



WORUMBO

Mark LaFlamme



Jack Wilding has a gift. The young newspaper reporter can hear the thoughts of his fellow man, random snippets that come to him unbidden. But this blossoming psychic ability brings Jack no joy. Some thoughts, he will find, were not meant to be shared. And along with the voices in his head come the memories - dim recollections of a childhood experience at an old Maine mill.

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PROLOGUE

July 8, 1994

A cold front will move into the area on Friday, dropping temperatures into the 60s, well below average for this time of year. Cool air will linger into the weekend with below-average temperatures persisting from the valley into the hills region. Clouds and mild showers are possible across the valley, while the remainder of Central Maine sees a fair amount of sunshine.

Nobody saw it coming. Not the meteorologists with their gadgets, not the almanac people who see signs in squirrel behavior and bird nests. Television weathermen were droll and bored all week. The newspapers had no alarming stories with high point headlines. All was well in the river valley until the winds came.

Giant clouds moved across a clear blue sky like rolling balls of granite. The wind plowed in just ahead of them.

The first gust came roaring out of the northeast. It rippled the tops of trees and bent aerial antennas at funny angles. It was minutes before 4 p.m. The wind arrived like a daylight prowler.

Babies laid down for afternoon naps twitched in their beds. Old men in rockers groaned and shivered. Dogs howled and cats ran for cover. The wind was like something skeletal sneaking across the psyche.

Around Myrtle, folks stepped onto porches only to retreat back inside. Backyard barbecues were blown across lawns and backyard chefs ducked into garages. Kids cursed as the wind sucked wiffle balls from the air and carried them off. Then the

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gusts intensified and knocked them down and the children cried for their mothers, fathers or older brothers.

The wind was fierce. It moved you along faster than you wanted to go, or it held you back like an invisible hand, depending on which way you were going.

A peculiar variety of items skipped across roads and lawns, seemingly alive. Birdie Drouin's entire wardrobe was out there somewhere, having been snatched from her clothesline and thrashed about when the gusts began to roll in earnest. She was a mammoth woman and her clothes looked like tents shredded by the wind.

The frames of old houses and new ones creaked. Shingles were ripped from roofs and they blew away like pages from a book. The sign with the big smiling chef above Bim's Burgers on Locust Street was blown off its anchor. It crashed down onto a police car parked at the curb and there was an explosion of glass.

Jean Clarendon was coming out of To Hair is Human two buildings down and she screamed. But the scream was carried away by the rushing wind and by a doubly loud explosion a block away.

A bright green van driven by Seth Getchell had flipped over at the corner of Locust and Oak. The van slid into a not-quite-street-legal motorcycle driven by Ricky Gallagher and the two vehicles rolled almost elegantly into the gas pumps outside Dave's Sunoco. There was a final screech of metal, a moment of ominous silence, and then an earth-shaking explosion as a gas tank erupted. Flames rolled into the air and were swept down Locust Street by this magnificent, unstoppable wind.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Seth Getchell was dead in his burning van and the teenage girl in the passenger seat was unconscious and bleeding. Ricky Gallagher had skidded

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through the glass door of Dave's boxcar-sized station. He was bloody and bruised but alive. He hauled himself up from the glass-strewn floor, stumbled outside and was blown onto the burning van. He screamed for a full minute. Jean Clarendon would later admit she watched him burn before taking refuge beneath a battered bus.

The wind poured on the town like a tidal wave.

Roughly two miles west from that ugly scene, 8-year-old Jack Wilding crouched next to a monstrous stack of railroad ties. When the wind pounced from the northeast, the huge wooden planks provided a degree of shelter from blowing debris. Before that, they had afforded Jack perfect cover from the eyes of the guards prowling in front of Worumbo.

Jack wasn't supposed to be anywhere near this old mill at the edge of town. His parents (it would be almost two years before his mother would go insane and vanish) believed he was behind Brookside School, playing pick-up baseball with Kevin Sweet and the rest of the neighborhood crew.

His mother would have been horrified to learn her boy was out on his own and vulnerable to perverts, drug addicts and others of licentious nature. Dad, well... Dad just did not understand Jack's fascination with this sagging brick building, with its one massive turret and discreet army guards flanking the front and sides. Dad did not believe in mysteries and thought exploring them was a wasteful endeavor.

For young Jack Wilding, Worumbo was the brightest of all enigmas. It was more tantalizing than questions about how babies are made or where people go when they die.

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Some of the older kids said there might be space creatures inside the old mill. Scientists could be conducting weird experiments on them and learning all kinds of things about space travel. Jack had seen no evidence of this.

He had, however, seen strange things during his expeditions to Worumbo. Twice he had spotted ominous, black vans rolling up to the front doors. Men in suits unloaded cages with what looked like monkeys inside them. The monkeys were carried into the mill and the black vans drove away. Jack had never seen animals being carried *out* of Worumbo.

Around the time the wind blew in from behind him, Jack had been watching two men share a smoke near Worumbo's main entrance, beyond the chain fence. From 30 yards away, Jack saw that these men wore army fatigues and that one of them carried a mean-looking rifle strapped to his back.

His heartbeat quickened. Vision seemed to blur. In his concentration, he leaned against the railroad ties and smeared black creosote against his white baseball jersey.

He didn't notice this. Here was proof that the army people running things at Worumbo placed a high priority on security. In newspaper stories, military spokesmen consistently claimed the abandoned textile mill was merely a storage facility for machine parts. Jack knew better. You didn't keep armed guards around day and night to protect cogs and fuel pumps.

He reached to the back of his jeans and pulled out a small notebook. The word Worumbo was written on the front of its yellow jacket in black magic marker. The notebook was in his hand perhaps one second when the first big gust pounded him. The notebook pages blew over one-by-one with a sharp sound, as if an energetic ghost was reading quickly through his notes. One of the pages was ripped away. It sailed on the wind toward Worumbo.

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Squinting, pulling his arms around him, he shoved the notebook down the front of his pants. He turned toward the wind as if expecting to see the source of it.

The trees that flanked the river behind him were alive with motion. They bent dramatically toward the river as if trying to drink from it. Pine trees normally thick and proud now appeared feeble and afraid.

The wind intensified. Jack took unsteady steps backwards to keep from falling. For a moment, his cover was blown and he was exposed to the sight of the guards.

With effort, he lunged into the wind, like a wide receiver flinging himself over the goal line. He grabbed at the railroad ties for balance and was rewarded with an inch-long sliver of wood in the web of his hand. He cried out but the wind snatched the sound away. Bleeding, he groped for the planks again, hoping to anchor himself and avoid being blown right into the arms of the guards. God only knew what they would do to him.

The wind shrieked. Gravel blew in his eyes, forcing him to squeeze them shut. His fingers dug for purchase again on the nearest plank of wood. He was aware of a grating noise above him. The ground beneath his feet seemed to lurch. The wood beneath his fingertips jerked, like a powerful dog on a leash.

The first 200-pound beam that tumbled from the top of the stack scraped across Jack's shoulder as it blew past him. It ripped his shoulder out of joint and tore a long gash across his skin. He was sent sprawling onto his back, opening his eyes only to feel more dirt blow into them. What he saw before squeezing them shut again were thick, dark beams spinning above him like magic Lego blocks in a world of giants. Then a heavy blow caught him on the right side of the head. There was a flash of brilliant light. For a moment, Jack thought of his

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mother and father and wondered dimly how he would explain *this*.

There was a sudden, fierce pain in his right knee and yet Jack still did not fall unconscious. His cheek was pressed against the dirt, with blood pooling around his head like a dark halo. The notebook was tugged from his pants and it went skidding across the gravel. Then it was lifted up as if it had been punted. The notebook sailed across the air with flashes of alternating white and yellow.

He opened his eyes a final time and saw two figures looming over him. The giants come to reclaim their toys, perhaps.

They leaned in close, blotting out the bright sky above him. The men seemed to cower from the wind, but still they loomed. Jack distinguished army jackets and fancied he could smell cigarette smoke. One of these figures appeared to be speaking.

“Got to get him inside...”

The wind made the words seem very distant.

“The hell we do, Bruce... Get our asses kicked for that.”

Jack’s eyes fell closed. Blackness filled him up. He was unaware when strong arms reached beneath him, hauling him off the ground. He wasn’t cognizant of being carried through a strengthening gale, across a gritty lot, beyond the chain fence and through the main doors of Worumbo.

Jack Wilding lay within the walls of the mysterious building the entire thirty minutes the freak wind storm battered Myrtle. He might have been terrified had he known. He might have been delirious with excitement.

Moot point. When Jack awoke, it was a day later and he was in a bed at St. Jude’s Hospital. He had been found at the side of Locust Street, a mile from his home, his tearful, red-eyed mother told him. Nobody knew what had happened to him.

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When he came to, it was bright and quiet outside the window of the hospital room. The windstorm was over. Nine people had been killed, including the teen-age girl who burned in Seth Getchell's flaming van. An elderly woman had been blown into the river while walking her Shih Tzu. The woman's body had been recovered but there was no sign of the ankle biter. Some wits speculated it might still be flying around up there like a shrill and hairy kite.

A family of four was crushed to death when their old Cape Cod collapsed on them while they took refuge in the basement. A homeless man was cut in half by a stop sign that came spinning out of an alley.

Jack was one of forty people who survived injuries suffered in the storm. His was the most mysterious misadventure, and four stories about it ran in the River Valley News.

He recovered completely from a dislocated shoulder, three nasty gashes and a fractured leg. He also began to suffer occasional but excruciating headaches accompanied by strange, fluttering sounds only he could hear. He spent three days with a fever during which he hallucinated and screamed from his bed.

No doctor was bold enough to suggest the fever or headaches were the result of the trauma Jack suffered in the windstorm. Brain scans were done and countless tests performed. No conclusions were forthcoming.

The voices didn't come for another ten years. By then, the headaches were gone. Jack Wilding never made the connection between the voices in his head and his secret spy trip to Worumbo. Not right away, at any rate.



Jack Wilding has a gift. The young newspaper reporter can hear the thoughts of his fellow man, random snippets that come to him unbidden. But this blossoming psychic ability brings Jack no joy. Some thoughts, he will find, were not meant to be shared. And along with the voices in his head come the memories - dim recollections of a childhood experience at an old Maine mill.

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