Dawn of the Flying Pigs

Jerry Bumpus
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The summer Jim and Buzzy roughnecked, Jennifer went with them out to the oil fields and sat in Jim’s old station wagon reading by a kerosene lantern and eating raw turnips. She was pregnant with me and craved turnips. On their breaks Jim and Buzzy sprawled out in the back of the car and listened to the Cardinals’ games on the radio while they ate their sandwiches. Then they slept until Rufus Troop blew his whistle, or they just lay there, too tired and depressed to talk, looking out at that big steel derrick lit up brighter than day and glaring like an altar of steel, and they thought about Sandra Goddard, Rowena Pribble, and all the trouble Jim had got us into showing off.

Thanks to Jim, that had been The Year of The Hard On at Mt. Vernon Township High School. Sandra Goddard and Rowena Pribble, the yearbook editors, just made it official by working a dozen good ones into Golden Memories and Sports Moments, airbrushing cars, school buses, buildings, hillsides, and the map of Illinois. If you turn the yearbook this way and that, you can find them lurking everywhere.

But the honors went to Jim. Sandra and Rowena succeeded in sneaking one of his into the yearbook. You can’t see it at a glance, because there are so many people in the picture, a foldout with a hundred people crowded into the locker room; the Rams had just won the Christmas tournament—and like everyone in the crowd, you tend to gaze at the trophy the boys on the team hold over their heads.

Jim has an arm in the air, though he’s so far from the trophy that, after you’ve spotted the erection and look again at his smile and the peculiar way he is standing, bent out from those around him, you suspect that he raised his hand to get your attention. Sandra and Rowena had doctored the photo, using certain Polaroid pictures which had floated around school that year. But Jim had been, indeed, the subject of those Polaroid pictures, and everyone recognized him, for by then he was very well known; that is, that part of him, which had become a legend in its own time, as they say. Jim was expelled three weeks short of graduation—not just because of the yearbook but for everything else that year, for turning the school into a place haunted by hard ons and rumors of hard ons, for all the stunned fascination, the frenzy and adulation. (Sandra and Rowena graduated, went off to college, got married, etc.)

When Jim’s mother protested (that’s Rita, whom I called Grandma when I was a child), the principal told her that not graduating should be the least of Jim’s worries. Twenty-odd daddies, uncles, and big brothers hoped to get their hands on him—and probably would, when the time was right.

Aside from those individuals, a lot of people, hundreds, wished that Jim would just vanish from the face of the earth. That is, go back to California.

But Jim couldn’t go anywhere. Broke and desperate, Rita and Jim
had loaded his three little sisters and all the clothes and dishes and other things they had room for into and onto their old station wagon and, breaking down every twenty or thirty miles and waiting for charity to get them going again, spent the summer of 1969 going from southern California to southern Illinois. That’s another story.

They were true Californians and knew they were going the wrong way but they had no choice. They would have gone on welfare in California but Jim’s father was crazy and had vowed to kill Rita and all the children. So they would live with Rita’s half-blind old mother, Jim would finish his last year of high school, he would get a good job.

But the boys and girls at Mt. Vernon Township High School had never seen anything like Jim. He was golden-haired and golden-skinned; he was tall and strong and good-looking, a great athlete, and one day after football practice someone had a radio in the locker room and on the way to the showers, with a towel around his waist, Jim started dancing, the towel fell off, he kept dancing, and he was doomed.

Jim did vanish, as so many people wished he would, but not back to California. Rufus Troop gave him and Buzzy jobs where no one could find Jim, out in the middle of nowhere.

Buzzy later became my father in a sense, though I’ve never called him that. He graduated but it didn’t matter, he wasn’t ready for anything, least of all so-called life. He would gladly have stayed in high school another year or two. On the basketball squad he had been good at guarding and dribbling, but he was too shy to take a shot. Buzzy is in the famous locker room picture, though he can’t be seen. In Jennifer’s yearbook (Buzzy and Jim threw theirs away) he showed me where he was. “Right . . .” putting his finger on a space between two people, “there.” With a magnifying glass I saw a white sliver which might be half of a face.

By August of that summer, Buzzy and Jennifer were Jim’s last and only friends. But his showoff days were done, anyway. Everything was finished.

But nothing is ever finished. Time is layered. If you could live long enough and stand back far enough, you could probably even see stratifications. Jim didn’t live long enough to see any stratifications, wouldn’t have had any idea what I’m talking about. Though the night he got torn up pulling pipe he did learn the past is never finished with us.

An oil rig at night is spectacular in a glaring, outlandish way, with lights strung up on the derrick and around the edge of the drilling platform like footlights on a stage, though the only audience out there are the animals that come to take a look, and the woods itself which winds through the county like an endless snake. (All this is from what Jennifer told me. She planned to write a book about it, someday, lots of books about everything.)

The rig is encased in a tremendous shrill ringing shell of steel noise from an engine so powerful it can turn the drill a mile down in the earth. The men stuff cotton in their ears and tie bands around their heads with flaps over their ears under their hard hats to try keeping the noise out,
but it’s impossible, for they’re immersed in the noise like fish in a bowl filled with mercury. The men yell back and forth just as if they can hear each other—it takes a long time to get used to the idea that there’s no way you can be heard. Even after they start using hand signals they forget and yell at each other.

They have to pull pipe if they hit rock. The drilling stops and they pull all those long steel pipes out of the hole one by one and pile them by the platform. Finally, out comes the big old drillhead, the thing that has been down in that unimaginable place boring deeper and deeper. The drillhead that grinds through rock looks like a bunch of fists studded with steel triangles. The men put this drillhead on the first length of pipe, stick it in the hole, and lower it down until there’s room for another length of pipe up in the derrick and screw it to the first pipe. This goes on and on until they have a mile of pipe in the hole and the drillhead is ready to gnaw through solid rock. After they grind through the rock they put the other drillhead on. Back and forth. Sometimes that summer Jim and Buzz would be exhausted from pulling pipe night after night. Other times they just drilled smoothly along.

When Jim got hurt they had been pulling pipe all night. It was about 4 a.m. Jennifer had been reading, then dozed off. She didn’t like being out there with them, but she had a premonition, which she kept to herself, and she was afraid to stay alone at night in the dinky little house the three of them were living in that summer. When she woke up she got out to pee and give the mosquitoes a chance to bite her right where you almost never put repellant. She was watching them work, not really watching but seeing without thinking about it.

Jim was running out, as they call it. When a length of pipe was pulled out of the hole up into the derrick, Jim looped a heavy chain around an end of it. Sometimes he just gave it a sling. Then the man at the controls of the winch hit the gas, fiercely yanking the chain and spinning the pipe to disconnect it. Then Jim ran out—grabbed the down-end of the pipe and skated down a muddy steel ramp off the platform, swung the pipe onto the top of the big stack that had already been pulled out, and on a signal the top end was released and the pipe clanged down into place.

All this happened very fast. They would get a rhythm, especially the ones who were young, strong, natural athletes like Jim, all the operations and movements blurring smoothly into each other.

They had been doing the same thing for several nights—hitting rock, pulling the pipe, then going through the rock, pulling the pipe, then hitting rock again. To break the monotony they had raced to see who could pull and run out with the most pipe in an hour—Jim won. After that, they brought speakers out of their cars and had some music. Jennifer didn’t know how they could hear, inside all that noise. From the station wagon, the music and the noise wavered in and out of each other. The men had started working along with the music, not exactly in time with it but doing a kind of whirling, sloppy dance, sometimes fast, then steadying out,
then fast again. Sometimes the young guys would get caught up and go
so fast and so hard that they wouldn't know until they stopped that it had
emptied them out. Jennifer saw that Jim had got caught up with doing
that. Sweating hard and gleaming like a piece of machinery, the fool had
stripped down to his shorts and boots.

And Jennifer knew the instant it started, felt the realization form in her
mind at the same time if not maybe even sooner than the idea occurred
to Jim: he took off his shorts. She groaned, said out loud, "Oh Jim
idiot," trying to pierce that gleaming steel case of night air and noise and
the yellow tin hat he wore. If he heard her, a m rum at the back of his
mind, he ignored her.

The men clapped and whistled, of course. They stood looking up at
the drilling platform just as if they were watching a show in a roadhouse.
Those roughnecks no doubt watched with much the same unfamiliar
emotional reaction which the high school boys had felt, a mixture of awe,
confoundment, and a surging belligerence, ending with the same furious
or cold resentment which guaranteed for Jim an enemy in every man,
except Buzzy, who saw how big he was and how proud of it he was. And
it was quite a show, swinging and swaying up there on the drilling
platform—he knew how to get the most out of it, he had practiced a lot,
the two of them put on quite a performance.

When Jennifer told me this, here she closed her eyes. In grief and dread
of what happened next, I think. Though now, as I close my eyes, what
happened is enhanced vividly. Inside all that incredible noise shines a steel
cocoon of silence encasing the drilling platform. And I hear the same music
I heard yesterday, almost miraculously, as I leaned back from the desk
where I am writing this. I looked out the window of my room in the Hotel
Tyrol in Madrid and heard, from down in the hotel kitchen, the Beach
Boys singing I wish they all could be California girls—while Jim dances
in the bright lights on the drilling platform, watching his hands automatically
sling the chain around the pipe, then he spins on his heels and it happens.

The man operating the winch guns it half a second too soon. That's
all it takes. The chain is loose, doesn't take bite on the pipe, and is yanked
free of the pipe—the free end lashing straight out, and as Jim comes
spinning the opposite direction something flies away out of the bright lights
of the drilling platform, and as I close my eyes and see this I think of that
custom of leaving a little window open in the room where a person is dying
so the spirit can leave on its long flight.

Now there is that awful silence which comes when something final and
forever irreparable happens and everyone realizes it at the same time.
Jennifer is rising from where she squats beside the car. Jim turns again,
slowly, like that last slow lap after a race, and he is looking down at himself
now, too—before, he would only glance down when he was showing off,
letting everyone else do all the looking. But now he takes a long, breathless
look at it, more breathlessly than anyone in the past.

Jennifer runs toward the drilling platform. Buzzy and the others start
up the platform steps in that stunned, suspended way people approach calamity, as if it is a pit into which they might skid.

"My God, oh my God, what have you done?" Jennifer is yelling as she runs toward the platform. She tries to run up the muddy steel ramp and falls so hard she's afraid she has broken her chin, broken her left wrist, and killed the baby—me. No one notices she has fallen—they are all turned toward Jim—as Jennifer struggles up the ramp.

Jim is bent over, holding his hands between his legs. There is no blood. My God, how lucky, is Jennifer's first thought, how lucky, how lucky, how lucky. She is yelling but can't hear her own voice and the man on the drilling platform are talking too, she can see by the movement of their mouths, the veins standing out in their straining necks. He keeps turning away from the men as they try to see the front of him, until finally that isn't possible, he is surrounded, but he keeps turning anyway, then he sees Jennifer. His eyes are bulging, his lips are mashed flat against his teeth in an awful grimace unlike anything she has ever seen on his face or anyone's, his face is so rigidly flat the thought flashes through her mind that the chain struck his face, gouged out a part so cleanly his face can't bleed.

Then Jennifer saw what the men had no doubt already seen, blood dripping from between his fingers.

"Let me see," Jennifer yelled.

He turned away from her and she followed him in a circle, leaning forward and trying to take hold of his wrists. Another came up beside him, and one on the other side, holding him still, and Jennifer knelt down in front of him saying, "Let me see, you must let me see," and gripping his wrists she tried to pry his hands away from where they were cupped between his legs, which was impossible—all the men together couldn't have pulled his hands away.

Suddenly the big drill engine stopped, Rufus Troop had shut it off, which left only the generator, in contrast seeming to be barely a hum, and the radios which one of the men ran down to turn off, and when finally Jim let Jennifer take his bloody hands from between his legs, they saw at the same time, Jim looking down at himself and Jennifer kneeling between his knees, and the men crowding around to look, that the worst possible thing had happened. The chain had struck Jim just as he spun the opposite direction, shearing off the end of him.

"Oh Jesus," someone whispered. It hung straight down limp and headless. It looked like a finger drooling blood. Jim staggered and swayed forward, the men caught him and laid him down. Rufus Troop ran to the doghouse and got a first aid kit. They gave Jim a big wad of bandage to hold there and stop the bleeding.

Jennifer went down the steps of the drilling platform, wanting to run down them, to fly down them, but making herself go down them carefully, holding the rail. A pool of blackness ringed the ground close to the edge of the platform, the area shadowed from the lights on the derrick.
Jennifer could see absolutely nothing—she couldn't even see the ground itself as she lowered a foot off the bottom step. Then she was afraid to move because she couldn't see anything.

She went along the platform until she was to the corner, then she cut out at an angle and, back in the light again, ran as hard as she could to the car. She grabbed the kerosene lantern and with her hands shaking so badly she could barely control them, she tore a match from the book and tried to strike it. The little head napped off. She tried another, pinching the match-head—it didn't strike but smushed across the striking surface. She struck match after match, then threw that matchbook away and dug in the glove compartment for another one.

Finally she got the lantern lit. She ran back to the edge of the platform and shading her eyes with one hand against the glare of lights on the derrick, she started searching the ground. Cigarette butts, matchsticks, cardboard cartons, candy bar wrappers, pop bottles and aluminum cans, ripped up paper bags, a whole loaf of bread with the end of the wrapper torn open maybe by animals and the slices fanned out like a hand of cards, and boards and broken pieces of equipment slung off the platform, thousands of crumpled and twisted things that Jennifer had to look at closely, even reaching down and picking things up and moving them slightly because what she was looking for might be hiding in the shadow of even the littlest thing. And she had to be very careful where she walked, looking twice carefully each time she took a step.

On the platform Jim wailed, sounding less like himself or any person than some animal that the men up there were torturing just to hear its desperate suffering and the words, "Oh my God, my God, my God," that came out as he gasped for breath.

Then she heard them tromping on the platform. They had picked him up and were going to carry him down to a car and start the long drive into Mt. Vernon. Running up the platform steps as they were bringing him down, she told them to wait, that she was going to find it, she had to find it. They just kept coming, making her back down, and she ran beside them, saying it over and over, and they just continued toward one of the cars.

She ran back to the place where she had been looking. She held the lantern closer to the ground, stooping down as if utterly fascinated by the dusty earth and all the pitiful rubbish.

They were putting him into the back seat of a car. Jennifer ran over to them and yelled at them to please, please wait. One of them looked at her, his eyes blank, his face as vacant as a cow's, as if the words Jennifer spoke with exaggerated, absurd slowness and distinctness were quite beyond his grasp. "Wait. Give me . . . two minutes. That's all it will take. Two . . ." putting her face right in his, "minutes."

"He's bleeding to death, goddamnit," one of them said. "There's not time to wait. We got to get him to the hospital."
Holding her hands over her head Jennifer screamed, "I'll stop the bleeding! I know how to stop the bleeding!"

This baffled them.

"I'm a nurse!" she screamed, amazed and thankful that she had popped out with that—for it worked! One of them even said, trancelike, his lips slowly moving as if these words were the first he had ever spoken, "A nurse."

"But first," she said, "I must find it."

Two of them nodded. They understood!

"And then I'll . . ." She didn't finish because she had no idea what she would do. "Just wait. Wait. Don't take off. I'll go find it . . ." backing away, still holding up both hands.

"We'll come help you find it," one of them said.

"No! There's too great a risk of . . . trampling. The light is bad. I have to look with this"—holding up the lantern—"and I have to look . . . up close"—she held up her hand in front of her face—"like this. So just wait here. I'll find it in just a minute."

She backed away and they stared at her as if hypnotized, and as she went back to the side of the platform she looked several times over her shoulder.

Before she was into the center of the area where she thought it might be, she started searching, for she had really no idea where it might be except she had seen it flying in this general direction. As she bent down she realized that the area she intended to comb had gotten larger, and that the longer she searched, the more area she would have to include. A big spider going along stopped when it saw her and stood its ground.

The car started. "No!" she screamed. But she couldn't move from where she stood. If she ran to stop them, she was certain she would step on it, crush it, grind it into the earth.

They drove down toward the deep-rutted road and stopped by the generator. She heard shouting in the car, an argument that ended with one of them yelling at the top of his lungs that they couldn't leave the goddamned thing running with nobody the hell out here. One of them got out of the car and turned off the generator. The bright lights on the derrick went out. Jennifer stood in the lantern's dim circle.

The sense of urgency expanded all around her as in the darkness the woods came closer, came right up to her. She stopped searching, straightening with difficulty against the pain in her back. Holding the lantern high, she looked up at the derrick, hulking even larger in the dark . . . and she realized that in combing the ground she had moved out too far from the platform, into the trampled and rutted grass.

She went back closer and pressing hard with her arm against the small of her back, leaned down again and resumed searching, worrying that where she was looking now was an area which she had already searched. "I need some kind of system," she said out loud. But maybe just once
over wasn't good enough. All right. She started to get down on her hands and knees. Then she froze.

At the same time something moved through the black air above her head—how close she couldn't tell but she heard the soft muffled sound and felt the subtle stir of wind as it passed—she realized that something which she had passed over a minute ago was a strange object, some kind of strange bug or maybe a grape, but it didn't look like what she was searching for, didn't look like anything, really. And now she was certain she was standing on it.

Bending down as far as she could, so that she could see the space beside her right foot, she placed her foot there and looked at the flat grass where her foot had been. Nothing. She repeated the process with her left foot and sighed with relief that she hadn't been standing on it. Then she carefully turned and bending down as far as she could . . . she found the object again.

It bore no resemblance to what it was. It was just a little scrap, not even the complete piece of him that was torn off, though maybe it was, having yielded to that mystery of nature which everyone knows who has butchered or watched a butcher work, that all the parts and pieces, when they're cut and torn apart, make a sad little pile much smaller than their sum.

She drove as fast as the statin wagon would run, the old thing wallowing over the road some farmer had made bringing equipment through the woods to a patch of fields. She felt the baby struggling around, quite disgruntled at all this. When she reached the gravel road she floorboarded the gas and the car slowly gained speed until it was lumbering down the narrow road at a flat out 50 miles an hour.

She had driven about ten miles when she saw the other car stopped in the road and the men standing beside it with the doors open. She hit the brakes and the station wagon's rear end started coming around. She let off, blinked the headlights, and blaring the horn, passed as far as possible to the other side of the road without sliding off into the ditch. The men scrambled out of the way as she roared by.

She finally got it stopped and backed up, almost banging into the front of the other car. They just looked at her as she came up. “Well?” she said. “Well? What's wrong?”

Buzzy mumbled something, it sounded like he said He's dead. “What? What's that?” she said, her voice rising as she cut through them to the back door of the car where Buzzy stood, and he spoke again, low and confidential as if not wanting Jim to hear, “He's dead. He was drinking some whiskey and he just up an died.”

She was speaking but she had no idea then or later what she said, maybe it was only a shrill eeeee which had started to be He is not dead but didn't get completely or even partway formed as she shoved Buzzy out of the way and moved into the back seat over Jim as he lay on his side with
his legs drawn up. She couldn’t listen for his breathing because she couldn’t make herself be silent, hearing far away herself saying over and over No no no no . . . until he moved, she was certain he moved, a twitch in his shoulder.

“He’s not dead,” she announced for them outside the car and for Jim, too, inside that whiskey-smelling darkness in which he lay, the darkness seeming to emanate from him as he went farther and farther from her. She got out of the car. “Don’t move him. Don’t start the car. Wait right here”—though she already knew the car couldn’t get around the station wagon.

In the station wagon she carefully moved the Tupper Ware box so that she could sit in front of the glove compartment. That night she had brought turnips in the box. Now it contained the little piece of him. She dug into the glove compartment, throwing out bottle caps one by one, a can opener, poptop rings, a Marlboro box, matchbooks, two pencil stubs, and finally, after everything was out, trolling with her fingernails she snagged a piece of thread, rolled it between her thumb and forefinger, and when she picked it up, the needle was still on the thread.

She brought the lantern with her and had one of them light it, then told one of them to go to the other side of the car and hold down Jim’s shoulders and for another to lean down on his knees and hold him still. After having one of them scoot the front seat as far forward as possible, she squeezed into the back, kneeling on the floorboard and leaning over him.

He woke up, or it was more like coming back. The whiskey had already hit him pretty good, but he realized she was there, realized she was Jennifer, knew where he was more or less, and they talked to each other, their voices high and strained, and he didn’t understand what she meant when she told him what she planned to do, and when she leaned down and began, he lurched, bending double and closed on himself to protect himself from further pain.

She backed out of the car. They would have to get him out of there and hold him bent back over the hood of the car so she could get to him. It took all four men to hold him still on the hood while Jennifer leaned down into his bloody groin, Buzzy holding the kerosene lantern in one hand while he lay on his side across Jim’s chest, the lantern drawing the insects, curious at this spectacle, some even alighting on Jennifer’s hands as she worked, a mosquito boring into her left wrist as she sewed the ragged little piece onto the ragged piece hanging out of him, the futility of it like a cloak of distance between Jennifer’s mind and eyes, and the glinting needle and the pitiful black thread which she had used long, long ago it seemed, to sew a button on a dress, a button she had popped getting out of the car when she and Buzzy went to the grocery store one afternoon.

She didn’t know how doctors went about lining up the jagged edges when they attempted the miracle of reattaching torn off parts. Just put the piece back on where it looks like it belongs and sew it on? Can
you somehow line up all the tiny blood vessels? This won’t work, she told herself.

It was futile. Worse than futile, it was preposterous. When word got out, when the idiots holding Jim down on the hood of the car told everyone they knew, and when all the people in Mt. Vernon and in high school knew, they all would crow with laughter. And the people who knew Jennifer, beginning with her mother, would gloat upon this peculiar and infinite compounding of her humiliation.

But now it didn’t matter what people would say and how they would laugh, and how this part of Jim’s legend would become a legend in its own right, and how his maimed condition would haunt him privately and publicly—she could just imagine the cruel jokes, about trying to drill for oil with his dick, and the dangers of dancing with his dick sticking out, and a thousand other things just unimaginable. As she worked, sweat beading on her upper lip, holding her breath each time she pushed the needle through his flesh, she thought ahead to how she would maybe tell me this, someday, wondered how she could if I was one of them, not someone who could hear the story and know how all the absurdity and terror were counterbalanced on the hood of that car in the middle of nowhere by determination and its mercifully blinding aureole of dignity. Or how at least in that hour the one who is caught up by necessity, forgetting herself in action, is blinded temporarily by knowing that this one thing, in this one moment, is not only the right thing to do but the only thing in the world that can be done.

Driving on into Mt. Vernon, Buzzy at the wheel of the station wagon—the rest of them following in the other car—Jennifer rode in the back with Jim, lying beside him to hold him still. He had drunk all the whiskey and had passed hysteria to babbling, talking to Buzzy and Jennifer, continuing to talk when they tried to answer. As the sun came up he loudly asked if Buzzy saw what he saw. “What’s that, Jim?” Buzzy called back. “Pigs, man, don’t you see ’em?”

Jennifer saw what he meant. The clouds in the east weren’t just mounds turning from dark gray to purple to blazing pink, with some vague resemblance to pigs—they were indisputably and purely a herd of pigs driven up from the night and being launched one by one, wind on the horizon scattering them across the sky.

Jerry Bumpus