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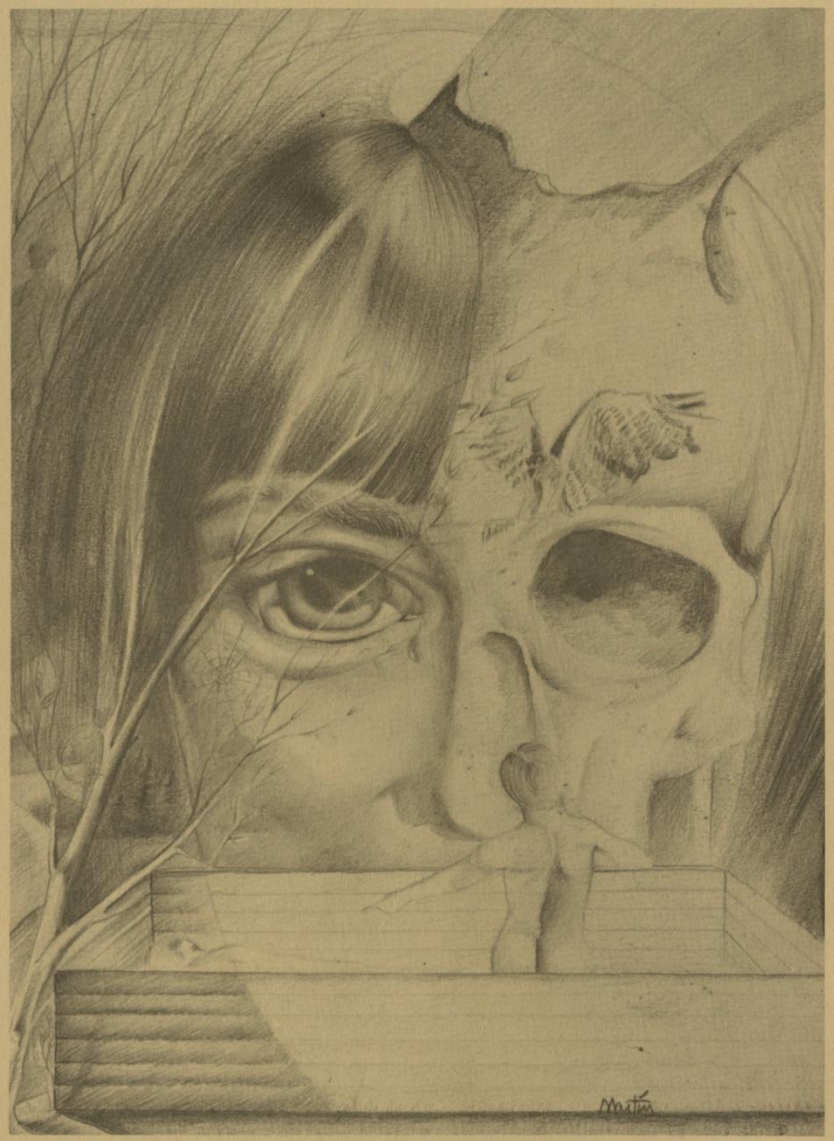
# *ZEPHYRUS*

**SPRING 1972**





sugar maple leaf
your arms forward
seeking each other
green tipped arms
trying to hold in
a bronze border
red yellow centered veins
pretty colors
there all summer
undercloaked cygnet
much like man
aware of the brave
only in time
to see the
material fade.

Vera Boulton

# HOW I RESCUED BENJAMEN BURNS

by

Nancie Calloway

When the streams turn to copper
And the hills are barren ash,
Then you know men value green
More as the color of their cash.

"It's not the money, Dad," I'd said. "I'm sorry you lost it, but that's not what's getting under my skin anymore."

"I know." he'd said. "I know. But there was no other way. We're an island now. The town's dried up to a gas pump and the school's closed — already taking off the siding. You know we can't make a decent living here anymore. And your little sister . . . she wants her friends."

I sat up in the silent chill of the room and the springs squeaked upsettingly. (I didn't want to wake anybody yet.) I got dressed, poked the coals — they were out already — and then went out on the porch. There was a faint glow above the hills across the road. The sun was up, but the trees were still in the night. I sat in the swing. I didn't feel like swinging, but sometimes it's just easier to push off than drag your feet on the floor. I looked down the road, though there would be no cars (and not because it was so early). There were no cars now and the coal trucks were already breaking up the asphalt. They'd thrown gravel in the tracks, but the edges would still wash out the next good rain.

"It could've been worse, dear. They did give you that job in the mine office. The children are almost grown and we won't be too far from here." And then my mother went out and dug up her flowers.

When I got the letter, I ripped it in two. No, it wasn't the money. He thought he could hold out. But no one else could. Not all the land around here is good and some of it has hills that were designed before anyone thought of combines. Besides there's no one you can hire to help you get a crop in anymore, even if there was enough money in it to make everything worthwhile. And now there's only one place you can sell your land. Who would've thought those same friendly chunks we warmed our backs against last winter would break them this spring.

I taped that letter together after a while, but I still couldn't read any further. The old folks want the land for what happened on it; the children want it more for the things they've not had enough of and know their own will never have. No, it was a long time before I ever wondered how much he got out of it.

It was getting lighter and I got down and went to the road. A half mile or so down there's a wood's road — not more than a set of tracks now. That's where old Ben Burns was living then. All the kids used to call him Old Man Ben Gay, after the ointment. And I turned off there to see if he were still back there. It was a good fifteen or twenty minute walk, but he would come down to the road a couple of times a week, and people used to pick him up and take him to town. He was pretty regular, so when people didn't go by so often, my dad picked up a habit of driving by about the times he would be down there. I hadn't seen him since I'd come back though.

Before I got out of the woods, I could smell the coal smoke and knew he was at home and about. He was tugging at his well chain when I came up. I didn't help him; I knew better than that.

"You're the Williams boy." he said. "Hear your poppa's sold out on us. Guess I'm about all that's left back here. Think



they'll forget me?" And he laughed a bit to himself.

"No," I said. They know you're here. They keep asking my dad to talk to you, but he keeps putting it off. They know good and well there's no shallow coal under here, and they aren't in the business to sink shafts. Probably want to cut a road through here or something. It was the same way with our land, except they didn't even need it for a road. Dad had to practically beg 'um to take it. Guess they'll sell the timber off it."

"Your poppa," he said, as we walked to the house, "Your poppa's too young to put up much of a fight. He's gotta live. And he's got kids to raise. Me, all I've got left is fight."

The front room was cold in spite of the well-tended fire. Water spots on the ceiling and the cracked and flaking plaster said much about that. I also noticed the chimney was starting to separate from its hearth.

"I was born right over there in that corner," he said as he pointed out for the hundredth time. "Got my bed near the grate now. Move it over in that same place this summer. Must have been summer when I was born or it'd be near the fire where it is now. Guess I'll die in the summer. Right over there."

He would not be here in the summer. Either he'd die of starvation or some one would drag him off to one of those sterile establishments where they keep people of his sort.

"Put another chunk on that fire, boy. Don't remember when it's been so cold this late in the year."

It was already a healthy fire and I had my doubts about the old chimney. The first two or three upper layers of brick had already crumbled away or rolled down the roof. I remember last summer looking up in it and seeing blue sky in some places where mortar should have been. But I did put on a couple of small pieces, because I saw he was watching.

Well, I let him talk on a while. He walked out back to feed his cat and watch the ridgeline glow under the new sun. The mists hovering over the broad clearing swept back slowly and the whole world was silvery and wet. This was no trade for lysoled linoleum and central heating. No picture tube could give off that rich smell of mud and trees or drench your feet in the dew.

"I'll die here." he said. And I knew he would.

A few minutes later he'd gone back in, sat in an old stuffed rocker, and after a long discourse on his boyhood, had fallen asleep.

I got up and tip-toed to the door. But somehow I could not leave just then.

"Mister Burns?" I said. "Mister Burns." He stirred.

"Put some more coal on, boy. I feel a draft."

I pulled a quilt from his cot and laid it across him. I carefully arranged the remaining contents of the coal bucket so they would not smother each other. I tore up an old magazine and dropped the wads on the mounting flames. Then I walked out the door, leaving it open so the heat would not wake him for a while.

It did not take us long to pack the few pieces of furniture that remained. My mother was the first to notice.

"I see smoke over there! The woods must be on fire!" She ran toward the house.

"No use, Myra," my father said. "The phone's disconnected. Besides, they can take care of it; it's their land now."

"But what about old Mister Burns?" she cried. "It must be near his place."

"He sold his land last week. Haven't seen him since. Probably been taken to the home by now. You said you were out walking over there this morning, son. Did you see any signs of life?"

"No, Dad." I said. "Not a sign."

Larkenthal looks degenerate
Gazes at the dark blue sky from moonlit cliffs
Larken listen to winter birds that must scavenge to live
Into the hills he has fled
From man-made wounds he mortally bled
Bled in a house where family stood
Bled down the street and on the road
Bled and cried as pain increased
Bled and cried as pain slowly ceased
Bled until under leaves, in cooling breezes
Where no one could get to scrape the scab

Larkenthal has one long scar
But with his eyes he can forget
By gazing into noonday heat, digging into untouched loam
And feeling
Feeling the pure Mother grow in him
Knowing Her love and strength
Larkenthal looks degenerate
Gazes at the dark blue sky from moonlit cliffs
Larken listen to winter birds that must scavenge to live
. . . . . Into the hills he has fled
His wounds are healed
His soul is fed . . . . . .

Judy Gover



## ISOLATION

The world is a blind street beggar
And every face a trinket
For its cup. It would grope
To touch, but is too easily satisfied
With smiles — big sous.
In morning as I walk outside
I watch my smiles drop
Jingling in the tins of passers-by.
The hollow ring that follows isn't mine.

I am frightened; I must
Steal back those smiles bartered by others,
Used like bait — dangled
Before the pitiful greed of merchants.
The smiles snapped by strangers
And shown as proof in somebody's scrapbook
That somebody's daddy had lots of friends,
I don't want that.
I don't photograph well.

I would leave my soul as offering
But there are no takers: it is too much
Giving to be handled in cups
And would cripple blinded begging.
With their wisdom of unseeing I am left
Deserted, a spot light without audience.
My only comfort is the feel
Of my own shaking as I hear the echoes
Of hollow rings, dropping smiles.

Nancy Banks

## A DREAM SONG

I sat and watched with cool disdain
as one substantial edifice
burned quickly to the ground.
Pound, pound on heaven's gates
and still you'll not get in.
Your one recourse is but to laugh at sin.
So as one side fell straight away
and became an ashen mound,
I simply laughed at charcoaled bodies
as they tumbled round and round.

There is rebirth in laughter,
a baptism in mirth.
For twenty centuries have come and gone
and that infamous beast slinks stealthily
toward Bethlehem still.

We are the spectators of chaos
From which order must return.
And we will know a new salvation
promising minutes in hell.

Steve Harbison

The pumpkin-sleeved singer

like a black John Keats

makes an awkward bow and becomes

one more thing we knew — my how

those poets write flashy for a while.

Max Garland



## DECEMBER, 1922

Outside the window, the snow deepened in silence.

Deep in the dungeons of the library somewhere
in the stacks he sat surrounded by Greek
quotations and Restoration footnotes.

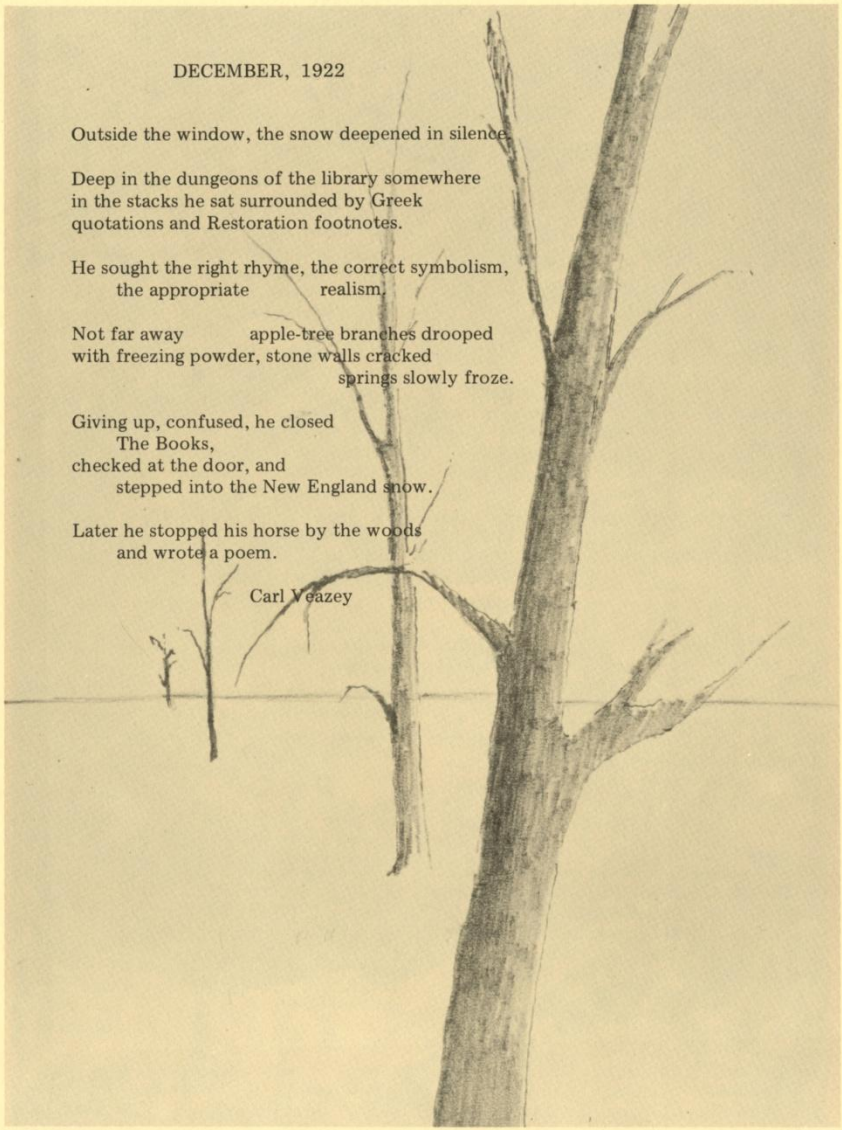
He sought the right rhyme, the correct symbolism,
the appropriate realism.

Not far away apple-tree branches drooped
with freezing powder, stone walls cracked
springs slowly froze.

Giving up, confused, he closed
The Books,
checked at the door, and
stepped into the New England snow.

Later he stopped his horse by the woods
and wrote a poem.

Carl Veazey





# THE DAY GOD DIED

A Short Story

by

J. Jordan Phelps

It all started when Jill James sat behind me in the fourth grade.

The first day of classes I was, as usual, racing through a library book before the teacher entered to take charge of the class. I was enthralled by a sequence about the French and Indian War where George Washington was having horses shot from under him during Braddock's ill-fated expedition into Canada. The gouge in the small of my back, the first time, was only mildly irritating. But the second, harder punch with a plastic ruler by-passed my reluctance to quit the printed page, and I whirled on my tormenter with the scowl I reserved for my nine-year-old contemporaries who belittled my bookwormish attitude.

A small pixie face surrounded by a close-cropped helmet of brown hair was peering inquisitively over my shoulder.

"Whatcha readin'?" she wanted to know.

"Oh, nothing much," I hedged, always wary of ridicule of my books and reading habits. The book was one of those juvenile biographies of great men, which Jill had already evidently discovered over my shoulder.

"You got to the part yet where he cuts down the cherry tree and pegs the dollar across the river?"

"That's only legend," I answered superiorly and somewhat comtemptously. "George Washington shouldn't be remembered for things like that. He was a soldier, a general and a President—important things."

She shrugged. Then her face split apart in a wide grin and I noticed the sprinkling of freckles across her small, pug nose. She extended an open palm as if it were perfectly natural for elementary classmates to shake hands.

"I'm Jill James," she said.

Belatedly I twisted in the school desk and grasped the small hand.

"Pleased to meet you," I mumbled formally, and then, "I'm Phil Jackson.

"I know," she grinned. "You can call me Jay-Jay. Isn't it lucky both our names begin with J? The grapevine says you were the smartest boy in Miss Wilder's Third grade class, which is why I'm behind you. I'm pretty dumb, but I hear Teacher always seats the fourth grade alphabetically, which means I'm going to be behind you anyway, so I don't guess I'll worry about grades this year."

I was spared from verbally registering my obvious shock at such a blatant overture to cheat by Mrs. Walters entrance at the first note of the tardy bell. Jill's information was correct. She grouped us by our positions in the alphabetical hierarchy, and Jill and I drew the last two seats on the third row, a fact cheered silently by Jill with a sharp nudge to my ribs and a sly wink that I remember, at the time, seemed more than criminal.

Jill was very extroverted, one of those people who couldn't help voicing whatever happened to cross her mind. Mrs. Walters continually reprimanded the two of us for talking in class, but that didn't bother Jill. As my ears burned with shame and I ducked my eyes under Mrs. Walters' remonstrations, Jill would sit with her head up, attentive, but cheerfully unaffected, refusing to seem contrite. At first I resented the continual reprimands that were inevitable products of Jill's gregariousness, and squirmed under the invective

Mrs. Walters so effectively administered. I had been a perfect student in both lessons and conduct, but it was impossible to ignore Jill and, in time, I began to copy her unconcern when caught. But, somehow, that unconcern never seemed completely legitimate in my case.

Jill and I grew to be great friends. She would lean up, tap me on the shoulder and roll her eyes to indicate Georgie Wilson's "taxi-door" ears in the seat ahead of me, and I would dissolve in silent convulsions of repressed laughter.

The first time we had a spelling test I felt the familiar gouge of the plastic ruler in my back. Cautiously, I glanced around.

"Separate," Mrs. Walters pronounced. "Separate."

Jill's eyebrows shot up in facing question marks. I scowled fiercely, just barely shook my head and returned to my paper.

The ruler dug sharper this time. Angrily, I looked around.

"Separate," Jill's mouth formed, and then she questioned with her face. I returned to my paper. Throughout the rest of the test, I tensely ignored the repeated attempts of the ruler to gain my attention.

When school was over, Jill was angrily waiting for me in the hall.

"O. K., Smarty Pants, what's the idea of clamming up on me?" she blazed.

I felt fiercely self-rightous and horribly put upon. I "deigned," a word I'd just run across in my reading, to mildly abhor "cheating." Then I turned and walked down the hall.

She was right at my side, clutching at my arms.

"Wait a minute, you know I hadn't studied that stupid test. Why wouldn't you help me?"

I looked at her. She was honestly angry, waiting for an answer.

"Jill," I said gently, "it would have been cheating."

"Fiddlesticks," she snapped. "Cheating is in monopoly or not being 'it' when you're tagged. This is school, it doesn't count."

"Cheating's a sin," I said, sure of myself, "it's wrong. I don't cheat."

"Not even for your best friend?" she asked, almost in tears.

Stung, I retaliated.

"You're not my best friend," I stated emphatically, and added with scorn, "You're a girl!"

She hit me twice with her small fist, making me stumble back against the wall, spilling my books to the floor. Then she was rushing toward the sunlight at the end of the hall, sobbing. My left cheekbone was throbbing with pain and I felt tears stinging my eyelids. I bent quickly and began to gather my books.

On the way home I told myself that it didn't matter. I grimaced when I recalled how I recoiled from her violent onslaught, and I hoped fervently that no one had witnessed the scene. I hated her! I did, I believed it. But, at the same time, I was somehow conscious of a repressed feeling of loss.

When I awoke the next morning it was a few moments before I remembered that I hated Jill James. But the shame of dissolving against the wall as her fist stung my cheek was still all too present. I couldn't hit a girl, I rationalized, but I hated her just the same.

In class, when our papers were returned, I tried to feel satisfied at the bright red A on mine, and to gloat at the D on Jill's. We weren't speaking to each other, but the papers were passed hand to hand down the aisle and I saw her grade. She hardly glanced at her paper; just stored it in her notebook out of sight.



I found myself missing the ruler in my back, Jill's whispered observations in my ear, her clowning, mock indignation at every assignment; and, for four days, I was miserable without her.

But Jill was entirely too irrepressible to hold a grudge. She talked to either side of her desk now, across the aisles, but gradually I began to again be included in her gibes and asides concerning everything from her classmates' personalities to the President's golf game.

On the fourth day after the spelling test, Mrs. Walters appeared in class in a particularily garish red and white checked dress that clung to her more than ample body in alternating stretched-rubber and voluminous folds as she preened herself at the head of the class.

"The ol' bag is already decorated for Christmas," Jill breathed into my ear. I chortled and swung around to wink my appreciation—both for Jill's wit and in recognition of her most overt peace offering since the test.

"Philip Jackson!" Mrs. Walters barked. "Perhaps you'd like to share Jill's conversation with the rest of the class. You apparently find it of more interest than English grammar."

I gulped and sputtered.

"Come Philip. What did Jill say?"

I was caught. If I told the truth I would ruin mine and Jill's reconciliation, not to mention the fact that I dared not quote the nickname Jill had used for Mrs. Walters. I swallowed and prayed for a reprieve.

"Philip!"

"Yes, Mam," I stammered, and then blurted, "Jill just wanted to know if I wanted to practice hitting ground balls with her after school."

"Jill James wanted you to play baseball with her after school?" Mrs. Walters asked, as if she found unbelievable the fact of feminine interest in sport. But the feigned disbelief was for the benefit of her nine-year-old audience, each of whom knew Jill to be the best sandlot shortstop in the fourth grade, but who nevertheless tittered in surpressed glee.

"Yes, Mam," I reaffirmed my lie.

"I'm sure the whole class is aware of Jill's 'tomboy' habits," Mrs. Walters was playing to the class as the fourth graders giggled in applause, "and Jill's failure to ever behave in any manner ever faintly resembling 'ladylike' behavior, but the both of you can at least observe the rule of silence during the class. Do you understand?" Both of us dumbly nodded our heads as she went on to single out Jill.

"And you, young lady, would be better off listening to the class if for no other reason than the fact you may be in the fourth grade next year if you don't. You must be aware that English is not exactly your strongest point?" The class was laughing freely now, and Mrs. Walters was smug under their approval. I hated her intensely, but a glance at Jill showed her smiling unconcernedly in agreement with the class' mirth.

Jill was waiting in the hall for me when school was over.

"Boy, did you tell a lie," she accused happily.

"I did not," I protested stoutly. "It was more of a fib. I couldn't tell Mrs. Walters what you said about her."

"Nope, Phil," Jill grinned, "a lie's a lie, just as bad as cheatin'."

"Look," I reasoned, fully aware of the weakness of my argument. "You'd got in trouble, it would have made Mrs. Walters mad to hear what you called her. I couldn't tell her that."

"A lie's a sin," Jill shook her head, "how can a sin not be wrong?"

"It was just a little sin," I pleaded, "the truth would have been worse for everybody."

"Wow," Jill chuckled and checked me out of the corner of her eye, "I didn't know you Methodists believed in 'degree of sin.' That wouldn't hold water down at the Christian Church."

Defeated, I trudged out of the school building, dejected.

"Look," I mumbled, "I'll ask for forgiveness in my prayers and promise never to do it again. It was wrong, I just did it without thinking."

Jill stopped with her hand on my arm. I turned to face her.

"Look, Phil, are you really sorry? Wouldn't you do it again? For me?"

"Never!" I blazed, happy for the outlet of anger. "Not if I'd known you'd act like this!"

Jill was instantly contrite.

"I'm sorry, Phil. Really I am. Don't think I don't appreciate it, I was just teasing you. I sinned, too, I was hoping you'd lie. And you did. I don't care why you did it, I'm just glad you did."

She smiled softly and stuck out that small hand.

"Friends?" she asked.

That's the way I remember Jill James—smiling her warm smile and offering her palm in the gesture that was to become characteristic of our whole relationship. That day, so long ago, I found strength in her friendship. I smiled, nodded and, in taking her hand, accepted Jill as I always would. I can remember praying hard in bed that night, asking the Lord's forgiveness and professing shame for my sin. But I can never remember really feeling sorry for the compromise with fact that afforded the least pain to all concerned—me, Mrs. Walters and, especially, Jill.

Jill was always there, growing up, occupying the position of "best friend" that is usually reserved, among males, for another member of the same sex. Whether merely cruising the streets on our bikes or playing baseball, we were always together.

I can remember leaning off first to take Jill's throw from short—hard, fast, and always accurate—in neighborhood pickup games throughout grade school.

"Way to stop, Jay-Jay, lotta hustle, kid," I'd chatter, trotting in after Jill had thrown out the last batter to retire the side. She'd already be washing her hands in the dust for a better grip on the bat, baiting the pitcher as she stood in close to the plate. She was so small she walked at least half the time, trotting down to first, her voice heaping scorn on the pitcher at every step, eyes wide with excitement and bubbling glee, her hair curling damply around her forehead. And, as likely as not, she'd be off like a greyhound at the first pitch, streaking down the baseline to slide into second in a cloud of dust just ahead of the catcher's peg.

I saw her cry only once. It was in the seventh grade and a community league had just been organized. I had been reading at home and, consequently, was almost late for the first practice and choosing of teams. I skidded my bike to a halt behind one dugout, eased through the gate of the wire fence surrounding the park, and started to dash toward home where the milling players were gathered. But something made me turn. There, in the deserted dugout, was Jill, quietly sobbing to herself.

"Hey, Jay-Jay," I said softly, "whatsa matta, kid?"

She didn't even look up, just sobbed the harder.

"Com'on, Jay-Jay, can't be that bad. What's the matter?"

"Oh, Phil," she wailed through her tears, dissolving onto my shoulder. "I wanted to play so bad and they won't let me. I've waited so long for 'em to start the league and now they won't let me play!"

"Com'on, Jay-Jay, that's stupid. You'll



be the best shortstop in the league. Why can't you play?" Even as I asked the question, I suddenly knew the answer.

" 'Cause I'm a goddamned girl," Jill cried, "that's why. They said it's only for guys."

I was suddenly more shocked at the thought of Jill's absence than at her profanity. Baseball without Jill? Imposposible!

"Look, Jill, don't take it so hard. What does silly ol' baseball matter? Look, I won't even join the league, then you and I can. . ."

"No you won't, Buster," she stiffened suddenly. She sat up and angrily shook the tears from her eyes. "Just because I'm a girl doesn't mean you can't play. They don't know what a shortstop they're losing," she said furiously, "but they've still got you, and I'm going to personally see that you're the best first baseman around. Nobody said I couldn't coach you!"

"Forget it, Jay-Jay," I said. "You know I'm not that good. I don't even care about base-. . ."

"You forget it, chum." You couldn't even tell she'd been crying. "Now shake it out there and sign up. Your first lesson begins as soon as this. . ." she grimaced, and then tried a shakey grin, ". . .farce is over. Hop to it, Tiger!"

Baseball was her life; actually I could take it or leave it, and I'd just about rather leave it. I tried to explain that to her. She reasoned with me for a flat three seconds. Then—with my arm doubled behind me, extremely painful when she threw her small weight against it—she convinced me.

"You ready to play baseball, Mr. Contrary?" she hissed.

With tears in my eyes—whether from the pain in my arm or from Jill's obvious sublimation I don't know—I nodded my head and mumbled, "O. K., O. K., lemme go!"

She released me instantly and jumped in front of me, beaming with delight. I watched her freckles split and reform themselves as she broke into the old familiar grin and stuck out her hand. I sighed and took it.

"Go get 'em, Tiger!"

Jill was as good as her word. She was at every game and every practice. And after practice, I stayed on through the dusk until darkness called a halt to Jill's slashing drives and grounders that she hit with a vengeance straight at me. Then she would spend a half hour pegging throws from short to first, for the first time working at inaccuracy. I caught them backhanded, over my head, stretched almost off the bag and with high, gut-wrenching leaps. We spent hours every Saturday working on my hitting, Jill blazing them past me while she forced me to crowd the plate and develop a hitter's eye.

She was determined, and I grew to be. It all paid off when I was chosen starting first baseman on the All-Star team, but even that wasn't enough for Jill. She continued to work with me the next year and I still have the trophy that—during my eighth grade season, when I began to grow and really hit a baseball—I was awarded as Most Valuable Player of the All-Star Game when my three run homer cinched the game in the top of the ninth.

Jill was ecstatic. I honestly don't think she could have been any happier if she'd been the one to lean into Tommy Perkins' slow curve and pole it over the left field fence. Which only made harder my resolution to tell Jill my decision regarding high school in the fall.

Somehow, without ever mentioning it, we had both agreed that bikes were now too juvenile, but she was bubbling with excitement and skipping like a kid as we walked home from the ball park.

"Wow, Phil, didja see ol' Perk's face when you slammed the ol' horsehide right outta th' park? I knew you could do it, Tiger. Oh, wow. . ."

"Hey, Jay-Jay. . ."

"Zap! Right over the fence!"

"Calm down, Coach, I wanna talk to you."

Something in my voice must have warned her. She subsided and eyed me curiously.

"Jay-Jay, I'm not gonna play ball in high school."

"Phil!"

"Look, Jay-Jay, I'm not even that good. With your coaching I got lucky and *bang*!. instant hero. . ."

"Com'on, Phil, it'll be tougher in high school, sure, but I'll work you harder than ever. You'll be starting at first by the time you're a junior, I guarantee it."

"That's not the point, kid. I don't want to play ball. It'd take up too much time. I'd rather be editing the school paper by the time I'm a junior. Maybe even run for class office."

"You'll have time for baseball, Phil. And anything else you wanna do. You're smart, you can do it."

"Jay-Jay, we're getting older. It's time we stopped playin' like kids. You're a girl. It's gettin' about time you acted like one."

She seemed hurt at that.

"I can't help it that I'm a girl," she said slowly.

"I know you can't, Jay-Jay, but you are. And there's nothing wrong with that. Act like it."

"Phil Jackson," she blazed. "You know I'd be a downright fake if I started prissin' around every guy I can beat arm wrestlin', makin' big eyes and swooning at mice!" Her voice was scornful, "Wearin' dresses!"

I could do nothing but agree with her as I catalogued her slight frame in dirty jeans and sweatshirt, the helmet of curls peeking from beneath a Cincinnati Reds' baseball cap.

"Jay-Jay, I don't want to play ball."

She looked puzzled, and helpless as she scuffed at a pebble with her sneaker.

"O. K., Phil, whatever you want." For a moment I thought she was going to break into tears. Then the old grin was there and the small hand jabbed at me.

"Friends?" she smiled.

"You know it, Jay-Jay," I grinned as I grabbed her hand. "Come on, I'll race you home!" Although I had been beating her for almost a year, I was a step behind as she reached her gate.

"See you tomorrow," I yelled as I slowed into a dogtrot for the last two blocks to my house. As I turned the corner I glanced back. She was standing alone at her gate, looking down the street after me. I turned the corner and she was lost from sight.

I don't remember if I did see her the next day. I probably did; Jill and I continued to be close, but we could never again be as close as before I told her of my decision to quit baseball. That must have been incomprehensible to Jill, but she never tried to affect my decision once she had agreed to "whatever" I wanted.

When we went to high school, it was Jill who arose in class assembly to nominate me for the freshman class president. And then, as self-appointed campaign manager, she supplied the ideas and energy which resulted in my election. As sophomores, she convinced me to run for vice-president, managed my campaign and again I won.

"That's just to give the 'groupers and grousers' an illusion of security," she winked at me, "and nobody will realize I plan to have you elected as president both your last years."

The strategy was evidently working, as I was elected president my junior year.



"Just keep quiet about next year, Phil, babe," Jill would caution. "Just leave it to ol' Jay-Jay; I'll have you in like flint next year," and I would grin and agree to whatever she said.

It was during my sophomore year that my decision about the ministry firmed into shape. I had always attended the Methodist Church, but as a sophomore struggling through adolescence, I became preoccupied and worried about evil and sin; and I finally decided to devote my life to God and my fellow man. I can remember telling Jill of my decision over cokes at the neighborhood drug store. She seemed puzzled at what, in those days, I termed my "call."

"Are you sure that's what you want, Phil," she asked, staring into the bottom of her glass.

"Jay-Jay, it's not a question of what I want," I protested with fevor. "The Lord has called me to save souls for Him. I can't shirk the duty I know is waiting for me."

"Whatever you want, Phil," she sighed. She looked doubtful as she shook a cigarette from her pack and lit it.

It was characteristic of Jill that when she had decided to start smoking she just did and, unlike most of our friends who sneaked, she smoked openly and without embarrassment in front of anyone, her parents included.

I, of course, did not smoke. I knew Methodist ministers had to take an oath of abstinence against tobacco in any form and, to me, Jill's crumpled pack of cigarettes were tinged inalterably with the blemish of sin.

"Jay-Jay," I probed tentatively, "I wish you wouldn't smoke. Your body is the Temple of the Lord."

She sighed. "Look, Phil, if you want to be a sky pilot, I won't try to stop you. I'll like you anyway. But I'm me, Phil, and you'll have to put up with me just the way I am."

Jill's casual irreverence bothered me. I trembled when she would refer to Christ and the Twelve Apostles as "J. C. and the gang."

"You call me Jay-Jay, Phil," she'd reason, "and I don't mind. Jesus has never indicated to me that he minds being called 'J. C.' "

"Jay-Jay," I'd say, "don't you believe in God's love? Aren't you worried about going to hell?"

"I can't say that I'm not," she'd admit, "but God never talks to me. And I'd hate to miss all the fun in this life and then die and find out I shouldn't have worried."

And she was dedicated to life, she enjoyed everything. Her junior year, she began to shed her "tom boy" cocoon.

One morning, walking to school, I halloed for her in front of her house. She came demurely down her walk in a skirt and sweater, with her hair frizzled and curled from the effects of a home permanant. She was quiet and subdued, and I detected the faint fragrance of a perfume.

I didn't know how to react to the new feminine Jill. She wanted to stop at the drugstore to smoke a cigarette, because "Ladies don't smoke on the street." I had to consciously remember the virtue of charity to keep from asking since when she had worried about that. I was bewildered and, seated in the drugstore, I was almost moved to panic by this new and strange Jill.

"Your hair looks nice," I finally tried in desperation. She jerked as if she had been slapped and stared at me. Then she was lost in fits of giggles.

"God, Phil," she gasped, "isn't it horrible? I don't know what ever made me do it." She was laughing in the old Jill way, completely and unreservedly.

"It does, Jay-Jay," I stammered, "it really looks nice."

She controlled her laughter long enough to pat my hand comfortingly.

"Of course it does, Phil, and it's nice of you to say so." Then she was caught by another series of giggles. "Oh, poor Phil, who will always sin with a lie for me. Phil, will I ever learn to be a girl?"

After the first experiment at being female, Jill endured until the frizzle in her hair was replaced by her natural curls. But she remained feminine, choosing skirts and frocks instead of her habitual jeans, making her transition naturally, but slowly.

I was editing the school paper by this time and spent every afternoon editing submitted material and writing the additional stories needed to fill every issue and I saw much less of Jill. But I knew she was succeeding in her efforts to be female; she had attracted the attention of an older, "college man" from a nearby junior college. She was often seen draped across the bucket seat of his Corvette, her hair fluttering in the convertible's windstream as he jerked clutch-popping around the local drive-ins.

I was aware of the other girls' opinion that Jill was being "fast," but, knowing Jill, I regarded those opinions—in an un-Christian manner, if I had but realized it—as the results of their envy of Jill's newfound role in the female sex. But Jill didn't take long to jar my confidence in her behavior.

I had been at the drama club's play practice and had stayed late to assist the stage manager with the construction of scenery. It was after midnight and I was approaching Jill's darkened house on my way home.

I identified the Corvette's roar before I saw the car. It braked to a halt in front of Jill's house and I saw Jill alight unsteadily onto the sidewalk. She leaned back over the car to give the driver a long, lingering goodnight kiss. Then she straightened and wavered on unsteady legs as the driver reved his engine and popped the clutch to jump down the street with a squeal of tires.

Jill stood there, feet apart, looking after the disappearing car.

"Hey, Jay-Jay," I said as I came up. "How's it going?"

She whirled around, almost losing her balance.

"Oh, 'lo, Phil." she said sheepishly.

I stood there uncertain, dimly aware that Jill was not completely pleased with my presence.

"You should have had him walk you to the door," I accused mildly, more to have something to say than in any real reproach.

"Oh, Phil, y're s' ol' fasshunned," she said, slurring her words. She lurched toward the gate.

"Jay-Jay," I said incredulously, "have you been drinking?"

She turned and looked at me, for a moment almost embarrassed. Then she chuckled.

"Phil, ol' Tiger, I guess I'm bombed."

She eased to the grass inside her gate, retching in body shaking spasms I was at her side immediately.

"You O. K., Jay-Jay?"

"No, I'm not," she gasped. "Actually, I think I'm gonna die." She hiccuped loudly as she tried to meet my gaze through tear-filled eyes. "I think I'm gonna puke."

"Jay-Jay! How could you?" I blurted, shocked.

"Damn you, Phil Jackson," she groaned. "How dare you worry about my soul when I'm so damned sick?" She collapsed and began to vomit onto the grass.

"I'm sorry," I said as I stroked her forehead as the spasm abated.



She gulped. "I'm all right. Honest. Just leave me alone, Phil."

"I'll just help you to your door," I insisted, pulling her to her feet. "Why did you do it, Jay-Jay?"

"Look, Phil," she said in a stronger voice, "let's get one thing straight. I'm not sorry. I wanted to get drunk and I did. It wasn't the first time and it won't be the last."

"Jay-Jay," I remonstrated, "look what it does to you."

"I don't care," she said sharply. "I enjoyed myself. I'm me. I'm me and I enjoy it. I like you, Phil, I even respect you. But you're not me, and this is the way I am!"

"O. K., Jay-Jay," I appeased her, "I'm sorry."

"And Phil," she was almost embarrassed again, "I'd take it as a personal favor if you wouldn't wear your knees out praying for me."

"Jay-Jay, I can't promise not to pray for you. You're my friend."

"O. K., Phil. If you can put up with my drinking, I guess I can put up with your praying. O. K.?"

Silently I nodded my head.

She stuck out her hand. The grin in her face was a little crooked, but it was there.

"Friends?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, taking her hand, knowing that whatever, that would always be true. She was still standing at her door, her face a white blob in the darkness when I glanced back at the gate. I waved weakly and, without waiting for her answering wave, if there was one, turned and walked toward home.

It was only two nights later, a bleak November Wednesday, that it all come to a head. I had come straight home from prayer meeting to compile and type the final draft of a term paper entitled "The Atom" for my third period physics class. About ten o'clock I heard the sirens and speeding vehicles outside on the street, but, engrossed in the paper, I hardly noticed. At about two, I typed the final sentence and fell exhausted but self-satisfied into bed.

Next morning, I was bleary eyed, sitting at the kitchen table and stuffing doughnuts into my mouth when my mother turned from the stove and said uneasily, "Phil, I have some bad news for you."

Somewhat surprised but unworried, I mumbled, "What?"

My mother came and sat beside me at the kitchen table.

"Son, Jill James was killed last night in a car wreck.

I dropped the doughnut and Mom reached out and took my hand. "She was dead on arrival at the hospital. I heard it on the news this morning and called her mother. Her father said her mother was in bed under sedation."

"What?" I faltered. "How? Not Jill?"

Slowly and with sympathy, Mom detailed what she knew—the single car crash a mile outside of town, the bad curve just short of Town Creek Bridge, the instantaneous death of Jill.

"The boy driving was treated for a gash on his head and released last night," Mom finished.

I didn't know him, but at that moment I hated him, the boy who had killed Jill and escaped unscathed.

"Do you want to stay home from school," Mom asked. "I know it's a shock."

"No, no," I mumbled. I dumbly

shrugged into my coat and stumbled from the house.

The gang at the drugstore were strangely subdued, stirring their coffee and then forgetting to drink it. I slid down by Tommy Perkins who looked up and asked if I had heard. I nodded.

"Man," he said, "you should see the 'Vette. Fiber glass body, just a shambles. How he lived through it I'll never know." He lapsed into silence.

"Were they drinking, Perk?" I wanted to know." He lapsed into silence.

"Were they drinking, Perk?" I wanted to know, as if it were important to fix the blame.

Perk shrugged. "I saw him last night at the hospital. Bound to have been speedin', but he seemed sober. Awful broke up about it though."

I forgave the unknown driver then, realizing that he must feel as terrible as I.

Classes were a wake that morning, with girls being driven home until past noon after they had suddenly collapsed into tears during class. Patsy Richards, who arrived at school, fainted in the library, cutting her head on a table as she fell, and had to be rushed to the hospital.

When classes changed, the silence was oppressive. There was only the dirge-like shuffle of footsteps in the hall without the usual chatter and laughter. As Perk and I were walking silently down the hall, an irreverent freshman who hadn't known Jill laughingly gouged a comrade and remarked disparagingly about the funeral atmosphere that clung to the halls. Perk didn't break step, just reached across me and clutched the malefactor by the throat in his massive hand and slung him across the hall to crumple with a shocked look from the lockers. It was the third period before I discovered I'd left "The Atom" at home.

At noon the editor of the yearbook called a meeting and the staff voted unanimously to dedicate the yearbook "In Memoriam" to Jill. The advisor suggested that I might write an eulogy to be included with the dedication. I declined immediately and without thinking.

"I thought you might want to," she pressed. "You and Jill were close, and you are our poet."

"No," I said firmly, and the editor later composed one that was unfair to Jill in its sickening sweetness.

Perk and I visited the funeral home after school. I determinedly signed my name to the register and was ushered into the room by an overly solicitous funeral director secure in his professional calm. The odor was omnipresent and has remained repugnant to me ever since.

Jill was arrayed composedly in a white, smaller than usual coffin, unnatural in her repose. The freckles stood out sharply against her pale face, and her lips had a tinge of blue around them. Her hair was too neatly combed, and I was suddenly struck with the fact that the laughing pixie with the habitual handshake was gone forever. I turned and stalked from the room.

Outside, I bit at Perk with scorn when he remarked tritely on how "natural" Jill looked. Ashamed, I went home alone. I was furious with everyone for Jill's death, and yet I was aware in my mind that this was the first real test of the Christianity that I held so dear. It was my first experience with the Christian fallacy regarding death: if God *is* in his heaven and all *is* right with the world, a Christian's death should be the time for rejoicing.

I suddenly broke out in a sweat. I remember that chilly November afternoon with the bare tree limbs lashing in the wind against a bleakly gray sky, and the seat trickled down my ribs, chilling me almost as much as the horror in my soul. Jill was not a Christian!

Oh, she attended church; she did not overtly do anything wrong, but I knew with certainty in my Calvinistic soul that Jill was not going to Heaven. I had



writhed too often under the sheets and pleaded with an unanswering God over some minor sin to feel entirely certain of Heaven's reward for myself. How much worse it would be for Jill!

I prayed that night. I lay with wide eyes and whispered words to the ceiling. I catalogued Jill's love of life, her basic goodness. Her failings I characterized, with all the emotional appeal of an attorney fighting against the certainty that his client will get the chair, as the result of her youth and begged for mercy. Jill was good!

I was aware, then, of my own shortcomings. I, Jill's friend, should have saved her, and I cringed at the thought of eternal fire for my own sins of omission. Then I became angry at my own selfishness, and I pleaded anew for mercy for Jill. I even tried to bargain with God.

"Oh, please, please, I'll go to Hell if You'll just save Jill," I sobbed wildly into the dark, knowing that every man is responsible for his own soul.

I slept hardly at all. At school, my eyes were puffed and red rimmed. I couldn't concentrate, lapsing from the classroom into long, silent meditations and renewed pleas to the angry God I was almost beginning to hate. At noon, the principal called me into his office.

"Why don't you go home, Phil? You can make up the work you'll miss until after the funeral tomorrow. I know you and Jill were close."

"No," I bit back savagely. "I'm all right." I couldn't give up. Any suffering was bearable if it helped Jill. Please, please my mind begged, God, if You're good, You won't let Jill go to Hell.

"Phil, you might feel better at home."

"No! I'm all right," I snarled as I whirled and ran from the office.

I spent another sleepless night feeling ever more wretched. I left my bed to kneel, cold and terror stricken, hoping against hope that some act of mine might atone for Jill. I prayed for hours, but my prayers were a monologue. There was no answer.

The next day, Saturday, I was one of the six Explorer Scouts who acted as pallbearers, and the church was packed. The coffin was strangely light as we carried it from the hearse into the church and deposited it on its stand before the altar. The school band, of which Jill had been a member, was there in full uniform. The church pews, the balcony, even the vestibule were thronged with Jill's classmates, parents, teachers and friends, and audible sobs and groans were a continual background to the dirges being played mournfully on the organ.

I sat there like a rock, dry eyed, almost faint from the heavy, sweet fragrance of flowers, rotten, with the decay that comes to all things dead.

The minister began to speak. He spoke of Jill, as if she were in the next room, in warm and loving terms. He spoke of her, not as a 17-year-old girl-woman, but as a child, reminding the congregation of Jesus' admonition to "Suffer the little children to come unto me." The congregation was in tears, but relieved tears, as if, with the minister's words, everything was all right.

The minister spoke of Jill as the recipient of good fortune, too young to have even known sin, who would now sit forever in Heaven, without blemish.

Wait, my mind rejected, you don't know. Jill was no saint, she was human, as real as anyone here. The Jill you describe never existed!

The minister begged the crowd not to be sad, to rejoice with Jill in Heaven, to anticipate meeting her again after death. And the crowd rose in unison to sing "Nearer My God To Thee" before the minister's eloquent benediction.

The crowd was relieved; the accident was no longer tragic, and they could go home appeased.

I was furious. Was I the only one who

knew Jill was going to Hell?

"Judge not lest ye be judged," my mind cautioned. But I couldn't. I knew if I died on the spot, my doubt would deny me Heaven. And Jill, too, had doubted. I knew it! Everything I had been taught regarding religion reinforced the fact of Jill's damnation. Yet, the minister, the Christians in the congregation, everyone seemed content to deny reality and believe in Jill's salvation for their own peace of mind.

I helped carry the coffin to the gravesite and stood respectfully unbowed as the minister prayed, as if by bowing I would condone these people's ignorance of Jill's state. She was good, I couldn't deny that. If I were God, Jill would be forever welcome in my Heaven. But I had been taught perfection, and Jill was all too human to be the Christian I had been taught would be saved. I could feel no comfort in shrugging the problem off onto God's wisdom and mercy. The God I believed in was just; I had been taught that sinners would be punished, and I knew Jill was damned. The coffin was slowly descending and. . .my heart was breaking.

I went home and, in the privacy of my room, again beseiged Heaven with my prayers. I had been taught too well, and I writhed in agony each time I realized that, even at that moment, Jill must certainly be feeling torment no mortal could endure.

Just before dusk I returned to the churchyard. It was deserted, with only the wind trembling the vast array of decaying flowers heaped on and around the raw, red wound the new grave made in the rich greenness of the cemetery. I fell to my knees beside the mound, my eyes watering in my helplessness.

"Jill," I whispered, expecting no answer.

In my mind I went back to Monday night, and I remembered Jill's shaken grin and her hand stab and query, "Friends?" My stomach clutched in physical cramps and I sobbed brokenly beside the grave.

"Why?" I asked the sky. "Why?" But only the wind moved.

Then I was remembering Jill straightening up from the grass of her yard. "Why?" I had asked her with the dim street light on the corner barely illuminating her face. But it was her face, the old familiar face, and I heard her voice, strong, confident, "I'm me."

*I'm me!* The whole joy of Jill's individuality raced through me. *I'm me!*

"Damn right, Jay-Jay," I said aloud. "You were you." Jill didn't need any excuses. The fact of Jill's existence was enough. She enjoyed life to the fullest and didn't hurt anyone. And for a while, I had been fortunate enough to share a portion of her life. "I'm me," she'd said. What more could be required?

I rose slowly to my feet and stood looking at the sky.

"God," I said with confidence. Not humble, not begging. Just telling. "God, You're a lair, and a cheat, and You probably don't even exist. If You do, You're sure messed up. I don't care anymore. I really don't, because if You're up there, God, and Jill's burning, then I don't want anything to do with you.

I was suddenly raging. I clenched my fists and shouted to the sky.

"You hear me, Old Man? I don't care! This is Phil Jackson, God, and I'm signing off. I'm gonna leave You alone, God. Forget it You. . ." I was sputtering," . . .You damned Old Fool!"

Nothing changed. The wind still blew through the twilight. The street lights were coming on along the street and the cemetery was silent. I nodded. I turned and began the walk home, resolving never, ever, to be anything but myself. I felt better than I had at any time since the accident.

Years later, I was not surprised to pick up a national magazine and read an article purporting God to be dead. I could pinpoint to a day the exact time of His death.



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