

## Will-o'-the-wisp

by Michael Channing

Jasper pulled up the wayward tongue of his right shoe, tied the lace, and took a moment to admire his brand new sneakers. He'd gotten them specifically for church camp. Not even his mom knew their secret, and she'd paid for them. At first glance they were all black. But look closer. Outlined in the faintest charcoal were images of skulls.

Two voices called him at once.

One said, "Hey, Jasper, come on. We got the ball." It was Herman waving him back onto the half-court.

The other voice said, "My friend thinks you're cute and wants you to be her boyfriend."

Jasper was held in place like a wishbone between the two invitations. Herman's shirt was sweat-dark, hair was plastered to his forehead. Basketball between his palms. The girl wore a white baggy shirt with a skirt down to her shoe tops, and her long black hair hung around her like a veil. A folded piece of paper in her outstretched hand.

Rarely was a boy ever asked to make such a decision.

He took the folded note. "What's your friend's name?"

"Helen."

"What's she look like?"

The girl laughed. "You'll have to find out." Then she ran away. Her hair lifted and fell like the wing of a crow.

"Earth to Jasper," Herman said. "You playing or what?"

Jasper looked at the note. It was an origami sculpture, folded and pressed into a skull, eyes drawn and teeth outlined in magic marker.

The basketball bounced off his head, shaking loose all thoughts of the origami gift and the mystery girl who sent it. Jasper slipped the paper into his pocket and rejoined the game.

Nightly church meetings were the price you paid for days full of softball, go-karts, and swimming. They tried to make it fun with puppet shows about handicapped kids and movies about mountain climbers who tie themselves to the biggest rock for safety. But they couldn't hide what it was: Sunday school every day.

The preacher talked about fishing and the benefits of a net versus a pole. But it was still church, and the folding chairs were uncomfortable, and it was hot in long pants, and Jasper's clip-on tie kept itching at his Adam's apple.

He missed most of what the preacher said. He kept looking around at the girls, wondering which was his new girlfriend. And Herman kept making fart noises with the cushion of his chair.

Then the call to prayer. No one moved, and the preacher, Pastor Mike, stood in front of the altar all alone. Jasper felt a little sorry for the guy.

"Let's go up," Herman whispered.

"Why?"

"It'll be funny."

"How?"

"I wanna do something."

"What?"

"Just come on."

Herman stood up, and for some reason Jasper was up, too. Heading to the altar. Other kids were moving, too, as if their rising made it safe. Some knelt and folded their hands. Some stood and closed their eyes.

Herman put his hands in the air and swayed and started to mutter. To Jasper, it sounded like gibberish, but Pastor Mike came over and said, "This boy is hurting."

Pastor Mike had a palm to the boy's head. Two more adults came over and put their hands on top of Pastor Mike's. It looked like a hands-in. Any moment they'd yell, "Y-a-a-a-a-y God!"

Herman's nonsense got louder. His mom took him to a different church than Jasper's. A Pentecostal church, and the things Herman told the guys on Sunday afternoons were better than campfire stories. People running up and down the aisles, rolling on the floor, crying out. For Jasper it was always a little scary to think grownups were capable of just going caged-rat crazy for one morning then coming home to fry up some chicken.

Herman was louder still, and now the adults were shaking like they had ice in their underwear. He was giving a good performance. Then he went silent. And the hand huddle collapsed, like they'd squashed Herman into the floor. The grown ups pulled away from him, circled around and watched as Herman jerked and kicked and drooled on the floor.

For a few seconds nobody moved. Herman did his bug-pinned-to-the-carpet dance all alone. Then Pastor Mike was beside him holding his hand and brushing the hair from his eyes.

It felt like forever. Jasper was powerless. Even Pastor Mike could do little more than grasp the boy's hand and whisper it would be all right. "God'll take care of you," Pastor Mike said. Which meant all anyone else could do was watch and look worried.

When it was finally over, Pastor Mike helped Herman to his feet and walked him through the silent, parting crowd. Herman looked at Jasper and didn't wink or smile to say it was all a joke. There was fear in his eyes. Cold, naked fear.

Outside the air was cool. The sun was heading for bed, and all the campers, decked out in their church clothes, were getting ready to do the same. Jasper bought a drink and snack at the concession

and sat down on the tabernacle steps. Waited for Herman to show. He didn't.

But the girl did.

She came bouncing up the steps, hair flying all around. "What's that?" she said.

"Moon Pie."

"Really? Can I try?"

"I guess."

She took a big bite. "It doesn't taste like the moon."

Jasper smiled.

"How about that?"

"Dr Pepper."

"Eww, it's got pepper in it?"

"No. That's just what it's called."

"Oh. Can I try it then?"

"Ma'as well."

She swigged it almost empty. Smacked her lips. "Wow, that was pretty g--" A deep belch escaped her throat. She laughed.

Jasper laughed along with her. "That was a good one."

"Was it really?" She tried again. Not as fat as the first one but still pretty good.

"Nothing burps like Dr Pepper." Jasper finished the drink and belched his best, shaping the sound with his lips. They both laughed.

"Where's your friend?" Jasper said.

"She's hiding."

"How come?"

"She wants you to read her note first."

Reflexively he patted his pockets. "I left it in my shorts."

"Then you'll have to wait to meet her."

"What's she look like?"

"She's very pretty."

"Really?"

"Yep. And she thinks you're cute."

"Which group are you in?" Jasper and Herman were in the Grizzlies. Jasper wanted to be called the Werewolves, but his had been the only vote. Then there were the Robins, the Eagles, the Cobras, the Knights, the Tweety Birds, the Sluggers. When the counselors called out, everyone would rally for roll call.

"It's a secret," she said.

"Am I supposed to figure it out?"

"Nope. 'Cause you never will." She hopped down the steps and ran across the quad and around the concession stand, her hair reflecting the sunlight like oil.

A voice hollered up from the drifting crowd. "All my Grizzlies gather 'round!" Jasper threw away his trash and joined his group. Herman didn't show, and the counselor skipped over his name while calling roll.

Jasper lay in his bunk. The room was silent save for the whir of electric fans, the occasional squeak of bed springs, and snoring somewhere off in the corner. In the bunk above, Herman was quiet and still. He'd been that way since the boys filed in and got ready for bed. Of course no one talked to him, not even Jasper, so he had no reason to say anything.

In the dim light Jasper found the knee-length shorts he'd worn that afternoon and pulled the crumpled origami skull from the pocket. The skull's jaw unfolded like an accordion. The face hinged

open like a gate. The note said, "I like your shoes." And it was signed, "Helen."

"Hey, Jasper," Herman whispered. He hung upside down from the top bunk.

"Yeah?"

"I'm worried about Ralph."

"How come?" Ralph was their friend back home.

"His parents don't believe in God. They don't even take him to church."

"So?"

"He might be in trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"Well. Like me. I was in trouble."

"For what?"

"For pretending to pray. For acting like the people at my church. I was making fun of them. And God got mad."

Herman was just a dark shape. Jasper couldn't see his face.

"He got mad and punished me. I had a seizure."

"Is that what you think?"

"Yeah. But I'll be better from now on. I learned my lesson. I hope you learn yours." Herman pulled himself back up and lay still in his bunk.

Herman tried to reconstruct the paper skull, but all he could manage was to fold it into a shapeless mash.

Herman's mom was there in the morning. Pastor Mike met her, and they walked off to where no one could hear.

"What're you gonna do when you get home?" Jasper asked Herman.

"I don't know. Me and Ralph'll find something to do. Go fishing."

"I wish they had fishing here."

"Yeah. Me too."

"You guys won't fish the river dry before I get back will you?"

"We might. You gonna beat everybody in basketball?"

"I will now that you're not in my way."

Herman cracked a smile. "Plus you'll get like a hundred girlfriends, too."

"That was gonna happen anyway."

They both smiled, which only made things worse.

"I'm scared, Jasper."

"Of what?"

"The Devil. I never thought--"

His mom was beside him now, arranging his hair with her fingers, buttoning an overlooked button on his shirt. "There, there. Time to go, now. Time to go. Every thing's alright. It's all gonna be alright."

She fussed over him some more. Rubbed dirt off his face that was never there. Messed up his hair, fixed it back only to mess it up again. Herman took it all in silence.

Pastor Mike said, "Would you like to stick around for breakfast, Mrs. Rhodes?"

"No. We got a long drive to get home. How are you doing, Jasper?"

"Okay, Miss Rhodes."

"That's good, that's good. Herman will see you in a week or so, won't you Herman? In a week or so."

"Yes, ma'am."

Jasper wanted to go crazy. Wanted to knock over Herman's mom, kick Pastor Mike in the stomach.

Grab Herman and the both of them run off. Take a couple go-karts and boogie on down the road.

"You take care of your mom," Pastor Mike said to Herman.

And they were gone. Herman with a backpack on his back and suitcase in his hand, and his mother with her son under her wing.

It was just him and Pastor Mike in the bunkhouse. The heat of the day squeezed in through the windows and added its weight to the air.

"Let's you and me go get some eggs and sausage," Pastor Mike said.

Jasper wanted to go crazy. But instead he went to breakfast.

They cut through the line. Few people would look Jasper in the face when he walked by. The ones who did looked sad and sorry, and he wanted to punch them in the nose. Boys and girls alike.

Him and Pastor Mike got a table to themselves. Paused long enough for Pastor Mike to issue a prayer, then dug in. Jasper ate with a fury, finished his first sausage patty in two bites, downed half his carton of milk, shoveled eggs like a backhoe.

"Are you tasting any of that?" Pastor Mike said.

"Yeah," he said because you were supposed to answer whenever grownups asked you anything.

"Do you know what happened to Herman?" Pastor Mike said.

"He had a seizure."

"That's right. Do you know why?"

That stopped him. He didn't know what to say, but he definitely didn't want to give Herman's answer. "He's got that disease."

"Epilepsy, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"He could. That just might be it. But it doesn't have to be. There could be other reasons."

"Yeah?"

"Do you know what Herman thinks made it happen?"

"Yeah."

"He told you? He's a brave kid. I'm worried about him." One of the counselors approached the table, but Pastor Mike waved her away. "He told me to watch after you."

Jasper pondered that for a moment. It was like a piece from a different jigsaw puzzle than the one he'd been working on.

"Your friend's confused," Pastor Mike said. "He thinks the Devil is after him."

Without knowing he would say it, Jasper said, "I don't believe in the Devil."

"Me either."

Jasper stared at the grownup in front of him. Everything and everyone else had faded away.

"There is no long-tailed, forked-tongued devil going around with horns and hooved feet. And God isn't some old guy with a long white beard and a bathrobe. But they are real. As real as the air between us. The Devil doesn't chase you. You choose him. And God doesn't punish or reward you based on some formula. When you choose to do right, you choose God. When you decide to do wrong, you've aligned yourself with the other team. You understand?"

Jasper nodded.

"There could be a lot of reasons your friend had a seizure yesterday. But I can guarantee you it was not because the Devil is after him or God got mad at him for pretending to pray. If God fined everyone who pretended to pray, he'd be busy handing out tickets all day." Pastor Mike grinned.

Jasper grinned with him. The world was all at once a different place.

Past the tabernacle, behind the concession stand, lay the Black Mountain Christian Camp J. P. Bullock Memorial softball diamond. Near first base, gathered in a half-moon around a prone, bleeding boy was a crowd of boys in ball caps and knee-length shorts. Others had separated from the group to

stare into the surrounding woods, watching where Jasper had run off after slamming a softball into the boy's mouth.

Jasper ran. No briars snicked him. No branches slashed his face. The forest opened to allow him passage. He came to the go-kart track. And stopped. The girl was there.

"You're Helen, aren't you?" he said.

She nodded. Her hair shook like the weepings of a willow.

"You still want me to be your boyfriend?"

She smiled, and Jasper's insides fluttered like a jar of flies.

"Then come on."

They ran together, and the woods welcomed them in.

Jasper explained in short sentences. The boy kept talking. About girls. About what boys could do with them. To them. Wouldn't stop. So Jasper broke his teeth. Because there was no god. There was no devil. There was only him.

"He deserved it," Helen said. She ran ahead and took the lead.

"Where are we going?" Herman called.

Her long hair flowed ahead of him like a dark river. "Where everybody goes," she said and laughed.

Helen brought him to a graveyard. A crumbling wall covered in dead vines surrounded the cemetery. A rusty gate cinched with rusty chains hung limp on its hinges. They entered through a break in the wall next to it. The trees here were still, as though the wind had chosen to remain outside the wall.

He followed her past cracked stones with names and numbers worn to obscurity. Some stones were arranged by size to indicate the father and mother and children that followed.

Girls were always asking him to do things, and he always did them. Carry their books or check their homework, do their homework. There was a girl in school who always asked him for his cookie when

they had them in the lunchroom. Herman and Ralph always ragged on him when he gave it over. How much is a cookie worth? they'd say and punch his arm. He never let them know her smile was payment enough.

Beyond the graves was a little black church. With a stumpy, black steeple and rickety steps leading up to its closed doors. Helen led him inside to see all the people.

Only they weren't people. Their forked tails flickered like fans. Teeth and horns glinted in the light cast by smoky lanterns. The one in the pulpit froze in mid action, claw pointed at the arching rafters, and aimed his red eyes at Jasper. The congregation turned, and two dozen glowing embers, burning in the ash pits of a dozen devilish faces, pinned him in place.

Jasper's heart began to pump pure lava into his veins. This was... amazing. They all looked so happy to see him.

The preacher pointed a sharp talon at Jasper. "We have a visitor," he hissed. "Welcome him in, won't you?"

The crowd clapped and stomped their hooves.

"Come on in," the preacher said.

Helen took Jasper's hand. She was still a girl with pale skin and black-tar hair. But her eyes were fiery red. "It's okay. Really." She whispered in his ear, "Don't worry. It's just about over, anyway." She smiled, and Jasper followed.

She led him to a pew, and they sat near the aisle. Jasper looked about at the church members. A couple were quite small with hooves that didn't reach the floor. Others seemed older with deep wrinkles and stubby horns. He noticed a walking cane of braided wood.

The preacher set his finger in the air once more and continued his sermon.

"There was a young will-o'-the-wisp who boasted he could lead a man lost through his woods for days upon days. To prove his swagger, he revealed himself to a hunter who did indeed follow him

deeper into the woods. The hunter followed young Will day and night. When he stopped to rest and eat of his provisions, Will would hover in the distance, twinkling his promise of treasure. Soon the hunter ran out of food and water, and the game grew too scarce to trap, and the creeks dwindled to a trickle. Still onward the hunter roved. Having come this far he figured a bit further wouldn't hurt him. But of course it did. The hunter was hopelessly lost, hungry and tired. After seven days, the hunter expired. Seven days. Will literally glowed with pride. But when he was ready to leave, he found that he did not know where he was or which way was home. The most talented will-o'-the-wisp ever known was lost. In a matter of days, away from his home ground, he guttered out like a candle."

The preacher ended his sermon. The congregation stood and sang. Jasper followed along in the hymnal and mouthed the words to "Darkness in the Tunnel," "The Alchemy of Sorrow," and "The Great Below."

Row by row they left the church. The preacher shook hands with everyone. "Hey, Sport-o. Lookin' tall there, Tiger." He patted the little ones on their heads. "You got your hands full, don't ya?" he said to the mother, who beamed with pride.

Jasper watched them change as they stepped out the door. Horns replaced by hats and haircuts. Scales into tweed and cotton prints. Hooves to shoes.

"So what do you think?" the preacher asked as he and Helen stepped past.

"It was... good." Jasper stammered as he faced those red eyes straight on.

"We gonna see you next week?"

"Um..."

"He's just visiting," Helen said. "He has to go back in a few days."

"Well it sure was nice to see a new face around here. You kids go have yourselves some fun."

Outside they were preparing for a picnic. The two kids, brother and sister, chased each other around tombstones, hid behind trees, found each other again. Adults lounged on blankets and laughed and

chatted. The oldest fanned himself and swatted flies with a rumpled hat. It all looked so normal.

The four children got along fine. They ran and jumped, traded off being "it," filled the graveyard with a joyous noise.

Then the little boy said, "Let's get one of them to play with us."

Jasper, who thought he was pointing at the adults, said, "I guess. Sure."

The boy and girl held hands, and the boy took Helen's, and Jasper joined in between the girls in a circle around a grave.

"What game is this?" Jasper said. His voice shook. So did the rest of him.

The air was suddenly cold, the light at once dim. An electric charge flowed through the chain of hands. Jasper felt it zigzag up his right arm, through his chest, and out the fingers of his left hand, which Helen was holding. She turned to him and smiled. Jasper felt strong, happy to be part of the circuit. Especially in the glow of that smile.

A sound came from below. Jasper felt the vibrations through his shoes. Something clawing upwards. This was power, true and actual. No waving a stick and calling it a sword. No pretending the neighbor's dog was a dragon. Here was real magic, coursing through him, cracking open the earth and demanding its secrets.

"Corwyn! Dido! Time for lunch!"

The two siblings dropped their handholds and ran back to the picnic. Which left Jasper holding his girlfriend's hand.

"Thank you for not being scared," she said.

Jasper leaned a little bit forward. "Thank you for not being scary." They met in a brief, dry, beautiful kiss.

"Come on, you two," the preacher called. "Lunch is ready."

They sat on blankets and handed around plastic plates and utensils. Corwyn and Dido slapped

playfully at each other. The grownups talked about things the kids didn't understand or didn't care about. Just as always.

Then someone opened the picnic basket.

A thermos went round and splashed a thick, scarlet libation into plastic cups. From bundles of aluminum foil and Tupperware containers came selections of stubby little fingers and round little toes.

Jasper was running before anyone could unwrap the main course.

Roots and brambles snatched at his ankles. Or were they gnashing teeth slick with the grease of fat and ligament?

He ran till his skin itched and his gut filled with hot stones. Voices called his name up ahead, and he stopped. They sounded like people he knew: counselors, other kids from camp. But who were the fakers? And which monsters were true?

They marched toward him in a line. Pastor Mike was there, a sad forgiving look on his face. Jasper ran to him, and arms hugged him tight as he cried.

He saw her one last time. When his mom and dad came to pick him up. They tried to scold him but lapsed into worried, silly little promises. As they loaded him and his suitcases into the car, he saw her watching from behind a tree. She didn't wave, and neither did he.

As the car pulled out and his parents chattered on about nothing, he looked up at the scuttling clouds and down at the blurred ground. He was alone on the highway in between. He took off his shoes, stretched out on the backseat, and let the world slide by.