

## A God Called Josh | STORY AND ARTWORK BY BODI PARKHURST

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Pam.”

We didn’t have television in our home. “There’s too much trash on it,” Momma and Daddy said. Instead, we had a flat reel-to-reel tape recorder. On it Momma listened to taped sermons, gospel quartets, and a wobbly-voiced lady named Deldelker. Sally and I admired her full, fruity tones extravagantly.

“Listen to me,” we shrilled to each other. “I’m Deldelker.” And we would summon as full a vibrato as we could manage.

For a few weeks we flirted with the idea of actually *becoming* Deldelker when we grew up, but when Pam heard us, she disabused us of this notion. “You can’t sing,” she told us bluntly when we shared our plans. She was wrong. Sally and I could and did sing, often and loudly, with full vibrato.

Finally it got to be too much for Momma. “I don’t want you kids doing that; it’s not nice to copy people,” she said sternly. To take our minds off Deldelker, she put on a story tape for us. The tape was a mixture: a radio drama of Noah and the flood; Eric Behair reading “Chinese Lady and the Rats,” “Pokey, the Runaway Bear,” “Sally, the Runaway Monkey,”

and “Packy, the Runaway Elephant,” and then, as filler, “Little Black Sambo.”

The first time Momma played the tape I listened enthralled as God spoke from our tape recorder, telling Noah to get a move on and

build the ark. I heard the people’s exclamations as Noah’s sons started construction and Noah started preaching. I heard his congregation ridiculing him and his family, and then gasping as the animals thumped aboard. I heard Noah’s last invitation to come into the ark. And then I heard the door close, the first few droplets of rain, and then a downpour. Thunder crashed.

Someone screamed, “Open the door!” Someone else pounded on it. And suddenly our living room was full of the sounds of terrified people dying in the crashing waters while Noah and his family listened from inside the ark, righteous, safe, and smug.

They didn’t even throw a rope over the side. The pastoral peace of the ark after everybody outside got done drowning gave me time to catch my breath, but I never really got over the horror of it. *Why didn’t they pull some of the people up on deck, at least?*



“Legacy”

The nightmares started. I floundered in the crashing waves outside the ark, my family safe within. It took me a long time to die. I learned to busy myself in another part of the house during the flood story, which brought up a new fear. *Was I Grieving Away the Holy Spirit by avoiding the terror and guilt the flood story brought?*

*Should I listen, search my heart, and then confess, as Pam did?* I had seen her at it, playing, looking thoughtful, creeping up to Daddy or Momma and whispering furtively.

I never knew what her transgressions were, but after one confession Daddy said impatiently, "You don't have to confess *every little thing*, Pam." I knew from this that Pam's sins must be positively miniscule, because Momma and Daddy's usual view was that no sin was too small, no transgression too minor, to keep us out of heaven.

This brought up a new worry—which sins did I need to confess? Momma and Daddy's answer—every single one—didn't tally with Daddy's impatient reaction to Pam doing exactly this.

*Was confessing a sin unnecessarily a sin? Did I need to confess the unnecessary confession? Maybe it was showing off—my besetting sin, according to Marie. Did I need to confess that too?* I was afraid to ask. I couldn't pinpoint what my sins were, aside from showing off and bed-wetting, but my guilt told me they were real.

## Happy heathens

The next story on the tape was almost as bad. "Once upon a time there was a little old Chinese *la-a-a-dy*, and a little old Chinese *ma-a-a-n*, and they lived together in a *little old Chinese house*. Now, they didn't know *our* Jesus. They prayed to a god

called *Josh*." That seemed a little informal to me, but perhaps that was how they did things in China. It turned out that the little old Chinese house was filled with little old Chinese rats, which ate all the little old Chinese man and lady's rice. They talked it over with Josh. "But," Eric Behair informed us, "Josh couldn't see, and

Josh couldn't hear, and Josh couldn't do anything. He just sat there, and he *loooked*, and *loooked*, and *loooked*."

The little old Chinese lady left the house—probably to get away from the rats, I decided. In her wanderings around town she heard beautiful singing. My stomach tightened at this part. Many mission stories involved perfectly happy heathens being lured into evangelistic meetings by beautiful singing.

But the songs were the honey in the trap. Once they entered the church, their carefree heathen lives were over. They had only two choices. They could get baptized and cope with the fallout. And fallout there would be: Christians

Suffered For the Lord. They lost jobs, homes, and families; gave up beautiful, colorful native dress for a ragged pair of black pants and a white shirt; and then came to America, where the best Adventists were, and lived in poverty.

If they made the other choice, and left the meeting unconverted, they got roaring drunk and then were mauled by a lion as they staggered homeward, although sometimes it was a crocodile or a cobra. Or their favorite child died. God didn't take kindly to being spurned.

I willed the Chinese Lady to ignore the singing and hurry home to Josh, waiting in her nice, safe, rat-infested kitchen. But this was a



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mission story, and the Chinese Lady disregarded my telepathic messages. She went in. She listened to the story of Jesus. She was sold, had herself baptized, and rushed home to share the good news with the little old Chinese man.

He was less than enchanted. His dinner was late, and the rats had been running

little old Chinese man plain rice. Her beat her, but it did no good. The rats were everywhere.

Desperate, the little old Chinese man finally offered his wife a deal: If Jesus could get rid of the rats, he could have Josh's job. The little old Chinese lady wanted to get rid of the rats herself. Also, she was eager to try a form of witnessing



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around. "Cook me some pork and rice, wife," he told the little old Chinese lady.

"But I am a Christian now," she replied. "I can't feed you pig any more. I follow the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Lord Jesus Christ tells me not to."

The little old Chinese man had been counting on pork and rice, and now some god he had never heard of said he had to eat his rice plain. And the pork was *right there*. "If you go to church I will beat you," he told her. "Josh is good enough for us."

Yes, I silently encouraged the little old Chinese man. *Josh is good enough for you. Make her listen. Show her who's boss.*

But the little old Chinese lady mule-headedly insisted on her new religion. Moreover, being a good Adventist woman now, she instantly recognized an opportunity to Witness *and* Be Persecuted for Her Faith, thus killing two birds with one stone. She went to church, returned home, took her beating rejoicing, and then cooked plain rice for the little old Chinese man, who beat her again for not cooking him pork.

This state of affairs continued for some time. The little old Chinese lady spent all her time hanging out at church and rubbing balm on her bruises. She ignored Josh, who returned the favor, gazing dustily at her while she cooked the

that didn't involve Grievous Bodily Harm. "All right," she said.

She and the little old Chinese man sat down in the living room, and she taught him how to pray in Adventist. "You have to fold your hands, like *this*," she said. "And you have to close your eyes, like *this*."

The little old Chinese man followed her instructions. The little old Chinese lady prayed. A few rats ran across the floor and out the door. "Huh," said the little old Chinese man. "Josh coulda done *that*."

The little old Chinese lady said, "Jesus isn't done yet." She prayed again. More rats ran out.

"Huh," said her husband. "Josh coulda—"

"*Jesus isn't done yet*," said the little old Chinese lady, and she got a little snippy about it. She prayed yet again. At long last, Jesus ponied up. Rats poured out of the walls, out of the rice bin, out of the beds. They raced out the door. Eric Behair concluded: "And they *never* . . . came *back* . . . *again*. And *next week*, when the little old Chinese lady went to church, the little old Chinese man . . . *went* . . . *too*." Organ music swelled.

Hurrah for the little old Chinese lady, hobbling along on her little old bound Chinese feet. Jesus saved her the cost of an exterminator. I hated that story. I liked the little old



Chinese lady, cooking pork fried rice for the little old Chinese man. I liked dusty, sleepy Josh. He sounded like a god you could live with. He might not be up to much, but at least worshipping him didn't get the little old Chinese lady beaten.

She didn't spend her days in an agony of guilt, fearing hell because she knew she had sinned but didn't know how. Josh let her put a little flavoring into her life, a little pork in the rice. It made me sad when the little old Chinese lady forsook colorful, exotic, albeit dusty, Josh for the gray and chilly world of Adventism.

### Run away

The runaway zoo animals in the stories were pretty much interchangeable. They lived in nice cozy cages, were tended by friendly keepers, ate good food, and yet in spite of this idyllic situation they still dreamed of freedom. Each found a cage door fortuitously open one day and escaped to wander through the city. Sally the monkey ended up in the hospital. Packy the elephant became a delinquent and ended up knocking over parking meters and sitting on cars. Pokey fell victim to depression and found his despairing way back to the zoo on his own.

All three animals went on to live quiet, blameless lives, hav-

ing learned their lesson: Flight Is Futile. Resistance Is Useless. Submit.

Momma generally turned off the tape before Little Black Sambo. She didn't approve of him. He was immodest since he wore only a loin-cloth. Besides, the story of a tiger running around a tree until he turned into butter was not

very uplifting. Also it was fantasy. A real tiger would have eaten Little Black Sambo long before butter came into it anywhere. Little Black Sambo was Fiction and therefore forbidden.

When the tape broke, Momma repaired it with Scotch tape. When it broke again, she repaired it again, and again, and again. Eventually the tape player disappeared into a cupboard and from my life, but the lessons it taught me endured. *Choose the lonely path of obeying God or die. Good Christians welcome suffering. Flight is futile. Resistance is useless. There is no escape; God is the only game in town. Josh is dead.*

The tape's most enduring lesson was exactly the opposite of the lesson the storytellers, and Momma, intended that I learn. That tape was created and played to reinforce my belief in God's intervention in the world. And oddly enough, I was prepared to believe that God *did*

intervene—in *his* world. But the world in which I lived was not a world in which God was interested.

God spoke to Noah. God honored the Chinese lady's faith. God was good, real, and present for others, but not for me. God was good to good people. But I wasn't a good person; all God held for me was a dreary lifetime of failure, followed by the lake of fire

that burns forever and ever, amen. I might have stood a chance with Josh.

The lesson of the tape was that the God I was learning about in worship and Sabbath School wasn't the god who ruled my life. ■

**Bodi Parkhurst** is a pseudonym.



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