

# Pranks and Pigtails

by **Nathan Wade**

My brother never checks his overalls when he pulls them off the line on Monday mornings. It's the perfect opportunity for a prank, and Monday is the perfect day for pranks because Josiah is always slow getting to work. He won't ever see it coming.

Josiah bursts out of the house with a yawn on his face and a biscuit in his hand. He doesn't have anything on but his underwear. With his long, brown hair matted down on the left side his face, Josiah scrambles over to the clothesline and starts dressing himself. Just as he yanks up his left leg to slip on his overalls, Jingles streaks out of her hiding place from within the left pant leg, knocking off Josiah's straw hat as she scurries to the barn and into my arms. I watch real quiet like from behind the hay bales, thinking there is no chance that I'll be caught. A confused heap of pasty limbs, Josiah tumbles backwards into the water trough that I have placed behind the clothesline.

My body shaking with giggles, I spy a now-soaked Josiah clambering up from the trough. It took only a week to teach Jingles how to hide inside the overalls. All you need is a little milk and bread, and that cat will learn nearly anything.

"Eliza! Get into the house this instant and quit keepin' your brother from workin'. He's already behind!"

Dang! How'd she know it was me? I can just see Mama standing on the porch, hands placed firmly on her hips, her furrowed brow indicating she is not in the mood for sass. I sure won't offer any. I trudge back toward the house to meet my angry maker. Whatever punishment she gives me will be worth it because of that little scream Josiah let go as he toppled into the trough. That will keep me laughing for hours.

I love summertime because it means I get to see my Mama. When I turned six, my wealthy uncle offered to send me to a boarding school back east. Now, the only times I get to see my family are holidays and summer break. Mama and Daddy aren't very book smart, but they're plenty life smart. I think they want me to have the education they never got. The kids at school sometimes call me "Smiley." At lunch, we always have straight-faced staring contests where two kids will glare at one an-

other until one breaks his poker face. I can't last longer than five seconds. This is evident when Mama confronts me.

"Your older brother's gotta lot of work to do, and he don't need you keepin' him from it... My lands, child, school gets out for the summer, and I can't keep you busy enough to stop you from all this mischief. Here, you need a job to do. Take the rest of this cream and start churnin' it." That's Mama for you. The hardest worker you'll ever meet and commissioning everyone else to do the same. I don't even bother protesting. Mama can't read books, but she always reads me like one. Deep down, I know Mama thinks it's funny. Besides, churning butter isn't too bad. It normally means we'll bake later in the day, and baking is almost as fun as pranking.

Mama loves to bake. She is serious most of the time, but not when she and I are baking. She always tells me that the sign of a good baker is whether or not their food is well-behaved. "There's nothing like a good, well-behaved muffin. All you need is a pinch of sunshine." I smile when I think about muffins being well-behaved.

I spend the rest of the morning churning cream and gathering eggs from the hen house. The work is pretty easy, and I start thinking about my next joke of the summer.

In the afternoon, my cousin Lou, also my partner in crime, comes over to play, and the scheming begins. Every Fourth of July, my family gets together for a grand celebration of America's birthday. Grampa and Granny hold a big barbecue for everyone out on their farm, complete with all the fireworks and watermelon a kid could ask for. This will be the perfect opportunity to strike.

"We could always just catch abuncha frogs and hide'm under all the tables," Lou offers. Lou, being a year younger, is typically unable to think on the same grandiose scale as me.

"Lou, my dear friend, we did that last summer, and I will not have a repeat prank on my record! We've gotta make a splash, and I don't just mean in the pond." I think about all that normally happens during our family gatherings.

Grampa and the uncles always meet around midmorning to smoke meat and play dominoes. They love to have fun. Surely, we can think of a

prank for them. I also suspect that a few watermelons go missing at these manly meetings. That is cause enough for a jape. However, the uncles are too levelheaded for any such shenanigans. They won't react near enough.

The aunts, on the other hand, are a different story altogether. I like to compare them to a brood of hens. Whenever they get together, they are always squawking or cackling about something, normally other family members. While the men smoke meat, the women usually go over to Aunt Margie's (Lou's Mom's) house to prepare the desserts. The aunts are plenty dramatic to get the proper reaction, but they're just too innocent. I need motivation. I need...revenge.

Herman will be there. Yes, Herman. He thinks it's so funny to yank on my pigtails. And he still needs to be paid back for the joke he pulled on me last summer.

Herman is my slightly older, way-less clever cousin. Maybe I'm a little biased, but last year, he poured salt into my lemonade when I wasn't looking. I was caught up telling an exquisite story to a group of my aunts, and I took a sip of the tainted drink without realizing what had happened. Instantly, I spewed the salty lemonade all over my now-not-so-captive audience. After receiving the lemonade shower, the aunts weren't so excited to hear the end of my story. Herman smirked in self-satisfaction all afternoon, glowing from his apparent victory.

Just thinking about it makes my blood boil. "Lou! Herman may have won the battle, but he certainly did not win the war!" It's decided. Herman is the target of our prank.

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On the night of July Third, Lou spends the night at my house because we want to have a sleepover before the big party. However, sleeping is the last thing on our minds. Our plan is complete. We are going to set a jar of crickets under Herman's bed—he is deathly afraid of insects. Just their sounds make him whimper.

Under the cover of darkness, we sneak across the field to Herman's house. Every door is locked. This is unexpected. We check the windows. Lou notices some underwear still hanging up on the line. Could it be? It's definitely boy underwear, and Herman's an only child. I check the tag.

"Yep, Herman P. Winkleberry III. These are his. Well, even if I never see this prank completed, at least my last name's not Winkleberry."

I immediately have a new plan. Herman's dad always keeps fresh meat down in the cellar. I send Lou around the backside of the house to check the cellar. Moments later she emerges with a handful of ground beef.

We rub the underwear all over with the meat. Once we think the underwear is thoroughly soaked, Lou returns the meat to the cellar. The underwear is still wet, so we decide to take it back to my house and let it dry on top of the wood-burning stove.

At dawn, Lou and I scurry back over to Herman's house and hang his underwear on the line. I expect Rufus, Grampa's bloodhound, will be very excited to see Herman today.

Once midmorning arrives, Lou and I are stuck baking desserts with all of the aunts and other girl cousins. If it wasn't for Mama and Lou, I don't know if I could handle all of the drama gathered under one roof. I enjoy the baking though. Mama and I even whip up some very well-behaved muffins to take. I'm sure everyone will comment on how good they are.

Finally, we make our way over to Grampa and Granny's to start the celebration. The farm is neat and tidy. Dining tables covered in red, white, and blue fabric are scattered all around the yard. The watermelons, some already cut open, are sitting on a long table that will soon be filled with our freshly baked desserts.

The Uncles and Grampa are all standing around the smoker talking. Most of the boy cousins are playing football in the yard. However, I cannot find Herman anywhere.

"Ooooouuuuurrrrrrrrrr!"

I hear Rufus's distinct, bloodhound bark near the house. Rufus is pinning Herman to the ground and licking him all over. Herman is squealing at the top of his lungs, but no one seems to be paying much attention. Success never felt so sweet. Lou and I run over to Herman, smiling from ear to ear. Having received our revenge, we help relieve Herman of his current predicament by dumping a bucket of water on him and Rufus.

Sopping wet from water and hound slobber, Herman gives me a sheep-

ish look. "I knew my underwear smelled a little funny this morning. You wanna call a truce?"

"Sure... Well, at least until the end of the day," I say.

"Alright! Everyone gather 'round. We're about to say grace!" yells Grampa.

As the entire family begins to circle up and join hands, I cannot be more content. I love my life, and I love my family. I always treasure the time I spend with them. It's so good to be home.

The prayer ends and we all line up to get our food. I feel cold ice running down my back and turn to see Herman running frantically away toward the opposite end of the line.