

LYNDA RUTLEDGE

AUTHOR OF FAITH BASS DARLING'S LAST GARAGE SALE

*West*  
With  
*Giraffes*

*A Novel*



West  
With  
Giraffes

*West* A Novel  
*With*  
*Giraffes*

**LYNDA RUTLEDGE**

LAKE UNION  
PUBLISHING

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*To the real hurricane giraffes*

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Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul  
remains unawakened.

—Anatole France, Nobel Laureate, 1921

The admirablest and fairest beast ever I sawe was a  
jarraff . . . prince of all the beasts.

—John Sanderson, traveler, 1595



# New York World-Telegram

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SEPTEMBER 22, 1938

## MIRACLE GIRAFFES RIDE HURRICANE AT SEA

NEW YORK—Sept. 22 (Special edition). After riding through The Great Hurricane that decimated the Eastern Seaboard yesterday, the SS *Robin Goodfellow* limped into New York Harbor this morning along with two giraffes left for dead . . .



**Compiled from Sep. 23, 1938, news reports**

. . . In one of the few accounts ever recorded of hurricane survival at sea, the merchant marine freighter SS *Robin Goodfellow* rode straight into this week's cataclysmic storm off the coast of Haiti. Witnesses describe swells blocking out the sky, fish swimming in the air, and winds whipping waves into water spouts as seamen caught on deck helplessly watched one snatch a crewman into the void. Crawling to the hold where their mates pulled them in, they had no choice but to abandon two crated Baringo giraffes to face the hurricane's full force . . . Within minutes the ship

went into a half-roll starboard and stayed that way for 6 hours of pelting waves and winds, abruptly righting itself as the hurricane passed. On deck, all seemed lost save for one battered giraffe still standing in its lashed crate, its companion's crushed crate found in debris jammed sideways against the ship rail with only the gigantic beast's lifeless head in view. But as the crew gathered to push the carcass overboard, the downed giraffe stirred and opened its eyes . . .



Few true friends have I known and two were giraffes . . .

—Woodrow Wilson Nickel

# PROLOGUE

*Woodrow Wilson Nickel died in the year 2025, on a usual day, in the usual way, at the rather unusual age of 105.*

*A century and a nickel.*

*The young VA hospital long-term care liaison assigned to dispatch his worldly possessions to survivors—which in Woodrow Wilson Nickel’s case was an ancient military footlocker and no survivors at all—stood in his vacant room. Determined to keep on schedule, she checked the time. Her job made her feel like some Gatekeeper of Things Left Behind, especially with centenarians gone long before their hearts stopped beating. They were the only ones with footlockers anymore. And old footlockers with nowhere to go were the worst, their contents full of mortal meaning departed with the departed as if she could actually see the past vanish into thin air. So she took a deep breath and opened the old trunk, expecting to find the usual musty uniforms and faded photographs.*

*Instead she found a giraffe.*

*The footlocker was full of ruled writing pads, dozens of them, stacked in bundles bound with twine. Perched on top with a yellowed newspaper article was the giraffe, a tiny antique porcelain souvenir from the San Diego Zoo. Despite herself, she smiled wistfully and picked it up. As a child, she’d seen a whole group of the tall, gentle giants at the zoo before they’d become so horribly rare.*

*Gently setting down the giraffe, she picked up the first batch of pads to move them aside when the top pad’s large old-man scrawl caught her eye. She eased onto the edge of the bed and read it closer:*

Few true friends have I known and two were giraffes, one that didn’t kick me dead and one that saved my worthless orphan life and your worthy, precious one.

They’re both long gone. And soon I’ll be gone, which will be no

great loss to be sure. But the man on the TV just said that soon there'll be no more giraffes in the world at all, gone with the tigers and the elephants and the Old Man's sky-blanketing pigeons. Even as I punched the screen to shut him up, I knew it could be true.

Somehow, though, I know there is still you. And there is still this story that's yours as good as mine. If it goes extinct, too, with my old bag of bones, that'd be a crying shame—*my* shame. Because if ever I could claim to have seen the face of God, it was in the colossal faces of those giraffes. And if ever I should be leaving something behind, it's this story for them and for you.

So, here and now, before it's too late, I am writing it all down on the chance a good soul reads these words and helps them find their way to you.

*With that, the VA liaison untied the first batch and, forgetting all about her schedule, began to read . . .*



... I'm older than dirt.

And when you're older than dirt, you can get lost in time, in memory, even in space.

I'm inside my tiny four-wall room with the feeling that I've been ... gone. I'm not even sure how long I've been sitting here. All night I think, since stirring from my foggy mind to find myself surrounded by other old farts staring at a fancy TV. I remember the man on the screen talking about the last giraffes on earth and rushing over in my wheelchair to punch him. I remember being pushed back here quick and a nurse bandaging my bleeding knuckles.

Then I remember an orderly making me swallow a calm-down pill I didn't want to take.

But that's the last time I'll be doing that. Because right now, pencil in this shaky hand, I aim to write down one singular memory.

Fast as I can.

I could spend what I feel in my bones is my life's last clear hours to tell you of the Dust Bowl. Or the War. Or the French peonies. Or my wives, so many wives. Or the graves, so many graves. Or the goodbyes, so many goodbyes. Those memories come and go here at the end, if they come at all anymore. But not this memory. This memory is always with me, always alive, always within reach, and always in living technicolor from deadly start to bittersweet finish, no matter how old I keep getting. And—Red, Old Man, sweet Wild Boy and Girl—oh, how I miss you.

All I have to do is close my worn-out eyes for the smallest of moments.

And it begins.



# 1

## *New York Harbor*

Boats were flying through the air, streets were flowing like rivers, electric lines were exploding like fireworks, and houses of shrieking people were being blown out to sea—the date was September 21, the day of the Great Hurricane of 1938. The entire coast from New York Harbor to Maine got smacked so hard it was the stuff of legend, seven hundred souls gone to their final reward as wet as mackerels.

Back then, you got no warning. You'd notice a storm over the water and you'd be worrying how bad that cloud looks when the banshee wind and rain hits and you're scrambling for your life. The dock piling I'd wrapped my scrawny young self around got whipped airborne. Next thing I know I'm waking up in a ditch with a tramp yanking on my cowboy boots. Seeing me rise from the dead, he yelped and ran. I was still in one piece somehow, if black, blue, and bloody, with only my suspenders popped off and gone. So as the rest of the living world began hollering for help or hearses, I wiped the dried blood off my face, grabbed hold of my trousers, and struggled to my feet. The boathouse where I'd been standing had blown away along with Cuz, my third-cousin boss. Found him in a shallow pool of boat shards, a sloop's mast stuck straight through him. I wasn't much to look at even before my hurricane-wallop—an overgrown farmboy with a face newly scarred and a neck sporting a birthmark the size of a state fair prize yam—but I sure looked better than Cuz. I'd say I was lucky, but I hadn't had enough of a relationship with the word to use it. I'd say it was the worst day of my life, yet it was already far from it. I can say this. I never thought I'd see a bigger eyeful than that hurricane as long as I lived.

But I was wrong.

Because the last thing you think you're going to see in the middle of flipped boats and buildings afire and bodies dangling and sirens wailing is

a couple of giraffes.

I'd been there not six weeks, Dust Bowl dirt still coating my young rowdy's lungs—and despite my God-fearing ma, that's what I was, a dirt-farm rowdy, pure as a cow pie, cunning as a wild hog, and already well acquainted with the county sheriff, the dust layering my every breath leaving little room for the Holy Spirit to breathe on me. Cuz's bilge-rat boathouse was where I landed after the Dirty Thirties blew so fierce in my corner of the Texas Panhandle that every nester and sharecropper for miles was flung clean off the map. Some like my ma, pa, and baby sister left the hard way, six feet under. Some hit the road with the Okies to California. The rest, like me, headed toward any kin who'd take them in. The only family I had left in the world was an East Coast stranger to me named Cuz, who might as well have been the man in the moon to a seventeen-year-old Panhandle boy. But there's being alone and there's being an orphan alone in an empty wasteland digging graves for all you ever loved with no one to ask for help except the sheriff—which I dared not do for reasons I cannot yet bear to confess.

Sitting there by my ma's, pa's, and baby sister's graves, I let evening turn to morning. Still covered with the dead dirt that had killed us all, I dug up my ma's Mason jar of coins from her withered garden and stumbled dry-eyed toward the highway. Not until a long hauler stopped his truck to ask me where I was headed did I find out I was mute.

“You an Okie?”

I tried to answer. Nothing came out.

“Cat got your tongue, kid?” the driver said.

Still I couldn't spit out a word. Eyeing me good, he jerked a thumb toward his empty truck bed and dumped me at the Muleshoe train station . . . right across from the sheriff's office. I waited for the next train east with one eye back at his door, knowing I was unfit to answer questions he'd surely have if he saw me, and just as the train pulled away, the sheriff strode out to look straight at me looking straight back at him.

Jumpy at every stop after that, I got as far as Chattanooga with my ma's coins. From there, I hopped a boxcar until I saw some tramps fling a bum off the train after stealing his shoes. Then I swiped a motorcycle and rode it until it ran out of gas, snitching food along the way like a stray dog, until I had some snitched from me by a bum with a straight razor. That got me hitching straight to Cuz, where I found myself eye to eye with more water than my thirsty eyes could take in. When Cuz asked me who the hell I was, I had to scrawl my answer with a coal lump on the dock, to which he harrumphed, “Figures I'd get a dumb one, being from that side of the

family,” and put me straight to work for my supper. For forty silent days and nights, I called a moldy cot in the back of the boathouse home. Now I didn’t even have that. Nobody was left to come look for me and nobody was newly dead I’d mourn, Cuz proving himself to be such stone-hearted scum I was already plotting to snatch his cash and run.

Holding up my pants in the hurricane rubble, I stood wobbly over what was left of the man I’d traveled half the USA to find, then reached around the bloody mast pole and picked his dead pockets. When I found nothing but his lucky rabbit’s foot, I started kicking him so full of my own hurricane fury that I kicked myself back to speech—I was kicking and cussing Cuz, the gray sky, the black ocean, the putrid air, my ma’s precious Jesus and his cruel God Almighty Father—until I slipped and landed on my backside, eyes to the drizzling sky. With that, the logjam inside me busted wide, and I lay there sobbing like the lost boy I was.

Finally, I struggled up on my boots again, tied up my trousers with a piece of soggy boat tether, and wandered back to the dock.

There I sat, pure miserable, watching ship after ship limp into harbor. Until I saw the giraffes.

Up the dock, a storm-clobbered freighter was unloading. I don’t remember getting to my feet or moving. I only remember standing in the middle of the freighter’s crew in their blue dungaree uniforms, staring. There, before me, were two giraffes under a dangling crane that had just unloaded them like a pack of tires. One was alive and swaying inside a cracked but upright crate, the colossal beast’s head thrusting up treetop tall, the other, lifeless, sprawled across the entire width of the dock, its crate crushed around it like an accordion. Back then, nobody knew much about giraffes, but in the little schooling I had before the dust came, I’d seen a picture of one, so I was able to put a name to the wonder. Staring at the downed one, I was sure I was gazing at a real-life carcass of a real-dead giraffe . . . until the carcass opened a brown-apple eye to gaze up at me. And the deathly look in that eye sent a familiar shiver down my young spine.

I knew all about animals. Some you worked, some you milked, some you ate, some you shot, and that was that. You learned early not to make a pig a pal or your pa would soon be forcing you to thank Jesus for the blessing of eating everything but its squeal. Even feeding a stray dog would get you a whipping for taking food out of the family’s mouth. “What’s wrong with you? It’s just an animal!” my pa kept saying. There was no room for such weakness past being a boy in knickers, especially when, at the risk of hellfire, the worst two-legged human was better than

any soulless four-legged animal—or so I was taught. Problem was, whenever I locked eyes with an animal I felt something more soulful than I ever felt from the humans I knew, and what I saw in that sprawled giraffe's eye made me ache to the bone. The giraffe's eye had stopped moving, taking on a pallor I'd seen too many times in an animal's eyes right before my pa would be deciding whether to eat, bury, or burn them. I pushed in closer, waiting for the seamen, all looking like damp hell themselves, to shove me back where I belonged.

Instead they were suddenly parting like a dirty-blue Red Sea.

Coming right at us was a shiny new truck with a wood contraption strapped to its long flatbed that would've made Rube Goldberg proud. Shaped like a squat *T*, it looked like a two-story homemade boxcar plopped down on the entire length of the truck bed, wooden window openings along the top, trapdoors along the bottom, and a short step-up ladder nailed on each side. I jumped out of the way as the driver—a goober-looking guy with cauliflower ears and enough Dapper Dan pomade on his hair to grease an engine—jerked the rig to a halt.

The passenger door swung wide, and out crawled a leathery old man with a face like a mule. That's what I've called him all these years—the "Old Man"—but here and now as I write, older than old myself, I'd bet the farm he wasn't much past fifty. He had on a rumpled jacket, a yellowed white shirt, and hangdog tie. One of his hands looked gnarled, and propped on the back of his head was an old fedora that looked like it'd been stomped on so much it had forgotten whether it was pork-pied or pinched.

Slamming the door, he seemed headed toward the mutton-chopped harbormaster, who was waving what seemed to be a couple of telegrams his way. Instead the Old Man tromped right past, striding to the giraffes as if unaware of any other living thing on the dock but the giants before him.

First, he went to the upright crate with the standing, swaying giraffe—the male—and started talking to it low like secrets. The giraffe slowed. The Old Man reached in to gently stroke it, and the giraffe's swaying stopped. Getting down on his haunches by the sprawled female, he started up the same soft giraffe-speak. She began to quiver. He put his hand through the crushed crate slats to touch her, and as the giraffe lay still as doom, he began stroking her big head with that gnarly hand until she closed her eyes. For a moment, the only sound in the world was the giraffe's labored breathing and the Old Man's cooing against the waves lapping against the dock. Then the harbormaster stomped over to shove the telegrams under the Old Man's nose. The Old Man took one look at them and tossed them to the ground, a fury flit crossing his face I knew far too

well—he had him a temper, too.

Right then, the ship captain appeared from the harbormaster’s hut, his uniform ripped and face bruised, and the dungarees turned toward him as one.

The Old Man glared his way. “You kill my giraffe?”

“Mister,” the harbormaster cut in, “they lost one of their mates out there and it’s a miracle they made it in with or without your fancy animals if that means a thing to you.”

The Old Man’s face made it clear it did not.

With that, the dungarees were all in a lather. I thought they just might pounce on him. From the look on his face, I thought he just might want it.

“We got her here . . . ,” a voice rang out, and you could almost hear the words left hanging in the air: *Now save her, ya bastard.*

The Old Man, his hand still on the downed one’s great head, didn’t move.

As the grumbling grew louder, though, a dented gray panel truck came rattling toward the rig from the street with a sign on its door so faded I could only make out the word “Zoo.” Out from it hopped a stubby, well-scrubbed college-boy type in a white coat clutching a black doctor bag. He strode past us like he was on a holiday, headed to the Old Man.

“We’ve got to get her on her feet or she’s done,” the zoo doc said by way of hello. The Old Man motioned to the harbormaster, who whistled over a couple of longshoremen with crowbars, who started yanking at the crushed crate around the tangled giraffe. But it wasn’t fast enough for the Old Man. He started pulling at the smashed planks himself, gnarled hand and all. When there was nothing more to yank, the crane’s harness—still around planks under her body and feet—went taut, groaning like it was alive as it pulled the giraffe upright. When she faltered, the dungarees rushed by me, plunging their hands in to help the Old Man steady her. With one more tug, everything went full upright and the harnessed female was up on three of her four feet in a flash, violently so, everyone but the Old Man jumping back. And there it was. Her back right leg, from knee to fetlock, looked as if someone had taken a ball-peen hammer to it. She wobbled, fighting to stay up on her three good spindly legs.

“Steady . . . girl . . . steady . . . ,” the Old Man purred as the zoo doc felt along her body.

“Her internal organs seem intact,” he said. “This leg’s the telltale.”

I thought it was good news until I remembered they shoot horses for less.

Opening his black bag, he cleaned, splinted, and wrapped the leg,