



## Wild Tom

by Karl Harshbarger

[Home](#)

[Summer 2014](#)

[Winter-Spring 2014](#)

[Fall-Winter 2013-14](#)

[Summer-Fall 2013](#)

[Spring-Summer 2013](#)

[Winter-Spring 2013](#)

[Fall-Winter 2012-2013](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

Casey's sitting in a room with four other boys and three girls. The room is in the annex down the hallway from the main worship room of the Addison Lutheran Church. The room doesn't look like a church room at all but more like a classroom over at the junior high. Only a lot smaller.

Sally Carter, Betty Feinbach and Peggy Prost are sitting in the front row. Sally's the prettiest of the three with that nice blue dress that's been ironed in a crisp way. Her blonde hair falls over her shoulders. The boys, all five of them, including Casey, fill up the back row. Dean Coglin's right there in the middle, his black hair all slicked down with Brilliantine. He's the one that's really good at whistling.

Pastor Miller's up in front of the room talking about God. He's a round, little man with a bald head. But even though he's got a bald head, he's not really old.

He's saying stuff about God, stuff like how God is everywhere at all times and knows everything about everyone. And even though God knows everything about everyone, even the darkest, deepest secrets we never tell, here's the wonder of God: With all our imperfections, God loves us. Everyone. All equally. With a love that passeth all understanding. He loves the babies in the world; he loves the little children in the world; he loves the boys and girls in the world; he loves all the fathers and mothers in the world and he loves those who are sick and those who are dying. Everywhere. Without exception.

Casey sees Dean Coglin hold up his hand.

Pastor Miller pauses in his talking. He looks at Dean Coglin.

"Yes, Dean?"

"Even Wild Tom?"

Several of the boys guffaw. The three girls in the front row look back at Dean Coglin and then to Pastor Miller.

Because Wild Tom is that crazy, old coot of a guy with the long hair and the long beard who wears the smelly clothing and sits on the bench in front of the courthouse most afternoons. He lives alone in a shack out at the edge of Addison. He used to have a wife. But not anymore. Some people say he murdered her.

"That's an excellent question, Dean," says Pastor Miller. "Yes, that's a very excellent question."

"So, does he?" says Dean Coglin.

One of the boys guffaws again.

Pastor Miller is looking right at Dean Coglin.

Editor's Note

"Yes, Dean, God loves Wild Tom. And, Dean, perhaps, I don't know, perhaps you will find this even more amazing: God also loves you."

Guidelines

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Contact

It's the next week. The three girls and the five boys, including Casey, are in the living room of the parish house waiting for the confirmation ceremony to begin. First there will be the regular service, then the confirmation ceremony. Dean Coglin's wearing a black suit with a red tie and his hair is really, really slicked down with Brilliantine. The other boys don't have suits but pressed pants and pressed white shirts and their hair is slicked down, too, although not as much as Dean Coglin's. Sally's wearing a white dress that's made out of satin or some cloth like that and she's got a red rose pinned to her dress. Her blonde hair falls down over her shoulders.

Pastor Miller comes in. He looks at everyone.

"My goodness. Well. Such a distinguished company. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen."

The girls say, hello, right away. Casey says, hello. The other boys mumble something. Pastor Miller shakes the hand of each person there. He starts with the girls and moves to the boys. Each time he does so he says, "Remember, God loves you."

He shakes Casey's hand last. "And, Casey, believe me you, it's true. God really loves you."

He gives Casey's arm a pat, and then says to everyone, "What do you think, ladies and gentlemen? Shall we?"

The three girls and the other four boys follow Pastor Miller out of the door, but just before the door Dean Coglin gives Sally a push and Sally turns around and says, "Now, you stop that!"

Dean Coglin puts his hands in his pockets and starts that kind of trilling whistling.

Casey is the last to come out of the parish house. That's on purpose. He's not sure why it was on purpose. But it was. When he comes out of the parish house he sees that Pastor Miller and the other three girls and four boys have already gone up the steps of the church and that Pastor Miller is talking to Mr. and Mrs. Kleinfelder.

Standing just outside the parish house Casey can see the cars parked in the church parking lot, and beyond the parking lot he can see the elm trees bordering the street coming up to the church. Above the branches of the elm trees and way in the distance he can see the rounded top of the water tower on the other side of town. Even though he can't see the lettering from where he is, he knows that the word, "Addison," is printed on its side in big, black letters.

Pastor Miller and the three girls and four boys are no longer on the steps going up to the church – neither are Mr. and Mrs. Kleinfelder. Which means they have all gone inside the church. Well, of course, Casey can't see into the church from where he is standing but he knows where everyone will be sitting. The Kleinfelder's, just to take one example, will sit in the second row on the left but next to the aisle; the Henderson's, including their six children, will sit about half

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way down on the right side; his own family will sit about half way down on the left side across from the Henderson's; Mr. and Mrs. Ginsberg and their son will sit about three-quarters of the way back on the right side. Then there's that new Polish family with a name Casey can't pronounce. Casey's not certain where they will sit because they're new. But, for sure, Mrs. Feinbach, who always wears black, will sit by herself in the front row.

Now Casey can hear the organ music swelling up from inside the church and Casey knows that all the people will be reaching for the hymnbooks in front of them. Mrs. Feinbach won't reach in front of her because she's sitting in the front row. She always has her hymn book beside her.

So Casey understands that the regular church service is starting.

He should go into the church now.

That's what Casey tells himself.

He should walk across to the church and up its steps, open that big door and walk up the aisle and slip in beside his mother who will be sitting next to his father, then Aunt Adda and then his little sister. His mother will be wearing the same red rose she was wearing in the car coming to church.

But Casey doesn't go over to the church and walk up the steps.

At least, not for right now.

Instead, for some reason, he walks the other way, away from the church, across the grass beside the parish house toward that little gravel road which leads up Johnson's Hill to the cemetery.

It's true. That's what he's doing.

He reaches the beginning of the gravel road. He looks up it, sees the black, shiny, wrought-iron fence surrounding the cemetery, and also sees the tractor path which continues beyond the gravel road and up past a cornfield on one side and a pasture on the other toward the woods at the top of Johnson's Hill.

He should go back.

God loves him.

Instead, Casey starts up the gravel road toward the cemetery.

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Casey's leaning on the black, shiny, wrought-iron fence looking into the cemetery. From down below where he was before, at the church, or, actually, at the parish house, he wasn't able to see the stones laid out in a row above the dead people. But now he can see them. Over there, about three-quarters of the way along the stones are the stones for Casey's family, the O'Brien's and the Henessey's. Casey's grandfather and grandmother have stones there. So does his great-grandfather and great-grandmother. Only those stones have been there so long you can no longer read the letters on them.

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Casey turns away from the fence and looks up toward the top of Johnson's hill and thinks, Maybe I'll go a bit further.

That's what Casey tells himself.

So Casey leaves the cemetery and starts up the tractor path. There's a cornfield on one side and a pasture on the other. The pasture doesn't amount to much, the grass mostly worn out with lots of weeds and lots of cow dung. And there aren't any cows in the pasture. Even the cornfield on the other side doesn't look so good. Not like the cornfields down on the flatland surrounding Addison where the corn grows way over your head and where his father has his farm.

That's when Casey sees Wild Tom.

It's true.

Casey sees that Wild Tom has just come out of the woods up there near the top of Johnson's Hill and is coming down the tractor path toward him, right toward him, the long hair falling over his shoulders, the shaggy beard, the rolling, veering walk.

Casey thinks about running into the cornfield. Of hiding in there.

But he doesn't.

Maybe he doesn't because he sees the corn's too thin to really hide him.

Or something like that.

Wild Tom's now just a little ways away from Casey.

Wild Tom stoops. He looks at Casey. Wild Tom has crazy eyes.

"Well, boy?"

Casey can't say anything.

"Cat got your tongue, boy?"

Casey can't talk.

"Boy, you's all dressed up. How come you's all dressed up?"

Casey doesn't answer.

Suddenly Wild Tom's laughing. It's a cackling kind of laughing, a high kind of cackling laughing.

"Sonovabitch!" he shouts.

Wild Tom's slapping one of his thighs as he laughs. He has his mouth open as he laughs and Casey can see that Wild Tom's teeth don't really fit that good in his mouth.

And suddenly Wild Tom's not laughing anymore. It's as if he never laughed at

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all. Not ever. Wild Tom is looking up to the sky. He's seeing something there. Then he turns to Casey.

"Boy?" says Wild Tom. "You hear 'em?"

"Hear what?" says Casey.

"Them," says Wild Tom.

Except suddenly Wild Tom's laughing again, that high kind of cackling laugh, all with his mouth open. "Sonovabitch!" he shouts as he slaps his thigh.

Then Wild Tom's gone. He's not gone, but he's as good as gone. Because he's for sure started down the hill along the tractor path toward the cemetery and then the gravel road toward the church.

Except he's not totally gone. Because suddenly he stops. He turns around. He points his finger at Casey.

"Bung-ho!"

And then the strangest thing. Wild Tom turns and continues down the tractor path. But he starts whistling. Casey can clearly hear the whistling. A kind of trilling whistling. Same as Dean Coglin. Only better. The notes going back and forth. Beautiful.

Casey watches Wild Tom pass the shiny, wrought-iron fence at the cemetery, all the time whistling, but the sound of the trilling growing fainter and fainter, until by the time Wild Tom's passing the church he can't hear the whistling at all.

But the bells in the steeple of the church start ringing.

Casey's way up there above the church. He's even way above the steeple where the bells are ringing. He's even above the cemetery where the stones are laid out in a row above the dead people. He's so high up that when he looks down he sees all of Addison laid out, the soft green of the trees along the street going away from the church toward the ragged outlines of the downtown buildings with the courthouse at its center. And beyond those downtown buildings, way on the other side of Addison, he sees the water tower standing on its four legs with the big, black, bold letters spelling, "Addison," painted on its side. And beyond the water tower – he can only see this because he's up so high – the flatlands stretch out, all the fields of corn and oats and alfalfa disappearing into the distance to the rims of the earth.

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**Karl Harshbarger**, an American writer living in Germany, has had more than 80 publications of his stories in such magazines as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Ploughshares*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Antioch Review*, *The New England Review* and *The Prairie Schooner*. Two of his stories have been selected for the list of "Distinguished Stories" in *Best American Short Stories* and twelve of his stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

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