

INTO THE STORM

**A man is drowning in a ferocious storm.
It's up to 12-year-old Tucker Willis to save him.**

By Eleanora E. Tate
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I want to tell you about a boy I knew who lived in Morehead City, North Carolina, named Tucker Willis. He lived by Calico Creek where it narrows down to marsh grass, flounder, and fiddler crabs. It's not far from the back side of the Morehead City Port, where the big ships come in from the Atlantic Ocean.

Everybody liked Tucker. He was good at nearly everything he put his hand to. But when he turned 12, he was still so short he looked like an elf. And you know how it is when you're a little different—even in some harmless kind of way. Kids called him Squirt, Shrimp, Inchworm.

I thought Tucker was the cutest thing in the world. **1 But to him back then I was ole knock-kneed LaShana Mae, the girl who lived down the street.** I was a few years younger. We were friends, though, and went to the same school and the same church—St. Luke's Missionary Baptist.

Back in those days—in the 1970s—I was just a skinny girl with braids and braces. Kids called me Wires and that infuriated me. So Tucker and I had a lot in common; we often talked about the things kids called us, especially when we went fishing. Even though being called those names hurt, Tucker laughed it off. He was a tough little dude.

But one day, Tucker did something that made everybody stop calling him names he didn't like.

Before I tell you what changed things around, you need to know a few things about this boy.

Tucker could do anything that any other kid his age could do. He was

a hotshot shortstop on the Little League team. He could jump like a flea on the basketball court. He was smart in school. He was in the Boy Scouts. He could swim like a fish and surf. He got teased about surfing, because not many black kids we knew surfed. As much as we all loved the water, not a whole lot of us even knew how to swim. I didn't. Not until Tucker taught me later on.

Tucker looked like a Tootsie Roll to me in that big ocean. Yeah, I had a name for him too. I called him Tootsie Roll, but never to his face. I just kept it to myself. When I called him that in my head, I didn't mean it in a bad way.

Tucker liked to fish on the little pier alongside his house. In the summer, he'd lie on his stomach and catch the biggest flounder to come out of Calico Creek. Sometimes we'd fish together on his pier, and I wouldn't catch anything—not a pinfish, not a lizard fish, nothing. But Tootsie Roll always did.

He and his dad or mom would fish out on their little pier all night sometimes, with a lantern for light. I never fished out there at night because the mosquitoes and gnats would eat me up. Plus, my momma liked to tell me that they used to do baptizing in that creek. That

was OK, but then Momma'd say, "LaShana Mae, you watch out about being around that creek by yourself at night. The people who got baptized there and who've passed on come back to that creek as spirits in the middle of the night when the moon's full. They'll be singing and celebrating, and they don't want to be disturbed."

Me being a scared little kid, you can believe that Momma didn't have to worry about me going out to Calico Creek by myself at night. But sometimes I'd go to my window and look out to see if anybody was celebrating the way she said. All I ever saw were grown folks fishing. Sometimes somebody would holler when they caught a big one. After I grew up, I understood that Momma told me that story to keep me out of trouble. She was worried I'd drown.

Anyway, what happened to change the name-calling began when Tucker was on his pier fishing. He noticed a man on the Moten Motel dock a few yards away. The man had a thick white mustache and beard and wore a blue-and-gold military-style jacket and cap. I wasn't there, so I didn't see him, but that's what Tucker told me.

The man waved. Tucker, being friendly, waved back. They struck up a conversation. The man said his name was Richard and that he was staying at the motel. His home was in Manteo, on Roanoke Island, on the Outer Banks, where he worked with the U.S. Life-Saving Service.

Tucker figured what Richard meant was that he worked for the

U.S. Coast Guard. **2 Tucker was extremely knowledgeable about the Coast Guard, but he had never heard of this Life-Saving Service.**

Tucker asked the man if he liked to fish. Richard said yes. He'd been a commercial fisherman before he became a captain in the Life-Saving Service. As a lifesaver, he said, he and his men went into the ocean in the middle of hurricanes to save passengers and crewmembers whose ships were sinking.

Anything relating to water fascinated Tucker, so he must've asked Richard a million questions. Richard didn't mind; he said he rarely got to talk to kids much anymore.

Richard explained that to be in the Life-Saving Service, you had to be strong, an exceptional swimmer, a quick thinker, in good physical health, have good eyesight, and understand how perilous the sea can be. He told so many stories about lifesaving that Tucker wished he could enlist right away, and he said so. He had the right qualifications—other than being too young, of course.

3 And too short.

Richard told him it wasn't the size of a person that got the job done. It was how much the person wanted to do it. How were those huge ships able to move into the Morehead City Port and back out to sea? Most couldn't do it without little tugboats pushing and pulling them in, Richard said. A tugboat could bring in a ship many times its size.

Richard said that Tucker would make an excellent tugboat, and one

day might even grow to be a big ship. Then he thanked Tucker for the conversation, said maybe they'd meet again, and wandered back toward the motel.

A few days later, Tucker decided to go fishing at the Atlantic Beach pier. His dad worked there as a cook. For some reason I couldn't go. I've always wished I had. Tucker said he took his surfboard too, in case fishing got slow.

It was early morning, but a hot July wind blew in from the southwest, making the waves choppy and sandy. Tucker said only one guy was in the water, floating on a red raft like a huge jellyfish.

An hour passed and Tucker hadn't gotten a bite, so he left his rod and reel with his father in the pier restaurant's kitchen and went surfing. After he swam out far enough, he climbed onto his surfboard and rode a wave in. When he glanced back at the pier, guess who he saw? Richard, on the pier, clapping for him. This time Richard had on shorts and a regular shirt.

"Do it, Tugboat!" Richard hollered. "Pull that wave in!"

Tugboat? Tucker said he frowned until he remembered Richard's story about tugboats. So he waved back and swam out to pull in another wave, passing the man on the raft.

4 The man said, "You're little to be way out here, ain't ya, Squirt?"

Tucker shook his head and kept going. He pulled

1 POINT OF VIEW

This sentence tells you who the narrator is. But who is the main character? How do you know?



2 TEXT STRUCTURE

Why is this detail important?

3 CHARACTER

How does Tucker feel about being short? What details so far make you think so?



4 TEXT STRUCTURE

How does this comment relate to what happens later?



in four more waves until he noticed a tall purple thunderhead rising up on the southwest horizon. That cloud meant a storm was probably on its way, but Tucker figured he had at least half an hour before the wind kicked up and the rain began. Tucker wasn't afraid of anything, but his common sense and his folks had told him to always stay away from water when storms and lightning came along. It's hard to get grown without having common sense, because being stupid can get you killed sometimes.

Keeping an eye on the horizon, Tucker went on pulling in those waves until a huge one arched up behind his back and crashed down on him. Tucker disappeared.

Wipeout.

No big deal for Tucker, though. He popped right up in the water and grabbed his board, which was tied to his ankle. He was all right. But the man on the raft wasn't. He thrashed around in the water screaming that he couldn't swim.

As that big black cloud spread across the sky, the wind and waves grew rougher. Wanting to help the man but concerned about his own safety, Tucker hesitated, then straddled his surfboard and, using his hands for oars, paddled toward the raft. He'd have time to bring the guy's raft back to him and then head in. But as Tucker passed, the man lunged at the surfboard in a panic, knocking Tucker off.

Then the guy grabbed hold of Tucker. Tangled up in that big bear's

arms and legs, with the sea getting choppier, Tucker said he knew he was about to die.

Just then, something lifted Tucker up through the water and onto his surfboard, where he was able to catch his breath. That's when he saw his friend Richard in the water too. Richard was hauling that raft toward the man. With two big heaves, Richard snatched the guy straight up out of the water and onto the raft.

"Let's push and pull it, Tugboat!" Richard yelled. "Push and pull it in!"

Somehow Tucker and Richard pushed and pulled that raft—**5 with the guy glued to it**—close enough to shore that the man was able to wade in the rest of the way. Four or five people splashed into the water and helped them onto the beach and into the pier house. One of the helpers was a reporter on vacation.

As soon as everybody was inside, the rain poured down. An arrow of lightning whizzed across the pier into the water and lit up the whole ocean. That's when Tucker said he got scared, seeing that lightning. He'd have been fried alive.

The guy Tucker rescued was named Mr. Nibbles. He was so grateful that he gave Tucker 100 dollars right on the spot.

The reporter interviewed everybody and took pictures of Tucker, Nibbles, and Tucker's dad, who almost had a heart attack when he heard what happened. When the reporter asked how such a small boy was able to rescue a big, grown man,

Tucker said, "'Cause I'm a tugboat, like Richard said. We pull the big ones in."

But when he turned to point out Richard, Tucker couldn't find him.

The reporter's story about Tucker's rescue appeared in the local paper, then got picked up by the Associated Press and went all over the world. CBS News flew him and his folks to New York to be on its morning show. Afterward, back home in Morehead City, strangers stopped Tucker on the street, in stores, even came to his home. They wanted to meet the little "tugboat" that hauled in that big man and get his autograph.

Businesses up and down Arendell Street put up WELCOME HOME, TUGBOAT! posters in their windows. And there was a parade. Tucker was a hero. He and the mayor rode on the back of a big ole white Cadillac convertible and waved at everybody. I was so proud that I almost forgot and hollered, "Way to go, Tootsie Roll!" but I caught myself in time.

Everybody—even local folks—called him Tugboat after that, including us kids. We'd never seen a real hero close-up before, especially one our age. It wasn't cool anymore to tease him with those other names. Funny how things can turn around, isn't it?

And you know what? Tucker grew to be tall. He went to North Carolina Central University, joined the U.S. Coast Guard,

and lives in Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, on the Outer Banks.

But there's something Tucker never figured out.

When he first told people that Richard was the true hero, nobody believed him. Apparently nobody but Tucker had seen Richard—not even Mr. Nibbles.

There's more.

When Tucker went into the pier gift shop to spend some of his rescue money, he picked up a book about the Coast Guard. He was thumbing through it when he stopped at an old-timey picture of some black men wearing jackets like Richard's. They were standing in front of a building on the Outer Banks. Below was a picture of . . . *Richard*. Mustache, beard, jacket, everything!

Tucker read, "History of the Pea Island Life-Saving Service. Captain Richard Etheridge was keeper of the Pea Island Life-Saving Service, a forerunner of part of what is now the U.S. Coast Guard. This unique, all African-American, courageous lifesaving crew, and those who followed, saved hundreds of shipwrecked passengers' lives by plunging into stormy seas and bringing their charges to safety."

Tucker said he shot out of that gift shop toward the restaurant to show his dad the book to prove his case, but what he read next made him stop: "Captain Etheridge, born in 1842 near Roanoke Island in North Carolina, died in 1900."

Tucker said he probably read that date 20 times before it sank in.

Richard Etheridge had been dead for nearly 100 years. How was it possible that a dead man had helped Tucker save Mr. Nibbles?

6 Unless Richard was a ghost.

Tucker hit up the library the next day and searched for anything he could find on Richard Etheridge. There wasn't much, but what he did discover was that Richard Etheridge was all those great things he had read about and that he really did die in 1900.

A few years later, when Tucker's folks visited the North Carolina Aquarium on Roanoke Island, Tucker found Etheridge's monument and grave. The headstone was marked 1842-1900. **7 That's when Tucker stopped talking about Richard being involved in the rescue—unless somebody asked.**

If you run into Tucker "Tugboat" Willis, ask him about the rescue, and he'll tell you. Then, carefully, ask if he ever met Richard Etheridge. He'll tell you yes, he did, and what he learned: that it pays to be polite to everybody you meet. You never know when that person might help you.

Every time Tucker tells me the story, he tells it to me the same way I told it to you. **8 Seeing how Tucker turned out proves that some mighty things that help folks out in some mighty big ways can come in mighty small packages.**

It also proves that good things come to those who wait, like I did. I know, because I'm Mrs. LaShana Mae Willis, Tugboat's wife. ●



5 WORD CHOICE

How does "glued to" help you picture this scene?



6 MOOD

Many ghost stories are spooky. Is this story spooky? Explain.

7

INFERENCE

Why did Tucker stop talking about Richard?

8

INFERENCE

Explain what LaShana Mae means.



Saved From Disaster

How a team of heroes rescued the passengers and crew of a sinking ship

By Kristin Lewis

October 11, 1896, brought one of the worst hurricanes North Carolina had ever seen. Fierce winds whipped the waters into a roiling frenzy. Thundering waves **pummeled** the shore in explosions of foam. And in the distance, the *E.S. Newman* was sinking—fast.

The desperate crew and passengers prepared to die. But that would not be their fate. Because a man named Richard Etheridge was determined to save them.

Sinking Ships

Etheridge was born into slavery on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. During the Civil War, he fought for the North.

After the war, he returned to the Outer Banks and trained as a surfman in the Life-Saving Service. At the time, surfmen were stationed along the East and West coasts, tasked with spotting sinking ships and saving their crews and passengers. (The Life-Saving Service later became part of the U.S. Coast Guard.) Etheridge had grown up near the water, fishing and boating, and knew the tides and currents well.

In 1880, Etheridge was promoted to keeper of the Pea Island Life-Saving Station, meaning he would lead his own team of surfmen. But not everyone supported the promotion. Though by this time slavery had been outlawed in the U.S., racial prejudice and



Captain Richard Etheridge (far left) and his Pea Island Life-Saving Station crew, circa 1896

discrimination against African-Americans remained strong. The white surfmen on Etheridge's team quit in protest. And his Life-Saving Service station was burned to the ground by a group who thought a black man should not hold such a high position.

Yet Etheridge refused to give up. He went on to lead the first all African-American team of surfmen. They were stationed along a dangerous stretch of coastline known as the Graveyard of the Atlantic because so many ships had sunk there. Etheridge and his surfmen soon earned a reputation for being one of the most courageous and disciplined teams in the country.

Even so, the Pea Island surfmen were ignored by history. That is, until 1996, when the U.S. Coast Guard **posthumously** awarded Etheridge and his surfmen the **prestigious** Gold Lifesaving Medal.

So what happened to the crew of the *E.S. Newman*?

Despite the **perilous** conditions, Etheridge's team charged into the churning ocean waters in the middle of the hurricane—risking their lives. And they brought all nine people on board the *E.S. Newman* safely to shore. ●

Writing Contest

What does Tucker have in common with Richard Etheridge? Answer this question in a well-organized essay. Use text evidence. Send your response to **Tucker Contest**. Five winners will each get a signed copy of *The Secret of Gumbo Grove* by Eleanora E. Tate.

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