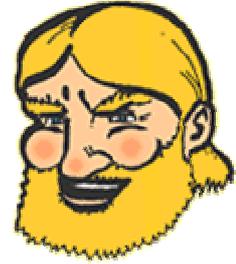


The Viking in the Basement

"I wonder what's in here?" Brian whispered, shining the flashlight on the old door with the rusted hinges, and the strange looking key in the lock.

"Maybe we should go back upstairs," I whispered back. The truth was, I was getting a little nervous. It was Brian's idea to cut lunch and sneak down into the pitch-black dark basement of our school and go exploring. He's twelve, almost a year older than I am, and he likes to take more chances.



Before I could stop him, he had turned the key and pulled the door open, and shined the light inside. What we saw made us gasp.

It was a huge statue of a man in a sitting position, carved out of wood and painted in full colour. It had long red hair and a bushy beard, and wore a gold, horned Viking helmet. Its ugly, frowning face was made even worse by a realistic scar that had been carved down one side of it, and its eyes were closed, like it was sleeping. Looking at it gave me a major case of the creeps.

"Hey, I know, it's a statue of Mr. Johanssen," Brian said, and I laughed. Mr. Johanssen was the school's head janitor. He was about the size of bear and always looked like he was mad.

"Yeah, and if Mr. Johanssen catches us down here, we're toast," I said.

"He won't," Brian said, but then he stopped talking when we heard a noise coming from somewhere behind us. "Shhhh!" he hissed, shutting off the flashlight. It was completely dark now and totally silent, except for a strange creaking sound.

"C'mon, Brian," I whispered, "turn the light back on so we can get out of here." I was really getting scared now.

"Okay." He switched the flashlight. Then I heard him gasp.

Looking in the direction of the light, I saw the Viking statue again, but it had changed. It was standing now. I backed up a step and so did Brian, but he kept the light on the Viking's face, which turned toward us with a horrible creaking sound. Then it did something that scared me into screaming out loud: it opened its eyes and looked at me!

The thing took a shuffling step toward us and that was more than Brian could take. He fainted dead away. As for me, something inside told me to grab the flashlight and run!

I ran as fast as I could through the dark basement, but I could hear the sound of heavy, shuffling footsteps right behind me. I ran back to the door we had come through to get into the basement, but it was locked. I was trapped!

The footsteps came closer, and I spun around, shining the light behind me. The Viking statue stepped into the light beam, its face really angry now, and its wooden lips stretched back to show huge, white teeth.

It came closer, closer, and I tried to run, but couldn't. It was like my legs were made of cement. Then something inside my head screamed **MOVE!** and that seemed to convince my legs.

I ran behind a nearby stack of boxes and crates and I could hear the footsteps following me, but I had an idea. I let it get close, then I pushed against the boxes as hard as I could and tipped the whole stack over on top of it. I knew that wouldn't stop it for good, but it might give me enough time to get back to Brian and try to find a way out.

With my heart pounding so loud I could hear it, I ran back to Brian, who was still laying on the floor. I shook him, but he was out cold. Then I heard the shuffling footsteps again and they

sounded close. Shining the light up, I saw the Viking just a few yards away and gaining on me. It looked really mad now! "Get up, Brian!" I yelled, shaking him harder.

The Viking's eyes bulged and glowed in the light beam. It was coming toward us, its arms outstretched. "Get up!" Now the statue was close enough to grab us.

I figured, this was it. Then the weirdest sound I'd ever heard echoed through the basement. It was like a song or a chant, but in some other language.

The Viking heard it too, and froze. All life disappeared from its eyes and it was a statue again. Another figure appeared in the flashlight beam, and this one was shaped kind of like a bear.

"Is your friend all right?" Mr. Johanssen asked.

"He fainted," I managed to say.

"Let's get him to my office," Mr. Johanssen said, kneeling down and picking up Brian like he was a doll. "Shine the light ahead of me."

"What was that thing?" I croaked as we walked through the darkness.

"It was found buried when they were digging the foundation for this school," Mr. Johanssen answered. "And if I'm right, it sailed to this continent a thousand years before that."

A thousand years?

We were in his office now, and I was glad to see light. He set Brian down on a beat-up old couch.

"But that thing was made of wood!" I said. "How can it move?"

Mr. Johanssen went to a first aid kit on the wall and pulled some smelling salts out. "How indeed?" he said. "Legend tells us the Vikings were fiercer, braver, stronger and harder to stop than anyone else in history. Ever wonder why they were so tough? Maybe it's because they weren't really human at all. Maybe they were really warrior statues made of wood or stone and then brought to life through some kind of ancient Norse magic, magic that has been long forgotten... by most people."

Then he smiled at me in a really creepy way that made my skin crawl, and held the smelling salts under Brian's nose. Brian came to, coughing.

"Now then," Mr. Johanssen said, "I'll make a deal with you two. I won't tell the principal you were down here if you promise never to come back." We promised and then got out of there as fast as we could.

Brian remembered nothing about the Viking, and when I tried to tell him about it, he just looked at me like I was crazy. And frankly, I thought maybe I was, too, until one day a month or so later. I had stayed late for a band rehearsal and just as I was leaving the building, I saw Mr. Johanssen loading a piano into the freight elevator. Right before the elevator door closed, I noticed that someone was helping him.

Someone wearing a Viking helmet.

