



# Jase's Gift

By Ashley Bourne

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**I keep his dusty  
pack of Camels in  
my drawer and  
remember that  
summer . . .**

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*Ashley Bourne lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and wrote this story as an eleventh-grader at Stafford Sr. High School in Stafford. Editor of her school newspaper, The Stafford Indian Smokesignal, she has won several awards for her fiction and poetry. Her other interests include horseback riding, documentary filmmaking, and history.*

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he summer I turned sixteen came with balloons and roses from my friends, a beat-up black jeep from my parents, and a half-empty pack of cigarettes from my cousin Jase.

They weren't for me to smoke; it was Jase's last pack. He gave the rest to me after he decided to quit. The jeep has long since been scrapped, the balloons deflated, and the roses lay dead and pressed between the pages of my dictionary. But I keep that dusty pack of Camels in my dresser drawer and remember that summer.

Jase was eighteen when he came that June; his mother had just died. I never knew their family very well because they lived in Cassidy, an eight-hour drive from our house. I remember him at the funeral: he had shaggy blond hair to his shoulders and dark circles under his eyes. I was staring at his black suit—it looked severely starched and a year's growth too small. My mother told me then that he was going to stay with us for the summer.

"Just until things get straightened out. The poor boy, with his mother dying so suddenly, your Uncle Neil just can't take care of all the kids until some, ah, arrangements are made. It's just for the summer, hon." With that, she patted my shoulder absently and moved away to speak to my father.

I felt betrayed. I had always been an only child, and now I had to share my house—for the whole summer—with a cousin I had seen only on Christmas, and even then we spoke little.

Later, as I was leaving, I saw him in back of the funeral home, alone. I had come out before my parents, and I was heading for the car when I saw the lean figure out of the corner of my eye. I squinted at him briefly; he was right in front of the sun. He was smoking, and all of a sudden I felt sorry for him. I wasn't sure why, and it troubled me for several days.

Jase arrived the weekend after we got out of school. My mother asked me to get his bed ready after dinner, so I went upstairs and tiptoed into his room while he was watching television. He walked in as I was putting on the pillowcases. He looked startled.

"Hi. I was just, ah, changing the sheets."

"Oh, okay." We fell silent again. I felt like I needed to say some-

thing.

"I'm really sorry about your mom." I regretted it the instant it was out of my mouth, and my awkward expression of sympathy made him uncomfortable.

"Yeah, well . . ." But he never finished, and his eyes never left the window.

"Goodnight," I said and left him alone with his thoughts.

He remained sullen and quiet for the first few weeks. We barely spoke; I felt awkward because I didn't know what to say, and I think he felt edgy anyway. He liked to be by himself, and I wasn't really surprised when I found him one day in the woods behind our house, sitting at the base of my favorite tree. It was always the place I came to be by myself and think. He was smoking, eyes half-closed and barefoot. He turned his head warily toward me.

"Hi," I said. My smile faded as he just looked through me.

"Hey," he answered, and turned back to whatever he had been staring at. I sat down near him. I had no idea what to say.

"So, um . . . how are you doing . . . here, I mean? What do you think of the town and all?" I was trying, but I had no clue as to what was going on in his mind.

"It's okay, I guess. Not much to do." He took another drag on his cigarette and blew out a toxic cloud of smoke.

"Can you do rings?" I asked.

"Nope," he answered. We sat in silence a minute before he spoke again, hesitantly. "I can blow smoke out of my nose, though." And he did. I smiled.

The smoke was starting to drift my way. It stung my eyes a little, and I coughed when it curled up my nose. He gave me an appraising look.

"Want to try one?" he asked, holding the glowing stick out to me. Tempted, I looked at it for a second,

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then snatched it up and put it to my lips. I drew the smoke into my mouth and held it there, rolling my eyes toward him for directions.

"Okay, inhale it now," he said. I pulled the thickness into my lungs and I felt it burning my throat and lighting up my insides until I knew they must be glowing like the tip of his Camel. It hurt, and I parted my

lips to exhale. A tumult of angry smoke poured out of my mouth—much more than went in, I'm sure—and my tongue tasted like singed tobacco. I handed him the cigarette back.

"That's pretty good. You didn't even cough," he said. I turned away and spat to get the nasty, burnt taste out of my mouth. It didn't help.

"What?" he asked.

"That tastes awful. You should quit, you know."

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**"I'm really sorry about your mom," I blurted. My sympathy made him uncomfortable.**

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"Nah. I've been smoking too long," he said in a lofty tone.

"How long?"

He didn't answer immediately; he looked away.

"Two years," he said, darting his blue eyes at me to see if I believed him.

"Oh," I said.

We sat in silence until I looked at my watch. It was almost two o'clock. I was meeting my friends at the pool, so I got up to leave. He watched me. I knew I should invite him to go, but I didn't really want him to come along. I didn't think he'd enjoy himself and I'd end up feeling guilty being with my friends, so I'd have to go and sit with him and try to be friendly while all my friends had a wonderful time. I asked anyway. I felt him studying me with those sharp eyes.

"Nah. I don't feel like it," he answered, so I turned to go, relieved, and left him with a hasty "Okay, bye."

Still I couldn't enjoy myself at the pool for thinking about Jase alone in the woods. I ended up sitting alone at the edge of the pool anyway, wondering if he didn't like me.

And so it went for several more weeks; I would find Jase at the base of the tree, or sometimes in it, but always smoking and always staring off into the distance. I would sit down, or sometimes climb up into the giant branches and we would talk a little, or just sit and enjoy the quiet.

He asked me to drive him to 7-11 for cigarettes sometimes. I had my learner's permit, and he was eighteen, so my parents let us drive to the store alone for practice before I got my license. Little did they know . . .

I actually started to get to know him, my cousin

who smoked, who liked to read Kerouac and Jack London, who liked dogs not cats, whose favorite color was dark green, and who knew just about all there was to know when it came to fishing. And then one day, he wasn't the stranger who had come to stay with us

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for the summer; he was my cousin Jase. I even let him read my stories.

"These are good," he said. Coming from him, I knew it was a compliment. He was very interested in my writing; he even helped me revise my stories. He was becoming a friend.

But I didn't like driving him to get cigarettes anymore. At first, I thought it was great that he trusted me. We had a secret, and the quick trips to 7-11 and going home the long way so he could finish a smoke were fun. But every night, I lay awake and heard the dry cough that plagued him. It was nothing serious, or so he claimed; it only lasted a few minutes. Still, I felt like it was partly my fault. I felt guilty. So I stopped driving him to buy cigarettes. I knew my parents wouldn't buy him his Camels, and our house was ten miles from the 7-11; I didn't think he'd want to walk that far.

"C'mon. Let's go to the store real fast, okay?" he asked.

"You just bought a pack the other day. Aren't you going through them pretty fast?"

"What's it to you?" His eyes turned wary, and his voice lost the friendly edge I had become used to hearing.

"Well, it's just, you smoke a lot and I feel bad because I know . . ."

10 "You know what? That your parents wouldn't want me to have them? That my father wouldn't want me to smoke? That you might get in trouble?" He tried to sound nasty, but I think he was mostly shocked; he looked like he'd been double-crossed.

"They'll kill you," I said, feeling like a self-righteous pamphlet—or my mother. "Lung cancer—I don't feel like helping you ruin your lungs. You've been coughing more since you've been here." I tried to explain. His eyes blazed and his face wore a half-amazed, half-betrayed look. I suppose he couldn't be-

lieve that I, his only friend here, had refused to support him. He just walked off.

When I went for dinner, my parents asked where Jase was. I said I thought he was in his room, which was true. I thought he'd just gone inside after our argument.

It started to rain halfway through my second slice of pizza. By the time I finished off my Dr. Pepper, thunder crashed and lightning spliced the darkened sky outside. During dessert, the rain really began to pound. My parents had just stepped into the den when the door opened. I looked up from loading the dishwasher. Jase walked in.

He was soaking wet; his clothes were plastered to his body and his hair hung in wet strands as water rolled off his face. Darting his eyes quickly around the room to make sure my parents were not there, he pulled a wet, slightly crumpled pack of Camels triumphantly from the pocket of his jeans. Then he went up to his room. I followed the wet tracks upstairs and was about to knock on the door when I heard him cough and I lost my courage. I tiptoed down the hall to my room.

We didn't speak much for the next week. It wasn't just the smoking that bothered me, it was that

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**"Cigarettes will kill you,"  
I said, feeling like a  
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he didn't fit into my carefully-structured world. I had gotten to know him, but I wasn't sure if I liked everything I knew.

My birthday was a sunny day near the end of August. Jase was leaving for home in a few days. My friends had taken me out all day, first shopping, then to dinner and a late movie. When I walked into the house, it was dark and absorbed in sleep and silence. I crept up to my room. I noticed a small, wrapped package on my dresser. I picked it up gently and peeled off the crumpled wrapping paper. It was a half-empty pack of Camels. The wrapper was water-stained, and there was a note folded between the cigarettes.

Sorry, no money.

Happy Birthday.

These were more trouble  
than they're worth.

I quit. J.

I felt the smile bursting out on my face. The next

morning, Jase had packed his things. I didn't get a chance to talk to him alone, but I hugged him as we walked out to the car. While my parents were talking to Uncle Neil, Jase asked me quietly if I had gotten his present. I smiled, and said I liked that one the best of all.

"You know," he started, "I'd only smoked for a few months. Not really that long," he confessed.

"I knew it all along."

"Yeah, I'll bet!" he laughed as he got into the car.

"Come see us at Christmas!" I called just before they pulled away. Jase waved, and I watched their car as it turned out of our driveway and rolled out of sight. ★

## Witch

Will she sink or will she float?  
She's playing dead in the cellar again  
Looking for a place to sleep.  
Over there, she is the one, lies lit up  
It's strange how she wanted to touch  
my face.

The sweet wind burns off my dead skin  
She's playing games in the cellar again  
What we wanted, not what we thought,  
Hear one more offer for Salem's lot  
I don't know why it's time for bed  
so early.

My sweet little heretic in mourning  
One soft soul found in denial.  
When she crawled out, black bleach hair;  
Not at the expense of what is true, she lies  
Roaming on a half-broken glide of rollerskates  
with her broomsticks  
waving  
high.

I saw the grass stains on her fingers.  
What's wrong with the crooked-nosed lady?  
If there's anything wrong with her, it's you.  
She endorses the use of lying,  
Only if it doesn't shade what's  
the truth.

Should we throw water on her?

—Margaret Richardson,  
Twelfth grade, Robert E. Lee High School,  
Staunton, Virginia

## No Escape

On red and purple nights I weep  
As darkness watches and soldiers sleep.  
Where tall and greenish grasses grow  
The rockets' shell-storms blaze and glow.

As iron vultures die and burn  
The flames of zippos lash and churn.  
In murky waters soldiers fall.  
My friends and foes shriek and crawl.

The powder's white teeth tear and foam.  
While Charlies come, I dream of home,  
A home that moans on quiet streets  
As gales of bullets glow and streak.

While gunboats ring and Hueys fly  
Infernos' bushes choke the sky.  
As bright vermilion cordial flows  
I lie where red-stained grasses grow.

—Brian Asis,  
Twelfth grade, David Starr Jordan High School,  
Long Beach, California

## Invitation to Artists

**We'd love to see your illustrations, photographs, and doodles. Please follow these guidelines and use the cover sheet on page 5.**

1. Use either black ink or charcoal on white paper. (Pencil and blue ink do not reproduce well.)
2. **Color work is encouraged** and considered for the magazine's cover. Paintings of any size are welcome.
3. Photographs may be taken with any type of camera: keep your negatives in case you are asked to send them later.
4. Do not fold or mat your artwork. Insert cardboard backing in the mailing envelope to prevent damage.
5. Complete the Merlyn's Cover Sheet on page 5 and send it in with your art. Also, on the back of your submission, provide your **Name, Grade, Home Address and Phone, School Name, Address and Phone.**
6. *Merlyn's Pen* will respond within **ten weeks.**

Address submissions to:

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