

BILL

By Gus Dick Andros

When my roommate Bill was in the hospital, it was a far cry from the hospitals of today. Now the rooms and hallways are painted white, with overhead fluorescent lights and paintings on the wall. The effect is antiseptic, and I feel like I'm the biggest germ in the place. But then, I was sitting vigil in the hallway at St. Anthony Hospital with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Callahan. The atmosphere had a built-in depression: the hallways were dark wood paneling about half way up, and above that the walls were painted off-white and bare. The lights were dim, making it feel like a dungeon. I felt as if the hospital was preparing me for the worst.

We sat in silence, each in their own thoughts. Finally the nurse came out of Bill's room and said, "You'd better come in. He is going." We scurried into his room, positioning ourselves around his bed, Mr. Callahan on one side and Bill's mother on the other. I stood at the foot of the bed. We just stood there watching Bill trying to breath. I could tell that he was unaware that we were there.

When I was eight years old I stood at the foot of the bed of my grandfather when he died, and here I was exactly in the same place ten years later, waiting for Bill's last breath as I did for my grandfather's.

As I stood there I thought back on our relationship and how important Bill was to me during my teenage years.

When I entered high school I was a fat, unattractive boy, and for my survival, I had developed a fast wit and a sparkling personality. Even with that I could have easily gotten lost in this large school had not the athletic abilities of my older brothers made the name Andros mean something. I was accepted into many organizations because of my brothers' popularity.

I was aware of all the popular boys in school, most of them athletes, and I envied many of them. Bill Callahan, an upperclassman, was a non-athlete who was a top man at Central. I remember him as the most handsome boy in school. I was jealous of him because he was everything I wanted to be. I was just 15 and saw Bill as a movie actor. He had a full head of dark brown hair that looked like ocean waves, his features were well defined, and the style of his clothes always said money to me. Our paths only crossed in the hallway. He never spoke to me nor did I to him.

One day in the assembly the principal made an announcement that Bill Callahan was in the hospital and needed blood. We were asked to get our parents' permission to donate blood. The thought of doing so didn't enter my head, and I never gave it much thought after that. The name Bill Callahan didn't come up in my circle of friends; Bill's

social stratum was above ours.

By the end of my first year in high school, I became very aware of my physical unattractiveness, so while I was working in our restaurant during the summer, I went on a severe diet of 800 calories a day. I lost a third of my body weight in two months and discovered that I had a face and a body that was quite handsome. The change was so drastic that my own brother, Plato, didn't recognize me when he was home on leave from the service.

The beginning of my second year in high school was totally different. I still had my wit and personality plus a beautiful body. Now I was popular on my own. I didn't need my brothers' reputations to be noticed.

My bother Dee and I were to co-host the first meeting of the semester for the Red Shirts, the largest pep club in school. Mother had prepared a meal for an army and had gone to work. While I was dressing, the telephone rang.

"Hello, this is Bill Callahan." the voice said, and before he could continue, I blurted:

"I thought you had died."

"No, no, just almost. Is this Dee?" he was laughing

"I'm sorry, it's just that I hadn't heard about you since you went into the hospital. No! This is Gus, his brother." I wasn't even sure he knew who I was.

"Hi, Gus, I called to find out where you lived, so I could come to the meeting tonight." I told him and he said, "That's great, I live nearby; I'll see you there" and hung up.

I stood there for a minute, I couldn't believe that I had just talked to Bill Callahan on our phone, and he had called us. I had always thought of Bill Callahan as something special and never thought that our lives would cross.

When he arrived at the meeting, I met him at the door and introduced myself. Bill had lost a lot of weight and his beautiful hair, although still curly, was very thin. He was still good looking because of his fine features, but he was no longer a young Robert Taylor.

After the meeting, Bill stayed behind to help Dee and I get the house back in order so mother wouldn't have a heart attack when she saw the mess that seventy boys could make. This was not the Bill that I saw at school. I never knew how thoughtful and caring he was. I always saw him surrounded by the elite.

I was too excited to call it a night. I received many compliments on my new

appearance, and Bill was my greatest admirer, repeatedly telling me how I had changed. Before that night no one had ever said a nice thing about my appearance. I shared my feelings with Bill as we cleaned the house. When I asked about his illness he was reluctant to talk about it, and I never brought it up again.

I walked Bill home and told him what I had thought of him. "If you only knew," he laughed and I was soon to learn that laughter was the weapon he used to cover his feelings. "Why are you so embarrassed that everyone thinks you look so good?"

"Bill, I've always lived under the shadows of my brothers and at home I was never noticed unless I created a scene."

"I watched you tonight and you certainly held your own with all those guys."

"I have been fighting with Plato, my older brother, all my life, so the members didn't disturb me a bit."

"Gosh! I wish I had your guts to talk back at the meeting tonight, like you did. I might agree with you, but I couldn't have said anything."

"Do you think that any of the members noticed?"

"They would have to be blind, deaf, and we know they're dumb." Now we both were laughing. As we walked in silence for a while I knew I had found a best friend.

Because of his illness Bill lost a year of school, and we found ourselves in the same class. His social life changed and many of his old friends, over time, found new interests. My new image was helping me become more popular, and Bill found that he was riding on my coattails. Bill and I couldn't have been more different: I was always bucking the system, and Bill was always trying to keep me in my place.

I spent more time at Bill's house than at my own. Mrs. Callahan told everyone it was like having a second son, and my mother told me sarcastically to move my bed to the Callahan's.

Everybody needs someone with whom they feel comfortable and with whom they can share secrets and know they are safe. From the very first walk home with Bill, I felt I could trust him.

I wasn't much of a board game player, but through his influence I became an expert at Monopoly. His interest in politics introduced me to a new world outside of school. We both met many other people, and we brought them into our world without losing our relationship. We even formed a small group called "OA's" for "old acquaintances."

At the end of my second year Bill wrote in my yearbook and, to this day, when I

feel depressed I read it.

Dear Gus Jr.

I hate to write anything in here because there are so many nosy people who will read it but here goes. I think you are one of the grandest fellows in the world, Gus. I value your friendship above 10 others because real friends are the ones you can confide in and they won't tell or talk behind your back. Although we have known each other about 7 months you will leave a more vivid impression on my life than any other person. Gus, I admire you for all your many qualities and mainly your truthfulness, because you are not diplomatic and say what you think and mean it. Our friendship has been very profitable to me because you have helped me a lot. Gus you have brought me a lot of amusement and I have enjoyed all the times we have been together.

Lots of Luck
Bill Callahan

By my senior year, Plato and Dee had gone into the armed services, leaving me home with mother, whom I saw less and less.

There wasn't a teenager alive at that time who didn't think about going to war, but when Bill was 4-F, I never questioned it because I knew it had something to do with his earlier illness.

Bill was elected president of the senior class and I vice-president. I was cheerleader, president of the debating society and the art club, and vice-president of the student council. Bill and I had our fingers in every pie at school. Because I had a car I chauffeured Bill to every meeting. We spent more time together than ever.

My first physical proved me to be 4-F (they said because I had bad feet) allowing me a chance to finish high school. After graduation, I got a job with the Douglas Aircraft Company where I helped build C-47s. The company wouldn't promote me even though I was qualified, so I left in time to start college.

Bill and I were roommates in a freshmen's dorm for our first semester. The first night he thought that we should be able to lock our door, so he tried a key in the lock. He was successful in locking it, but we couldn't unlock it. He hammered on the door until someone came to our aid. They got the headmaster, who had to have the door removed. We didn't start off too well with the headmaster. Bill panicked, but I was in my bed laughing into a pillow.

That first night I also learned that my dear friend Bill snored loud and long. I got used to it, otherwise I would never have gotten to sleep. I became adept at sneaking out after hours, but Bill wouldn't try.

There was a guy living across the hall that was full of mischief and more like me. I thought that we might become roommates, but when I made the suggestion to Bill his face showed such pain that I never mentioned it again.

We finally got our mothers to sign a release so we could live off campus. We got a room in a boarding house and we were much happier. Bill was majoring in architecture and I in art. We had a ball in school. In the house there were guys from all walks of life. During the war the fraternities had closed so there was really no class system, and we got along swell.

Right after Thanksgiving Bill became moody and spiritless, neither one of us thought much about it. We were both working hard to maintain our grades, so if he was tired, I could understand it. I was also tired but I was used to this kind of life. I went on my merry way: dating, getting involved in school activities, I even worked as a model for the art classes.

One night when I left the room, Bill was at his desk doing his work but when I returned Bill was having a nosebleed. We tried everything to stop it.

"Put your head down between your legs," I suggested

"If I get it any further down I'll be standing on it."

"Stick your head under the faucet and let the cold water run on your neck."

After about five minutes he gargled, "You're trying to drown me."

Nothing we tried brought results so I said, "I think we better get you to the infirmary." I stayed until they stopped the bleeding and then they sent me home, telling me that everything would be fine. However, they kept Bill.

The next day the university had his parents come and get him, and he went immediately into St. Anthony Hospital. I really thought they just wanted to take tests.

That weekend I visited him, and he looked great. Bill was my best audience and making him laugh was easy. I told him all the news at school, including a funny story about a pre-med student who hid a dead shark under the bathtub. The cleaning lady, who had given us all a rough time, ran screaming from the house swearing never to return. Bill was laughing so hard that he doubled over in bed. I had to give him water so he wouldn't choke. When I left the hospital I thought that by the next week he would be back at school.

At the university I was working very hard preparing for midterms. Many nights I didn't go to bed at all. I went straight to class after studying all night. That weekend I went home and to bed without calling a soul. The next morning my mother woke me and told me that my friend Martha wanted to talk to me. With my eyes barely open I made my way to the phone. I was pissed that I couldn't sleep on my day off.

"Do you know if Bill is dead yet?" were her first words.

"What do you mean? I saw him last week and he was fine."

"He wasn't to live the night," I heard her say, although it was as if I were sleeping and she had interrupted my dream. The tenor of her voice told me, though, that this was no dream.

"I'll talk to you later!" I said as I hung up the phone and called the hospital. Bill was still alive but his condition had not improved. I dressed and was out of the house in minutes. When I got to his room I met Mrs. Callahan. She fell into my arms trying to tell me something, but I couldn't understand her.

Bill's mother asked the nurse to let me go in. At first the nurse refused, but Mrs. Callahan told her I was his brother. When I entered, Bill was in a coma and was light green. I took his hand and held it, he didn't move. I squeezed his hand harder, hoping to get a response, but there was none. I felt so helpless that I started talking to him. "Bill, it's Gus, please say something." He turned his head, but I wasn't sure if he was awake; his eyes didn't open. "I'm here now, and everything is going to be all right." Nothing. "Bill, please look at me." I got no recognition. "Your mother and father are outside and we love you." I could not swear to it but I think his eyes fluttered. I bent down and put my cheek next to his. I repeated, "You're going to be okay." I really believed that; Bill just wasn't going to die. I was staring at the body in front of me and trying to see it as Bill, when I felt two hands on my shoulder. They were Bill's fathers.

"There is nothing we can do but pray." I turned to him throwing my arm around his broad shoulders. I felt I was slipping away. My knees wouldn't hold me up. He led me out of the room, and Mrs. Callahan hugged me. I think they had given up, but I wasn't going to let this happen.

The three of us sat on a bench in this dimly lit hall watching nurses and doctors make their rounds. You could hear moaning coming from other rooms and see people crying as they left the rooms of loved ones. We sat there all that night, and by the next morning, he was still with us. I told the Callahans I wanted go to the Christian Science Church.

When I entered the church, I met Helen Emerson and her father. Bill and I both had dated Helen and she was a member of the "OA's." They asked about Bill and I told them that prayer was the last hope. Helen and her father helped me pray.

Mr. Emerson drove me back to the hospital; Mr. and Mrs. Callahan were still sitting on the bench. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when the nurse came out of Bill's room and told us to come in.

Standing there lost in my memories, I knew that I would never hear Bill's laugh again, never have anyone to confide in, or to keep me in check, or keep me awake with his snoring.

Even in a coma the body fights death. I knew Bill felt no pain; the three of us was feeling the pain. Bill was turning his head from one side to the other, trying to get his breath. I gripped the bed board to steady myself when Bill, gagging on his last breathe, said, "Gus."