



STORM CENTER

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Storm Center

by

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Storm Center

Dedicated to
those wonderful O'Neill cousins
the children of
May, Florence
Agnes, Harry
Isobelle and Kathleen
who encouraged
me to write all
this down.

Foreword

This book is a story about an historical fact: the great Hurricane of 1893. I have treated it as a work of fiction, but it should come under the category of oral history. All the characters are real, and with the exception of the von Geist family, I have used real names. All the events are real. I did not have a tape recorder hidden away in the corner, but if I had had one, it would have played us back the very conversations I have had recorded in my memory.

The Storm of '93 — it was called a Cyclone in those days — did enormous damage to the coast of South Carolina and the coast of Georgia. It took place on Sunday the 27th of August. For days before it struck the Weather Bureau had been in close touch with Havana and then with the Bahamas. There were regular bulletins on the storm's progress by telegraph until it went out to sea. In those days ships did not have wireless communication and there were no airplanes to fly into the eye of the storm and report its progress. Once it reached the open sea it was lost.

Everyone on the coast knew of the danger of the great storms, for there had been two violent, terrible storms in the year 1885. Queen Victoria had sent Princess Alexandra to Charleston with relief gathered from all over the Empire. But the memory of the storms had been dimmed by the devastating Earthquake of the next year, 1886.

These were very bad times in the history of South Carolina, which had been struggling to recover from The War in the sixties, Reconstruction in the seventies. The Storm of '93 severely damaged the rice fields, the Low Country's principal source of income,

which were then completely ruined by The Storm of 1911. Almost everybody is familiar with the tremendous storm in DuBose Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*. That was the 1911 storm which wiped out the mosquito fleet — the boats and the fishermen.

I have often thought that our friends abroad must have thought of South Carolina as we, in this century, have thought of Bangladesh: a country ravished by war, its bonds repudiated, a scene of storms, earthquakes and ruined rice fields.

Stories of these cataclysms, with the possible exception of the storms of '85, are part of the texture of our lives. There has not been a violent, extremely destructive storm since 1911, (although every season brings threats and menaces). But, like Camille, which destroyed the Gulf Coast and is always referred to there as The Storm, no matter how many lesser storms have succeeded it, these great events are ever present in our minds.

In this account of The Storm of '93, I have used the oral history of my mother's family. But since this book has been long in accomplishing, many families have shared their memories with me. The City of Charleston *Yearbook* for 1893 furnished all the corroborating details.

I have to add a note about the von Geist family. I did not use their real names. They are, though, a real family and from all accounts they were as rich, as beautiful, as well educated and as witty, in a word, had just as much fun together as Mother said they had. My descriptions of them do not exactly jibe with the events in their lives. I always mixed them up, and although in subsequent years I have had ample opportunity to straighten out the dates and biographies, for this tale I have left them as I imagined they were when I heard stories about The Storm as a little girl. For an accurate account of them, which in no way diminishes their glamour, see Thomas R. Waring's *The Way It Was In Charleston*. He's a member of the family.

And one final word about *Storm Center*. This is a story of the summer of '93 as seen through the eyes of a precocious nine-year old. In my opinion this is a happy device, for the stories were told to me when I was a child by my mother, who had lived through

Storm Center

them as a child. This point of departure eliminates the very thought of stormy sex and bad language that has found its way into much of contemporary writing. *Storm Center* is not intended as a child's book, but a book that can be read by anyone who can read, especially inhabitants of the Coast. May they heed the warnings, listen to the weather reports and take these mighty forces of nature very seriously.

Since there are a great many characters in this book, I think a list of them, here, will be helpful to the reader. The O'Neills, in 1893, had six children and there were six in the Chisolm family (each family had lost a child). And each family had three or more servants. There were aunts, grandparents and neighbors who were very important. Such large families were the rule in those days and children grew up surrounded with relatives. Their own elder sisters and the younger siblings of their friends figured prominently in their lives; servants were sometimes more important to them than their parents. To have written an account of The Storm of '83 and not to have included the vast cast that took part in the drama would have distorted the tale.

So here they are — their titles, their names and their nick-names and their ages:

The O'Neill Household

Father — Henry — his full name was Henry John O'Neill

Mother — Molly — Mary Ann Baker

May — Mary Elizabeth O'Neill, May was turning 14

Flossie — Florence Harrison O'Neill, who was turning 12

Beth — Elizabeth Quale O'Neill — 9

Then there was Bernadine who had died at age 3

Ada — Agnes Baker O'Neill 5

Helen Devereaux O'Neill age 3

Alma —died at birth

Henry — was six months old. His full name was Henry John O'Neill, but he was never known by it.

Then there was

Daisy Quale, the O'Neill cousin who spent much of her time

Storm Center

with The Family.

And the four servants:

Lizzie Sheraton — head nurse. Lizzie was Irish
Dah — Becca Brown, nurse, Afro-American
Ernest Small, butler, general factotum, Afro-American
Henriette — Henry O'Neill's superb French cook.

The Chisolm Household

W. B. — William Bachman Chisolm

Sue — his wife — but here I've run into inaccuracy — Mrs.
Chisolm's name was Felicia. She was Felicia Oliveros
Hall, but I discovered this too late to change her name.

Susannah — Susan Hall Chisolm age 13

William Bachman Chisolm, Jr. 11

Tudor Hall Chisolm 9

Aly — Alfred deJouvre Chisolm 7

Caspar who died as an infant

Felix Chisolm age 3 — I have reversed the positions of
Felix and Aly. Felix was really older than Aly.

Felicia, the baby who was born on the Fourth of July.

Auntie — Miss Arabella Hall — Mrs. Chisolm's unmarried
younger sister. Miss Arabella may be apocryphal. There
was a Miss Arabella who tripped on the stairs with that
precious tray of milk (and all the bad boys laughed
while the babies cried and cried), but recent research
seems to indicate that she was not Auntie.

The Chisolm servants:

Big Peter, giant deaf mute, aid and comfort to the Chisolms.

Annie, the cook

Mamie, the Chisolm's Dah

And of course The Family had frequent visitors from the city:

Grandfather — Frank — Henry Franklin Baker

Grandmother — Mary Agnes Myers Baker

Uncle Johnny — John Baker

Aunt Ann, his wife

Joan (pronounced Jo-ann) and Louise, their daughters

Storm Center

Then there are the von Geists, but since these are not the real names of this enchanting family, details of their vital statistics are not available.

Oh, then there was Father Duffy, the family friend and confessor, who came regularly one afternoon a week to give religious instruction.

Chapter One

“Beth!” Called Her Mother

“Beth!” called her Mother from the big bedroom on the second floor, “Beth! Are you all packed?”

“Yes, Mother,” Beth answered from the library downstairs.

“Flossie,” Mollie turned to her eleven year old who had been standing behind her watching her in the mirror. “Would you mind seeing what Beth has packed? And hurry, child, if we’re to catch the three o’clock boat, the trunks will have to leave in a few minutes.”

Obediently Florence ran up the broad flight of stairs into the back room and threw open the trunk, “Oh, for goodness sakes! Two dolls, doll clothes, tea set, sketch book, seven other books, crayons, pencils, money box: no clothes at all! Beth!” Florence ran down the two flights of stairs, “You forgot to pack your clothes!”

“Dah packed them, didn’t she? She packed Agnes’s and Helen’s.”

“Dah did not. Put that book down. Come on upstairs. Come on! Beth, that was your job. You have your own trunk and you are supposed to pack it. Look! Your clothes, they are right here in the drawer! Put them in the trunk, in the tray. Panties, underbodies, petticoats, nighties, stockings, sashes — where are your good shoes?”

“On the Island you don’t need shoes.”

“You know you have to dress for the afternoon. Get your best dress out of the bottom drawer, and the ones hanging in the wardrobe. Don’t put them in all crumpled like that! There! Fold them. May! Do you know where Beth’s good shoes are? She can’t

find them.”

“What did you say? I can’t hear you from in here” came the reply from across the hall.

“Don’t tell May, Flossie! I’ll find ’em! I guess I took ’em off in the library yesterday. Maybe they’re under the divan.”

“How can you read in the library with it all closed up like it is and with sheets on the pictures and covers on everything? I hate going in there. I’ll be glad to get to the Island.”

“Flossie, is Beth packed?”

“Yes, Mother, just about, and my trunk’s ready.”

Their slim, brown-eyed mother stood in the door of their room, an elegant hat on her head. She was pulling on her gloves. “Florence, go down and tell Poinsett to come up and get the trunks. And, Beth, go find your shoes. You left them under the divan. What can you do with a child who will remember her books, and leave her shoes behind?” This last question was perhaps addressed to their mother’s guardian angel. No one was expected to answer it. Beth scampered to find her shoes while her mother continued to organize the departure. “May! Dah walked down to the corner with Agnes and Helen. Would you please tell them we are ready? And then call Lizzie to bring Harry. I think we’ll make it after all.”

May, who was thirteen, perfectly turned out in a sailor dress, with a long pleated skirt that came almost to her ankles, a guimpe hiding her throat, her pretty dark hair caught in a ribbon at the nape of her neck, did as she was told.

Beth recovered her shoes and hastily put them in the trunk as Poinsett was starting to move it, while Florence pointed out the other luggage that was to go with the family. Poinsett had once been the O’Neills’ butler, but now he had a dray of his own.

This was a very exciting day: the move to the Island. It was already growing hot in town, and people were worrying about the fevers that always came with the heat. The baby, Harry, had been fretful and cried all night long. His fair skin had an ugly heat rash. Beth wanted to discard her stockings as well as her shoes. And there were rank odors. A neighbor’s trash can full of shrimp heads

gave out a horrible smell. The stable, in the back of the yard where the cow and the horse lived, suddenly seemed much closer to the house. The high brick wall was sprouting luxuriant ferns, and in spite of the gardener there were rank weeds along the edge of the driveway. And it was hot. It was very hot; hot and sticky. Tempers flared.

Through the open windows, sounds came, too. Friend Street was paved with cobblestones. Wagons, carriages, and vendors' pushcarts made loud clattering, penetrating noises. The street cars on Broad Street made a frightful, metallic racket, although they were nearly a block away from Henry O'Neill's large handsome brick house. It was the only large house on the block that had escaped the terrible fire of '63. That was thirty years ago, but the scars were still visible. The new houses were wooden, with jigsaw lace on the porches and gables, and were set back from the street.

Henry O'Neill, the master of the house, had gone ahead with Henriette, the Alsatian cook, Katie, the Irish maid, and Cork, the Irish setter, to supervise the final arrangements for opening the house: seeing that the oil lamps were filled, their chimneys cleaned, setting up the mosquito nets, making the beds, sweeping the sand out one more time, and preparing supper on the kerosene stove, which Henriette hated with a passion. Katie would then come back to the city and stay in the house to keep it aired while the family was away. Cork, of course, was no help — but getting him to the Island ahead of time was a big help.

Hampers of linen and clothes had already been taken by Poinsett to an earlier boat, which had been met at the Island dock by an Irish drayman, and delivered to the O'Neill cottage on the front beach at Station Sixteen.

"Come on, Beth!" called Florence from the piazza, "Come on!"

Beth slid down the bannisters — book in hand — from their third floor to the landing, "Good bye, good bye, bed!" To second floor, "Good bye drawing room, mother's room!" to the next landing —

"Come on, Beth!" — to the wide downstairs hall — There on the piazza was the assembling family. Beth waited and read.

Poinsett had left with the trunks and Ernest brought the carry-all up to the piazza steps. Lizzie Sheraton was there with Harry dressed in his long baby clothes. Dah with Helen, three, and Agnes, five, got safely into the carry-all. Then Mother, with May, Florence and last Beth, her nose in the book, her brown bobbed hair flopping forward over her eyes, climbed into place.

"Beth, what are you reading that you can't put down?" asked her mother.

"David Copperfield," said Beth, looking up distractedly, her mind still deep in the problems of Mr. Micawber.

The gardener, who had been standing by, shut the tall iron gates after them.

Ernest would drive them to the ferry landing, then he would establish them on deck. He would help Poinsett get the trunks on board and then he would return the carry-all to Friend Street. He himself would come over on the six o'clock ferry.

Beth put down her book momentarily to walk on board, and looked around the vast upper-deck cabin. It was actually the whole interior of the ferry with long wooden benches around the sides and a wide cleared space with occasional posts. Ernest established them as comfortably as he could, with their mother in the middle and Lizzie Sheraton, prim in her nanny's uniform, at one end, and the big comfortable black Dah, her head tied up in a white kerchief, at the other.

But once the family was established on the ferry, Beth dropped the book altogether and went out to explore the upper deck. From the high rail they could look down on the other passengers boarding and the vehicles coming on board, carts, wagons, buggies, even an elegant closed carriage. Florence stood by her side, equally absorbed. Then suddenly Beth grabbed her arm, "Florence! Look! They are coming on board, too, on this very same trip. The von Geists. See them, they are getting out of their carriage, and they are coming on this very trip!"

"Who? Oh! the *von Geists*! Oh, Beth, how thrilling! May, come see! There's Heloise, she's the youngest, and Victoria, and Maggy. Why do they call her Maggy when she's so beautiful? Beth, don't

you think Marguerite is a most beautiful name?"

"They're all here, those are the oldest sisters with them, and their mother and the governess. Constance is married and lives in New York, and Hortense is engaged. Look what Heloise and Victoria have on, May! Sailor suits just like yours, sailor hats, and veils!"

"I wonder if the bear is coming too."

"The bear! Oh Beth! They don't care anything about that mangy old bear. They like music and painting and poetry and dancing. They all speak French."

"And German. Heloise told me. I bet they'll bring the monkey and the birds, the parrot and the canaries. She always shows them to me."

"Yes, I remember that time you ran away when you were seven."

"I did not. I was just exploring. And she took me in and we had cookies and lemonade, and she showed me the monkey. She had on a sapphire ring to match her eyes! Her father gave it to her."

"And you just managed to stay on and on. And you should have been punished," said May. "All the trouble you caused."

"Oh, May, why did you have to bring that up?" said Florence, again leaning over the broad rail of the upper deck of the *Sappho*, and frankly staring.

"Well, I would have been spanked, too, if you hadn't taken up for me, Flossie. You know that. Look, Flossie! I think they're coming up here! May!" — but May had gone.

Beth was beside herself with excitement. "Oh, Flossie! Was there ever such a beautiful family?"

Beth and Flossie, who were after all big girls, Beth was nine and Florence almost twelve, were distressed at this point to be joined by Lizzy. She had the baby, Harry, in her arms but she was here supervising them. "Girls, your mother says to come sit by her."

"Oh, do we have to?" said Beth.

"Yes," said Lizzy severely.

"I don't want to," said Beth fiercely, "You can't make me, either, Lizzy Sheraton!"

“Beth! Oh, Beth! Don’t start something,” pleaded Florence. “We’ll come,” she said to Lizzy. “You can see them perfectly well if you sit by Mother.”

“Not from inside there in the cabin,” wailed Beth.

“Come along,” said Lizzy firmly.

“You might as well,” said Florence, “You don’t want to make a scene — because here they are coming upstairs now. Come on! What would they think!”

So Beth yielded and went into the dark cabin with its long wooden seats, but not without a considerable show of temper. May moved over and let her have a place next to their mother. Beth scowled and pouted, moved restlessly, swung her feet. May took the baby, Harry, from Lizzy, saying, “Do let me hold him, you must be hot and tired.” And she walked off onto the open deck with him in her arms.

“Why can’t you cooperate like your sister, Beth? Why are you so rebellious always?” asked her mother, looking down into the defiant brown eyes of her daughter. But Beth knew that May would walk straight around the deck to see where the von Geists had disposed themselves. The baby was just an excuse. Why hadn’t she thought of it? She was simply furious. May would see them all. She might hear them talk. They made very funny jokes and little rhymes about each other. She wished she could hear. They weren’t a stupid family like this one; everybody being hushed up and sat on. They conversed!

And sure enough the O’Neills were being hushed up. Dah had tried to keep Agnes and Helen by her. Agnes had pulled away and was standing by their mother urgently demanding something in a whisper. Mrs. O’Neill beckoned Lizzy, who had taken the baby back from May. “Take Agnes and Helen down to the Ladies Room, Lizzy, I’ll keep the baby. Do you girls want to go, too?”

“No.” Beth tossed her head.

Their mother whispered, although there was no possible chance that anyone could have heard her. The *Sappho* had left the dock and was under way. She vibrated mightily as the huge paddle-wheels swept down into the water, the great pistons of the engine

rose and fell and as she made the turn and headed across the harbor for Mt. Pleasant. It was very noisy in the cabin. Beth wanted to be on deck watching the swirling water, watching the city fall away, admiring the von Geists.

"You treat me like a baby," she muttered. Would they ever realize that she was nine? When May was nine she had been allowed to go to New York with the Aunts. Fortunately the engine and the paddle wheels made so much noise her mother could ignore the defiant mutter.

"No, May, you can't take my book! *I'm* reading it!" Beth snatched *David Copperfield*, which May had picked up from the bench where Beth had left it.

"You must apologize to your sister," said their mother severely.

"But *I'm* reading it."

"Yes, it's your book, but that's no excuse for snatching and being rude. May, it is her book, so give it back to her, but Beth, apologize."

"I'm sorry, May," said Beth solemnly.

Florence had bought a bag of roasted peanuts from a boy who went around with a tray. "Beth, here, these are for you. I wonder if we can find a twin and join on Philopena."

"In peanuts? They're only in almonds, Flossie."

"No, here's one. Look!" Florence showed a shell with twin nuts in one half of it. "You take one, and I'll take one, and we'll join on." She held out the nut. Beth took it, put it in her mouth, and duly held up her crooked little finger. Florence hocked hers around it, and said, "What's the forfeit?"

"You'll get up at five o'clock in the morning when I ask you to, if —"

"Oh, Beth! All right; — if you'll read *David Copperfield* aloud to Agnes, Helen and me if I win."

"Oh, I'll win," said Beth. And she did. She always won. Flossie would join on, promise a forfeit, and then didn't remember and would accept some trifle, forgetting that the object of the game was to refuse anything offered by the other person.

Florence was dreamily looking out through the open end of the