

First Place: Fiction

"The Prophet of Lindsay Middle"

By Muriel Mackie

For about six seconds, my entire 6th grade class was convinced that Christ had been resurrected in the form of Jaqueline Miller, and for about six seconds after that, I contemplated skipping the rest of school to look for a banyan tree to sit under. And even though I'm lying about that last part and Alvin keeps calling me a smart-ass, the first bit is completely true, which is, to me, all the crazier.

Jaqueline Miller and I were never anything more than strangers, even *after* she was supposedly possessed by Jesus, despite the fact that we'd both been floating like amoebas through the same public school system our entire lives. My mom never seemed to get that—she would always ask why I wasn't friends with people in my grade when we were canned in the same brine, but that's just how things *were*. You can't win them all, and since I never tried to win Jaqueline, as though she were a stitch-smiled plush lying underneath my mechanical claw of friendship, the odds were low. At best, like with most strangers, I watched her passively from a distance and frequently forgot she existed unless outrightly reminded. Considering the events that followed, I've wondered occasionally if my idle arrogance somehow caused everything, as if it was punishment from God for not paying enough attention to my fellow man, but all things considered, if *I'm* the one somehow pulling the strings, we've got less of a God and more of a Gosh (mom told me that joke once).

Either way, the only thing I really remember about pre-immaculate conversion Jacqueline is that she smelled like a liquored-up strawberry on account of some awful, mid-range perfume

concocted by a presumptuously talented Etsy woman, and that she followed fads: when it was pegging your jeans halfway up your calf, Jaqueline could hold a hoagie, when it was liking dad-rock, Jaqueline knew every song (title) ever written by four freewheeling guys from the 70s, when, most recently, it was Silly Bandz, her arms looked positively lacquered with multicolored status symbols, and when it was God, Jaqueline let the Lord in.

I'm not exactly sure when it started, if she had been preaching in secret bathroom sepulchers to knit-brow tweens for far longer than I knew, spreading her influence beyond the glare of rightfully concerned adults, but *I* became aware, along with most everyone else, when the righteous scourge began—accusing random people of literally anything and everything. Animal cruelty, familial mistreatment, gossiping, bullying—no one was free from her insane, hilariously incorrect finger of judgment.

We initially thought it was a joke obviously, so some people tried to play along when she sauntered up on a hazy chariot of Drunken Shortcake No. 9, spouting nonsense about how we cheated at four square and disrespected our elders, but Jaqueline did *not* take it well. Almost immediately, she went from a generally well-liked, slightly vapid, charmingly pungent 11-year-old to a conspiracy theorist proselytizing a religion no one but her understood. It wasn't constant, but after a while, she had something to say, every day, about every one of her peers, though no one really paid her mind. Those more sensitive objected of course, and through the tip of a noble tattletale or two, Jaqueline was called to the principal's office more than once, an injustice she always bore with ostentatious dignity. More than anything else, the memory of her marching out of Mr. Bouse's classroom with those mincing, slightly swayed steps followed by a cloudy procession of antiseptic strawberries, stays with me forever, seared into the pinkly flesh of my pulsing brain, mostly because she stepped on my foot on the way out.

However, because very little actually happened outside the occasional “vision”, nothing in the way of punishment came from her occasional visit to Principal Kenning and we, the students, quickly learned to live and let live. Even so, when the “visions” started, there were sporadic mutterings about what was going on, wondering how and why she was keeping this up so long, a worm digging into our collective psyche. Repetition is a powerful thing my mom says, and God knows Jaqueline had the chops, but it was all so goofy no one really acted on the slight paranoia blooming along the edges of our intellects. All told, it was pretty funny for a week or two, and then she accused Carl Ghulam. I don’t think it would have ever worked without Carl Ghulam.

That fateful day, Carl and a few other track and field boys were loudly playing tetherball when she strode up, attended dutifully by a thick trail of noxious potpourri, casting their game into a barely visible haze. At the time, I was losing rather badly to Alvin in a game of handball and as such welcomed any pride-maintaining distraction, so when we heard from across the blacktop Jacqueline Miller positively *scream* that Christopher Brzezinski had cheated on a spelling test, I was first in line for the show.

“What?” he said, laughing slightly, catching the ball with a solid *thump*. “What spelling test?”

We were all giggling now, spectator and heretic alike, because how could you *not*? There she was, mousy-brown hair flung over her shoulder, Silly Bandz shining dully in the October sunlight, positively *cocooned* in clouds of alcoholic whimsy, accusing one of the most popular boys in school of cheating on a *spelling test* of all things. But Jaqueline, to her credit, paid no mind to the small crowd she had unintentionally gathered and instead turned her scalding attention to the chuckling Carl Ghulam.

“And you!” she declared, calling him like God to Saul (Alvin says it wasn’t actually that impressive but he’s like nine so whatever), “You lied! You are a dirty rotten *liar!* How dare you! How *dare* you! You never went t—” and that’s when Carl broke down crying.

In a second the whole world ended, and at the center of the rubble was Carl, sobbing, like *gut* sobbing on the ground, snot running down his face, and all of us too stunned or slow to realize what was happening. No one moved to comfort, or get a teacher, or even glance disbelievingly at one another because what the *hell* was going on? Carl was a cool kid, a track guy, and also eleven, so why was he embarrassing himself like this when he should have been joining in like the physically active, mischievous kid he was? We never would get an answer, because that’s when Jaqueline stepped closer, kneeled down, and hugged, *hugged*, Carl, *then* started saying a bunch of stuff about how he could be forgiven if he opened his heart and told the truth and that her visions had guided *her* to the truth and if he let “it” in he’d find peace and a bunch of other stuff I can’t remember because then *Carl* started going off about how he was the one who accidentally killed the class hamster and covered it up by saying the janitor, a recovering alcoholic prone to occasional lapses in memory, had left a window open and a hawk got to poor Hammy.

It was surreal certainly, but only got worse when Jaqueline, the only one taking advantage of the end of the world to build it anew in her own image, said “I know” and the whole crowd, which had grown so much that teachers were jogging over to see if someone had lost a chunk of hair again, gasped aloud, including me. Now, I didn’t believe her obviously, it was just a coincidence that our resident It-Guy was concealing a dark secret, but at that moment every word was worth its weight in gold so when Carl said, “Oh my God!” in a modern, *Friends* kind of way, probably because he was slowly regaining his senses and finding himself in an enormously

awkward situation *while still hugging Jaqueline*, it didn't seem like a coincidence, it seemed like a calling. A prophecy.

Whatever our inexplicable religious feelings on the matter, Carl Ghulam shook himself from Jacqueline's embrace and slunk into the background, profoundly self-conscious.

Now, I've never been overly concerned with God, I figure He's doing fine, but Mom, Alvin and I go to the Free Methodist in town and it's alright. I've been to Sunday school and whatever, but in the spirit of honesty the only time I've *really* thought about God is when I think about my mom and her now-dead mother, my grandma, who hated each other. Grandma was a devout participant of the Lord's work via the Free Methodist and I think my mom hates that she somehow fell to loving the same God her mom did. If mom had it her way, she'd do everything in her power to defy the woman who birthed her, but at the moment, she just vents her frustrations by singing the loudest during service.

The point I'm trying to make is that it isn't *crazy* to think someone might lightly trip towards the idea that all this "your classmate speaks the truth" nonsense proved "true" even if it *was* based on knee-jerk assumptions concerning accidental language from a guy we'd been prone to gravitate towards. When you know there's someone called God and He works in mysterious ways and you weren't *really* paying attention during Sunday school, certain ideas just seem more plausible is all, but then again, that's just me. I don't know what to say about the others.

Either way, the next few days rumors spread like wildfire with at *least* every kid in the 6th grade speculating wildly about whether or not any of it was true until, you guessed it, Jaqueline was Jesus reincarnate. Her name started with a "J", what were we supposed to do? I didn't actively add grist to the rumor-mill, but even saying nothing somehow contributed to the polarizing problem because then people simply decided what you were thinking, no input needed. There were

some kids who thought she was pulling our proverbial chain, lying to get attention as she was liable to do, but the vast majority thought, at the very least, *Jacqueline* thought it was true and started calling the nay-sayers “Philadelphia’s” (Philistines). Eventually, the whole issue got hairy enough that teachers got involved and parents too in a very eye-pinching sort of way, but never really stuck their noses in our business until it was too late. Mom seemed disappointed in herself after the fact, ashamed. At Cash’s insistence, we picked her wild flowers.

Jaqueline, meanwhile, spurred on by her new celebrity status, bought a whole pack of Christianity-themed Silly Bandz which she very proudly showed off, wobbling a bit on her feet as she did so, almost as if she was overcome with the power of the Savior. I didn’t mind the pomp, but Alvin rolled his eyes so much he might have been having a vision of his own. Regardless, the next day is when we truly basked in the full force of God’s might.

It was recess, Alvin was trying to teach me Magic, and per usual, Jaqueline was wandering about with her pack of friends, looking slightly drawn, shouting stuff about who did what and how she (Jesus’ chosen mouthpiece) could save the world if we would only but listen. Per usual, Carl Ghulam was avoiding her. This time however, though we did not gather at her feet, we also did not giggle.

“Jackie!”

Suddenly, a shriek ripped through the air. One of Jaqueline’s friends, Katie Something (actual name), had sharply ended the slow parade, and people were already beginning to gather. I ran to the scene, unwilling to miss a second of her new sermon (which were always so much more exciting than the ones at church), but only saw Jaqueline Miller collapsed on the ground, looking pale and shiny, thin chest heaving.

I remember wondering if her perfume had finally achieved its intended use as an asphyxiant, but only secondarily. I mostly remember thinking, in the six seconds it took for Carl Ghulam to rush over, that maybe I was wrong, that maybe it was scary seeing your classmate lying on the ground, looking so strangely like an 11-year-old, Hello Kitty patterned chest delicately swelling and deflating, that maybe I was grateful for the small hand of my little brother wrapping around my own. For a long, long six seconds, it seemed the only thing making sense was the Sun shining warm on my back, its rays mixing with Jaqueline's perfume to create a strange, saccharine smog, and the slightly sweaty hand of Alvin tucked protectively in my own, a hand I knew would soon lead me away from this strange, awful thing. For six seconds I believed her, I believed it all, and it was awful, worse than anything I've ever known. But then Carl showed up, elbowing past the crowd until he was at Jaqueline's side, brandishing a pair of bright blue safety scissors, and in one, two, three, four quick motions, cut right through the Silly Bandz that had been slowly cutting off blood flow to Jaqueline Miller's brain for the past three weeks.

She had anemia apparently. After a brief, evaluative hospital stint she came back to school, looking slightly abashed, a little pale, and a whole lot less vocal. The school issued a pointed rule about taking off certain novelty bracelets at least once per day, especially when preexisting medical conditions existed (and also that medical conditions needed to be properly checked every year), the adults supposedly in charge of making sure kids didn't start cults in the courtyard rubbed their temples and wondered what could have possibly gone so wrong in less than a month, and we, the students, were left to wait for hindsight to make any sense of the situation. Alvin only let loose a deep breath and shook his head, even now tells his friends not to gossip. No one ever seemed to truly understand what had just come to pass, but Carl Ghulam seemed to know, not that I'd ever ask.