

# Philip and Gene

*by David Ackley*

As if everything were pointed toward the one ending, our lives are lived backward in memory. If things ended badly, the prism of memory turns to the facet of tragedy, and all that came before is painted with premonitory gloom.

Perhaps this is partly why I have trouble remembering my childhood, as if in the attempt to wipe away the grief over Harry's death, everything that came before that had to do with him were erased in the one swipe.

I could see though that for you, the trip with your oldest brother, Eugene, when you were twelve, and he was thirty, however it might end( to which you likely didn't give a thought as you waited on the porch steps for his Ford to pull up ) must have made you shiver with excitement. Sometimes it would be hard to contain at one and the same time that Gene was both your own brother, and one of the high heroes of your existence. For if your other brother Harry was older than you, he had not yet crossed the line into manhood at seventeen; not long before, the two of you, though you were considered tagging along, would have roamed together in Greeley Park; at Harry's challenge, you'd have climbed this tree or swum across that pond. But Gene was something different, and if with Harry, as with older—but not too much older— brothers, there was something of imitation and something of rivalry, your oldest brother Gene was something apart, loved in hopeless aspiration, to become so fine.

Gene a man before you barely knew him, by the time you really did, when you were seven or so, sat with your father and his at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette to Dad's pipe, their deep voices murmuring the talk of men. He had fought in the Great War; he was married with two baby boys of his own; he had a job selling boiler equipment; he owned a car and a home. War veterans greeted him with delight on Main Street. It was understood, in the American Legion that he would one day be Commander. He ruffled your hair

on his way out the door and called you "Kid," which made you proud to be spoken to at all by this confident towering human being. Somehow past belief, your own brother. As if you, a dwarf, were brother to a giant.

He was taking you with him on a sales trip for a day through a few towns on the other side of the border in Massachusetts. You'd done it once or twice before, but you'd never tire of riding the narrow border roads, looking at the pasture woods for deer or a spooked partridge or a rabbit stiff as a statue on the far side of a ditch that you'd drawn down on : Bing, you said behind your pointed finger and then grinned at Gene behind the wheel. "Got 'im." "Tough shot," Gene said, laughing. And then you'd think about Gene in the war and try to picture what that was like, the thing that boys wonder about men who've seen the great mystery, what it was to have another man in your sights and how you did it and whether you yourself would pull the trigger when it came to it. Which is at the deep heart of the mystery of our own selves and what they will do when the choice is to stand and fight, or run away.

You talk baseball; you can play well enough—but it's not easy with glasses to hit, the way the ball slips in and out of view when you move your head, and you make more outs than you should, hitting too many grounders from swinging late. Harry saw Gene play for the Nashua team and told you about the time—the year before Gene went off to the war—when Gene struck out twelve of the Hollis boys on their home field. "And he could hit some too," Harry said. So Gene tells you to keep your head still as you can from the time the ball leaves the pitchers hand until you swing; you just need to see where the ball's going to be, not where it is when you swing. And this is how it is with a family of father and brothers, how each of them can give you pieces of what you need in the life of a boy and a man. And with Gene, because of who he is and what he'd done and that he's a man and your own brother, you want to write down every word he ever says to you and memorize it, that's how you feel about him.

So the day goes by; you stop at the different towns where he has calls to make, waiting in the car, or walking around outside, flipping stones into the trees or looking at the different cars parked in front of a small plant, few of which are as nice as your fathers' black Buick. At lunchtime you stop at a diner in Methuen and you both have the blue plate special which is a hamburger steak with gravy and mashed potatoes and peas and the waitress is a big blonde woman, who kids a little with Gene who you think is what they call "handsome," though you don't know for sure. And the hamburger steak tastes real good in some kind of restaurant way that's different than mother's, though probably not as good, but that you like a lot. And Gene leaves her a whole fifty cent piece for a tip and she gives him a big smile when she picks up and says,

"Come around again, Daddy Warbucks." And they both laugh.

You don't head home until after dark, on the narrow twisty road up through Pepperell, and you're just feeling a little sleepy and happy with everything the day has given you and so you don't even notice except for a kind of jerk in the motion of the car at what they tell you later, in the hospital, was a big curve coming out of town where "everybody has trouble," which then led to some loud noises and something like falling sideways and maybe your head whacked against the inside of your door when the car rolled over.

Your glasses broke so you can't see the doctor's face, in the very bright light of the hospital room, and there's Gene and mother and Dad, Gene with an arm in a sling. And you know how bad Gene feels, and it just kills you more than anything, because you don't really care about your stupid "fractured skull," all you care is that it doesn't matter, you had the best time and you can't wait to get well and do it again.

You can't say it, though, not knowing how to put into words what you feel and you're afraid that another day like that will never happen again though you don't know exactly why. It's just the way things go, you're beginning to learn. Just because you hold your head still, and wait and do everything right and want it so bad never seems to matter, as if all those events and forces and the choices of

others that we choose to label, for want of a better word, luck,  
always stand decisively between everything we want to happen and  
everything that does.

\* \* \* \* \*

