that crap. Have you heard from Jane?"

"No."

Her mother looked disappointed. "Oh, well. She is probably busy. You know. New city. New friends."

"Yeah."

Her mother sucked in her cheeks and looked straight into her daughter's eyes. Samantha braced herself for a lecture.

"Look Sam, I don't want to say it again—"

"Yeah. I know. I know." Samantha peeled her eyes off her mother to look at her glass. Even though it was still mostly full, she reached over to grab the pitcher on the table to fill it further. There was a little awkward silence as she took a sip from the glass.

"Okay, well," her mother said. "You need a little time. A break. I understand. No hurry."

Exasperated, Samantha responded, "Well, maybe you should be looking for a job."

Her mother laughed. "Oh, well, maybe I should. But we were talking about you. You know I worry. I try to be patient."

"I know Mom. I know."

"Speaking of which, did you clean your room?"

"Mother!"

"Well, heaven knows what you spend your time doing here all day. Could you find the time to clean your room?"

"Yes Mom. Tomorrow."

"You promise."

"Yes. Yes. Yes. I'll do it. Okay?"

Samantha got up with her plate, dumped the remaining food on it into the sink, and walked over to the dishwasher to put it away. Her mother sat at the table, sitting, watching, as Samantha finished with the rest of the dishes. When Samantha was done, she went up to her room to check her e-mail, closing the door behind.

A few hours later Samantha came downstairs to join her mother watching the ten o'clock news in the living room. Her mother sat in the easy chair as usual. Her favorite coffee cup, the large one with pictures of cats and dogs, sat empty on a coaster on the side table. Although the news was on the TV, she sat reading a romance novel, engrossed. Samantha took her usual place on the sofa.

"Oh, Sam," said her mother, lifting her eyes just briefly from her book, "you'll want to see this. They're interviewing Willy. The puppet."

"Oh really?" Samantha asked. Her mother didn't answer, but the TV did, showing, as the news often did, a splashy summary of the upcoming news seg-

ments. "Meet Willy!" the news show promised, flashing a picture of the puppet, before switching to a commercial. A few minutes later, the news show continued.

The familiar newscaster appeared on the screen at her usual desk, but next to her was Willy the puppet, with his squeaky voice. Samantha found the juxtaposition jarring. The puppet looked completely out of place, like a tourist, or a lost child in a sports bar. And he acted funny, answering questions about "Duddle's Friends", how it was produced, and how it was originally conceived. Samantha shifted uneasily on the sofa.

Suddenly, on the TV, Willy stood up, grew taller, impossibly tall, until his head soared above the anchor desk like the branch of a moss-covered tree. And then he just ended, suddenly. And out of the bottom his long furry blue body stretched a hairy, bare arm. And as the arm was raised, a man came into view. The man was large, both tall and wide, with a long black beard, wearing a red tee shirt with the Duddle show logo in front. He put Willy, now inanimate, down behind him, like a discarded piece of rubbish. Samantha was appalled.

"Oh my god! How can they do that?" Samantha said, in a rush.

"Do what?" her mother asked, still reading her book.

"Kill Willy!"

"Kill?" her mother finally looked up, resting the book in her lap. "Oh, look, the puppeteer."

"I can't believe they did that!"

"I always wondered what he looked like."

"What about the kids?"



"A big guy isn't he."

Samantha brought her hand to her mouth, covering it. "I can't believe they did that!"

"Oh Sam! He's a puppet!"

"He's Willy!" exclaimed Samantha.

"Ssh! Listen" urged her mother, as the interview continued. The puppeteer continued to answer questions, acting very much like an ordinary person, to Samantha's confusion, and talking in a deep voice. He seemed like a happy man, and joked with the newscaster. After a few questions, he reached back, and then sank, like a submarine, under the desk. Once again, there was Willy.

"I can't believe they did that." Samantha said, quietly. Her mother had long since gone back to her book.

Samantha arose late the next morning, as been her habit lately, to the bright light of the morning, tinted yellow by the curtains in her room. She left her window and her door closed last night, and so she woke this morning feeling a little suffocated and stale. The clutter in her room surrounded her from her bed, looking no better from her halfhearted attempts at cleaning the previous day. As she sat up, her eyes rested on the Willy doll on her dresser. The interview last night on TV came back to her in a flash.

"Crap" she said.

She got up, picked up the doll, and, not sure of what to do, she placed it back down in the same place. She then picked up a shirt from the floor, and tried to decide if it was clean or not, and couldn't. "Crap!" she said again, this time louder. She then started picking up all the clothes, struck by a strange sense of urgency, piling them up and tossing them outside, both

clean and dirty. Outside she started shoving the clothes in the hamper in the bathroom, and when that filled up, she lugged the hamper out of the bathroom and tossed the clothes in the washing machine. Once most of the floor was free, she rushed around the room, searching under the furniture. "Ah ha!" she exclaimed each time she found a long lost piece of laundry, pulling it free, and tossing it outside.

Finally she could find no more clothes. Still wearing her sleeping clothes, now covered in dust and standing on her feet, she looked around her room with her arms on her waist, like a super hero, after a conquest. And then she saw the dusty, old posters on the wall, and she suddenly felt mad. "Crap! Crap! Crap!" she said, as she walked up to each poster, tearing them down, heedless of their condition. Once the posters were gone, she took the knickknacks and toys scattered around the room and threw them unmercifully into the closet, and tossed the trash she found under the bed into the waste basket with an odd vindictive glee. And when she was finished, when nothing was left, she placed Willy, now dusted and clean, alone on top of the pristine dresser, like the emperor on his throne.

For a long time she sat on her bed, staring at the room, restless, but now with nothing more to do. "Better!" she said. And then she finally got up to take her morning shower and dress.

Downstairs, on the kitchen table, she ate her breakfast cereal. On the edge of the table, where her mother always left it, was the morning paper. Although she saw it each and every day, she had always ignored it. Today, however, she chose to pick and tug at the paper, eventually pulling out a particular section. Pushing her cereal bowl aside, she opened the sheets of

paper, and started reading, with rapt concentration, biting her lip. After reading a few pages, and still huddled over the print, she uttered a quiet word, "Maybe."