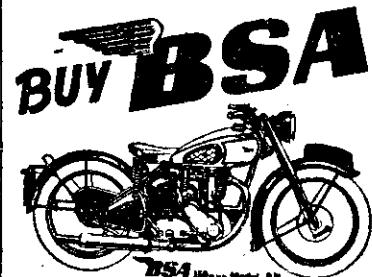


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**SHORT STORY**

# THE MUDDY CHANNEL

**J**UST believe in the power of the Lord, said Mrs. Fowler, and the rest shall be added unto you. She placed her hands lightly on the sick girl's brow. Relax. Be at peace. The Lord is with you and knows your need. She departed with that encouraging smile, which, to those who were somehow not under her spell, looked uncannily like a smirk.

The girl lay quietly under the smoothed quilt, her thin, delicately boned hands idle by her sides. She lay a great deal like this, sometimes without moving for an hour. For a child of 12 her expressionless face was pitifully aged. She had been bedridden for three years, and she did not believe she would ever walk again. She wished the chattering woman who spoke about God would stay away. She wanted to be alone with her own vision of God that sometimes, if she were very quiet and waited very patiently, came near with a trembling radiance. Out of a shining mist a man with a beautiful, tender face would lean down to her.

Jesus! she would cry.

Run, Gertrude, run! he would say. And she would bound into his outstretched arms. They often played for hours at all sorts of games she herself invented. It was always sunny in the fields where they met, lambs bounded and daisies shone, and Jesus' gown was never dirty, no matter how boisterously he and Gertrude ran and played. Other children stood round watching, or sometimes played too. The whole scene was very like the big picture on the Sunday school wall that Gertrude had, often gazed at when she was nine, before she

Written for "The Listener"  
by BARBARA DENT

Yes, mother.

But next week when Mrs. Fowler went to sort out some of Sylvia's books she found that all the best titles had mysteriously vanished.

Sylvia, she said, what have you done with your books?

What books, mother? asked Sylvia innocently.



"A glimmer of interest showed in Gertrude's face"

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became ill. Under the picture was written, Jesus said, Suffer the little children to come unto me. In Gertrude's mind the word suffer indubitably spoke a direct summons to her. For did she not suffer?

So she really didn't want to listen to Mrs. Fowler. She had her own Jesus—she didn't intend to let any God that Mrs. Fowler brought with her displace him. In fact, she didn't like Mrs. Fowler. Mrs. Fowler asserted that she would walk again before very long, but Gertrude knew she was lying. There had been too many doctors and people. She regarded them all with an unchildlike cynicism. She just wanted to be left alone with her playmate, Jesus.

At home Mrs. Fowler told them all about it at the dinner table. Her own daughter, Sylvia, was 13.

And just think, Sylvia dear, said Mrs. Fowler, poor little Gertrude hasn't walked for three years. Just imagine that! Not to be able to ski or run or play basketball, or do any of the things you take for granted—wouldn't that be terrible?

Yes, mother.

And don't you wish you could do something for her?

Yes, mother.

Well, shall I take her some of your books? Or perhaps you'd bring them yourself next week when I go and see her again.

All the books that aren't in your book case. You must have put them somewhere. Where are they, dear?

Oh, no—I haven't shifted them, mother, said Sylvia, shaking her dark plaits round her small, oval face.

Mrs. Fowler knew her daughter was lying. Sylvia knew her mother knew she was lying. She also knew her mother was helplessly wondering what to do. Sylvia had never been smacked. Her mother never lost patience with her. Mrs. Fowler believed in ruling through Love. God wouldn't like you to do that, Sylvia dear, she would say, or, Mummy's so disappointed—I'm sure God is too.

Mummy, God, and disapproval were inseparably linked in Sylvia's mind. She didn't like either God or mummy much, and, added to that, she despised them both. It was so ridiculously easy to get your own way. You just stood there and smiled blandly and blinked, and tossed your plaits reproachfully, and lied. If she was found out in one lie, Sylvia immediately capped it with another. If her mother discovered her books neatly laid under her mattress, well, she had only to smile blandly again and say, Fancy that, mother—I can't think how they got there.

What was Mrs. Fowler to do? Indeed, if she had been a little less certain of her undoubted favour in the eyes of the Lord, and the consequent inclusion among the chosen ones of her husband and Sylvia, she would have despaired at

NEW ZEALAND LISTENER, MAY 9