

CHARLTON HESTON IS GOD

JOHN T. PRICE

Jason Murphy's dad was killed in August, when the sun is red and round and you can look straight at it without squinting. He was crop dusting and his plane just fell out of the sky. The next morning my mother opened the paper and asked me to join her on the couch. There, on the front page, was a photo of the wreckage. She held me on her lap and read the caption—"Charles Murphy," "killed," "accident"—in her most careful voice. I stared at the photo, at the twisted metal, wondering how he could be in that scrunched-up place, big Mr. Murphy, World War II hero and ace pilot. I searched the shadowy places for his tall flat-top, his brown-cruled work boots, his bulging forearms, any sign of him at all. There was nothing but the dark tail of the plane sticking up from the corn, like a windmill.

"This will be hard for Jason," she said. "He'll need a good friend."

156

I slid out of her arms, stepped outside, and sat down on the front step. Twenty-First Street didn't look any different—the same white houses, the same row of locust trees, their feather leaves drooping from the heat. Dale Chalmers and the younger boys were kicking rocks along a curb that might still be followed to its usual end, the Murphy home. And in the doorway, Mr. Murphy, kneeling, as he had just the other day, to shake my hand and offer me a cold pop. I tried to hold it that way for a while, as if the street led to the same home, the same family, the same boy. But I knew what was actually going on in that house, the same as it had in mine, back in April, when my baby brother was born dead: the familiar strangers shuffling in with their cheesy casseroles, the dim light seeping through the shades, the mother resting behind a closed door. And for Jason, the unanswered questions, the silence. He would need someone to talk to and to teach him the way of things. He would need, as Mom had said, a good friend. I sat on the steps for a long time, waiting, in case that friend happened to be me.

The Iowa Review

The next morning, outside the doors of Duncombe Elementary, I waited past first bell as the other kids entered, including my little sisters, Carrie Anne and Susan. I refused to walk them to their classrooms, and they would tattle about that, but I didn't care. I only cared about Jason—what would I say to him? That morning, before school, Mom touched my cheek, handed me the scissor-cut obituary, and told me to give it to Jason. "Tell him we're thinking of him," she'd said.

Thinking of you.

I might say that.

When all the other kids were inside, Galen Darcy crawled out of a window well. He stood in front of me, with his dirty face and long hair and brown summer skin. We were in the third grade.

"If you're waiting for Jason, he won't be here the rest of the week," he said. "Didn't you hear about his dad?"

I nodded.

"He burned to death in his plane. Nobody knows what happened, but I'm sure he hit an electric line. Crop dusters hit electric lines all the time. They fly really low and get killed a lot. That's what happened to Jason's dad. He crashed and couldn't get out in time, so he burned."

Galen's dad was a doctor. To him, people didn't just die, they choked, bled, rotted, starved, stroked-out, and *burned*. I usually ignored him when he talked like this, like back in April, when he told me my baby brother had drowned, even though he hadn't been swimming; he'd been inside my mother. I would've ignored him again, but then there was this thing I hadn't thought of before: that if you studied the way a person lived, if you knew something about anything, as Galen always seemed to, you might be able to see his particular kind of death. As if a photo of a scorched and scrunched-up plane in a cornfield should have been taped to the Murphy refrigerator from the moment Charles had chosen to dust crops.

The bell rang and we went inside.

The rest of the week I watched for Jason from my front step every day after school, just in case he showed up. I even tried to pray for him in church. We hadn't been to church for a long time, but then that Sunday morning Mom pulled the covers off and told me to get dressed. I thought she was kidding and yanked the covers back over my head, but then she snapped her fingers.

When we entered First Congregational, the people by the coffee machine turned their heads to look at us. Some of them moved in our direction, but Mom told us to come along, leaving Dad to greet them. She walked each of us to our Sunday school rooms. Mine was separated off from the big meeting hall by an orange accordion divider that could be opened (Reverend Hearn had explained) to make us kids feel like we were part of the "vital community of faith." Our parents, the Reverend, anyone could just wander in and join our discussion. That first Sunday back in church, I was glad to see the divider closed. I didn't want those people staring and putting their arms around me, like they had back in April.

Mrs. Long was our Sunday school teacher. She had long dark hair and cheekbones that were high and soft like pillows tucked under bed sheets. Her flowery skirt whispered when she walked across the carpet. She greeted us with a big smile, and asked what we'd done that summer. We raised our arms and shook them and shot out names of people, animals, and places. She said she was glad so many of us had mentioned spending time with friends (had we?) because that was going to be our theme for the day: friendship.

She handed each of us a *Golden Children's Bible*, which was big and heavy as a rock. It wasn't like other Bibles, as I'd discover later that night, under the covers, with a flashlight. *The Golden Bible* told stories about people getting stoned to death and attacked by snakes and having leprosy thrown on them, and it had lots of pictures: Absalom hanging from a tree by his hair; Samson with his eyes gouged out; Thebez dumping the millstone on Abimelech's head; the boys Sadrach, Meshach, and Abednego standing in a fiery furnace, but not *burning*. It

showed, in full color, all the plagues of Egypt and the bloody battle at Jahaz and Noah's flood, which I kept coming back to: the rough, rising waters sweeping away lions, hippos, monkeys, and giraffes and tossing them against rocks. Some of them were already dead and belly-up. There was a man in that picture, kneeling on a rock and holding a baby lamb while the waters rose around them. There he was, a man who loved baby lambs, about to be swept away with all the rest.

Mrs. Long had us turn to the chapter called "The Parting of Elijah and Elisha." In the picture, a fiery chariot blazed across the sky behind two white stallions, their nostrils blood-red and flaring. Inside the chariot stood an old man in blue robes, arms stretched out like he wanted a hug.

"That's the prophet Elijah," Mrs. Long said, "on his way to Paradise. The man down there in the corner is Elisha."

She told us that this was a story of two friends who stuck together no matter what. Elijah was loved by God, but was a very lonely man. One day he walked up to Elisha, who was working in his field, tapped him on the shoulder, and made him his best friend. Elisha followed Elijah around for many years, listening to his speeches and watching him perform mighty works, which included healing the sick and embarrassing sinful kings. But there came a time, Mrs. Long said, when Elijah knew he was going to die. He asked Elisha to leave him alone, but Elisha wouldn't do it.

"As the Lord lives," she read aloud, "and as your soul lives, I will not leave you."

Elisha stayed faithful to the end, and as a reward, Elijah promised to give him a double portion of his power, so he could keep up the prophet's good work.

"See that white cloth falling from the chariot?" Mrs. Long asked. It looked like a big hanky. "That's called a mantle and it holds a double portion of Elijah's power. It's floating down to Elisha, just like Elijah promised. Do you know the first thing Elisha did with his new power?"

He cleaned the poisoned waters of the Jordan River because no one could drink from it or water their fields.”

A girl raised her hand: “So Elisha was a friend to the farmer?”

“I guess he was,” Mrs. Long said. “Very good point.”

I wondered about that the rest of Sunday school and into the adult service. Elisha had been such a good friend to Elijah that, with God’s help, everything they’d touched that was broken—the river, but also people—had been healed. When Reverend Hearn announced the silent prayer, I closed my eyes, folded my hands, and tried to pray for my friend Jason. It had been a long time since I’d prayed, maybe since April, and it was harder than I thought. Back then, on Good Friday, my sisters and I had been sitting on the couch, watching the first half of *The Ten Commandments* on TV. When Dad called Mrs. Freeburg, our babysitter, to tell her they were going to stay all night at the hospital, we were stuffing fistfuls of popcorn into our mouths and watching baby Moses bobble down the Nile in his coconut-shaped basket. I was already bored; tomorrow night, during the second half of the movie, we’d get the good stuff, the miracles: staffs turning into snakes, God’s fiery tornado, the parting of the sea. When Mrs. Freeburg told us that our own baby was on the way, it was hard to sit through the rest of it. Jochebed caught between the stones, Nefretiri showing her screaming servant off the balcony, Charlton Heston stumbling into the desert—my sisters were scared, but I knew it would turn out okay. When the movie ended, I raced upstairs to my bedroom, switched off the light, and crawled under the covers. I folded my hands, like I had every night, to say thank you, and fell asleep.

I opened my eyes and looked around the sanctuary. I was sitting at the end of the long pew, next to Mom. On the other side of me was a brick wall. I searched it from the bottom, near the brown carpet, all the way up to the big wood beams that arched across the ceiling and came down behind the altar. Kneeling there, under dim spots, was Reverend Hearn in his black robes with his own white mantle draped around his neck. His prayer voice was deep and slow, adding even

oo
oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo years in the future ...” It was hard to know where to go from there, but Galen took over and made a story of it. In each chapter, apes invaded a different Fort Dodge, Iowa, landmark (the courthouse clock, the McDonalds, the Karl L. King Memorial Band Shell), shot a bunch of people, and lobotomized town leaders whom we referred to by name because they were friends of our parents. Galen handed Jason a pencil and said he could draw the ape fighter jets for the next scene.

“This battle will take place in the stormy skies over Saint Paul’s church.”

“Apes don’t fly planes,” I said. Galen and I had seen *Planet of the Apes* together at the Astro Theater. Dr. Zaius, the orangutan Minister of Science, had crumpled up Charlton Heston’s paper plane and called it “nonsense.” Galen knew this, but now he acted like he hadn’t heard me. So I picked up a pencil and got going on the steeple. St. Paul’s was one of the tallest churches in Fort Dodge, and I drew it from the top edge of the paper clear down to the bottom. Jason’s fighter jets weren’t very realistic, even though his dad had been a fighter pilot and shot down Nazis. These jets looked like floating chickens with stubby wings on their backs, like dorsal fins. Shark chickens.

Galen was busy drawing our parents’ friends running through trenches, shooting guns over the hoods of burnt-out cars, and flipping backwards from the force of exit wounds. I had to admit he was good with a pencil. It was beautiful the way Galen pulled the point of it upwards, a paint stroke versus a chisel. You could see each finger of every hand, and the faces, full of feeling, were like people you knew or remembered. Galen drew the paths of the bullets straight from those people on the ground up to the planes in the sky, then back again.

“Make one crash,” Galen told Jason, without looking up.

“What?”

“Make one of your jets crash.”

Galen then locked his eyes on Jason, the same as he’d done to me

back in April, the day of the funeral. My sisters and I hadn't been allowed to go, and when I told Galen this at recess, he'd locked those eyes on me and asked if I'd ever been to a funeral. I hadn't. He'd been to his grandmother's funeral, he said, and described how cold her skin was and how they'd sewn her lips and eyes shut to keep them from snapping open and scaring someone to death, which had actually happened in Missouri. I'd tried to ignore this, also, but felt the throw-up coming on and ran inside.

Jason didn't throw up. He just picked up his pencil and sent one of his shark chickens straight into my steeple. He scribbled in a giant cloud of smoke and flame.

"How's that?"

Galen shrugged and started drawing again.

During the walk home after school, I hung a little ways behind Jason and Galen, who acted like I wasn't there. After Galen took his cut-off, Jason and I talked again, but only about school. When we got to his cut-off, I stopped and wanted to tell him something more, something important, but a drain opened and all the words ran out. I shoved my hand into my pocket, and felt the crumpled newspaper article. I took it out and handed it to him.

"Thinking of you," I said, and then he walked off down the street.

After that, I hardly spent any time with Jason or Galen after school, which was fine with my mother. She was still angry at Galen about the army men incident. That summer, just before school started, Galen had lined up all my army men in the driveway, dumped the lawnmower gasoline on them, and set them on fire. They melted into crazy shapes, into each other—that's what happens during a nuclear war, he warned me. That's what will happen in Vietnam. Then Mom came outside and started yelling. Galen had dropped by a couple of times after that, but Mom had told him I couldn't play, so he stopped coming. I was okay about that now, because it meant I wouldn't have to hang out with Jason, either. Those two seemed to

have become best friends, and it was tough for me to watch it. I watched television instead.

One afternoon, I heard a knock at the door. It was Dale Chalmers, who lived one neighborhood over and was a year behind me in school. He was taller than me and stockier, but had a thatch of curly white hair that made him look like a clown. Dale was the only boy in his family, like me, and had two sisters, but they were in high school. The few times I'd gone over to his house, his sisters had tousled our hair and teased us in baby voices about being "just a couple of boys." This was annoying, but Dale had seen some annoying stuff at my house, too.

I'd hung out with Dale a little, but not as much as with Galen and Jason—Dale was only a second-grader. But after that time he knocked on my door, that time when I didn't think I wanted any friends, we spent almost every afternoon together. We were both starved for rough-housing. Jason and Galen were the only boys in their families, but they hadn't been good for that sort of thing. Jason could barely walk and chew gum at the same time. And the one time I'd seen Galen wrestle in gym class, he'd gotten pinned and then punched the other boy in the mouth. I didn't want to get punched in the mouth; I just wanted to get rid of all the corked-up electricity inside me. It would start building after school during *Batman* and keep on building through *Lost in Space!* and *Star Trek—Fire torpedoes, Mr. Chekov!* By the end of it all, I'd be doing flips off the couch and Dale would be pounding at my door, crackling with his own electricity.

We had a set routine. First we'd visit the woodpile to try to scare out the huge woodchuck Mom claimed was living there. Then we'd head down to the maple tree to swing on the thick, scratchy rope tied to one of its branches. Then, in the flat grassy place, we'd fake-fight. It always started with a few insults and Dale throwing a "wing cross"—a wide swing, easily blocked. I'd pump my fist into his gut without touching him, and make a punch sound with my lips. Dale would fake a grunt, then drop and cut my feet out with a "sweeper kick." I'd struggle inside his full-nelson, free an arm, and drive my

elbow into his belly. He'd throw a wing cross and the whole thing would start over.

Finally, we'd collapse in the grass and gaze up at the green soggy trees, listening to the sounds: lawn mowers, garage radios, cicadas. It was all comforting, the fight, the sounds, the resting there in the grass.

One time, after a fake fight, Dale asked if I wanted to spend the night at his house. Mom said it was okay, so after supper we met at my door and headed through Danger Pass, also known as the space between two neighboring garages. We stepped carefully across his back porch, littered with Lincoln Logs, Lego pieces, and the broken bodies of superhero action figures. Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers were in the TV room with the pocket doors shut, the newsman's voice seeping through the crack. I could see a slice of the screen, the rough, shaky shadows of people tearing through jungles or city streets—it was difficult to tell. People always seemed to be running during the news, the camera never still. Dale peeked inside and asked if it was okay if I spent the night. I didn't hear them answer, but Dale closed the door and said, "C'mon."

We played in the basement until after midnight, because no one told us to go to bed. When we finally hauled ourselves upstairs, Dale went into his room and told me to wait outside. A sliding door opened and closed. Dale dragged out two sleeping bags: a Jungle G.I. Joe sleeping bag and an old brown one with a cowboy on it, which he tossed at me. The hallway was dark, except for the orange glow from the night light. Lying on the floor, I could just see the old bookshelf at our feet. On top of it were framed photos. In one there was a younger Mrs. Chalmers, her short black hair pasted to her scalp, and in another was his father, looking tall and crisp in his military uniform. Between them was a picture of a little boy. He was dressed in overalls and toddling toward the camera, his fat little arm raised up and shaking a toy bunny or mouse. He had curly white hair.

"Is that you?" I asked.

“No, that’s my brother, Robert.”

“You have a brother?”

“Yeah, but he died before I was born.”

“How’d he die?”

“I dunno. He had a disease and he died. That’s his room over there.” Dale turned his head toward his own bedroom, the door open a crack. “I don’t like to sleep there.”

I stared into the dark behind the door, then back at the picture of Robert. How many people had walked by it and never guessed?

“I had a brother who died,” I said, “but he was only a baby. His name was James.”

Dale asked me what happened, but I didn’t know much. James was born dead. I never saw him. In the silence that followed, my eyes floated back to the photo. It felt familiar, and not just because Robert looked so much like Dale. Then I noticed the hallway in back of the boy, the hanging pictures, the wallpaper. It was the same hallway where we were now. The person who snapped the photo must’ve been standing right about where we had our sleeping bags. I could understand why it spooked Dale; it spooked me, but only a little. Robert had lived—there was the proof, in the photo, in the hallway that was now empty of him. There were no pictures of James, no hallways he’d toddled across. I had nothing compared to Dale.

Or to Jason. Jason had spent most of his life with his dad, had lots of photos, and had gone to the funeral. That’s why he’d missed a week of school, Mom had told me, to be with his family and go to the funeral. He might not have seen the body of his father (how burnt was it?), but he’d seen the coffin, maybe touched it, and at the cemetery, the men carrying it across the grass to the untucked earth—also to be touched—and lowered into place. A real place, marked with a tombstone and remembered. In my mind there was no picture of James and in North Lawn Cemetery, on the earth above his head, no tombstone; just a dirty patch and some plastic daisies. My parents had taken us there once. They’d promised to put a stone there someday,

but I worried it would be too late. Finding my brother in either place, the mind, the earth, seemed more impossible every day.

Then the shadows seemed to gather on my side of the room and flood inside, toward the empty place that needed to be filled. That couldn't wait another second.

"My brother talks to me," I said.

Dale stayed quiet. So I told him another lie. I told him that, actually, my brother talks to me *all the time* and reveals important information: dangers and government secrets and what kinds of cars we'll drive in the future (all silver, all fast). Anything, really, I want to know.

"Oh yeah, sure," Dale said, rolling over in his sleeping bag.

I told him he could ask me anything he wanted, anything at all, and James would tell me the answer.

He asked who was tougher, King Kong or Godzilla. That was easy—Godzilla breathes fire. Dale got quiet, thinking up the next question, which I thought would be simple, like how the dinosaurs died off or where Vietnam was or how Evel Knievel made his motorcycle fly. I thought it would be simple, because I thought Dale was simple.

"What does God look like?"

This was not simple. Dale kept his back turned, as if he wanted me to think he hadn't asked the question or that he didn't really care about the answer. But I could tell he cared. I cared. We needed something more than a lie. I lay back with my head on my hands and shut my eyes. I shut them even tighter than I had in church, creasing my forehead, until tiny stars popped and shot across the dark screen of my eyelids. I could have told him that: stars and darkness. But I kept on searching, squinting harder, until the galaxies stopped zipping by and, slowly, a face took shape in the void. The only face.

"Charlton Heston?"

I wasn't sure at first, but then it was like a key turned—*Charlton Heston*—and everything opened. Inside the darkness, I followed that face back across the stars, to a desert lake, then the rocky ledge of Mount Sinai and then, in a blink, onto the radioactive sands of the

Forbidden Zone. Then back again to water, a baby floating in a shell on the Nile, the smell of popcorn, and my father standing in my bedroom doorway, Easter night, letting the candy drop from his hand. He didn't care that I saw him. Then over waterfalls and into a rattling cage where a gorilla is whooping it up and shooting off a fire hose—*It's a madhouse!* a voice screams. *How did this cruel, upside down world get started?* I didn't know, but through it all, hadn't that face been with me? Hadn't it always been with me?

Dale didn't say anything, and in the silence I felt the weight of what I'd just said and thought pressing down on my chest. I couldn't hold it for long, I knew—it was too much for one boy. I could already feel it slipping, the hope of it, and becoming something else, something terrifying or even worse, silly.

"My brother told me all that, too," Dale said, and pulled his sleeping bag up around his shoulders.

"That's good," I said, and closed my eyes.

168

Dale followed me everywhere after that, asking questions and listening carefully to the answers, which got bigger every day. I couldn't stop myself. I told Dale that James not only talked to me, he'd granted me magic powers, because that's what brothers and best friends do: share things no one else can share. The nature of these powers was borrowed from the *Golden Children's Bible* and other sources. Like Moses and Dr. Strange, I controlled the elements with my mind; like Jacob and the Silver Surfer, I wrestled with omnipotent beings from outer space; like King David and Dennis the Menace, I was deadly accurate with a slingshot. And then there was my super-human strength. Like Samson's, it was divine, but included bionic technology. I'd been in a terrible accident, you see, out at the Fort Dodge gypsum mines where a ton of rock had caved in on me, crushing my legs and arms and half my head. My left eye had popped like one of my mom's bath beads. The doctors at Trinity Regional had rebuilt me, making me stronger, faster, better—with help from James. Like Gide-

on's angel, my baby brother had descended in a shower of gold dust, placed his hands on my twisted limbs and filled them with a strength I was only now beginning to measure.

Dale's brother had granted him powers, as well, I told him. One day, while visiting his dad at work (Mr. Chalmers installed carpet), Dale had been in a horrible accident involving a hot glue gun. He woke up on another planet where he was tortured by three aliens with bald veiny heads just like the ones in *Star Trek*, Episodes 11 and 12, "The Menagerie." But even that distant planet hadn't been beyond the sight of Charlton Heston, the face of God, who sent Dale's brother, Robert, to the rescue. Together, Dale and Robert used mind control to hurl fiery boulders at the alien heads and destroy them. Back on earth, Dale continued to use his powers to fight evil and elevate furniture for his dad's carpet business. They made a lot of money.

I liked telling Dale this story, and he often asked me to repeat it. Mostly, though, I liked telling the story of Dale and me together, the two instead of just the one, Elijah and Elisha, chasing adventures and punishing enemies and making things right again.

169

Dale and I kept our distance at Duncombe Elementary, giving each other knowing looks and hand signs, so no one suspected our secret powers. We'd meet after school and take a different route home, to avoid Galen and Jason and the others. I'd be telling stories the entire time; he'd be listening. When I got to the exciting parts, I'd start walking faster, and sometimes Dale would fall behind. He always caught up, but then, one time, I heard the screech of tires. I looked over my shoulder and saw a man getting out of a car. He was red-faced and yelling and moving towards Dale, who was standing in the middle of the road, frozen. I yelled at him and he started running. I ran with him. We kept on running, even after the man gave up, hopping fences and charging through sticker bushes, all the way to the stadium practice field. Tucked behind the curve of the retaining wall, I caught my breath and asked Dale what happened.

John T. Price

“Robert spoke to me and made my mind throw a rock at that man’s car.”

I didn’t say anything. We waited until it was almost dark, then snuck back to our homes.

A few days later, Mom marched into the family room and turned off *Star Trek*. She stood in front of me.

“Mrs. Chalmers said someone threw a rock through her front window. Do you know anything about that?”

“No.”

“Good, because she’s not the only one. Mr. Severson’s car window was broken yesterday.”

She turned the television back on, but I couldn’t watch. I stepped outside and waited until Dale emerged from Danger Pass. He wanted to fake fight, but I told him I had something important to tell him. We walked to the end of the yard and climbed the sumac, its bright red leaves surrounding us like fire. I told Dale that he and Robert had to stop throwing rocks at everyone, that his powers were only meant to be used against evil people, not good people. Not his mom or his neighbors or his friends. Okay?

Dale nodded. But a few days later, walking down that same street, there was a screech and another man shouting and cursing out his window.

“Why?” I asked Dale when we reached the retaining wall.

“He was *evil*.”

I ignored Dale’s knocking on the door the next afternoon and ran up to my bedroom. I called down to Mom that I didn’t feel like playing. She told Dale, and I watched from the window as he walked back through Danger Pass, tossing a rock in his hand. I wasn’t sure what had gone wrong, only that it was my fault—no one else in his family threw rocks or tried to hurt people, as far as I’d heard. What had I done? I’d told stories, that’s all. But it was more than that, I knew. When I was around Dale, to feel something, to want something, was to tell a story about it. And to tell a story about it, and make someone

believe it, even if you didn't, was to make it come true in a way. Dale believed my stories, and that was enough to draw a shining curtain around us both, to bring close what I thought might be lost: a brother, a God, a friendship capable of healing the broken places in our lives and in the world. It kept back the shadows, at least for a little while.

But something had gone wrong with this story, and once you set a story loose, could you call it back again? Could you fix it and start over? I took out the *Golden Bible* from under the bed, because that's where Reverend Hearn said we could search for the answers. I turned to the picture of the flood, the man with the lamb, and quickly put it back again.

I don't know why or how many days later I opened the newspaper sitting on our coffee table and saw the advertisement: *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, starring Charlton Heston, was showing at the Astro Theater. When Dale pounded on the door that afternoon, I opened it and announced the good news. Dale looked happy, maybe because I was talking to him again. And I kept on talking, telling more stories I knew weren't true, but hoped would become true, for him, about how James and God had spoken to me in a dream and wanted Dale to stop throwing rocks. If he didn't stop, the world—Fort Dodge, Iowa—would be transformed into a desert, just like the Forbidden Zone in the first *Planet of the Apes* movie. Dale had seen that movie, I knew, and it had scared him. He looked at his feet and said he had to go home.

Dale was gloomy the next few days and not very interested in the giant woodchuck or any of our usual adventures. He didn't invite me to spend the night. There wasn't any rock throwing or running for cover or reports of broken windows, either, but it wasn't long before his fear began to wear off. Once, when I turned my back on him, an empty pop can flew over my head and landed in front of me. It was only a matter of time.

Saturday finally arrived, and Mom dropped Dale and me off at the

Astro. Galen and Jason were in the lobby, and we joined them in line for popcorn. Galen was excited about the movie, and couldn't stop talking about it. We entered the theater, which was big and dark and smelled like pond scum. The walls were decorated with Gothic sconces and there was a balcony that we thought was strictly reserved for high-schoolers and men wearing sweat pants. We settled into the cool, plastic-covered seats, happy that we'd found four in a row that weren't torn with the stuffing sticking out. The lights dimmed, the big red velvet curtain parted, and we got started with Woody Woodpecker and Droopy. The cartoons felt as out of place in that theater, before that movie, as they would've in a church sanctuary. None of us laughed.

Beneath the Planet of the Apes finally opened with a rolling ocean tide, crashing onto a strange orange shore. In the background was the familiar voice of Cornelius, the chimpanzee archaeologist. He was reading from the sacred text of ape civilization (twenty-ninth scroll, sixth verse), and Galen recited the words out loud from memory: "Beware the beast man, for he is the devil's pawn. Alone among God's primates he kills for sport or lust or greed. Yea, he will murder his brother to possess his brother's land. Let him not breed in great numbers for he will make a desert of his home and yours. Shun him, drive him back into his jungle lair, for he is the harbinger of death."

The scene shifted to Cornelius reading from the scroll to Taylor, the lost astronaut played by Charlton Heston. This story was starting where the first one left off. Taylor and his beautiful but mute mate, Nova, had successfully escaped their ape captors and were about to set out on horseback into the Forbidden Zone. The orangutan Dr. Zaius—Minister of Science and Chief Defender of the Faith—was tied to a rock. He warned Taylor not to go into the Forbidden Zone: "You may not like what you find." Taylor went there anyway (as we knew he would) and discovered the Statue of Liberty buried up to her chest in nuclear rubble. He'd been on Earth all along.

"You blew it up!" he screamed, pounding his fist in the foamy sand. "*Damn you! God-damn you all to hellllll!*"

That voice, that face—it was beyond doubt or question now. Inside the theater, in his presence, I felt the universe slide into focus. *Our* universe, the one we shared, Charlton Heston and the rest of us, which nobody else could see or understand. How many people we loved or might have loved had been lost for no reason? Too many. And it was okay for us, for him, to be angry about that, to scream and cry like babies and pound our fists in the sand. It was okay, even, to swear. But that didn't give anyone the right to destroy everything with bombs or rocks or floods. That didn't give anyone the right to stop caring.

Dale's eyes were wide open and fixed, and I hoped it would sink in, for good.

The movie mostly followed the story of Brent, another tight-jawed astronaut who'd followed Charlton Heston's time-space trajectory and crash landed, as he had, on future Earth. But Charlton Heston, or somebody's memory of him, popped up from time to time, stitching everything together. There he was, moving across the desert, as he had in *The Ten Commandments*, facing walls of flame and ground-splitting earthquakes and forks of lightning. There he was, being tortured, as Dale had been, by bald mutants using mind control. One of those mutants was the same guy who played villainous King Tut on the *Batman* TV show. It all made sense.

Until it spun out of control. It started when Nova got shot and died. The blood on her chest looked horribly wrong, like liquid nudity. Charlton Heston and Brent then decided to make a run for the underground Doomsday Bomb to disarm it, I thought. The bald mutants, who worshipped the missile like a god (*The heavens declare the glory of the Bomb and the firmament showeth his handiwork*), planned to blow it up before the apes could get their damn dirty paws on it. Charlton Heston snuck into the sanctuary, but then, while peeking around a corner, got splattered with machine-gun fire. He screamed and bled all over the wall. Dale leaned way forward in his seat. Brent jumped out and fired his gun at the apes, killing one after another until he got splattered. After

Brent died, Charlton Heston coughed up some blood and crawled toward the crystal command consul. I prayed he wasn't injured that badly, that he might still defeat the apes, disarm the bomb, and save the day—for me, for Dale, for the world. Instead, he reached forward, spat out *You bloody bastards!* and launched the missile.

I looked at Dale. His wet cheeks glistened in the light of the explosion.

Then he was up and scooting down the row of seats, holding his gut like he'd been punched for real. He ran out the exit and was gone.

"Why'd he do that?" Galen asked, chomping his popcorn. I searched his face for the answer, then peered at Jason. He was staring at the screen, at the darkness of the scorched earth, as dry-eyed as the week his father died.

"Why'd he run away?"

I lifted my napkin, wiped the butter off my mouth, and shrugged.