

# the witch's hand by patrick o'leary

They were telling scary stories.

Three boys with red lips in a red tent in the backyard on the first summer night warm enough to sleep out. They'd brought their sleeping bags and their flashlights. Jimmy Glimm — their host — provided a spread of candy bars and Cheetos which they promptly washed down with a pitcher of Cherry Kool-Aid. They smiled when they spotted his backpack in the corner of the tent. He took it everywhere; he probably slept with it. But he never explained why. He didn't have to. Jimmy was the coolest kid in school by far. His perfect blond hair hung in bangs just above his blonde eyelashes and blue eyes. Girls drew pictures of him in their notebooks and when he walked by they'd lean their heads together, follow him with their eyes and whisper, "It's him." Bullies never messed with Jimmy. Teachers learned to call his name when no one else had the answer: "Entropy." "Galahad." "Marsupial." Everybody still talked about the drowning girl he rescued from the muddy Saginaw. And they all envied the ease he had with his body, the lopping, almost musical way he walked, his sagging backpack rode him like a jockey rides a thoroughbred. Jimmy Glimm seemed already complete, already adult, while they were still stuck in rehearsals. Sleeping over at his house was a real privilege. It made the boys feel special; more alive, almost bigger, as if by sharing his inner circle they might become everything he was.

It was late when they heard a strange ripping sound and a "thud."

Then silence.

And in the silence both of the boys who were guests tried to puzzle out what they had just heard. They decided: It had to be an apple dropping from an apple tree, tearing through the leaves and landing on the lawn. They remembered climbing the tree last summer and eating apples before they were ripe and getting terrible gas. Farting all over the place. "Laughing gas" they called it. It was how they first met Jimmy.

It had to be an apple.

It couldn't have been anything else.

"That's the witch's hand," said Jimmy as he clicked on the flashlight and underlit his face, taking his turn.

Then he told the story of Isadore The Witch. The Knight Who Worked At The Hardware Store. And The Stalking Inescapable Hand. Until that night they couldn't have imagined hands more exotic than, say, a conductor's with their acrobatic grace, or the singing hands of a hula girl. But after Jimmy told his story they could see the spell coming off the witch's hands like ribbons of light that turned into thunderbolts, smashed against the round silver shield and set the heart painted at its center ashudder. And the knight swiftly slicing the witch's hand off at the wrist. Standing over her as she bled to death. Her eyeballs turning white as she spit out her last curse, "My hand will be the hunter. And you will be the prey. It will hunt you down wherever you may flee. It will find you, knight. And with that hand I will take your last breath. Then I will take what you love the most."

The knight built a fire and burned the severed hand till all that was left was ash and bone.

"It's come," said Jimmy Glimm, looking out of the tent into the dark.

"How'd it get here?"

"Fell out of the sky. It probably grabbed a hawk by the talons and wouldn't let go."

"Talons?"

"Talons are bird claws."

One boy shivered. He had once touched the waxy sheath of skin on a yellow chicken claw. "Why's it come back?"

"It's just something you can't get rid of. You know, like a weed, or a little sister. Even if you try to lose it, it keeps coming back."

They realized he hadn't answered their question. "But Why?"

Jimmy smiled and pointed the beam at his friend's face and said, "Why what?"

The boy squinched his eyes closed. "Why's it keep coming back?"

Jimmy turned the light away. "It's looking for something."

"Wha?"

"The knight who chopped it off."

"He's dead by now."

"No, he's immortal."

"So what's he got to worry about?"

"Yeah, if he's immortal he's gonna live forever."

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"What do you mean **No**? What are you **talking** about?"

"He's human. He's not angelic or demonic. He bleeds, he sins, he hurts, he hungers."

His guests looked at each other then, each trying not to frown.

"I'm saying the knight can't die of natural causes. Only unnatural. Like bad luck. Or magic hands."

The boys were frowning. It broke the rules, you see. All the immortals they'd ever heard about were indestructible. In movies, comics, cartoons and books even, "Immortal" meant "Invincible." What was the point of living forever if you were always in danger?

"Anyway," Jimmy continued, "the hand has one day every year when it can roam the earth looking for the

knight."

Okay, so there were rules. "One day?"

"Yeah."

"What's it do the rest of the year?"

"It waits."

"That's stupid! What if he sailed to London? How would it ever catch up?"

"He did. So the hand grabbed hold of an eel and it swam her across the British Channel."

The boys imagined a squirming green eel with sharp teeth; its jaws clamped shut by the fingers of a white hand that wouldn't release it until it had made the crossing. And even then you would still feel the eel scum on your fingers.

"It can do that?"

"It can do anything. It's smart."

It became a problem they could analyze in depth like how would you survive a flood (climb up on the roof and bring a sandwich) or how many bananas can you eat before you blow up (between 14 and 18) or why does anyone ever get married to girls (they had no idea).

"Well, it's simple then. You just keep moving."

"Yeah, move so the hand never finds you. Never stop."

"But the hand never stops either. It crawls as far as it can from midnight to midnight. And then it waits a year before it moves again. But it won't stop. It'll never stop until it finds the knight."

"Does it ever forget where it's going?"

"Nope."

"Or who it's going for?"

"Nope."

"How's it know where to go?"

"It's magic."

Maybe it was the combination of words: "Magic" and "Smart." But it finally occurred to them how powerful and dangerous the hand was, and they asked the question they were avoiding.

"What's it gonna do?"

Jimmy swallowed. "Rip his throat out."

They felt more than saw the long cold fingers upon their necks, the same white fingers that cast the spell upon the knight.

"Too far," said one boy.

"Yeah. It'll never catch him."

"It already has. Twice."

The boys looked at Jimmy and tried to understand his faces. Jimmy always had more faces than anybody. It could drive you crazy trying to understand which one he'd put on next.

"He got stupid. He let his guard down. I mean, he'd been safe for centuries... Anyway, the first time it caught him was in the first elevator in New York City. He was the operator and it was his job to explain to folks how it rode on tubes of water that lifted it up and down. This was when people would line up through the lobby and out to the street just to ride on it. They called it a 'contraption.' There was a Chinaman on the elevator. He never stopped smiling. He wore a tuxedo and a black top hat, and a red silk scarf with a pearl pin in the center. The Chinaman waited till it was only him and the knight onboard. Then he got off on the fourteenth floor and he turned and bowed. And as the doors closed he reached into his vest and tossed something to the knight. It was all bones then. But the next time it had skin."

There was a long pause.

"It was 50 years later. He was on a car ferry going from Canada to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan."

"Wait! Wait! Wait! What happened in the elevator?"

"What do you think? That's how he lost his ear."

Both of them were very still because the only person they'd ever known who was missing an ear was Jimmy's dad.

"So he was leaning over the side, watching the wake churning up the dark grey water. Wondering how deep the lake got there. It was noisy and he only had one ear so he didn't hear it coming. It got him by the ankle and wouldn't let go. He had to beat it with an axe. He broke his ankle but he got it off and threw it overboard. Lake Superior is really deep. So it must have taken it a long time to get back on land."

Together, though neither of them knew it, his guests imagined the exact same image. A hand trapped under the ice that covered a lake. Its blue fingers clawing, clawing at the pale clear wall above it.

"Where'd you hear this story?"

"Who said it was a story?" For a moment, Jimmy peered out the open slit of the red tent, and juggled the flashlight back and forth. The boys looked at each other again to check if the other thought it was a joke. But nobody wanted to risk laughing at the town hero and never getting invited over again. And both knew Jimmy's dad walked with a limp.

"Okay. First? My dad doesn't work for the hardware store."

"Sure, he does. I seen him do the paint can shaker."

"He made my mom a new house key."

Jimmy swatted their evidence away like mosquitoes. "That's just his cover. He's really a knight of the Seventh Order who was granted immortality."

"For wha?"

"For killing a witch named Isadore. She stole the breath of babies. Put dead crows in chimneys. And

dried the breast of the King's daughter."

"Which one?"

Jimmy smiled. "He only had one."

One boy squinched up his face.

"So the King touched him with a golden sword four times on the cheek and made him eternal."

"Kings can do that?"

"This was a long time ago. They had lots of boons then."

"Boons?"

"Those are gifts." He saw their faces. "It's complicated."

"So the hand...is coming for him?"

"And me. Once it kills him. It'll drop and come crawling for me. Unless..."

"Unless what?" "Unless I get someone to cut my hand off first."

They giggled. The boys imagined they were telling stories around a campfire in the woods, and how the dark would start just at the edge of the flames. The flashlight making the red tent glow whenever it strayed off the face of the teller. They loved these kind of stories. Where something terrible was going to happen and you couldn't do anything about it.

"A saw could do it," one of them suggested. "A tree saw." He smirked. "Your dad's store has 'em."

Jimmy shook his head. "Takes too long. An axe would be better." He looked at his backpack. "A hatchet would be best."

"Someone would have to hold you down."

Jimmy looked at them.

"Because you couldn't just stick your arm out. You couldn't hold still. Even if you wanted to. Even if you closed your eyes. I couldn't."

"Me neither."

"And what if you missed?"

One of the boy's grabbed his wrist and shook his hand and yelped with horror as if it were hanging by a thread of muscle. The other boy giggled.

"That's right," said Jimmy. "It takes two. One to hold, one to chop."

A pause as they looked toward the flashlight beam as if into a fire. They could almost hear the crackle.

"They'd have to be strong. They'd have to be your best friends in the world."

Jimmy's red lips disappeared as he jammed them together and frowned. For a few moments they were lost, waiting for his lips to come back.

"But...then...you'd have to find someone to drive you to the hospital."

"His dad would do it."

"You're not listening. My dad..." He swallowed. "My dad would be dead."

"A neighbor then."

A pause.

"Maybe you could walk."

A pause.

"Couldn't you cut your own hand off?"

"No. Somebody else has to do it."

"That's a stupid story."

"Yeah it's like the convict and the lovers on lovers lane."

"What's that?" Jimmy asked.

"It's that dirty store on TV. They sell underwear and condoms."

"No, stupid, it's where teenagers go to make out and have sex. Anyway they find his hook on the back of their car."

"Oh yeah. I remember that one."

"Hanging on the bumper...dripping."

"Yeah, dripping. There's a lot of hand stories."

"My grandma knew a boy in Indiana who blew off his hand playing with fireworks."

"M-80?"

"Roman Candles. She was trying to scare me."

"Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"Shhhhh!"

A pause.

"I don't hear anything."

"Shuttup."

It was the quiet after you thought you heard something and that something was waiting for you to stop listening.

"I heard something."

"It's your sister. She's trying to scare us."

"No. She's at Mom's."

They listened until they couldn't take the silence anymore.

"Was it another apple?"

Their host said, "Apple?"

"Yeah, an apple. Falling through the leaves and landing on the ground. Like before."

"Who said anything about apples?"

"You did."

"No, I didn't," Jimmy said.

"Well, somebody did. It's the only logical, you know."

The knight's son said, "It would be logical if I had an apple tree."

They laughed then, as if they'd been waiting to laugh for a long, long time. "What do you mean? We climbed it last summer."

"Laughing gas."

"Yeah, laughing gas."

"Yeah, it's over in the corner of the yard."

"It was. But dad chopped it down in the fall."

The boys were silent.

"It was rotting anyway."

The boys were still.

"He used this."

One of them started shaking his head, going, "No. No way. No Way."

And the other started asking questions and every question sounded higher than the one before it. "What do you mean he chopped it down? How could he chop it down? If he chopped it down we wouldn't hear the apple going through the leaves. If he chopped it down there wouldn't be any apple? Right? RIGHT?"

"Here," Jimmy said. "Hold this for a second."