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The Dark Hole
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Arriving at Throughsome

I will endeavor to write somewhat of the things that are in my heart about my adventure when the Great War came to our land. I've seen both light and darkness because of that war--a light that makes everything else seem like a dream, and a darkness that takes away all hope--a hope that I had been drained of. When the light came, there was a hole in me that was so deep, the filling of it overwhelmed me, and I became a simple shepherd.

I lived in a hole in the ground in the days before the Great War. I don't mean dirt like a rabbit hole. There was a pipe stuck in the ground on the crest of a hill. You entered it by a portal, a round metal door with a hand wheel on its center which controlled the spokes that locked the portal into the rim of the pipe. I had seen such on tops of submarines. Where I lived was like a submarine inside as though a giant submarine had been stuck into the earth and covered up with a hill. There were dozens of apartments under the hill where people lived separated by these pipes. The vertical pipes led to the outside. The horizontal ones led to the apartments. My apartment was spherical in shape like a bathysphere. It was only big enough for one or two persons to fit in--and a cat named Meow.

There was a port hole where I could look out and see the brown

wooden towers across the way. I could do that because the hill I was in was high and steep there. To the left of that was my bunk with a built-in chest of drawers underneath. Because of the rounding of the floor, I had a ladder to get up to my bunk. There was another ladder to the right of the port hole that led to the portal that opened up to a long and dark escape tube. Opposite the bunk were a sink and a stove.

Whenever I was in my room, I would stare out of that port hole on account of my closet-a-phobia. It took all the courage I could muster to descend down into that dark hole. I lived under a constant fear of being crushed or some fat visitor coming and getting stuck in the portal. I had enough air and light from the port hole. That was one of the reasons I could descend, because the light came in from the port hole and out the portal up the pipe. Whenever it turned dark, I just slept with Meow curled up next to me on the bunk. I didn't wake up until it was light. In the darkness of winter, I was never there except to sleep.

There was running water and gas for the stove in those days before the Great War. It must have been local because as the war approached, there was always water and gas. Whether it got turned off or not because of the war, I don't know. I didn't stay around when the war did finally come.

I didn't ever know where my parents had come from or had moved to. I lived on a farm for the first eight years of my life. They must have just dropped me off there. I was always treated as one of the farm hands. That's how I figured Ann and Elvin weren't my parents. They fed me and gave me a bed and told me I had to work for my bread just like everybody else. I don't have any recollection of my parents at all.

I was lucky to get my apartment, so I shouldn't complain. Allen and Fred were two guys that worked for Ann and Elvin. When hard times came just before the war, Allen and Fred took me on a train leaving Ann and Elvin behind. I was eight years old and had never

been on a train before. It was huge and black and steaming hot. I had imagined it to be a fire breathing dragon as I saw steam coming from every vent, and its call was like the shrieking of a hawk diving for its food. I kept my face to the window during the whole ride except to eat some biscuits Ann and Elvin had given us. It was in the spring and I saw plenty of shiny shorn sheep grazing in the fields. I noticed that the few horses and cattle I saw were drawn and skinny. I looked at the land. It had that over-grazed look. There was more dirt than grass, and the grass was brown and dried up. I saw a lot of desert shrubs and cactus. The green fields I remembered of Ann and Elvin's farm had only been a dream.

Allen and Fred knew a friend in the city. They had traveled there before. That's where they had come from. They were sure we could room with him or one of his friends until we could find a place of our own. His name was Charles they had said.

When we got to the town (it was no big city as I had thought), it was one shanty built on top of another until it looked like towers sticking up out of the rubble. They were reddish brown in color and were catacombed with tunnels and stairways and ladders. They didn't have room for me, but Charlie knew someone under the hill, he said. They might have room over there. Truth was, he didn't want any kid around when the girls came over. He let me stay the night, but I didn't get much sleep with the girls and drinking and carrying on and the band playing so loud. The girls complained when they saw a child at their party. It turned out that I stayed there several days. There was a party every night.

When the arrangements were made, I was introduced to the Underhill people, and I thought it quite odd to build your home out of tubes and pipes. It was there that I met Gretchen. It was her family that said I could live in the hole. Nobody else wanted it.

I went down and down on a metal ladder with round rungs. I saw entrances to other apartments as I went down as well as tunnels

to nowhere (no place that I could see, anyway). I went down and down until I thought I would suffocate. Then I saw a little hole with light coming from it. I said to myself that must be it. I felt a little breeze flowing up through the hole. That was reassuring. I went down into a round metal bulge. I was surprised to see a bright light coming through an open port hole. After my eyes adjusted, I could see the brown wooden towers across the way through the port hole. I was so surprised that I didn't notice at first a small kitten on the floor meowing. The port hole was at ground zero. I could reach out and touch the grass growing on the hill side. I guessed the kitten had fallen through there.

Gretchen's mother was yelling down hole, "You come up and dinner with us! Couple of hours. Follow yer nose."

It was a noise that bounced around the metal bulkheads and in one ear and out the other. I did not answer. There were a lot of littler noises bouncing around. Only one was familiar. It went "meow, meow." I looked at the bunk and the sink, but I didn't see its source until it started climbing up my pants.

"Meow!" I exclaimed. It looked just like the cat I had loved at Ann and Elvin's, the one that got run over. It had been such a good mouser. It was black with white spots or white with black spots. I never could tell. And, it didn't have a tail. This little kitten didn't have a tail either. It was a Manx. My other one was a good jumper. It would jump from the floor right onto my shoulder and perch there. I wondered if this little one would turn out that way. I thought that it might be the same cat, just reincarnated.

I took the little creature up into my arms and stroked its furry coat. As it cried "meow, meow" without stopping, I knew it was hungry. I knew there was a biscuit in my coat pocket from the train trip. I reached in, pulled it out and let the kitten sniff it. I then took a bite and chewed it until it was soft and spit it into the sink. I put little Meow in there and it gobbled it up. I took another bite and chewed it

and spit it in the sink. I kept doing that until the kitten became disinterested. I ate the last bite myself. Meow tried to climb out, meowing. I caught him and held him in my arms. He was purring. I had done the right thing.

I put Meow on the bunk and crawled up after it, not using the ladder. There was an old olive green army blanket on the bunk. We both curled up into its folds and went to sleep.

I was awakened by a little girl's voice calling me to dinner. I opened my eyes to see hers peering up at me from the edge of the bunk.

"You forgot, didn't ya," she laughed. "You'll go hungry around here, Dear, if you forget!"

She left and I left Meow and started up that fearful passage after her. I looked up and saw legs and a bottom swaying back and forth underneath a short skirt disappearing through a side tunnel.

It was true what Gretchen's mother had said. I could follow my nose to the food. The smell of fried chicken wafted down the hole to my nostrils. That helped me forget some the tightness I felt around me. I found the tunnel that Gretchen had turned into. She was waiting at the other end of it. She looked at me and went through the door.

Gretchen was a head shorter than me. She seemed to be my age, but she talked like a grown-up. The tunnel was just her size. She could run through it without bonking her head. Not me, I had to duck. I imagined that her parents were the shape of apes, walking with their knuckles pressed against the floor.

The door opened into a large room that proved to be a kitchen. There was a long wooden table surrounded by about twelve men. The white enameled stove and ovens and sink were situated opposite the table. There seemed to be a pantry door opened next to the entrance to another tunnel on the far end.

I was over- powered by the aroma of fried chicken, black pepper

gravy and biscuits.

"Come on in!" cried Gretchen's mother.

Gretchen caught me by the arm and took me to the far end of the table to an empty chair. There was a plate already filled with a leg and thigh, rice and gravy, green beans and two high rising biscuits waiting for me. It was still hot. As I sat in my high backed wooden chair, I noticed a glass of buttermilk sitting in front of me. They must have known I grew up on a farm. I loved buttermilk!

Gretchen was sitting across from me. She ate staring at me. Whenever I looked at her, she smiled, and I blushed.

Gretchen's mother was round and buxom and was always talking loud and laughing. She wanted me to eat a second helping of everything and told me I would die of starvation when I refused. Her husband had a big red nose and red cheeks with slick black hair on his round balding head. I learned from listening to conversation that he died his hair and that he was red from working near the blast furnaces at the factory, and everyone called him Cherry or Derry. I couldn't tell because of their accent. I wound up calling him Cherry or Father Cherry.

The thinner man sitting beside Cherry was Gretchen's older brother. His hair was black and pushed back. He had a thin black mustache. He was always jerking his head and pulling at or scratching the back of his neck. His name was Dan, and I was told by Gretchen that he was sent back from the war to work in the factory. He was always joking and laughing with the others, but I could tell there was a scare in his mind. There was a faraway look in his eyes as though he wasn't all there. Even though, he could keep up a conversation.

By the time I finished eating, there were only a couple of men sitting at the table drinking their coffee and talking about the war. The older one addressed Gretchen's mother as Mrs. Skirmitz. While she was clearing the table, she said to me, "You've already met my little Gretchen, I see." That's how I learned Gretchen's name.

When Gretchen saw me take my last bite, she got down and raced around the table, grabbed my arm, pulled me off the chair, and we were off exploring the Underhill. I could hear the echoing voice of Mrs. Skirmitz calling, "You children don't be late!"

We went from tunnel to tunnel seeing all the gas lines and water lines overhead and underfoot and all the bedrooms and kitchens of other families and saying "Hi" to everyone. There was never what you might call a parlor, for the kitchens were where everyone met for conversation. If people weren't working at the factory, said Gretchen, they were eating or sleeping.

She had to show me her bedroom. It wasn't spherical like mine. It was a little cubicle with no windows or port holes. It had a wooden closet with a full length mirror on the door. She had to take off her skirt and show me all the different skirts she had and prance in front of the mirror. I sat on her bed while all this took place. It was a lot thicker and softer than mine, but she was a girl anyway and should have soft things. I wasn't jealous because I wasn't used to luxury. She wound up wearing a short fluted red skirt.

I can remember that pug nose of hers still turned up left over from babyhood and her smile showing her two big front teeth. She smiled to one side and had dimples. She had thick kinky blonde hair, so I thought she might be interracial, but I couldn't believe that. Her skin was as white as her mother's baking flour. Of course, I read somewhere that the Celtic peoples had course hair. Maybe she had Celtic blood in her.

After the beauty parade, we took more tunnels and wound up to my surprise under the street next to the tall wooden towers. They were right on top of us as we peered out the manhole with its missing cover.

Now a thing happened that was completely unexpected. It never even arrived near the borders of consciousness. It was that Gretchen, as we descended the ladder, fell from the ladder screaming, falling

right on top of me. It nearly threw me off the ladder, but I held on, wrenching my left shoulder, grabbing her with my left arm, grabbing her soft bottom with my hand. She planted a big kiss right on my mouth, squeezing me tightly with her arms and legs. I wanted to yell out "Ugh!" but I was polite and didn't. I just carried her down, setting her on her feet softly.

Something grabbed hold of me. I thought I was going insane, for I began laughing and running back in the direction we came from, laughing my fool head off. She must have followed me, for we both wound up at her place. I looked at her again and ran down to my place still laughing. I didn't understand what had come over me. I climbed onto my bunk and giggled myself to sleep.

The next time I saw her, she seemed shy, like she changed personalities. She was on the opposite side of the table not looking at me. I gave her a good morning, but she only looked up at me with moon shaped crescents, dreamy like, and then back to her plate. I was completely perplexed--very bewildered.

I ate biscuits and gravy and drank buttermilk in silence. Sausage was put onto my plate and I ate that two in silence.

Gretchen got through with her breakfast and left the table. She walked over towards the door to the bedrooms and stopped. She stood there and pouted.

Mrs. Skirmitz asked, "What did you two do last night? She's got her feelings hurt pretty bad."

"I dunno," I said, and shrugged my shoulders.

As I got off my chair to leave, the giggles came back, and I couldn't stop them. I felt quite light-headed and giddy. Gretchen stomped out of the room and slammed the door behind her. The wheel that locked the door down seemed to turn all by itself.

Mrs. Skirmitz started giggling also and said, "Oh, is that it?"

I looked at her and turned red and ran out.

Gretchen didn't talk to me for a couple of weeks and I was

dearly enamored of her. In the meantime, I found that I had to work for a living, but I was used to that. I had worked at Ann and Elvin's since I was out of diapers. Dan and Cherry introduced me to the factory. The day they took me, they gave me a pale with biscuit sandwiches in it. When we got up to the gate of the factory which was made out of hurricane fence, we waited in line. The guy at the gate yelled out "thirty two!" and let in thirty two men. There were growls from the men left outside the gate, and the guard at the gate growled at Dan, wanting to know what he was going to do with his pet dog, meaning me. He told him he need some help cleaning up down in the hold. He gave Dan a coin which he pinned to my chest. I noticed Dan and Cherry and the other men picking up similar coins from a board just beyond the guard house which they pinned to their own shirts.

I was pretty strong and tall for my age and knew what work was. I didn't mind the work. Putting heavy loads on my back strengthened me. My mind though, was upon a six year old girl that was disturbed. I figured it out after a couple of weeks that I had embarrassed her on that ladder underneath the street. I was so sorry, and all I could get out of her at meal times was a shy glance. Even though I was carrying metal shards and clumps and sweeping floors at the factory, all I could think of was her.

It was in the evening after dinner when I was retiring for the night when Gretchen spoke to me again. I had tried for several nights apologizing to her without any success, and here she was, following me down into my hole. She sat cross legged on the now carpeted floor with the crimson light of a Summer night shining onto her face. She sat there petting almost grown Meow. I looked down at her from my bunk being very excited about her presence in my room. I wanted to run and laugh still, but I held it inside. I only smiled. She was a light that made me forget that I was in such a deep hole with a mountain pressing down on me.

I don't remember exactly what we talked about, but I can bet it

was about that day when she fell into my arms. I remember her asking me about work at the factory and her saying, "Bo-ring, bo-ring." I have a feeling she was telling me how boring her life was. I will never forget that we wound up in my bunk in each other's arms, she apologizing to me, and me apologizing to her and falling asleep holding each other. We slept that way all night until the dawn.

We became fast pals. She became the family I never had, and she showed me a love I never had known but had always wished for.

I thought I had a family in Ann and Elvin, but they acted more like care-takers, never friends. I imagined that family members were friends, and Gretchen was my fast friend--fast by my side at all times in my early years.

I think I must have yearned for Ann and Elvin, though. I dreamed of them nearly every night. I think I must have been trying to make them the family they never were to me. I always dreamed of them taking care of me, having loving, smiling faces. Those yearnings of all those years unfolded within those dreams.

The dreams faded as Gretchen's love and friendship filled my life.

Ann and Elvin had lived in a tall three-story, red brown farmhouse. It was three times as long as it was wide and covered with large square shingles. Chimneys buttressed each end. There was a third chimney poking its belching mouth up in the middle of the steep roof waiting for a stork that never came. Like the chimneys, the roof was brick red, but made of shakes. There was a middle door stolen from some colonial style home. It had steps going up to it with a small foot porch...nothing fancy. Through it was the stairs to the master bedrooms. The stairwell that we went up was on the right end of the house. It had a door from the back of the house. When you got inside, there was another door that led into the kitchen. All the coats and boots were hung underneath the stairs. The dorms were up on the third floor. There was no second floor entrance, and the dorms only went up as far as the middle chimney. That's the one that kept us

warm. That end chimney remained a mystery unless it was attached to the stove in the kitchen.

The dormitory was open with bunk-beds on each side of the middle carpet that rolled on up to the chimney. It wasn't designed right. Instead of a hearth by the fireplace where we could sit around, there were two shower rooms on each side of it. It made the shower rooms hot in the winter, but we still had plenty of heat in the bunks.

Elvin was a mechanical genius. He made the chimney so it would heat up a couple of hot-water tanks on each side to supply the showers. This made it so that in the summer we had to take cold showers because there was no heat. There was one exception. The summer we left, it got so hot outside that even the cold water ran warm. That was when the bad times came. That was when the drought came.

The kitchen had a large black cast-iron stove/fireplace and brick oven. Somehow they were combined so the brick oven was directly in the middle of the stove. That was also Elvin's invention. As I think back on it, even the stairwell was a big hole in the chimney, but there was never any smoke in it except what breathed out of the mouths of several farm hands. It made the stairwell pretty cozy in the winter.

The long table in the kitchen resembled a picnic table, only larger with a long white table cloth covering it. That's where all the socializing took place. It was in the middle of the room against the street-side wall between the walk-in pantry and the big stove/fireplace.

The kitchen was always busy. Someone was always fixing food and baking bread, and there was always someone there to eat it. If they weren't eating, they were sitting at the big table drinking tea and talking. It always smelled of tea, tobacco and biscuits.

There were two maids for the kitchen alone, and they lived in the basement. I never saw the kitchen when they weren't working in it. I think Ann bought all the groceries. She made sure the pantry was

always full.

Behind the home was a red barn with its arched roof where some of the milking cows were kept as well as the riding horses as well as those kept for the wagon and buggy.

Across the street was the co-op with its barn and huge grain towers. I always imagined them to be a castle with knights in shining armor. There was a railway behind where all the grain and hay went out.

I remember that dark bleak day when the train came. Ann and Elvin were standing together at the kitchen door as I came in from the field. They told me to go upstairs and get all my things, handing me a carpet bag to put them in. I went up and emptied my drawer into the carpet bag and then rolled up my bedding and slung it onto my shoulder. When I came down, they gave me a bag of biscuits and told me to take them out front where Allen and Fred were waiting. They didn't say goodbye, so I thought it was just another chore they were sending my on, albeit, a long one. Spending nights out on the range with a bag of biscuit sandwiches or corn fritters was something that had become such a regular occurrence in my life. We would always be out several days at a time repairing fences or cleaning up after someone else. I thought nothing of it.

We usually went out back and hitched up Bessy and Sam to the wagon and headed out to where ever. We never met out front. I thought that was strange, but I never questioned them about it. I just went and did. That's the way it had always been since I had been about three years old. I had started by sweeping the kitchen floor and raking the barn floor and feeding the chickens. When I got older, I found that I could lift boards and limbs of trees and help clear the ground where someone had been working. I hauled everything on my back and became a regular work horse. I was later given charge over pigs and cows. I watered down the pigs and led the cows in and milked them. What I loved best was going out to watch the sheep. So when

they sent me out with Allen and Fred, I didn't think anything of it, except that I was never required to gather all my things, and when I saw the tall guys going off in the wrong direction, I had to ask.

"Where we going?" I called as I ran to catch up.

Allen said, "We catch the train this time."

That lit a light in the darkening sky. I had never been on a train before. I had never seen a regular train, only those creepers that moved the grain cars around. I would see them pulling the grain cars to town. Sometimes there would be grain cars out back of the co-op and the next day, they had mysteriously disappeared. When going to the co-op to buy vegetable or flower seed every year or sometimes to bring back live plants like tomatoes, we were never allowed out back where the train track was. We even went along the tracks on the wagon for miles and never saw a train, though I would hear their scream in the middle of the night as they passed by in the dark when I was bedded down.

Storm clouds covered the sky that night. There was lightening and thunder as there had been the previous nights, but it was a dry storm. There was never any water. Allen said that the lightening was caused by the dust being carried along. Ann and Elvin had told us the previous night not to shower because the water was low. We had to save what little we had for drinking. But that was nothing. I had gone many days without a shower. Now the thought of that was making me thirsty, so I looked at what Allen and Fred were carrying. I saw no water bag. We always carried a water bag with us.

When I tried to hand Allen my bag of biscuits, he told me to keep them, said they had their own. That was another strange thing. We never carried our own. Someone always carried the common lunch bag and the water bag and put it on the wagon. But now we were taking the train and things were different.

We went out around the left side of the co-op and went up the ramp onto the loading dock. There was a grain car their and one

hooked on behind it. They looked like two grey metal cows with two huge tits. Fred hopped onto one, clinging onto a ladder leading up to the top. Allen grabbed me by the waist and lifted me onto the ladder as Fred ascended higher up. Then Allen hopped on board. We all climbed on top and waited. I thought this was a funny way to ride a train, but there were no passenger cars where we could sit down. Allen told me to hold on to the rail that was on both sides of the top. My butt fit just between the rail and the top. I held on with both hands because I felt myself sliding down the other side. Pretty soon a crawler came and hitched itself to the grain car so hard that I almost fell over backwards, but Allen caught me.

The crawler pulled us downtown and up to another building with a dock and a ramp leading down to the rails. I was told to climb down. Allen and Fred followed.

Blackness covered the sky. Even the air was black. I couldn't see anything but the cones of light from the top edge of the building and what they shined on. It was quite blinding, so I stared out into the blackness. I heard Allen buying three tickets to Throughsome, wherever that was. I asked Allen what chore we had to do in Twosome. He said, "Nothing. And it's Throughsome, not Twosome." Fred put in his two cents and said, "We don't have a damn thing to do there!" Allen then tried to smooth things out by saying "We're going on a little vacation. We're through working for a while."

"Must be something Ann and Elvin want us to do, huh?" I blurted out.

I was ignored. Then after a long while thinking, I thought maybe we were going to do something for the rich aunt of Ann and Elvin's in that far off city where she lived. I asked, "What does Aunt Leota want with us?"

Allen turned around and raised his voice at me. "Leave it alone!"

But Fred didn't leave it alone or me. He had to run it into my face. He came down into my face at me with "You don't get it, do ya

little Buck! We ain't gonna do no work for Aunt Leota. We ain't gonna do no work for Ann and Elvin. We're capoot!. Through! We been fired!."

Allen grabbed him and pulled him away, saying, "Leave the kid alone."

Night blackness put its hand around my throat and choked me until tears streamed down my cheeks. I stood out of the light so the tall guys couldn't see it. We all just stared out into that blackness and watched the storm's white fingernail scratches against the billowing blackness. Ann and Elvin hadn't even said "Goodbye."

When the train came that night, it screeched a cry of dearth and shame. My thought was, what did I do? The screech got louder and louder as the train approached. Its single headlight aimed right for my heart. It shot straight for me, and I woke up with a gasp as I shot up from my bunk. Gretchen grabbed me and pulled me back down. That six year old held my head against her chest and caressed it, comforting me back to sleep as I held onto her for dear life.

I dreamed again of the coach we had boarded and the endless stream of land that passed by. The land was grey. The trees I saw had dark bare limbs. The sheep and cattle I saw with some horses grazing on the barren wastes were skin and bone. They looked old. I saw a lot of dead cattle lying on their side with their legs sticking straight out.

My mouth and throat were dry. Allen said that the clouds were nothing but dust being blown up from the dry ground, sure sign of a drought. Fred called it a dearth. Allen said he didn't know how to talk. That disagreement led to hitting each other with their fists on their upper arms.

Late at night, my tongue began to swell. I was in a daze. I heard Allen talk to a man, and then he handed me a cold wet can. It proved to be beer as I began to drink it down rather fast. Allen made me drink it slow, saying "Slow down, Buck. Take it easy." I heard Fred laughing his head off. I didn't mind the bitter taste. I was just glad to get

something to drink. Besides, it fit with the bitterness I felt inside. After finishing the beer, I handed it back to Allen and said, "Thanks." I then put my cheek against my soft bed roll and went to sleep, staring into the darkness.

I woke up with my cheek pressed against Gretchen's cheek. She was awake. We kissed naturally, without thinking about it, but then I thought about and, feeling giddy, started giggling.

"There you go again," she said mysteriously, "laughing at me," looking up out of the corners of her eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't help it." I thought a moment and continued, "I don't like girls, but you're different."

"How? Different?"

I squeezed her close. She squeezed me back.

"You're family, that's all, like a cousin, I guess."

"Is this how you treat your cousins?" she asked.

"I don't know," I answered. "Never knew any."

"Do you think I'm your cousin?" she asked. "Why did you say that?"

"I don't know. It just came to my mind," I said.

"Are we kissing cousins?" she asked.

Thereupon, we started kissing and kissing, at least, she started kissing and kissing me. She asked me if I loved her and I said yes. We wound up just holding each other and breathing into each other's mouths. We fell asleep for awhile and I woke up alone. I felt really empty without her. I felt empty all day at work. All I could think of was her. What was I? Only nine then?

There came a day when Gretchen introduced me to an uncle of hers who lived at the far end of the hill, opposite from my hole. He was white haired, had a short white beard, mostly looking like he forgot to shave for a week, wore wire-rimmed spectacles, and wore a red silk bath robe over his white shirt and black bow tie. He showed us something I had never seen before. Above his apartment was another

bathysphere, but the upper half was a bubble of glass. He said that it provided the maximum protection from the pressure under the ocean. But now that the ocean had dried up, he was using it as an apartment. Inside the glass dome was a most interesting tube he called a telescope. We could look into it and see the stars, he said. He invited us to come back after midnight, and he would show us some sights.

That night, there were no clouds, and the Milky Way spread over the black sky like a bed of diamonds, all sparkly. Whenever I was out with Allen and Fred, especially those times I had to stay up and watch the sheep, I would look at that dazzling spectacle in awe and wonder. I would never tire of it. Here in the city it wasn't so grand, but grand enough to still turn the mind to wonder and pondering the mysteries of the Universe.

After being shown the planets and moons and nebulas, having our souls filled to the brim, we settled down into a red leather couch that encircled the telescope where we could lie down and lean against the cylindrical wall. Our conversation turned to the time I arrived in Throughsome.

"And you stayed in those awful shacks?" she asked.

"I call them towers. They're reaching for the stars," I said.

"Just like the Tower of Babel they speak about in Sunday School," she reminded me. "Just as shaky, too. And the people that live in them are just like their towers, then."

"Yah, but they have fun."

"Don't you have fun, Buck?" she asked, taking hold of my hand.

"Yes. I use to have fun on the farm. Then, I was out in the open, but I have fun when I'm with you. I don't get so scared when you're around. Huh, I go zonkers when you're around."

"Mama says those girls over there are loose girls like there's something loose about them. Am I a loose girl? I'm always dropping things."

"No, Gretchen, you're not a loose girl."

"Would you rather be with one of those loose girls over there?"

We were both lying on our stomachs facing each other. I turned my head, trying to look up at the stars. I somehow felt threatened by her question. I said "No!" rather loudly.

"Tell me what it's like over there in those towers of yours," she said touching her hand to my lips. "What's it like living with those people?"

"Those people are my friends. Allen and Fred have always been my friends. They've always been at Ann and Elvin's. We've always worked together. They took care of me. We always shared our food and blankets. Allen always let me sleep with him out on the range, and even at home, up in the bunks, whenever I had bad dreams, he didn't mind me slipping under his covers and sleeping with him. We would always sing together when we worked. I don't know why he got so upset at me when we left. I guess he was just as hurt as I was.

"When we arrived, I saw this huge factory pass by that looked like a giant steam ship at sea with smoke stacks with all that black smoke coming out of them at the tops. There were also smaller stacks like torches with fire shooting out of them. I could feel the heat. It was like it was floating above the train tracks. I could see a lot of trains full of coal or steel going up and down the yard. There were men yelling and men singing, and steam whistles blowing, and I thought it was just lovely the way they were working all together.

"Then I saw those tall wooden towers, dozens of them all crowded together. They looked splendid with the red light of the morning shining on them. We passed them and came up to another loading dock. It was then that I took notice of the doors of the train. They were on the side and not on the ends as I had imagined. They opened all by themselves.

"'We got a little walk Buckaroo,' Allen called out. 'We will see if old Charlie is still around.'

"'Who's Charlie?' I asked.

"Some guy I used to know when I was a kid--used to work at Ann and Elvin's but got fired a long time ago.'

"Fred said that Charlie had sex with his mother and they both laughed. I didn't think that was funny, do you?"

"No."

"It took me a few days before I discovered what they were talking about. They didn't really mean it, it was just something they called each other."

"Oh, yeah, that thing."

"Walking all that way, my bedroll and carpet bag got really heavy. I guess I didn't really want to carry them. I was used to carrying really heavy loads. I really felt sick inside--like there was a big emptiness. Ann and Elvin sat in my stomach like rotten meat balls. Have you had rotten meat balls before?"

"No."

"It makes you want to throw up."

"Oh."

"But the further along the road we went, I felt free for some reason. I wanted to throw down my bag and bedroll and run and play. Either way, they were too heavy to carry."

"I was use to walking miles carrying a bedroll, but I had to carry that darn bag too. Anyway, we arrived at those wooden towers. I could see up close that they were patched together with wood and roofing metal--the type that goes like waves on a pond."

"Corrugated," she instructed me. "Uncle Smythe told me."

"And then I had to climb all the way up one of those towers to Charlie's place! I just threw down my bag and groaned. Allen had pity on me. He took my pants belt off and used it to attach my bag to my bedroll and said 'Climb!' and there I was, carrying that heavy load up those stairs."

"When we got to Charlie's place, I was so tired that I just plopped down in the corner on my bedroll and went to sleep. The last

thing I heard was 'What's with the kid!' but it didn't bother me. I felt like I was still moving, still on the train, still feeling that bump over the rails."

Gretchen giggled at the bump bump.

"I guess I really didn't sleep well enough on the train.

"I woke up to the smell of bar-b-que and the sound of strange music that made me want to dance. There was a band, and the place was filled with men and women dancing and eating at little tables scattered around. I later found out what a bar is. Allen brought me a plate of ribs and a bottle of beer and asked, 'You want to eat?' He put it on a table near me, and I got up and sat at the table. He put the food bottle on it and I ate and drank until I was quite full, and I belched really loud. But nobody noticed.

"Some woman wanted to give me some whiskey, but I told her I wasn't thirsty anymore and she laughed. I could see all her body parts the way she bent over. She had big red lips and wore a red dress that sparkled. She laughed all the way back across the room.

"It was like that every night. I couldn't believe they had a party every night.

And then after the dancing and the music was over, I had to sneak into my corner to get away from all the smooching and groaning. It made me afraid. I'm glad they got tired of me. I surely got tired of them. I didn't mind cleaning up the bar every day. That was easy stuff after having lived on the farm all my life.

"I was only there about a week though when I heard Charlie and Allen and Fred arguing. 'Yeah, yeah!' I heard. 'The ladies don't like him hear!' and 'He's like our little brother. We don't kick out our little brother.' and 'He'll be just across the way. That's not far. I know the guy. He's okay. Works at the factory.'

"Next morning, here I was."

"You like it here, don't you Buck?" She rose up on her elbows and knees, still holding my hands.

"I like it here with you," I said.

The Death of Gretchen

Gretchen's Uncle Smythe was a doctor. I thought she meant someone who cares for the sick, but she explained that it meant that he taught at the University. But it had been bombed out at one time, and so he now taught mathematics at the local high school.

I wondered at going to school. I had never been to school. Gretchen went to school, and she could read and write and figure. I had to work for a living, but I could draw and play a flute. (Though I had stopped, not being out in the country any more.) It was funny that I never got paid for working. I asked Daddy Cherry one time. He told me that I was Dan's charge. They didn't pay the charges. They were just there to learn. Dan was responsible for me, to feed and clothe me and give me a bed, not the company. Dan knew Charlie, and it was Dan's little hole that he built that I was living in. It was too close to the surface for most underhillers. Even though it was deep down inside the hill, it was poking out of the side of the hill, and no underhiller would think that proper planning or something. Dan said it was just too far down for him--well, it was too far down for me too, but it was my place. He stayed at home in the bedroom he grew up in. I supposed that I would always work for a living, but Gretchen had other plans. That's why she introduced me to her Uncle Smythe. He would teach me to read and write and figure. Then I could get a paying job and get my own place.

If I could read and write and figure, I thought, I could get a higher job where I could even be a foreman instead of a lowly laborer, but she had other plans. That's what girls do to guys, I found out. They have all these ambitious plans for the guys they like.

We were getting tired lying down, and I thought it about time we

left, so I sat up and she sat up and scooted over by me.

"Daddy Cherry used to be a low-life when he first started out," she said, "Mother introduced him to her brother Uncle Smythe. He taught him to read and write and figure the books, so now, he's a secretary or something. That's why he's so fat. He sits at a desk all day doing the books."

"You want me to be fat and old?" I teased.

She poked her finger into my stomach and said, "I'll never see any fat on you Buckaroo!"

We laughed. I laughed mainly because she touched me.

Gretchen's skin was soft like a baby. I loved holding her. I put my arm around her then, and she cuddled close. I was thrilled being with her. I had asked her mother one time why her skin was so soft. I would have asked my own mother the same question if I had had a mother. She told me that she hadn't lost her baby fat yet. It was just a matter-of-fact thing with her. It was a lovely thing to me.

Gretchen was funny. She was always telling me jokes she heard from her uncle. She told me of this Sufi master who heard another Sufi sitting on an island in the middle of a lake chanting. The Sufi master would walk along the beach of the lake each day to meditate, but he would be disturbed by the other Sufi chanting. It wasn't really the sound of the chanting that disturbed him. It was the way the other Sufi was chanting. One day the irritation became so great that the Sufi master got in a boat and rowed out to the island to correct the other Sufi. He found a small skinny man in a little hut chanting away. He said to him, "Excuse me, but this is the way it goes," and showed the grateful Sufi the right chant. He then got into his boat and started rowing back. When he got half way between the island and the shore, here came the Sufi, splish splash, splish splash, running across the water, huffing and puffing, to ask the Sufi master, "Now how did that chant go again?" And Gretchen would laugh her head off.

She was so sweet. She would crawl over to me and sit on my lap

laughing and hold me, spilling her tears onto my shirt. As I held her, my heart would fill up, and the clean smell of her freshly washed hair and body would fill me up a little more. I would put my nose down on her head and breathe deeply until I just overflowed. She would often tell me that I was glowing. We wouldn't talk at those times, just hold each other and feel the beat of each other's hearts.

There is no more Gretchen now. There have been times that I wet my pillow at night remembering her, holding my pillow instead of her. I dreamed of her often. After dinner, I would stick around and talk with Mrs. Skirmitz about Gretchen. She would say, "She was the strangest little baby. She was jabbering the moment she came out of the womb. She was always talking. I had to sit with her for hours while she sat on the potty, and we would talk. She trained herself, you know. She saw her mama sit on the potty, so she had to sit on the potty. She saw her mama make biscuits, so she had to make biscuits. You should'a seen her. She was all covered with flour from head to toe. She saw me puttin' on hand lotion, so she had to put on hand lotion. You should'a seen her! striped naked, standin' there on the kitchen table. She had buttered herself from head to toe. She was as slick as a greased pig, and I couldn't take hold o' her no way to pick her up and wash her off."

I would watch her wipe her tears with her apron as she talked.

She would tell me about Gretchen's insatiable curiosity.

"She was climbing twenty five foot ladders when she was one years old. She knew the tunnels by the time she was three. She knew all the underhill folk. She had to go each day to say 'Hi' to each one. Nobody would go with her. We know everybody down here. They all go to church. She was safe. She was always safe. And now this..."

After I got to know Gretchen (it was about three weeks after I had started working), she had to show me a surprise. There was a playground underground in which tubes wound around in spirals or went down at an angle like slides. The walls were completely smooth.

We joined other kids climbing in and out and sliding down and rolling around, and there was a maze of Jungle Jim bars everywhere so you could spend hours climbing around. Mrs. Skirmitz told me that she had taken one year old Gretchen in there and she had just laughed and giggled all the way through, and she would do it again and again all by herself.

In the couple of years that I knew Gretchen, she showed me all the underhill passageways, introduced me to all the families, and showed me rooms full of machinery and the men that took care of them. It was the machinery that gave the underhillers lights and gas and water, air conditioning and heating. They all knew her from when she was a toddler, and I was so amazed that she knew so many people. But there was only one really close friend, and that was her Uncle Smythe. "Those two," said Mrs. Skirmitz, "were like two wings on a bird.

"You know, it was he who taught our daughter to read and write, and she learned so young. She had such a thirst for knowing things. She could name all the stars and planets and tell you where they were at night. Other little girls play with their dolls, but it wasn't so with our little Gretchen. No, she had to play the quiz game and rack everybody's brains, asking questions of everybody about everything. That's why she so loved her Uncle Smythe. He could answer her questions. She would stroll over to his place just as you please, like it was nothing and never get lost. She could always find her way back. Her sense of direction was uncanny. We lost her one time at a church revival. I was worried half sick. But when we got home, there she was, waitin' for us on the hill top. I didn't have to worry about her. She had the angels watching over her if it weren't the neighbors. And we have such nice neighbors. When she was diapers, she would wander off to the neighbors-- there would always be someone to open the doors for her--and there would always be someone to bring her home. But when she potty trained herself that was the end of someone

bringing her home. She had to do it herself!"

Uncle Smythe lived alone. I guess he never got married. Whenever I asked him if he had ever fallen in love, he would begin by talking about his early days at the University and then trail off into mumbles. He would then grab Gretchen and claim that she was his family. At the time I met him, he was teaching her geometry, showing her models of different types of geodesic systems that could undulate and interconnect with each other. She would take them down off the shelf or from where they were hanging from the ceiling and show me how they worked. She would also show me models of molecules and show me how they related to geometry. She would take them apart and put them back together again and get me to do the same. And then there was the telescope. She would show me all the stars and nebulae she knew and all the twelve planets. She told me how Uncle Smythe's telescope was built on the principles of electrons and magnetism, that it wasn't your ordinary optical system. She knew much too much for a child her age.

After her death, I went back to Uncle Smythe for lessons, and he would want to know where Gretchen was. I would tell him that I didn't know, and he would start telling me about when she was little. "She would surprise me, certainly," he would start off. "she used to make a humming sound and put her lips to my throat or I would be humming a tune, and she would ask 'What is that?' and hum the same tune against my throat and ask that silly question. Then one day it dawned on me that she was asking about vibration. So I got some tuning forks and proceeded to give her a physics lesson. She gobbled it up! She just gobbled it up! Just barely out of diapers. One day she came to me and asked me what was one, two, three, four, five, and so on. So I started teaching her numbers. She understood Poincaré's Theorem. Imagine that! and no one taught her. She didn't want arithmetic. She wanted number theory. She took the apples I had used to teach her about addition and subtraction and piled them into a tetrahedron and

asked 'What number is that?' I was so thrilled at having a little genius to teach.

"She would come in with matrices of magic numbers that would add up in only certain patterns. She was always investigating all the beautiful patterns she could come up with. We got into the higher dimensions of space and time, but whenever we would talk about higher dimensions, she would bring up the subject of God and the angels and talk about them as if she knew them personally. She would dance when she talked of God and say 'This is how he dances.'

"She would tell me there was a mother in heaven as well as a father and that they were continually having children and putting them down on all the planets of the universe. I would ask her how she knew this. She would say that the ancient books talked about it. She was reading the ancient books when I wasn't looking."

One day I came home morose. I had seen something very sad. At Ann and Elvin's I had seen cattle slaughtered along with an occasional hog, and I had seen carcasses of dead animals, like a cow or a dog, or even a buck or two during deer hunting season, but to see a man die was another thing. I had never even been to a funeral. After dinner that day, Gretchen asked me, "Why are you so sad today, Buck?"

I didn't want to talk about it. My feelings on the subject were so untested. Then, she kept peering up at me into my face and tilting her head from side to side. I couldn't help being cheered up enough to talk.

"Okay," I grunted. "I saw a person get killed today."

"What happened?" she asked, touching my hand with her baby soft face, working it up along my arm, kissing it, trying to comfort me.

"I was cleaning up around a rock crusher. There was a man there too, cleaning the inside or trying to fix it. I wasn't paying attention. All of a sudden the machine turned on. It caught his arm. I tried to find the stop button, but it must have been on the other side.

There was a lot of yelling and men scrambling about, but nothing was done, and the man was pulled into the grinder. It was a bloody mess."

I started wondering then about life and death. I felt very moody. I wasn't necessarily talking to Gretchen, I just said, "What do we live for if we just have to face death in the end? And a lot of people die young. Why do we have to die? What happens to us? Just more fertilizer for the ground."

"That's simple, Silly," she said matter-of-factly. "We're not from here. We only come to this place for a visit. Don't you ever want to go home?"

That statement was so far out that it just hit me and bounced off.

I asked again, "What's the good of this life if we just have to die?"

"How do you expect to get back home, Silly?" was her reply.

The sound of home was appealing to me, so I said, "This is my home here with you, and this is where I want to stay. I don't want to have to leave you or your mom and dad or my friends Allen and Fred. Did you know they have a job now at the factory?"

"Buck," she said, exasperated that I tried to change the subject. "None of this is going to last. We're here for a time to get what we need and then we're out of here. Even I won't stay for long."

What a prophecy that turned out to be. I didn't think she knew what she was saying, but since I had no other beliefs except of a nebulous god out there somewhere in the nightly heavens, and having a hole which she filled, her beliefs came with her to settle in my heart with the love I felt for her. So what she said became very familiar to me as if I had believed them all my life. I didn't expect though that she would go really soon. I thought she meant that she would live perhaps until she was sixty years old instead of until she was ninety years old.

Gretchen described what home was like. She said, "There is a father and a mother and all our brothers and sisters. We go to school

when we are old enough, and guess who our teachers are? Father and Mother. There is also Big Brother and other older brothers and sisters there to teach us what they know. But one day everybody finished school and there had to be a final exam. And guess where the final exam is? Everyone had to come down here to take the final exam. We had to leave home. That's what we're doing here on Earth--to see how much we can remember. But we also can learn new things because we've never had a body before."

"I don't understand," I said. "What do you mean we've never had a body before? That's strange talk."

"Silly Buckaroo!" she said kindly and kind of loud. "We were born to Father-in-Heaven and Mother-in-Heaven. We were spirit babies. Then we grew up and were spirit adults. We went to school and then it was time to come down here. I entered into my mommy's baby and you entered into your mommy's baby when they were inside their tummies. That's how we got here. And when it's time to go home, we just step out of our bodies and go home. That's what the angel told me. He said for me not to be afraid."

"An angel talked to you?" I asked, stating to be bewildered.

She just smiled a big smile and beamed and continued with, "So you see how that man is okay that you saw today?" She rubbed my arm up and down to soothe me.

"You mean that he just went home?" I asked, getting inspired.

"Yes. He just went back home to Father and Mother--in a great white house where everything is white and shiny."

White and shiny--I thought. I had had enough of that kind of talk. I could take only so much of it. I guess I didn't feel good enough to be discussing that kind of subject. But the subject came up again another time underneath the spread of the Milky Way Galaxy. We were outside, lying on top of the hill, looking at the stars. A thought came to me. I spoke it out loud, not directing it to Gretchen, more to the stars that inspired the thought.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we could just keep our bodies?" I asked wistfully.

"Of course," she said. "We get our bodies back." The stars twinkled in her black eyes.

"We get them back, huh?" I asked, being tired of this game. It started hurting. I couldn't help thinking about that guy that got killed that day. I thought of all the loved ones people lose because of death. I even thought of losing Gretchen and her parents and of others I thought of as my friends.

"After they go through the repair shop," she added.

I couldn't deny her buoyant smile and the radiance of her eyes. My moroseness couldn't hold her down, and her beaming face made the fortress around my heart crumble. I had to believe what she believed because I loved her so.

In an enlightened moment, I said, "The repair shop--you mean the grave."

"You're never there," she said. "You're in Heaven and your body stays in the earth--for a while."

"And just when are you supposed to get it back?"

"It's called the Resurrection."

"And just when is that?" I asked.

"Oh--at the end. When everybody's through."

"She called it the Resurrection," said Uncle Smythe, one night. I had come to visit him again and the stars. I thought it might give me a lift out of the slump I had fallen into. "She said there had to be a sacrifice, and that our Big Brother was it. That he showed us the way by being the first to be resurrected. She said that he conquered death for all of us, and that it was through believing in him that he had the power to raise us from the grave. Gretchen didn't speak of the Christ per se. She called him Big Brother. She told me about the big light she had seen..."

"And the angel," I added.

"And the angel." He looked up at the stars. I could see them reflected in his eyes as I had seen them in the eyes of Gretchen. "She confided in me--and this isn't something to be published--that she sat in his lap one night when she was little and lost. He comforted her."

"The angel?" I asked.

"No. The Christ."

I felt such a spirit then that I wept.

"And was she found?" I asked.

"She came home on her own and sat on the hill until everyone else came home from looking for her." He sighed, "She was an angel."

Remembering all this, I had hope that I could once again hold Gretchen in my arms again.

The first time I saw Gretchen drop a glass of milk from her hands I thought her mother was going to spank her good, but it never happened. Gretchen only laughed, saying she didn't understand why she does that. Her mother only said, "Stand still and I'll sweep it up. Can't get glass in your toesees." Gretchen was in her bare feet at the time.

Because Gretchen laughed, I laughed too as if there were cords coming from her and I was her marionette. Everything she did I had to do, at least on an emotional level. I never dropped anything, and I thought she was awfully clumsy. I laughed out "You clumsy girl!"

Her mother replied for her. "She's clumsy, that way, she is. Can't hold onto anything. Always losing something. She'll loose her head one of these days."

"I already have lost my head, Mamma," she said, winking at me.

As soon as the glass splinters were off the floor, she scampered over to my chair and sat in my lap and held me tight. "On account that I can't let go of him," she said.

I am reminded now that when we first met she had fallen from a sewer ladder into my arms. I thought at the time that she was playing. Now I know she let go because she couldn't help it. I also understand

why she got me to carry her typewriter all the way across to her uncle's one night. She had taken me by the arm and dragged me into her bedroom.

"You can reach that typewriter up there," she had said, pointing to the top shelf in her closet near her bed. "Pull it down and help me carry it to Uncle Smythe's. I've got some stuff in some of his books I've got to type up."

"I'll bet," I said, "that he'll let you borrow the books."

"Go on, get it," she said with a half grin up her cheek.

I got the heavy thing and started to let her take half of it so I would be "helping" her carry it. She wiped at the air in front of her as if she were wiping at her face and breast, fingers spread out and fanning herself. The expression on her face turned desperate.

"You take it!" she said.

"I thought you wanted me to 'help' you carry it. That doesn't mean for me to carry the whole thing," came out of my mouth, and I didn't know if I were teasing or just being stubborn.

She left the room, and I followed after her. She turned around and shot me a look of anger that surprised me. "Just bring it along!" she blurted out.

We went on in silence until we had gone down a couple of corridors. The she said, "...I can't hold it."

I had never seen her like that before. It made me feel helpless. I tagged along until we got there. When we arrived, we just went on in. There were no door bells to ring and we didn't knock. She said, "Put it over there," pointing to a table.

"I have to do a report for school," she said.

"Can I stay and help," I asked which I wouldn't normally have done except for the change of her countenance.

"No," she said bluntly.

That hurt my feelings, and I rather dropped the typewriter onto the table instead of placing it there gently. I said, "Fine, then!" and

turned to go away.

She ran over to me, and grabbing me, buried her face in my neck.

"I'm sorry," she cried. "I don't know why I should be so upset. Don't go away mad."

I held her tight and noticed that she was starting to grow breasts already. She was eight years old by then and I was ten. We had known each other for two years. It was time enough to grow close enough for arguments.

The last argument we had was over a picnic basket. I was a numbskull at the time. Things didn't sink into my head very fast. I didn't think about her habit of dropping things. I guess I was just too excited about going on the picnic, expecting too much. We were in the kitchen and Mrs. Skirmitz was putting the final touches on the picnic basket.

"Mamma hurry up," Gretchen said anxiously, looking at the clock. There was a thing at school she had to go to later and she wanted to go on this picnic first, and we were running out of time. I'm sure she wanted to spend more time with me than her mother was allowing. She thought she was slowing things down on purpose.

"I'll be just a moment, Dear," she said. Mrs. Skirmitz wanted to put the napkins in just the right way.

"That's okay," I said, slipping my hands down into my back jeans pockets.

"No it's not!" Gretchen said, stamping her foot. "We have to hurry so we can spend more time at the park. I never get to be with you any more. You're always working."

It's true. I had finally been hired and was working longer hours.

"There, there," said Mrs. Skirmitz as she handed the basket to Gretchen absentmindedly. "Here you go."

"Come on, let's go," said Gretchen grabbing the basket.

We headed for the door. When we reached the outer door, I saw Gretchen throw the basket down the hole and laugh hysterically. She

ran passed me laughing back to the kitchen.

I called back, "You fool! What are you doing? You're creepy!"

I ran back into the kitchen after her to confront her, but when I re-entered the kitchen, she turned on me and started beating me on the chest with her fists.

"Wait! Wait!" was all I could get out.

Mrs. Skirmitz called out, "Gretchen, Gretchen!" She grabbed Gretchen and took her out of the kitchen.

I went down the hole and gathered up what remained of the picnic, putting all the chicken and celery sticks back into the basket, wiping the potato salad off my carpet and picking up the shards of glass from the bowl and throwing them away. I also had to clean around the hole into my apartment. I would vacuum later. I then took the picnic basket back up to the kitchen. I met Mrs. Skirmitz cleaning up the kitchen.

"What happened?" I asked, setting the basket onto the table.

"She threw the picnic basket down the hole."

"No, Honey," she said with a soothing voice. "She only dropped it."

"What's wrong with her?" I asked. "I didn't do anything to her."

Then she confided, "Honey, she's sick. It causes her not to be able to hold on to anything. You've seen her. She's always dropping things. She can't help it."

"Well, she laughs about it," I said, not understanding. "And then she gets upset."

She sat down in a chair where Gretchen had keeps her coat. She turned back around towards me. I pulled out a chair but didn't sit down.

"Can I go and see her?" I asked.

"She won't see you, Honey. She's pretty embarrassed at what she does. No need to embarrass her any further."

She took the basket I put on the table and took out some

chicken, wrapped it in a napkin, and gave it to me.

"You'd better go and have yourself some lunch. I'll take care of Gretchen."

I remember the next morning at breakfast, Gretchen wouldn't look at me. I felt embarrassed. I felt like I shouldn't be there as though I interrupted something private among strangers. Suddenly, Gretchen threw down her fork and splattered egg everywhere. She slipped behind her mother and a man sitting next to her and ran for the door to the bedrooms. She was gone. Her mother got up nearly knocking the man over trying to reach her, calling "Gretchen! Gretchen!" She went over to the stove, saying, "Oh, let her go then. She's a troubled girl." She kept wiping her hands with her apron as though she was trying to wipe the blame from herself.

I found out later that Gretchen had run to her Uncle Smythe. He said to me, "yes--she had come to me and we sat down together and I sang her a little song we used to sing together. It was a hymn. I don't know what prompted me. I'm not a church-going man. It seemed to comfort her. She told me then, 'Uncle Smythe,' she said, 'I love him so much, I can't stand him to see me like this.'"

"Like what," I asked him.

"Well, sick," he said. "She was sick. She had a tumor in the brain. It was growing. She would get these awful headaches, and there was this problem of dropping things. Her legs were also starting to get clumsy. She started to trip all the time. You couldn't tell unless you watched her some. She had pretty good balance. Only hymns soothed her, so I sung her hymns."

The last time I saw Gretchen alive was a Saturday afternoon. I saw her on the weekends anyway because of my working long hours. There was a nice breeze blowing on top of the hill. It was grassy and had only three trees. They were old and gnarled and bent toward the town in the direction of the constant wind. Meow had joined me. I petted her as she settled down in my lap and watched the shadows

creep up the towers across the way as the sun settled down behind me. Gretchen approached me so silently that I didn't notice her until she was in the act of sitting down beside me to my right. Meow growled a little the way cats do with a leading high note. Everything was turning orange as the sun settled lower in the horizon. Gretchen put her arm through mine and laid her head on my shoulder.

"They say the King is coming this way," she said softly.

"Yeah, that's the talk at the mill," I said, feeling very warm and comforted by her presence. "They say his troops are getting closer."

"The War will be here soon," she said softly, right into my ear.

I turned my head. She looked up at me and our lips met. We threw our arms around each other in a mad passionate kiss, let go and looked straight ahead.

She said, "We'll have to make a choice then. We'll have to choose sides."

"What do you mean?" I replied.

"Choose between the Adversary and the King."

"Yes, they call him the Adversary, don't they.?" I said, looking at the first stars appearing.

"They say he's evil."

"Not everybody. There's a lot of support for him at the factory."

As we watched the shadows overtake the light and the night creep over the earth, we were reminded of the coming darkness--the approaching storm.

Gretchen said, "I don't think the adversary can overtake the King's forces. Do you?"

"No," I said, giving her a little squeeze with my arm. "I don't think so. I think he's got most of the country on his side."

"That's not what I heard," she said quietly. "I heard that the King's forces are small in comparison."

I didn't want to think about such dark things, although, I didn't have any other thoughts. I was a dark time approaching.

Gretchen's mood lightened up a little as she said, "King Arthur said that right makes up for the lack of might. Didn't he say that?"

"I guess so," I said without really knowing. "You're the book reader."

"I'm sure he said that. Right makes up for the lack of might. So what if the King's forces are small. We'll smash him."

"We?" I asked. "What can children do?"

"We can do right."

"And that will make the difference?"

"I believe it will."

"I think," I said with an adult air, "that we shall just keep out of the way of the soldiers and let them do the fighting. We're just civilians, you know."

"Well..." she said a bit louder. "We can do our part!"

"And what is our part? Please tell me."

"Be obedient to the King. I am sure he is wise and good. He will know what we shall do."

That was a question for philosophers, I thought.

"Who is the King, anyway?" I asked, never having known him. All I ever knew was working at Ann and Elvin's. I started thinking of them and said out into the air, "I wonder how Ann and Elvin are."

"They say," Gretchen said, going into her sing-song philosopher's voice, "that the first King was God himself. And then his son was king--and then his son, and then his son, and then his son--why, they were all sons of God. The Church crowns him, you know."

"Yes, I imagine they do."

"Well, the King is the Son of God."

"I never thought about it."

"Well, you should. He's coming soon, and he's driving away the adversary, and I'll betcha that the adversary will get here first. And there will be a great division."

We watched the towers go dark against the thick blue sky.

"Those towers," said Gretchen very methodically, "those towers will go over to the adversary."

"Maybe not all of them," I said. "Some of them are my friends."

Blue turned to black in the night sky and it became pock marked with sparks of light. The night was being uncovered.

"Look what darkness does," said Gretchen. "It shows us the light. That's what Uncle Smythe told me."

"What about the day-time?" I asked, having to have an opposite point of view. "The sunshine..."

"Well, the sun is so bright, it blocks out all the stars. We can only see the rest of the universe...it's the big picture...only at night...in the dark."

"Well," I said. "Then some darkness is good, huh?"

"Yeah, but I'm glad we have the day-time too."

Then we both said, "And the sunshine!" at the same time, and we laughed.

We sat there for a long time until Gretchen started shivering.

"You cold?" I asked.

"No-o-o-o!" she said with her jaw quivering. "Take me ho-o-o-o-m."

We got up and I helped her over to the hole. She sat down next to it while I descended half way. I grabbed her about the waist and pulled her up to me. She grabbed my neck with her arms. I told her to grab my waist with her legs. She did so and we awkwardly descended, our cheeks pressed against each other. Chills ran down my spine. She was trembling hard. When we got down to her entry way, I stepped onto the rim and pushed us both through, hoping I would make it. Both our bodies made a tight fit. As I took her through the tunnel, her legs slipped to wrap around my legs. By the time we reached the kitchen, she was standing on top of my feet, and I helped her walk through the kitchen door. When we got into the kitchen, I handed her

to her mother who was always there taking care of the guys.

"Thank you Buck," she said, putting her arms around her baby and lifting her into her bosom. "I know what to do for her."

I never got to ask if there was something I could do to help. She whisked her away into the bedrooms. I went off to bed myself, feeling like I had been clubbed in the face. I rubbed my face and chin with my hand just before I descended down into the pitch black darkness that was my apartment. A chill went down my back, and I felt very afraid. I felt completely helpless, but I had hope that she would get better. I prayed that she would.

That night I was shattered out of my sleep with a "Bang!" and a "Thud!" It shook my apartment. I jumped out of bed and leaped onto the ladder. I heard Meow screech. I reached the door. It was closed! I panicked. This door cannot be closed! I demanded. I never close this door. I pushed against the door with all my might and couldn't budge it. I dropped to the floor shaking. I grabbed my knees. I wanted to scream, but there was no breath. I sat there in stark terror, suffocating. I blacked out.

Morning light coming from the open porthole gently touched me with its soft hand. I woke up shivering against the cold metal wall. There was a fog covering my memory of the night. Why was I on the floor, I asked. Had I a terrible nightmare? I sat there for a long time trying to remember. Then it dawned on me when I decided to get up. I leaped up onto the ladder and pushed against the portal. It opened and banged against the outer wall. The noise slapped my sinuses, and I reeled back with a painful headache. I put my hand outside the portal's rim to push myself out. I felt a jelly like substance. I pulled my hand out. I looked at it. It was red. My hand took on an alien character. I stared at it as I descended the ladder. I went over to the sink and turned on the spigot. Blood splattered over the sink as I let the water run over my alien looking hand. I recognized it as blood, but I didn't know what it meant. Surely, someone had fallen. I had always

been afraid that some fat lady would fall down and plug up the hole.

I didn't ever expect that someone else would clean up the mess at my doorstep, so I got a rag and let the water run in the sink and went back and forth from the portal to the sink wiping up the blood and washing out my rag. If I were on the farm, I would have expected it to be a prank someone had pulled at my expense. I thought of Fred and Allen laughing their heads off at throwing a slaughtered hog down the hole. But why the portal had shut before the something had hit was a mystery. The longer I thought about it, the angrier I got.

When I went for breakfast, there was only Dan and Daddy Cherry at the table drinking their coffee and talking. There were some pancakes and sausage left on the stove, so I helped myself. My plate and knife and fork had been on the table, but I noticed that Gretchen's and Mrs. Skirmitz's weren't there. The thought that they weren't here crossed my mind, but then who set the table and fixed the breakfast? Of course, Mrs. Skirmitz would have set the table before she went to bed. Maybe, I thought, She was just in there with Gretchen because Gretchen was sick.

As I sat down at the table, I thought to tell Dan and Daddy Cherry the cruel joke someone had played on me. I cut into their conversation with, "Someone played a cruel joke on me last night. I wouldn't be surprised if it weren't my old friends Allen and Fred across the way. It seemed to be a carcass of some kind, but they thought better of it and removed it before I woke up."

I looked at Dan and Daddy Cherry. They both had tears running down their blistered faces. Their eyes were red and droopy. Neither had shaved for a couple of days. They didn't look at me--neither of them.

Daddy Cherry was saying, "...the sweetest angle there ever was. Nothing like her will ever come after."

Dan said, "God's love was in this household. Now he took it all

back."

Daddy Cherry: "Remember how she used to sit cross-legged there on the table before us and lecture us on God and the Universe? Things never to understand she made clear as only a little child could do."

Dan: "Out of the mouths of babes...and her laughter I remember and always will."

Daddy Cherry: "She would comfort us like a well aged bottle of wine, and we would be more awake afterwards."

Dan: "And she was feared of no man nor beast. Every creature was her friend..."

At that remark, a great fear came over me. A lump came up into my throat. My mouth came open and let fall a bite of pancakes back to my plate. My mouth became dry, and I coughed out, "What do you mean!"

They kept on talking to each other. I had become a stranger and an outsider. I stared in disbelief as they both said, "Poor little Gretchen."

They both turned their sad faces towards me as I repeated, "What do you mean!"

Dan blurted out, "Where were you! She was lying at your door and you did nothing!"

"Oh God!" I cried. I brought my hands to my face, and in a moment hysteria, I cried out again, "Oh God! I didn't know it was her! I swear to God I didn't know it was her! And I couldn't get the door open!"

I felt I had fallen down that dark pit instead of Gretchen. I couldn't move. My arms turned to lead, and I stung all over my face.

"Just let her life ebb away!" echoed Dan's voice somewhere in my head. Daddy Cherry's voice that said, "Don't be so harsh on the boy," didn't comfort me. The blackness of the hole engulfed me. It entered my throat and worked itself down like a big worm into my

heart and ate away the last glimpse of light that had remained. I found myself at my portal wiping my hands where earlier I had cleaned up what now I knew to be Gretchen's blood--that little girl who had loved me so. It had been Gretchen's blood. I burst into tears. After a while, something made me look up. I looked up to see the round hole of blue sky above in the surrounding darkness. There was a single star shining in that patch of daytime blue. I raised my fist and "Oh God!" shot out like cannon fire from my mouth into the heavens above.

After a while of uncontrolled sobbing, I reached over and touched the latch that connected the portal to the wall of the pipe that made up the descent. I decided that I would go into town and buy a padlock. I would lock that door and never would it be closed again.

I walked the ten miles into town sullenly--still in shock. I got a very big padlock. It weighed heavily in my pocket on the way home. It was like I carried my heart in there.

When I got back home, the stars were out, but I didn't look at them. I had no reason to. Gretchen was gone, and that was something I did with her. I arrived at the hill where I lived and climbed the hill, and then I descended into the dark pit. It was a bitter darkness. Had it become my friend now? I felt it welcome me. When I reached the portal, I padlocked my round door to the wall. It would never close again, and I would feel safe. I descended into my apartment and threw the keys out the window. I climbed into my bunk and slept with Meow curled up against my chest. She was now my only comfort besides the darkness and sleep. Her soft purring put me to sleep. I dreamed Meow was Gretchen.

I must have slept for a long time. It was bright daylight outside when I was awakened by the incessant meow of a cat. At first the sound was far away in the sunlight as were the passing cars and people talking in the distance. As the meowing came closer, I became more conscious. When I became fully awake, I saw Meow crying right in my face. At the same time, I heard Mrs. Skirmitz calling.

"Are you all right Buck? I say, are you all right?"

I shouted back a hoarse "Yeah!" and under my breath I said, "Yeah, I'm all right."

I petted Meow who kept on meowing.

"What are you all upset about today?" I asked as I sat up.

"What's wrong? Did you miss your breakfast this morning?"

I felt a bit woozy and weak.

"Are you coming up to eat yet?" Mrs. Skirmitz called again. "We haven't seen ya in two days! Ya need to feed your cat and yourself as well!"

I jumped down and had to hold onto the bed before things stopped spinning around. I went to the sink and reached underneath and brought out the bag of cat food. I filled Meow's dish, and she rushed at it and proceeded to chow down with a chomp, chomp, chomp. Next, I gave her some water in her other dish and decided I needed to feed myself. My stomach was growling just like Meow at her dish with her ears pulled back.

Climbing up the ladder was treacherous. I was dizzy and felt like I was going to faint. I had to breathe hard in order to stay awake.

"You need some help Dear?" called Mrs. Skirmitz from far away.

"No," I called back. "I can make it."

I made myself go faster. It was a good thirty yards up to her place, but I made it. When I got in the door way with its yellowy light bulb shining from the middle of the ceiling, Mrs. Skirmitz pulled me up into her arms and wrapped me up in her bosom and carried me to the kitchen. I was much taller than she, so it was a mystery how her round form carried me there. She was both strong and fast. She had me at the table and feeding me broth before I knew what was happening. I thought it was so funny that I started giggling.

"Now there's a good spirit," she said. "I've got some good biscuits and gravy if you think you can handle that."

I took a deep breath and nodded. By the time she had warmed

up the biscuits and gravy I had revived enough to eat on my own strength. She sat watching me. I guessed that it was because there was no one else in the room to stare at. She was used to listening to the conversations that went on in the kitchen, and I wasn't talking. When I started giggling again, she said, "He's gone balmy with so much attention."

I couldn't finish the biscuits and gravy because of the exhilaration that came over me. All I could do was to giggle and say "Precious Gretchen...precious precious Gretchen..." I remembered that during the middle of the night I had dreamed about Gretchen.

I turned to Mrs. Skirmitz.

"I just remembered," I giggled. "I had a dream about Gretchen."

"Yeeees..." she said, very interested. "Please do tell me."

"It was so real! She was dressed in a single white gown that glowed...and she glowed. There was a brilliant light. I felt so good inside...so comforted...and happy! How could I forget!"

Mrs. Skirmitz's eyes were leaking, but she was still smiling.

"It was so real!" I said again. "Oh mama!"

With that, I covered my mouth. I hadn't meant to say mama. I had never called anyone mama before, and I wasn't sure if I weren't swearing.

She grabbed me off my chair and smothered me in her huge bosom.

"She was tellin' you she is alright," she said, squeezing me at every emphasis.

I couldn't breathe until she let me go. I thought I was going to die.

That day I got a mother. She and Daddy Cherry adopted me at the lose of Gretchen. I had always been treated as a part of the family when Gretchen was alive, and now it had become legal. I felt that I had a family to belong to for the first time in my life.

I was reminded of the story of Tarzan who had been adopted by

a huge ape at the loss of her own child. She pampered me at every opportunity. She even offered me Gretchen's room, but I couldn't do that. It had become a holy place that shouldn't be disturbed. I had glanced in there at one time, but I couldn't step inside. She was still there, even though she were dead. Her beautiful spirit still haunted the place. It would be my shrine.

My feelings towards myself and my life had greatly improved after that appearance of Gretchen in my dreams. Before, I was afraid of the dark and tight places. Afterwards, I slept good at night. Life became full of congenialities. With Gretchen, there had always been excitement. But with her family, there was a calm sense of home. That was something new to my experience.

THE COMING OF THE WAR

Dan was not one of the congenialities. He still blamed me for Gretchen's death. On top of that, I had missed work three days in a row. He wouldn't take me to work with him anymore. I had to pay for my lodging and food. I was told that wasn't allowed when I brought it up because now I was part of the family, but I still needed to work. When asked if I would rather go to school, I opted out. I was used to working all of my life, plus the fact that I was old enough to get wages, but young enough to need a sponsor at the mill. Dan was still a good man. He told me to look up Allen. So I did.

Fred and Allen worked in the pump foundry where they made huge water pumps for irrigation. Fred worked directly with the molten metal, whereas Allen worked in the wood shop where they made and maintained or repaired the molds for the pumps. He was really good at wood working and carving. I had seen him do that on the farm. He would carve all kinds of animals and strange shapes just for fun. He took me on as an apprentice.

Even though I was apprenticed to Allen, Fred gave me work sometimes. He showed me how to chisel out the big bells that covered the pumps and paint them inside and out with red-lead.

Allen had me repair the wooden molds to all parts of the pump. For small repairs, we used epoxy and ground the areas down smooth to fit with the rest of the mold. Other times we had to make new parts with blocks of wood cut with table saws or jig saws or band saws into the proper shapes and ground down with flat sanders or cylindrical sanders and glue them into the larger mold. Sometimes we had to use or invent jigs to get the right geometric shape.

The smells of the wood shop attracted my nose. I loved the smell of pine walnut and other hardwoods, but the epoxy stunk like a

skunk or worse. It twisted my nose horribly.

My training took a couple of years, and with all of this interesting work, I soon forgot about Gretchen. She became something of my childhood that I packed away. She might have been in the next room or around the corner, but that feeling soon became a knowledge of an invisible room that was just beyond my reach, and so I left her there and moved on to the other things in my life which was largely my work.

I was at the age now that I started noticing girls, not that I hadn't noticed Gretchen. She had been my companion, not a girl. Allen and Fred often took me up to the towers to the bar room where we first started out. They had fun by drinking and dancing with the girls while I would sit at a table sipping on an occasional root beer or ginger beer. I promised my new mama that I wouldn't drink alcohol. One of the girls there seemed to be attracted to me even though I was a couple of years younger than her. She would sit at my table and start up a conversation, and we would share a root beer. Sometimes though, she would have to have a real beer. Somehow, I was comfortable around her. She made it easy to talk. Her name was Bo.

She had a talent of telling stories. The whole group would often sit around in a circle instead of dancing and have her tell about the mummy coming to life after being transported from Egypt on a boat, or she would tell about witches and voodoo in the Caribbean. She had a library of Indian folklore, telling about the magic Indian and Tibetan yogis with their great mental powers. She was dark like an Indian and had black hair. She took me to her apartment one time and showed me shelves and shelves of books on Hinduism and Yoga, yet, from observation, she was from South America.

One night at the bar Bo and I were sitting at one of the round tables. She was telling me that I didn't know how to have fun. I could see she was going to give me a lecture on it.

"I don't ever see you dance or sing," she said. "What do you do

to have fun? All you do is work at the factory. Aren't you going to explode? You've got to let off steam once in a while or you'll go bazonkers!"

"I have lots of fun," I said. "In my spare time, I visit Uncle Smythe. He's a full professor. He teaches me history and science and literature, and we look up at the stars through his telescope. We talk about the very basic things of the Universe. He taught me to read and write."

"E-Gads!" she exclaimed. "We have a true stuffed shirt here. You like to read? Read this."

She slapped down a magazine in front of me with a smiling cruelly blonde headed girl with her big breasts popping out of her blouse. She flipped through the pages, and I think I turned red. My face turned really hot. She stopped at an article entitled "The Nature of Art" and slapped her hand on top of it.

"There you go," she said emphatically. "Read that!"

I read through the article in a couple of glances. It was about living in the here and now and getting down to your feelings, that man's moral nature led to judgments, bigotry and war. His nature was to be as children and explore his environment and to express what comes natural. The article showed several examples of art that were swatches of color, naked girls in odd poses and stick sculptures that didn't make any sense to me.

"You see?" cried Bo. "You've got to open up. Let yourself go. Be naked! Have sex!"

She peered closely into my eyes.

"You have had sex, haven't you?" she asked.

"No," I said weakly.

"What do you do? Masturbate in the closet?"

"No. I don't do that either."

She laughed hilariously, throwing herself back into her chair.

"I'm just joking!" she said, coming back into my face. "Loosen up

a little.

Just lighten up, will ya?"

She grabbed my hand, saying, "Come on. Let's dance!"

I thought she was going to say "Let's have sex" or something, but she didn't. We got up, and moving away from the tables, she showed me how to dance. It was more like slithering and bobbing up and down and throwing your hips out of joint. Then she would move her hips back and forth as though she were having sex.

That night as I lay in my bunk, I thought I wanted to have sex with Bo even though she was much older than me, but I started thinking of that dream I had about Gretchen glowing like the sun at noon-day. She was so innocent and not judgmental. I felt a peace come over me. The feelings of lust dissipated, and I gave it up thinking about Bo and started thinking of Mrs. Skirmitz and Daddy Cherry. There was a decency in their family I had never seen before. They worked hard. They expressed a homely love and kindness and concerned for their fellow man. They never complained about their lot in life. They never found fault with other people, even though they joked about the people living in the towers. Their jokes, though, usually wound up in feelings of pathos for their living in sin, as they called it. They even said that Allen and Fred had a spark of goodness in them and always would. They were simple folk who worked and loved and lived in a hole in the ground.

I asked Mama Skirmitz once why they lived underground. All she said was "because we made it ourselves." That didn't settle in my mind well, because I knew that the people in the towers across the way made their own dwellings too. So one day I asked Dan and Daddy Cherry about it as we walked to work.

"We're mechanics," said Daddy Cherry. "We were miners once too, but the mines played out. No more ore. Or the ore was bad. And there was the war. Our homes were destroyed. There was the mine, and after the war, no one owned it. So we moved in. We know that

temperature doesn't change much down there--and we could fit pipes together and put machinery together, and so, that became our home. We all knew each other already and trusted each other, so we formed a commune."

That satisfied my mind on that question, but what about the towers? Why were they towers instead of square houses all in a row?

Dan told me, "Why, other people built your homes for you as the factory did in the old days before the war. All we got was row houses. Now them that live in the towers are artists and artisans. Why there's musicians over there and writers and painters and carpenters and cabinet makers and millwrights and architects and designers of all sorts--all artists and artisans--they who build civilization."

I think he was philosophizing because the towers looked more like a shanty town when you were actually there or maybe I hadn't seen the more beautiful parts of it. There was one thing he said that I thought might be true. There were musicians there. I had never paid much attention to them when I was with Allen and Fred, maybe because they were loud and fit in like the furniture or the wall hangings made of macrame'. They were just there, and I had to force myself to recognize them. The music at Allen and Fred's came from live musicians. They were not stereos or radios. They didn't even have sound equipment.

There was no electricity at the towers now that I come to think of it. It was not well lighted as at home. That's why it always seemed dark there. They had coal oil lamps that gave out a yellowish glow--sometimes reddish when seen from a distance. That was part of their lifestyle. They lived in perpetual darkness. Of course, there was a natural rhythm and flow to their lives. They had sunlight coming through their windows during the day, and when it was night, it was night. Not so at home. It was perpetually lit up--at least in the kitchen and bathroom. I think I was the only one at home that let my room go dark.

Bo did lead me to some of the more beautiful parts of the towers. I went with her on one of my days off. We saw artist studios lit with huge glass windows and architects and designers offices with lens focused sky lights. There were some with mirrors in them. In fact, I saw a lot of mirrors used in their offices. My biggest impression was that the whole of the towers that was one huge building, was organic. One part of the towers grew out of another part. Nothing seemed tacked on. Some were even trees that had grown into walls and ceiling and stairwells winding up through the towers. Doors and cabinets looked like part of the structure. It was all one whole.

The odd thing was that the people always spoke a slang that frequently referred to God and sex. They were always wishing curses to come upon each other and every object they talked about. None of that ever happened with the underhill people.

We came to one artist studio and Bo and he addressed each other as if they were old friends, but I had never seen him at Allen and Fred's.

"Hi Will," she said cordially. "Am I on time? This is Buck. He's from Fred and Allen's place. We're old friends."

Will was thin and short and wore a black barrette on his bald head. He took my hand and looked at me with quite an interest. He said, looking me over, "Yes, you are quite on time. And how are you my young friend? Are you a model too?"

"No," I replied, taking my hand back.

"What do you do? a musician, perhaps?"

"I work at the foundry with Allen and Fred," I said.

"Oh, one of those artisans that make the fat and rich get fatter and richer. I like you. Won't you have a seat over hear and you can watch a real artist at work," he said, waving his hand toward a couch facing his easel.

The couch was an antique, older than my grandfather. I sat down and got the surprise of my life. Bo started undressing right in

front of me, laying her clothes on the couch next to me. She stripped down to her birthday suite and stated twirling in front of me.

"Like my bod?" she asked, pointing to Will. "He does."

"Look at these curves," he said as he ran his hands down her sides, ending up on her hips. He swatted her behind and said, "Okay, let's get to work. Up, up!" he said, escorting her to a stand with a stool on it. "Right there. Move this leg just over here." He took a silk sheet or piece of uncut clothe and draped over parts of her body, but not to cover her up.

I'm sure my face had turned red. I could feel it. I felt a hardness in my pants I wasn't used to and swore to myself that I was in love.

There was another occasion in which Bo took me to see herself photographed in the nude in a hundred different poses. It took an hour that passed too fast for me. I got the impression that she sold herself for a living--at least to the arts. She never told me she was a model. To her, it was just business. To me, it was like being attracted to a flaming fire.

And so, the war started. I was torn between the decency of my new found family under the hill and Bo, the sweet and seductive temptress. The war started with me.

"What war?" Allen asked me as we worked on a mold in the shop. "Everyone has been talking of The War. The War. It's coming. We heard of it at Ann and Elvin's. You've heard of it all your life. The King is driving the forces of evil before him. The King is sitting pretty in Capitol City. Having a vodka. If there ever has been a war going on, it has been little skirmishes in the outer districts of the kingdom. No war is coming in our direction."

"The King doesn't drink," I said in his divine defense. I smoothed down a piece of epoxy on the wooden mold with a sandpaper block, and the smell of it stung my nose.

"Not in public, mind you," he said, turning the bell shaped structure away from me. I had to follow it around, and then he got in

my way. I had to stand there with the sandpaper block in my hand. Then he peered down his nose at me and said, "I bet he takes a snort or two when nobody is looking. They all do it. All the rich and corrupt," he finished. And he finished off where I had been sanding.

He looked at me and said, "What are you doing standing there with your thumb up your ass?" I shrugged my shoulders, and he said, "Help me take this over there."

It was difficult because it was curved and heavy, and I almost dropped it.

"What's this you're doing with Bo?" he asked after getting the mold on the high shelf just right. He had taken it right out of my hands and hefted it up there as though it were nothing. I felt like he was just being kind to me, letting me help out in the shop. He stood there on one leg and leaned over my way.

"Oh, she's just showing me around," I said.

He put his hand on my shoulder and asked, "Hey, you been in her pants, yet?"

"No," I said, being embarrassed at the question, and surprised.

"I been in her pants--real fun," he said with a wide grin. "She's a fun gal."

I felt stabbed in the heart. I tried not to say anything, but I blurted out, "She's too old for me."

He could tell I had strong feelings for her. I was pretty easy to read, especially, since he practically raised me.

"Hey, hey!" he rang out. "That's the way to go. You just keep following her around. She'll let you in. That's the kind of gal she is," he sang to the tune of an old song.

Later on, after he saw that I was getting angry, we got back onto the subject of the King and the coming war.

"Which side will you take when the war comes, Allen?" I asked.

He had to calm me down with a few jokes and tickle me before I would talk to him.

"The King's side. Who else? You want me to side with the devil he's been chasing?"

"There is talk at home that he's already crossed the border and is heading this way," I said. "Dan and Daddy Cherry said we're going to have to choose sides pretty soon. That's why I asked you."

"Not in my life time, old man. Maybe in your life time, but not in mine."

I could tell Allen had made his choice by deciding not to decide. He would continue his life with no thought of the King except to make the King do or be what ever was convenient for Allen. He supported his life style of wine women and song by saying the King would do the same.

Dan, Daddy Cherry, and Mama Skirmitz all agreed that they lived a descent and moral life, go to work, earn a living, support the family and love thy neighbor as thy self all because that is what the King would do--different life style, same reason.

Both my new adopted family and my friends Fred and Allen chose the King. Only, while the Skirmitzes believed that the King was the Son of God, my friends believed that he was a son of a bitch--how convenient.

Sitting around the dinner table one night, a question rolled around in my mind.

I gingerly ate my pork chop which was usually my favorite food. Mama Skirmitz was the only one who knew how to make them tender and juicy, yet, I wasn't hungry. It took me a long time to eat it. By the time I finished, all the men that Mama Skirmitz fed were all drinking their coffee and talking. Mama Skirmitz cleared the table. When she took my dishes, I spoke to her.

"What if a girl wants to go to bed with you?"

The five men besides Dan and Daddy Cherry stopped their talking and looked straight at me.

Emer, a rough looking man with a broad jaw and broad

shoulders said, "She's the wrong type of girl. Stay away from her."

"Yeah, yeah," they all agreed.

Daddy Cherry asked, "Didn't you and Gretchen sleep together one night?"

"Yes," I said perplexed, not wanting to share that divine moment with anyone. "But that was different."

"How different?" he asked.

"We didn't do anything," I said with some pain.

"How different?" he asked again.

"I loved her," I said, almost in tears.

"Do you love this other girl?" asked Dan.

"Not like Gretchen," I said.

Then Daddy Cherry said, "Then you don't love this girl." He went on to pick his teeth with a tooth pick, not looking at me.

Peter, the one with straight black hair and who couldn't grow a beard, leaned out around Emer, supporting his head in his hand and leaning on the table. He said, "It's lust--just pure unadulterated lust."

Mama Skirmitz sat down beside me, wiping her hands in her apron and leaned towards me, saying, "You never did any funny stuff with our Gretchen, now did you?"

"Of course not!" I reacted.

"Well, now," she said. "There's your answer."

Emer spoke up. "I had a wife once, name of Nancy. When we met and fell in love, we never messed around with each other. We just went up and got married. We didn't play around and do things we oughtn't. We got married and started a family."

"Yeah," said Peter. "That's what God made men and women for--to have families. Anything else is a disgrace and a weakness of character."

Weakness of character--I wondered if my character was strong enough to not want Bo. I knew it wasn't.

Then we got on the subject of drinking beer. They knew what

kind of environment I was exposed to visiting Allen and Fred. I told them that I only started because there had been no water, but I was not drinking any now.

Mama Skirmitz added, "Now, drinking beer can weaken your character."

"Oh, I didn't drink very much," I said, feeling a little guilty. "I only drank one or two to be polite."

"You can't control it," she said. "It will control you one day, and then it will be too late."

"Well," I said, "I don't do it any more."

"Well," she said, "I'm glad you stopped."

I had a deep seated feeling of goodness in my heart that burned whenever I talked to my new family. I felt surrounded by a people that cared. I could call them my guardian angels because they were always watching over me. That night when we said goodnight, I expressed my gratitude and walked away with a floating sensation all the way down to my bunk. I had not felt like that since I had been with Gretchen. It fortified me for what was coming up next.

I had forgotten there were mountains. I couldn't see them from the hill where we lived. I usually looked towards the towers instead of towards the mountains behind the hill. Yet, there were other mountains I could see from the towers far off to the east. They were the Blue Mountains, beyond which, was the capital city KingsGaard. There were mountains to the south also. That was near the borders. You couldn't see it for the trees except from the towers, but there was a lake between the city and the western mountains. It was at the base of those mountains where I had taken Anne and Elvin's sheep.

The last time I went up to visit Allen and Fred, Bo was there. She was on the couch with a guy who was rubbing her chest. She said it was quite relaxing, talking to some other girl. I sat down at a table to listen to the music and ordered a ginger ale, not drinking the beer they offered me. Allen was up there on his trumpet playing with the band. I

had never seen him play before. It was interesting. I thought I would wait until he was through and talk with him, but Bo came over and grabbed my arm and said, "Come on, we're going to the lake. I know a special place where we can make love."

I found myself being taken down to the street and entering a car. I had no power to say no. Instead, I said, "I didn't know you had a car."

"I don't," she said. "It's my boy friend's, the artist."

She was in a strange mood. She had a boy friend. She seemed to be making love to a guy on the couch at Allen and Fred's, and she grabbed me to take me down to the lake.

We didn't say much on the way out. I kept staring at her breasts and got an erection. I thought for sure I was not going to come back a virgin. Yet, in a silent moment of our conversation, I heard distinctly my name being called. It was a very mild and clear voice. The clarity was what astonished me. I turned my head back to Bo and said, "What?"

"I didn't say anything," she said.

From that point on, my bladder was being filled up and got very full as to begging to hurt. I felt that if we didn't stop, I would wet my pants.

"I hear the call of Nature," I said.

"So do I Bucko," she said, grabbing my leg.

"I mean," I said, getting embarrassed, "is there some place we can stop? I have to go."

There was a light up ahead. I could see that it was a filling station as we approached it. I was really hoping Bo would stop. She pulled into the drive that was a white glow against the surrounding darkness. We moved up against the side of the green building. I could see two doors. One said "Men" and the other "Women". I got out and said I would be right back. When I got into the men's restroom and was relieving myself, I heard that angel voice so clearly saying,

"Buck." The memory of it rang like a crystal bell all the way back to the car.

When I returned to the car and got in, I noticed that Bo's countenance had changed. She turned the car around and burned rubber, the tires screeching as we raced back onto the highway. I noticed that we were heading back home. I was again embarrassed as I asked, "Aren't we going in the wrong direction?"

Bo blurted out, "No, I'm taking you back home."

We didn't talk the whole drive back. I noticed every light that shown in the darkness. I studied the lights of the towers as we approached, watching the towers grow larger and larger until we were there in the city once again. She pulled up to the hill where I lived and not the towers. I could see my porthole shining in the dark night and the silhouette of Meow waiting up for me. I was relieved when the car stopped, but confused.

I got out of the car and leaned down and said "Thank You," not knowing what else to say.

She said, "This is where you belong. Stay over here."

"Okay," I said timidly and shut the door.

She yelled back, "You know I can't compete with Gretchen!" and turned the car around, burning rubber to get the car out of there. I felt as though I had been slapped in the face. I walked away stunned, but I felt like floating on air as I ascended the hill. I looked up at the stars and then back to the towers. That was the last time I saw Bo until after the war. In fact, that was the last time I ever went back to the towers.

After staring at the stars for a while, I sort of floated down the hole to my apartment. Meow greeted me as I entered and jumped up on the bunk knowing that's where I was headed.

Going to bed that night I felt quite different. I think I grew a little. I was put in my place and never forgot it. Would I have gone through with it? I don't know. I was saved by an act of Nature and by

Divine Providence. Perhaps it was my way of escaping out of a bad situation, and I had my guardian angel helping me. I often wondered if Bo had heard Gretchen's voice too. By what she said at parting, I thought so. But maybe that's not what she meant, but Gretchen was there, never-the-less. I dreamed of her that night, appearing as a bright angel.

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Trouble started at brewing at the factory. It was the King's factory, and there was talk of union. I was surprised, because I thought it was like stealing. I knew that a union wouldn't necessarily own the factory, but it would own the factory workers. The workers would no longer owe their allegiance to the King. They would be loyal to the union, and if the King is the law, then the union members would be considered outlaws. They would be operating outside the law.

Unionizers got up on boxes or barrels to preach their doctrine of wrongful allegiance, as I called it, drawing crowds from their work places. Supervisors would command the workers back to their jobs. There would be fights started because others who considered themselves more loyal to the King would try to drive the workers back by using clubs. I thought this so unnecessary. It was only creating ill feelings and separating the workers into parties-the loyalist and the unionists.

Unionists taught strange doctrine. It was that rich land owners were corrupt, and the land should be owned by all the people. The workers should have a say in what goes on in the factories. All people are equal, and we should live as a classless society where everyone worked for a living. The King's laws were not enough to provide for the needs of all the people. Communities should be governed by their own laws and their own elected judges, not by those appointed by the King and his corrupt governors. They wanted clothing, housing, groceries

and medical aid to be free to the workers. They complained that the governors and judges of the land had too much power and that authority should be distributed among all the people, that the people should decide what was right or wrong, that the people should be free to do according to their own wills. As a union, all the people would be free to control their own destiny, have control over their own jobs and control the factories. They would right all the wrongs done to them. The wrongs they listed was the right to govern themselves, choose their own destiny without Big Brother watching over them, establish safer working conditions, have longer breaks, greater privileges, shorter work weeks, a greater labor force, have a say in the merchandising of what was made, and decide about tariffs and international trade. And the list went on.

At home, Daddy Cherry said, "If the demands of the unionists were met, there would be less criminals in the jails, not because there would be less people breaking the law, mind you, but because there would be less laws to break! And we would be having criminals rule over us, going against the King and his mandates."

Dan added, "What they don't tell you is that workers will be robbed blind by union dues which will increase yearly to fill the pockets of the ever greedier party bosses who would be outside the law of both King and union."

Emer spoke up after gnawing on a chicken leg until it was perfectly clean. "They teach that within a union is protection, but who is going to protect you from the union?"

Peter said, "Yeah! Even now, you can't oppose them without a fist fight. If you say anything they don't like, they punch you. They believe it will be the true democracy, but they don't allow opposing views."

"That doesn't sound like they want a democracy," added Mama Skirmitz. "It sounds like a dictatorship they want."

"What the King has done," Daddy Cherry said, "is given us good

and righteous laws to protect us and to guide us to be upright and moral citizens...to do good to one another...to take care of one another. What else can be done? If the natural man has to decide what we should do, we should all become corrupt."

"It's not the King's aids that are corrupt," remarked one of the other men as he lit his pipe. "It's the god-forsaking unionists."

I was listening to all of this, and when there was a pause, I asked, "Do you mean that the unionist are forsaking God, or was that a cuss word?"

Everyone laughed, and the man spoke up again.

"But I do mean it. They are forsaking God and choosing their own selves to guide mankind."

Daddy Cherry said, "Yes, and you'll find that the King's laws are directly correlated with the ancient texts of the prophets."

I knew that the unionists meant good and that a lot of their proposals were good such as providing safer working conditions, continuing education, more labor saving devices and socialized medicine, but as for socializing the whole nation with the unionists in control, I doubted their vision. After all, the King already owned everything. There were no rich land owners, and the King assured us that there was plenty and to spare for our high population. All we had to do was to be more unselfish. He left that part up to us. The King already had a program to take care of the poor, but as far as I could see, the unionists just wanted to be in charge of it. All I could see out of their arguments, and I was still quite young and unsophisticated, was that they were pretty much lying to the people in order to put themselves into power.

Arguments and fist fights became more frequent and more inflamed. In some sections of the factory, work had become impossible. I remember at the foundry where I worked, Allen noticed a fist fight outside. He said, "Come on kid, let's go get our fists bloody," and he rushed outside. All I wanted was to finish my work. But with all

the commotion, I was beginning to feel helpless and a bit hopeless. How could I work alone? One of my components was missing. I could finish off the larger bell mold, but I had no direction from there. There was no one else in the shop, so, I wound up slipping out the door and going home. No one was watching the main gate as I passed. That day, it seemed like no one cared for working. It had turned into a big holiday for fighting.

Fighting spread from the factory into the streets. It was mob rule. There were not enough constables. They couldn't arrest everyone, and some of them were drawn into the melee.

The next day after breakfast, a lot of us were climbing out of the hole to go to work. Emer was on top. He poked his head out first and got it struck with a club. Peter caught him as he sank. He was passed down the hole to the first passageway. The hole was closed and everyone went down and took care of Emer.

Peter had cried, "Get back down. There are a pack of unionists up there."

I could hear the unionists cry, "Come out o' there you muggers! We'll teach ya what's comin'."

When all of us got into the passageway where they were caring for Emer, Daddy Cherry called, "This way to the streets!"

I closed the hatch behind us and locked it so no one could follow. I caught up to the men going down the long passageways that seemed to go for miles. When we came out, it was on the side of a hill behind a lot of shrubbery and trees. The factory gate was just beyond. I thought, how ingenious.

The only people I saw walking through the gate were those pledging their allegiance to the King, but I saw some I knew to be unionists getting through. I didn't say anything. I didn't want to start a fight.

There was a crowd gathering at the gate. They all had clubs. If we were to go through the gate, we would have to go through them.

"Well, that's that, now, isn't it?" Elam said, putting his hands on his hips.

We stood there staring at the mob. As we did, more of came up behind showing up for work. The two parties stood before the gate staring at each other. There seemed to be more of us than them.

I was being pushed towards the mob from behind. The loyalists started shouting superlatives with the armed mob shouting back. The two groups approached each other. I was too big to slink away and found this tough guy shouting in my face. The next moment fists and clubs were swinging. I found I had to defend myself, so I started hitting and grabbing and being hit in return. I pushed my way through, grabbing bodies and shoving them aside despite the numbness and blood spreading over my face. I tasted the blood, and it gave me strength to push back. I pushed and grabbed and prodded my way through to the fence. I climbed to the top, kicking my way above the mob. When I reached the top, I carefully lay on the bobbed wire and rolled over, dropping to the ground. I lay there in dazed stupor for a minute or so, and then got up and ran over to the guard house. I didn't know what to do until I saw a fire hose.

Unionists followed my example and were climbing the fence. The loyalists standing around started helping me as soon as they saw me taking hold of the fire hose. We unrolled it, turned it on and with several of us holding it, turned it onto the loyalists, knocking them off the fence. We sprayed through the fence, knocking down those that got too close to it. The crowd dispersed. Most of the loyalists returned, and we went to work that day.

I got a lot of pats on the back, but I had a big head ache. There were several lumps on my head. I spent most of the day sleeping in a corner in the wood shop. Allen didn't bother me. He only smiled.

That evening, we went home through the same tunnel by which we had arrived.

Next morning, there were no mobs waiting at the exit hole, and

when we looked out, there were no mobs in the streets. We walked towards the factory the way we normally went. There was a wind blowing. It was so strong, we had to lean forward. The trees bowed towards us as though we were being worshiped. Those wearing hats had to hold them down or loose them. There were several hats blowing in the wind. Dark clouds boiled overhead. We met stragglers on the way that finally formed into a large gathering of noticed loyalists walking together towards the factory. When we got three blocks from the factory, we were jolted to a sudden stop. I pushed forward to see why we had stopped.

There was no factory to be seen. Either there was a dark thick fog or night had simply forgotten to leave down there at the end of the street. The darkness that had prevailed down there had joined the darkness from above in one swirling mass. Where I thought the fence and gate of the factory ought to be, I saw that the darkness had sprouted arms and legs that were gestulating in weird patterns as though the whole were one giant insect with a thousand independent arms and legs on its back trying to right itself. Then I saw that the darkness had spouted horses, dark horses with red glowing eyes rising up and clawing at the air. They brayed and stamped their feet on the asphalt. Their riders had trouble keeping them still. They wanted to charge. That darkness was a visible fear that swirled forward and gripped my heart as it did all of us, and I thought I had eaten stinging nettle for breakfast. I felt prickly all over.

THE WAR

Things like this weren't supposed to happen. Dreams and especially nightmares were supposed to stay in your sleep. I knew I was wide awake. I looked around me at the men. A shaft of light came down out of the dark heaven and I saw their faces. They were all contorted in fierce grins as though crazed with fear. But the storm blowing at us from the factory couldn't blot out the light. There was at least one of us that dared speak up. It was Daddy Cherry. The contortion in his face wasn't fear. It was indignity and revulsion.

He said, raising his fist, "We know who thou art! Thou art the devil! The enemy to the King! We will not fear you!"

Thunder boomed from the darkness before us and blew us backwards, but our feet being firmly planted, like a grove of trees, we bent backwards, but again straightened our-selves.

"We will not give in to the evil!" Daddy Cherry called out. With that, he started marching forward waving his walking stick in the air. (It was funny that I had never noticed it before.) We all followed him and started marching towards hell.

Guns from the darkness shot out. Some of us fell. The dark horses could be held back no longer. They charged. We charged, but our charge was interrupted. We didn't reach the unionists. There was a third charge from the left of white horses whose riders wore silver armor. We stopped in mid-step in our charge and we all yelled and shouted, "God save the King!" Light poured in upon us and we were saved.

We shouted, "It's the King! It's the King! It's the King!"

All the King's horsemen galloped in between us and the darkness, pushing the darkness before them.

Chills ran up and down my spine to see such a sight. I paled. The word we heard as children had come to pass. The King's forces driving

the evil before them were actually hear in our district. It was real. It was no longer a legend.

I trembled as I saw hundreds of silver clad knights on white horses run passed me, driving the black storm back into the factory yard and further. When they had all gone, the storm was gone and the light shone on a sprinkling of dead and wounded bodies strewn about the yard. The fence and gate were flat on the ground as was the guard shack.

Light finally came back to the factory. Men went back to work without checking in. I myself didn't make it to the gate. All of the King's men had not been in the charge. One of them on horseback approached me. He had cut off my advance towards the gate. He got off his white stallion and stood before me as though looking me over. I looked him over as well. He wore a cylindrical helmet that rose to a point and sprouted a fleur-de-lys. Chain mail came down from his helmet covering his neck and ducking underneath the metal plating covering his shoulders and torso. The King's emblem of a golden blazing sun was emblazoned on his chest, surrounded by other fleur-de-lys. I noticed a broad-sword with a golden handle and silver scabbard hanging down his left side on a silver chain. I looked at his face. He had thick eyebrows, thick mustache and a thick but pointed beard that reached to the middle of his chest. There was a gleam in his eyes, and his smile showed huge horse teeth.

I didn't know what to do or say, so I blurted out, "Are you the King?" like a stupid little boy.

He drew back and gave a hearty laugh.

"No, no, son," he said merrily. "I am merely one of his many captains." He paused as he placed his mailed hand upon my shoulder. "Buck, your name has come before the King. You are a very brave lad. We need men of your valor. Will you accept the King's commission?"

My whole life flashed before me, and my mouth must have dropped open, for he closed it gently with his mailed finger. I couldn't

think of a greater honor. I wanted to say something, but couldn't.

He lifted my chin and said, "The offer won't be made again."

"Yeah, yeah," I stammered. "I mean yes, Sir! I accept."

All I could think of was becoming a knight in shining armor, and being taught the ways of a gentleman. I would be cared for the rest of my life.

"Well, then," he exclaimed. "It will require you get on that horse with me and never look back. Can you do this?"

"What about my family?" I asked.

"What you have will never leave you," he said.

It was a cryptic saying, but I sort of knew what he meant. I thought of my guardian angel, my Gretchen, and my heart burned within me.

"Okay," I said.

The knight in shining armor mounted his horse, reached down and gave me a hand. I grabbed hold of his hand and he swung me onto the back of the horse. I was like gliding through the air, and I automatically strided the horse like a pro. We galloped out of the city and into the east hills. There were tents everywhere ... hundreds of them ... in the same shape as the knight's helmet. They had scalloped flags around the top rim of each tent looking like ring of coats of arms around the top of each tent. Some of the tents were vertically striped and some were checkered. Some were covered with fleur-de-lys. Others were of solid color, with every color of the rainbow represented. It looked like several circuses had come to time.

There was one open section of the circus that looked like a corral and a parade ground because of the many horses and all that was going on inside it, and then there was a section with many wagons and cannon. But most of that was off to the south.

We approached one tent near the middle of the camp that was white and covered with golden sun symbols with rays like snake-like daggers radiating from every sun. It was larger than all the other

tents. I imagined that it would have to be the war council tent where all the general would meet and talk about the war around a round table. Here, we dismounted.

He told me, "Stay here with the horse until I return."

I thought it must be very important what he was doing to enter that tent. The guards at the entrance saluted him with their lances, so I thought maybe he was a general.

As I stood there holding the reigns, the horse nudged my shoulder, making me stumble forward. He moved me towards a water trough where he took a drink. He looked back at me with a swing of his neck and head and pushed at me again with his muzzle. I didn't know what to think until, stumbling backwards, my foot stepped on a canvas bag. I had an epiphany. I had a startling understanding that the horse wanted to be fed. I reached down and looked in the bag. It was a horse's feed bag, and it was half filled with oats. I lifted the bag up to him and allowed him to put his muzzle in it and put the strap over his ears. He shook his head and grunted a thank you. That was a smart horse. He could communicate.

The knight came back out after a while. He wasn't wearing his helmet, but carried it under his arm. Actually, I remember him taking off just before he went in. He didn't have his mail gloves on either. When he saw his horse eating, he seemed astonished and said, "I knew you would do that! You will make a fine squire!" He then looked at me kindly and put his hand on my shoulder. He said, "You can drop the reigns, old Froggy there won't go anywhere. He's well trained. It's time to go in and meet the King."

I gulped, and got a lump in my throat. I shook in my shoes. The whole earth seemed to be trembling beneath me.

I won't say what happened in there except that I had audience with the King and swore my allegiance to him. I floated out of that tent with a burning fire in me. I knew that he must be the Son of God. He loves us as though we were his own children. I had never known that

kind of love before. I had loved Gretchen with all my heart, but this was something far above mortal love. He was a spiritual giant. I didn't come out of that audience dry eyed.

Sir Gwinn, as I learned was the knight's name while inside, had to keep his hand on my shoulder at all times. I figured it was so I wouldn't float away. He was to be my master, and I, his squire. He was the one who had been sent in as a spy and had seen me hose down the unionists. He told me this as we left on his horse, old Froggy. As we left, I kept repeating the new name that had been given me so I would never forget it.

Taking care of the camp was the first thing I learned. I had to take care of what they called a bivouac. I learned to keep a neat bed, take care of laundry, fold clothes in an exact way, pack, unfold and put up a tent, pack wagons, take care of the mess, that is, cook and serve the food and do the dishes, and take care of the horses.

I learned more of horses than what I had learned on the farm at Ann and Elvin's. I had to become a veterinarian and horse psychologist and know how to take care of the horse's armor and keep him well groomed for parade.

I had to take care of Sir Gwinn's armor as well, and his sword, how to keep it sharp and shiny, and keep his boots shiny. It was his bivouac I had to take care of. I slept on the ground by his bed ... at his feet, actually.

I was introduced to all the grooms and squires in the division, as we all ate together long before the knights ate. There at the mess tent, I learned all the names of the other knights. I learned all the steps for advancement as the previous squires had taught them.

Two more encampments passed as I learned my duties, and then came the sword. We used sticks at first and then blanks or spades that were metal but not sharp or pointed. We were also taught bayonet and hand-to-hand combat without weapons, using only our hands as weapons.

Within five years of maneuvers against the enemy, I became somewhat of a fair swordsman, being fifth in my class. I also learned to shoot firearms, and becoming a sharpshooter was just a sideline. (I heard that the Masters didn't need to hide from bullets, but could shoo them as flies with the sword. It would have taken me twenty years or more to even approach becoming a Master.)

By the time I was a young man of twenty one, I was taken before the King again to be tested. I passed the test of my skills and knowledge enough to be given charge of fifty men. I put a corporal over every ten men.

We were in many skirmishes but never in any great battle. Whenever darkness gathered on the land, we were there to drive them out. However, it seemed to me that they were never dispersing, only gathering into one location into a great body of blackness and storm. The place I knew as a fairy tale in my youth, but was real. It was Castle Valenteen. It was near the southwestern border of Kingsland. Since it was within our borders, I knew there had to be a final confrontation.

It was my understanding that the King did not want this confrontation. He was willing to manage the skirmishes that came up and disperse the Unionists. It must have been a great bereavement to him, knowing that he was driving away his own people. In the two time I had seen him, he looked as if he carried all the worries and sadness of all the people in his eyes and in his breath. But his countenance radiated faith and confidence in overcoming the evil in his land. There was no fear in him. When I had met with him, I could feel the love he had for all his people, even the Unionists.

Yet, there would be a final conflict. It was in all the legends I had heard as a boy. They spoke of the White King and the Dark King gathering all their forces together for the one final battle.

I thought once why didn't the King go against Castle Valenteen before their forces grew too large...go now while it was easily

destroyed. I even asked Sir Gwinn, our Division Head.

He said that it would not prove to be fair play if we hit our enemy when he was weak, that it was the knight's way to be equally matched, and that was why we were driving the Unionists into one place. "The King is no bully," he said. "He only fights to protect his own."

There came the time when the King's men had visited the whole of Kingsland and driven the Unionists before them until talk of Unionism was diminished. The King proved that he would provide and care for his own. He rebuilt factories and mines, making safer working conditions and providing needed health insurance and workers compensation and replaced corrupt bosses and managers who were robbing the workers of their pensions and provided for drought relieve in farming communities. He made it clear in all parts of the land, whether it was industrial or pastoral, that all complaints should come before the King instead of being kept behind closed doors to brew into a conflict. He showed his compassion wherever he went. There was only one place he did not go, and that was to the plain of Goremon, the plane of beasts at the foot of Castle Valenteen.

No matter where we were in the land, we had but to look over to the South West to see black clouds boiling over the horizon. Sometimes we were so far away that it looked like only a black spot in the sky, but it was still a noticeable blemish to our land.

On our marches we gathered up every garrison and posted division. Our forces increased as did the enemy's. Each soldier and knight wore a solemn face, at attention, listening for that final call...a call so desperate in which we knew that only a handful out of millions would survive the conflict. It would be a call to die for King and country.

Days on end I heard the monotonous sound of armor clanking, marching feet tromping the ground, the rhythm of wagon wheels rolling, clanking sounds from the chuck wagons,

moaning from a thousand oxen pulling the thunderous juggernauts, wagons so big that men marched underneath to keep out of the sun. On these we kept our supplies and war cannon. On some were small cities where the war captains kept their offices to make their plans. One was the King's palace.

Purple mountains surrounded us to the east and to the west as we moved south down a wide valley towards the incessant boiling wall of blackness rising to the top of the atmosphere like a whirlwind. We picked up more men and machines as we marched, and our forces grew daily. Our strength was as a whole nation on the move.

We moved through low lying hills and then into a green valley beneath blue hazy mountains. There were several passes through these mountains into the next valley of Goremon. Our forces split up, trailing to the mouth of each of these passes. I found myself camping at the mouth of the westernmost canyon. Looking at the opening of the canyon, I could imagine a large mouth with jagged teeth opening up ready to receive us. There was a bridge that spanned the opening of the canyon that looked like a nose, lip and teeth. The canyon walls looked like a narrowing throat that dropped into darkness.

My men seemed unafraid. Of course, they would not be. Each man knew for whom he fought, had met him personally as he had called each man by name.

Sleep would not come until late that night. I stared at the stars to the north with wonder and fell into a fitful sleep. I had dark dreams. A couple of time, I awoke with a jerk, thinking the Dark Lord had a hold of my face with his fingers in my nostrils and eyes, his thumb in my mouth. I couldn't scream! I had to look around to see where I was...to get my bearings. I sweat profusely. I was reassured by the campfires and the guards and the sleeping men. Still, the stars were only in half the sky and the darkness was creeping ever closer.

Morning came and breakfast went, and we all stood on our feet ready to march into the canyon. We waited for the blast of the long

brass trumpets.

The trumpets split the air! The command of "Men advance!" was heard. It came from my own mouth as though it had been another's. I heard hundreds of other captains giving the same command echoing through the valley, all shouting in unison, "Men, advance!"

We advanced into the cave-like canyon with its roof of blackness. The walls of the cave were red with pink and white striations undulating like waves of the sea. The darkness which I assumed to be so close receded farther into the canyon as we advanced. It was as though a light went before us, dispersing the darkness. I was reminded of the factory at home when the King's men went after the Unionists. As the King's men charged through the factory yard, they were a light that chased away the dark clouds. Or was it the Unionists that pulled the darkness along with them?

When we got near the opening into the next valley, little impish men jumped down off the faces of the canyon walls with knives and swords slashing at the King's men. They were smeared with paint the same color as the walls of the canyon. We all drew our swords and started slashing back. Instead of halting the columns, we raced forward to get out of the canyon and into the clearing so we could do better at defending ourselves. The little imps were bouncing everywhere. I slew one myself as it jumped out at me. It was light and followed the swing of my sword to the ground where it got trampled by our horses. I saw two men go down, but no more.

Sir Gwinn led the way into the clearing at a slow gallop, and the black wall retreated before him. I saw the bubbling of dark bodies and horse hoofs rearing up within the black shadows. When all the troops had passed through the canyon, we formed a bubble of light within the shadows. Sir Gwinn organized us into our battalions and divisions along the perimeter of the mountain until we were joined by the other troops to the east. Then all of the mountain that lay behind us was lit up with our light. All the King's men were ready to charge. The

trumpets blew a long shrill echo and the charge was in full force. The full force of the King took the light into the valley.

My mare was met by a black one with a black knight atop her. Both horses reared up and our swords clashed and clanged and sparks flew. I was amazed at the strength of his blows. I felt the hatred as hot breath blew into my face with obscene snarling. At one point, his sword slid along the edge of mine and was coming near my throat. In an instant, I twisted my wrist as the sword master taught me, and the tip of my sword plunged into his throat. He slumped back, and his horse ran back into the darkness.

I reared up and called, "Come on men!" and raced forward, not knowing who or what followed. I encountered strange creatures whose head or helmets were that of boars and apes and bulls with large thick horns. They all had tremendous teeth. They jumped on me from all directions and pulled me down from my horse and started biting my arms and legs and slashing at me with swords and cimeters. I whacked at them with my sword and shot at them with my pistol, and they just kept coming. I saw some of my men fighting them as well. I shouted all the encouraging words in my vocabulary, and fought as fiercely as I could, and we were, after long hours, able to gain some ground.

There was lightening and thundering and cold hurricane force winds blowing at my chest, making have to bend forward. The sound of trumpets faded away into the distance as though I was being left behind, and I couldn't find my horse. My sword arm was turning to jelly, so many black tar babies I had to slice through just to advance one foot. But by degrees, I felt that we were making some progress. Even so, the continual blows to my body head and to my arms and legs proved to be almost fatal. Once I lost my helmet, I lost all consciousness from a blow to my unprotected head. A bright flash of light was the last thing I remembered.

Was I dreaming or was the battle over? I was lying on the ground and heard only the stillness. I rose to my hands and knees.

And was it night or was I still in that black thick fog we had been fighting in? When I went to move, I could feel dead bodies of men and imps everywhere. It was the blackest thing I had ever experienced. I couldn't see a thing. I could have been in a cave, but it didn't sound right. I tried standing up. Pain slashed through my head. I hurt over every inch of my body like I had been stomped on. I had to walk slowly, because of the pain and because every step I took, I stepped on someone's arm or leg or chest. The stench of carrion was overpowering. I choked at each breath. I tied my kerchief about my face, but it didn't help much.

I had lost my sword, my dagger and my pistol. I found a sword sticking up. I thought I would pull it out of the ground and carry it with me, but when I pulled, it made such an awful sucking noise that it made my skin crawl. That wasn't the ground it was stuck in.

I walked on in the darkness. My eyes ached trying to see. After a while, the bodies became sparse and phosphorescent. I could even see the bodies of horses glowing in the darkness. They weren't glowing bright, but I could make them out, and they were a phosphorescent green. The bodies grew further and further apart the longer I walked, but the stench wasn't getting any easier to bear.

I took my armor off. I took it that the battle was over. I couldn't hear any noise. I became aware of my own stench of blood and sweat. I think I was bleeding inside my mouth. I had to swallow blood every now and then.

Darkness...impenetrable darkness...it was never ending. I asked myself, when would the dawn come, and why weren't there any stars? I got so tired that I literally dropped to the ground. There hadn't been a body for a long time, and as I passed out, I could feel clean grass the length and sweep of my arms.

I awoke to more darkness. In my dreaming, there wasn't any light, and as I woke up, there was still no light. Did I sleep all day and wake up in the night again? The dawn never came as I sat there for a

long time feeling my stomach growl. I remembered that I had a sack of smoked fish tied to my belt, but I had thrown it away with my armor. I got up and walked on.

The constant smell of a dead rat as though someone had tied one around my neck made me cry out "Oh God!" but no one heard me. Nothing moved. I kept walking for hours or days, I didn't know which. At one point, there was darkness on top of darkness that caught up with me. It grunted and startled me, and I jerked my sword into a swing and lost it. I twirled around with the momentum and fell down. I felt for my sword...couldn't find it...panicked, got up and ran. The dark thing ran beside me. Fear, stark naked fear, bolted me forward like a canon. I bumped into nothing, and I didn't feel the ground. All I was aware of was that I was in a new place, in a forest, and I had not bumped into anything. I wasn't running anymore, and my eyes had gotten used to the dark. I could make out trees and bushes and all kinds of undergrowth, but I hadn't bumped into anything. I couldn't get that out of my mind. I couldn't understand it. It wasn't logical. I had been running through this forest and hadn't touched a thing.

In the distance, I could see a light as though it could be a camp fire. I thought maybe it was a camp of the enemy, but somehow it gave me hope. It was light. I walked towards it.

THE PRISONER

Walking through the forest, getting closer to the fire, I saw it was not a camp of any kind, but a small cottage. The fire I had seen was a yellowish light coming from a window on the right side of the door.

Approaching the gate of the cottage, my eyes were fixed upon the orange and yellow glow coming from the window. I could smell the damp moldy bricks and rotting paper and wood. The ground outside was bare, and the two trees I saw had no leaves. It was as winter, but

without the freezing cold. Then I got a good whiff of the acrid smell of human flesh that has never known a bath and then the foul stench of human waste.

"Oh good grief!" I shuddered as I bolted backward! Suddenly there was an old lady standing right in front of me just beyond the gate. She must have been there the whole time looking at me, but I hadn't noticed. All my hair stood on end at the sight of her. Wave after wave of fear flowed from her presence like a wind of electricity.

I gathered all my strength and asked, "Where am I? What is this place?"

She responded with a cackle, "You are home, Sonny. You are home at last!" I thought for sure she was an old witch from story tales I had heard as a child. She opened her arms and cackled again.

"Come, come...come on in."

She had such power over me, I couldn't stand it, and I scraped my contorted face with my fingernails and ran away screaming. I ran as far away as I could, but I found that I had run in a circle and had come back to the horror of her open arms and her cackling voice.

She looked and smelled like a human corpse standing there in front of that little cottage that had ceased to be a home long ages ago. Her face was all wrinkled like a prune. She wore a black dress and held a black shawl about her head against the wind.

I felt numb from the fear. I just kept on walking. There was a strange effect like a dream. She stared at me, and her eyes kept following me like a picture you see sometimes of someone looking straight ahead, but the eyes follow you. She didn't move, and she just kept whispering my name. I was sure I was walking forward, but there she was, always in front of me, moving with me without moving, but she was getting farther away. I was moving away from her...she was in front of me getting farther away, but I was moving forward. Was I looking back at her and the cottage?

I couldn't tell. I was numb.

I felt dead. I walked on without cognisance of time. Walking through the dark wasn't something I did anymore, it became a state of being...walking in the dark. I don't remember ever thinking or doing anything...just walking in the dark.

After a long while, something whispered to me from the back of my mind, but I couldn't pay attention to it. I couldn't focus on it. I walked as one hypnotized, walking like a zombie. It was more like a feeling creeping up my spine. The feeling turned to fear, and the fear formed into word in my mind. It said, "Turn Back!" I had no will to turn back. The warning was empty. It was only a passing thought. The fear grew into sobbing and tears and trembling and grasping at my contorted face and the laughter of the mad, for my legs made no sense of it and kept on walking. They just kept on walking. A black hand had a hold of me and pulled me forward.

My feet found stairs. They were pulled up the stairs. I went forever upward, twisting and turning and going through forbidden passageways that were haunted by black demons I could feel, and I screamed, but I couldn't hear myself.

The passageways smelled of rotting brick and moldy mortar. The walls were slimy to the touch. The damp air was cold, stone cold in my bones. I could feel the dampness gathering in my lungs, and I couldn't cough enough. I had weird dreams of living in Ann and Elvin's house. It was empty of people. I was alone there. I searched, but there was nobody. I dreamed of that witch in the forest. She said she was my true mother, and I hated her. I dreamed of a tall empty house in the middle of a lake that was accessed only by walking down a long pier.

Waking up didn't mean anything. When I opened my eyes, I was in a room, but there was only darkness. When I lay down and went to sleep, there was only darkness. I had no reference. I didn't know how big the room was. I only know I was on a stone cobbled floor (or maybe a street) by the way it felt. I never knew how long I was asleep

or how long I was awake.

I was too afraid to stand straight up, so each time I thought I was awake, I would crawl on my hands and knees. I looked for a wall, but I was afraid to reach out for what I might find.

I was a prisoner...perhaps in a tower.

One day I finally reached a wall. I was concave, proving my earlier suspicions. I was indeed in a tower, in a room in the top of a tower. I would feel for a window. There should be a window. I would let in the light, I thought. But moving around the room, following the wall, falling asleep sometimes, I never found a thing. I didn't even know if I had passed by the same place twice.

It was eternal night, and always cold and shivering. Sometimes I would touch my sore eye balls to see if my eyes were shut or open.

Darkness takes on a personality of its own. I could imagine sometimes there was a window just above my reach, and I would stare at it. It was just a little grayer than the darkness around me that I breathed like smoke. It was his perfume, the dark smoke was, and I would see his silhouette over the window. I could feel his power that clutched at my throat. I feared breathing lest he notice me.

The darkness was emanating from him. He magnified all my fears. He was the source of the dark cloud I had seen with the Unionists. He was the devil incarnate. My hair stood on end ever time he would enter the room, and I froze. I wouldn't even shiver.

I clearly felt the power that made me a prisoner. I knew there had to be a door to the room. He had brought me to this place. Maybe I had been let down from the ceiling. I had heard of prisons like that. I knew he wouldn't let me out. He would let me rot...but the power I felt coming from him also sustained me. I had neither eaten nor drank anything since my entrance into the darkness. I had only breathed in the power of rottenness and hatred. That was his power...it was infinite hatred, and I hated him in return. I hated him and feared him...and thus he kept me prisoner. There may have been a door, but

in my darkness, it was inaccessible.

The air was completely filled with malice. I felt that if I turned this way or that way, I would meet him, and I could not afford that. It would tear my soul apart, and I would scream for an eternity. He was the bogy man under the bed magnified a million times. Before I met Gretchen, I would cringe under the covers at night. Now my imagined nightmares had been realized, and I was in his awful grasp. One time the thought of Gretchen came to my mind, and then he showed up and looked at me, and all I could do was scream, but no sound came out.

There was no escape. Every time I tried to think, my thoughts were turned into little grotesque figures that mocked me and taunted me, driving me not to think at all. I had to sit there against the wall feeling my bones as my flesh wasted away, spitting out my teeth and crying...ever weeping.

One time I dreamed that the place I was in was an empty theater. It was completely dark, but I found a door and opened it. I found myself in a lobby with a curved convex wall. I followed it around until I came to a double door. I pushed my way in and found an auditorium with nice cushioned seats that folded up when no one sat in them. I tried out the seats. I felt the concrete floor. I wandered down the slopping floor to the stage. I found an exit out and found myself back in my prison cell with no way out. Was I awake or asleep? I still couldn't tell. But I would have this dream over and over, and each time, I would get farther out into the offices. At one point, I found a street door. The only thing that stopped me from opening it was the abiding evil presence ever watching me. And I'm sure that if I opened the door, there still would only be darkness. The street I saw outside was totally dark, yet not so dark as my cell. Like an obedient pet, I always returned to my cell.

His presence everywhere soon dissolved my roaming spirit and I sat in the darkness. If thoughts of other people came into my mind, he would be there to punish me by his incessant stare, making me sob.

Was I his only prisoner? I had never known the presence of anyone else unless it were a goblin that came and tortured me, biting me and stretching me all out of shape in my dreams. Sometimes I would be eaten and wake up with a start only to find something scarier. His presence, the darkness.

I had only one thing left to me, and that was my fear. That was my life now. He was remaking me in his image. I was the darkness now. He was bending me to his will, and obviously, to do his will. If he let me go, I would be a black knight riding a black horse and not care and hate and kill everyone.

Once on Ann and Elvin's farm Fred had caught a ground squirrel and cut its chest open with his pocket knife which had a six inch blade. He watched its heart beat. Later that day, he came back to see if it was still alive. He lifted it up and opened it. Its heart just barely was beating. He laughed and threw it away. I felt like that's what the devil was doing with me. When my heart stopped beating, he would laugh and throw me away, but I knew he never laughs, and when my heart stopped, I would be his.

For a long time I only stared into the darkness. Then I began living my life over and seeing everything happen as though it were a movie. I saw myself leaving Ann and Elvin's and living with Gretchen and her family, working in the factory, being drafted into the army and ending up staring into the darkness. This movie would repeat time after time, over and over until I was getting pretty tired of the whole thing. I never knew what to think of it. It was just something for me to do, I guess. Funny, he didn't stop me.

I did learn that I wasn't singular and that I wasn't someone special. I hadn't been singled out for suffering. There were many ranch hands that had lost their jobs and wound up in the King's service. Other men had gone hungry and others had lost loved ones. Many men told me their stories as they were picked up by the King's men and recruited. Many had been wounded in battle. Some lost their lives.

I saw that now. I was no one special. But I seemed to be the only prisoner. I didn't even notice a rat or a cockroach.

A long time passed. I got sores all over my body. My tongue swelled up. I got dizzy when I tried to stand. My belly was protruding, and I stank. I couldn't stand myself, and I hurt all over. I couldn't think without my head hurting tremendously. Before I died, the end came. It was like waking up just before dawn, though, I had never closed my eyes all night. I noticed that the darkness wasn't black anymore. It was gray, and it was getting lighter and lighter. Something was gone. He was gone. I couldn't feel his presence any more. When it got light enough to look around, I did so, and I found a large wooden door.

I stood up, and with deep breaths, I was able to sustain myself somewhat. I looked around the small tower room wondering why I hadn't been able to even feel the door before. Even in the darkness, I could feel the wall, but never a door. Maybe he had kept it from me.

I painfully walked out the door. I went down the steps to a large room. I crossed it. It was empty. There were no furnishings or decorations. I found what may have been a suite of offices. At least I could say connecting cubicles.

I remembered how it felt to feel his presence, and chills went through my spine the whole time I spent exploring. The whole place was empty, though, and he wasn't here. I thought I could feel him around every corner, but he never showed up. I thought how funny to be without him. Even the hatred I had felt was gone. I had no more feelings except that my hair stood on end every time I entered a new room.

I went through hall ways and passageways until I found glass windows and was able to look outside. It was truly dawn outside. The red purple clouds showed that the sun was about to come up over the mountains.

I heard bugles, and I started sobbing. It was the King's men. I started towards what I thought to be a door, trying to yell out. I only

heard a hoarse cry come out of me. It was only windows. I couldn't find a door. Maybe it was that I was so attracted to the light that I only saw the windows.

I went to one window and heard a woman scream. It wasn't me, I assured myself. No, it wasn't me. I didn't make that sound. I looked in the window at my reflection. There, I saw a naked skeleton covered with skin. It had long scraggly hair and a long thin beard. I wondered at it for a while. I felt sorry for it. At last, I saw another prisoner. I tried to touch him. It was me.

I searched for a door the only way I knew how. I felt along the wall until I did come to a large wooden door. I slowly opened it. I heard screams and astonished cries. I saw a lot of people, men and women along the street, and I saw soldiers marching. Then I saw the King. He smiled at me, and I fainted.

My Recovery

There was a memory that came back to me as I felt a cool breeze blow over me. I had ascended up a stone stair case, and I knew that if I were to rejoin the King's men, I would have to travel down that stony stair case and go down into the valley where I had seen their tents. I tried to, but my legs wouldn't take me. They trembled, and then I fell down the stairs. I woke up with a jerk! I was lying in a bed with a white canvas tent over me, and a warm woolen blanket over my boney body. A cool breeze was blowing.

I looked around. There were other beds with men lying in them. There was a bottle of serum attached to a thick wire frame, and it had a plastic tube running from it to a needle in my arm. I looked at it for a long time. It was evident that there had been several attempts to put that needle in my vein, and it felt very sore. My bones hurt. All of me hurt.

There were about 50 beds around me. There was a smell of

cleaning alcohol. It made me woozey. I heard men moaning. There were many that were bandaged up. Some looked dead or asleep. There were some sitting at desks writing letters or memoirs. There were some without arms. I couldn't see any without legs until I saw a lone man sitting in a wheelchair strolling down the middle isle. His left leg had been amputated just above the knee.

"Ah!" said the man in the wheelchair. "The human skeleton has awakened."

I looked at the man and started sobbing. It was Allen.

"I never did join that union," he said. "What happened to you? You look like you haven't eaten since the last day I saw you."

"Allen?" I asked hoarsely. "Allen? Is that you?"

"You recognize me Little Buck! Owe!" he grabbed his head as he approached my bed. "Got to talk softly," and he stated again near a whisper. "I got this one big head ache. Never goes away."

Allen reached over behind him to a tray overhanging an empty bed and got a glass of water and a pill. He took that and then I told him I had been on a long walk. I don't remember much after that. I must have gone back to sleep. My body was not yet functioning well on its own. After having been sustained by the darkness, I had to get used to taking in fluids and nourishment. After I got stronger, I could talk to Allen.

After a long silence which may have been sleep, I turned my head towards where Allen had been. He was no longer in his wheelchair, but sitting up in bed reading, something I had never before seen him do.

"Allen?" I asked, "Are you a soldier for the King?"

He turned towards me, resting his book on his chest and said, "Yessiree, true an' blue, that's me!"

"It's funny how I joined up," he said. "You remember that day the King's men came to drive out the Unionists?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, I was running down the yard near the foundry because I was being chased by horses. Everybody was running away...running faster than me. I was sure I was for the Union, but as I looked at that black cloud ahead of me and realizing I was headed right for it...well, the fact is, I just wasn't angry! I think that's what stopped me. I wasn't angry. I was for the Union and all that, but why be angry? You know how light hearted I am. Why, I can do a lot of barking, but I'm a noble old dog wagging its tail in delight of the light and life. Darkness? I can't stand it except to look at the moon and the stars with a girl in arms. Well, anyway, I stopped and stood there looking at that black cloud, asking myself if I really wanted to go into that. I turned around and looked at the King's men running all around me, chasing that cloud. I wasn't afraid of them. I saw light in them.

"There I was being surrounded by the King's men. One of them turned back and put a sword to my throat. 'Having second thoughts?' he asked. Right then, I felt really peaceful. I smiled, and he smiled and put his sword away. 'Sorry,' he said, 'Thought you were a Unionist.' 'Not me,' I said. 'You a fighter?' he said. I told him I could throw a mean punch. 'Want to come with us? We need good men like you,' he said. I had no second thoughts. I said 'Yes' and he gave me his hand. He lifted me up on his stead and we rode off to camp. I got trained to fight, went off to war and wound up here with part of a leg gone.

"Say," he said. "I learned something," as if he were apologizing.

"What's that?" I asked.

"What the Unionists were doing."

"What was that?" I asked again.

"They had some legitimate complaints...some about working conditions and all that, but the King already had a program in place to take care of anyone who lost his job or who wasn't getting paid enough or who got sick or injured and couldn't work. None of that was new that they were spouting off. What they were really doing was trying to get people to own their own lands and property when it was

already owned by the King. But even that was not quite right. That's what they said, but they were also saying that the Union would eventually own all the land and then every one would be working for the Union and the King would be dethroned. They weren't espousing democracy after all, or capitalism. They were pure socialists. That's why the King was after them. They wanted to dethrone him and set themselves up in his place, owning all that he owns. It was just one king trying to dethrone another, even though the second king wouldn't be a single person, but it would have had the same results, except, I don't think the bureaucracy that would have resulted would have been very compassionate as the King is.

"I found something else," he said, leading me on.

"What was that?" I asked.

"I found out that Ann and Elvin never did own their farm. It works like this. You put in a request. The King gives you a plot of land with a contract that you will take care of it, and whatever you grow or raise, you have to give back the increase. That's where the food or other things you buy at the store comes from. Either that, or it's given to the poor."

That was interesting to me. I wondered why I had never learned that. I guess I was never interested. There was a lot I was never interested in, only in living my life and working or fighting in the War.

"Now tell me how you got hear," he implored.

I told him what had happened to me, and how I came to be a captain and then told him how I got lost and wound up in the castle as a prisoner. All he could say was "Wow!" Then we exchanged war stories until I got so exhausted I passed out.

In the days of healing, Allen and I talked about what we would do when we got out. He told me that he had been in touch with Ann and Elvin. The drought had eased up and they needed him back. He thought he would go back to the farm and take over because they were getting old and couldn't take care of the place any longer. I

asked him how he would do without a leg. He showed me one day by prancing about on a new leg the army had given him. He wanted me to come with him back to the farm, but I couldn't make up my mind. I was getting homesick for my hole in the ground and Gretchen's parents. But I didn't think very much about Gretchen any more. I didn't think very much at all. I either meditated or slept when I wasn't talking to Allen.

The day came they released Allen. I was just on the verge of regaining my strength enough to get out of bed and walk around. I was started on solid food and was gaining weight. I was sitting on the edge of my bed when he came in to say goodbye.

"Well, Buck," he said, "When you get strong enough to leave the camp, come out to the farm if you have a mind to. There will always be a place for you."

I told him I would if I had a mind to...if I could make up my mind. If I had a desire to do anything, it would probably be in a wide open space with lots of natural sun light.

I told him, "But for right now, I'll stay with the corps and take my orders from here."

"All right," he said, giving me a firm handshake. "Get well." With that, he left.

We had discussed all our days on the farm at Ann and Elvin's and all our days working at the factory in the foundry. We had depleted all our experiences of the Great War and all our ideas about the philosophy of life, but there was one haunting thing we never discussed...that was whatever happened to Fred. Whenever I had asked, Allen changed the subject. I imagined the worst. Either he had been killed by the King's men or he had joined the darkness and then killed by the King's men.

I wondered about Bo also, but I never told Allen.

Now that I was well enough to venture outside, the day nurse had the habit of wheeling me outside in the same wheelchair Allen had

used. I loved the smell of the horses and cattle and the nearby pines. To be able to breathe the fresh air was a tremendous medicine. I felt stronger each day, but the doctor gave me orders to be wheeled over to physical therapy. It wasn't a vacation I was on, he told me. That's where I ran into nurse Bojensen...and I could only stare. It had been a long time, and she had grown into a beautiful woman.

She could only see me out of the corner of her eye as she was busily messaging a fellow soldier. He was half naked and she was rubbing his back with the most deliciously aromatic oils I had never smelled before. Her black hair was done up underneath her white nurse's cap, and her dark skin clashed with her white nurse's uniform. It was tight and showed her figure well. I was in love all over again.

She said, "I'll be with you in a moment." Then she told the other nurse, "Just leave his chart on the desk."

I looked around. There were other tables, and there were weight lifting machines and double bars held off the floor to help men walk. I thought I would be using that to get strength into my legs.

She talked to the other soldier for a while, helped him get dressed and on his feet and sent him on his way. He went over and started working out on some weights. Then she turned around and saw me staring at her. She stared at me and then laughed joyously, clapping her hands out in front of her like a little girl.

"Buck! What in the...I hardly recognized you. Why, you're so skinny. What happened to you?"

She came over and sat down on a stool she pulled in front of me.

"I guess they recruit everybody, don't they?" she said, still amazed.

"You know Allen is here!" she said excitedly.

"Was here," I said. "Left yesterday."

"And he," she said, looking startled for a moment. Her face grew stern as she tried to hold back the tears that came, and then she smiled, wiping them away and looking up a little way saying, "he

forgot to say goodbye...never mind. Let's look at your chart."

She reached over my shoulder to get my chart on the desk behind me. Her face and soft neck and breasts came an inch from my face, and I wanted to grab her and hold her tightly against my body, but instead of doing that, I melted.

She looked at me after settling back onto her stool and asked, "Whaaat?"

I said, "Oh, just nostalgia, I guess."

"You were thinking of when you were a little boy."

"I was thinking of you in the nude, like when you were having a painting done."

"Oh, those days of modeling are over. I've got more important things to do now. Let's have a look at you...I mean your chart."

She acted as though I disturbed her a little, but not as much as I must have acted towards her. She tried to show me a regimen of exercises to do on the exercise bars and on the mats to improve my strength, but I was distracted and often dizzy in her presence, so much so that she had to repeat what she said several times.

Every other day, I would spend an hour or two with Bo. We weren't always alone, and I'm sure she appreciated that. I showed too much attention to her, and she could plainly see that. She saw me naked enough when she would bathe me or message me all over. She said that she was balancing the scales since I had seen her naked quite often in the studios. It didn't help my desires for her...only increased them.

She remarked that it was nice to see old friends again when she was messaging my back and hips. We both laughed.

Bo was a different person. She had always been somber, dark and mysterious. Now there was a light in her eyes and a glow about her person, and I wished it was because of me, but I saw her that way with the other soldiers. She was genuinely happy. She was almost angelic, but when she rubbed me down with those scented oils and

massaged my muscles, I felt like we were having sex. One time I broke down and started weeping. She immediately noticed. She lay down beside me, and I grabbed her and sobbed away into her bosom. I held her as tightly as I could. She gave me a big hug and we kissed. I started unbuttoning her blouse and kissing her breasts. She held me tight and said, "Buck, this isn't what you want, and I can't give it to you. I can give you my love, but not like this. I'm a different woman now, and you're all grown up...you're different. You're not unlikeable, nor unlovable. Someday you will meet a younger girl who will be just right for you."

She was a few years older than me, and I guess more mature. I'm sure she wanted a more mature man to be with, but I wanted her so bad I couldn't think straight. It would become awkward when we were together. I would grab her arm. We would look at each other, and she would change the subject and tell me to do this or that exercise. We got to the point where we didn't do much but talk of the old times back in Throughsome.

Within the three months I stayed in hospital getting my exercise and eating properly, getting my strength back and doing much talking, I got to know her story. She was devastated by the war, raped by people who were supposed to be her friends. They began to be drunk all the time and getting into fights and destroying each other's property. A lot of art was senselessly slashed or broken to bits and smashed because of quarrels and arguments. People were murdered out of drunken rage. There was no sense to life anymore. A dark cloud hung over the towers, and she experienced the terror of being molested by demons and evil spirits. There was a lot of fighting and then the bombs came and destroyed the towers. She was found half naked and starving by the King's men and taken to the hospital. There, through her recovery, she started helping people. Never mind that she was treated with love and kindness without the pretense she was used to, she wanted to show that love and kindness to others in the

hospital. Then she met the King who came to the hospital to visit the sick and injured. He had taken her by the hands and looked into her eyes. She said that she had never known such a love and light in any one, and it filled her whole soul. She experienced true joy and a yearning for something higher in her life. She seemed to float the rest of that day. She found her way into rehabilitation after she recovered and had remained there.

She took her position as doing her part in the Great War to bring light back into the faces of those who had met the darkness. She was sent from hospital to hospital until she wound up in the plain of Gormon at the feet of the Castle Valenteen.

I became strong enough to be discharged from the hospital, but I wouldn't go. I kept visiting Bo. I would interrupt her work, talking to her about nothing very rapidly. I would visit her after work in her quarters, and every time we were alone, I would force her to kiss me. She acted as though she had no resistance. After several days of this, I guess about a week, I went to rehabilitation early in the morning to see her. When I saw she wasn't there, I went to her quarters. She wasn't there either. I went to the pharmacy, the infirmary, the mess, the canteen, the showers, everywhere I could think she might be. Then I went to the head nurse and asked if she knew where nurse Bojensen was. She said that she had been transferred. I felt my face ashen, felt all the blood flow from my head and fainted. When I woke up, I was in a different ward. There were no soldiers here with bandages. Some were tied to their beds either screaming or mumbling.

There was an officer that came in every day and talked to me. He said that a lot of men here get attached to a nurse and fall in love. I didn't want to listen to him. He didn't seem to know what he was talking about. This wasn't any nurse. This was Bo. She was a link to my past...a link to my identity. When I didn't have her, I didn't have myself. I was gone. I would just sit in bed and stare and not think of

anything. I didn't know what was going on around me. I was never hungry would never eat. They had to put me back on plasma. I was only hungry for Bo. I would cry her name out in my sleep, and in my sleep, I would return to that dark castle prison. Although I couldn't find my old master, the darkness was still there...the darkness of loneliness.

Night after night would be the same nightmare. Every day the same officer would come and want to talk to me about my feelings and thoughts. I didn't have any, only a hunger for Bo. One day I got so tired of it all and cried out, "Oh God!" and wanted to die. I passed out. I was back in that dark tower. "Oh no!" I cried, and just sat there and bawled.

After awhile, after I got all the tears out, I could hear the scurry of voices and feet. I got scared and started looking around to see if I could see anything. I saw a pinpoint of light. It was so wonderful. I was sure it was the way out. I got up and ran towards it. It was a long way off, but I kept getting closer to it, and it kept growing brighter. As I approached the light, I realized that it was a person standing just outside in a garden filled with the most wonderfully scented flowers. The person was a little girl, and I was a boy again running towards her open arms. I recognized her.

"Gretchen! Gretchen!" I called.

As she embraced me, I felt whole again. I felt the joy and love we had together living under the hill in Throughsome. She kissed away all my tears, and I actually felt happy again.

She said, "I'll always be here for Buck, Always."

I woke up laughing joyously. I felt relieved. I didn't have anymore compulsion towards Bo. I knew my place. My strength was back. I sat up in bed and smiled at the doctor and the nurses that stood around. They had some kind of instruments in their hands, but I wasn't interested in that.

The doctor returned my smile and asked "What happened?"

"My angel told me every thing is all right," I said.

"You're read to leave," he said. "Pack your bags. But before you go, I want you to go with this man."

The crowd opened up and Sir Gwinn stepped up to my bed side.

"Hello old friend," he said, reaching down to shake my hand.

We exchanged smiles, and the handshake was warm and strong. He pulled me to my feet, and I felt power flow through me like electricity. I jump up and down and said "Yes!" We embraced. Here was a true friend. We held each other out at arms length and laughed heartily.

"What would you like me to do, Captain?" I asked.

"Get dressed. We have an audience with His Majesty," he said.

I looked at him quite astonished.

"Come on, come on. He won't wait all day."

"Am I ready?" I asked, slipping my pants on.

"Don't worry," he said with a serious but calming expression as his thick eyebrows came together. "When the Lord calls, we come."

"That is our duty," I said, completing his thought.

"Yes, yes, I know."

I stopped to thank the doctor and the nurses and then walked out with Sir Gwinn, tying my tie.

"Do I have it right?" I asked. He only laughed a little.

The King's tent was the Holy of Holies in the camp of Israel. His throne was the Ark of The Covenant. I felt that I walked on holy ground as I approached with bowed head, prostrating myself before him. He bid me rise, and I rose. He bent down and lifted my chin to look into my eyes. It was like looking into eternity and being filled with infinite love. I felt like I was floating again and had to be helped out. I remember him saying that I had no more darkness left in me. Later, when I regained my strength and composure, I asked Sir Gwinn what he meant.

"Do you remember the battle in which you were lost?" he asked.

"Yes, a little," I answered.

"That was your finest hour. You fought so valiantly, and your men followed your example, that it opened up a corridor for the rest of us to overcome the darkness. But you were wounded and taken prisoner. You became filled with darkness. That is why nurse Bojensen had to be transferred. You would have harmed her."

When he said those words, I realized what a mistake I had made and became very red in the face. He put his hand up to stop me.

"That is all right now. Everything is ironed out and reconciled. Nurse Bojensen is safe, and you are safe. You have found the light again."

Conclusion

There was no more war, so most of the army was dismantled and disarmed. Sir Gwinn gave me a big bear hug and a slap on the back and we said our good-byes. I knew my days under the ground were gone forever. I desired only the open air and the wide prairies and low hills of Ann and Elvin's. I took up the invitation of Allen's and headed for the nearest train station. I did a lot of meditating on the train, and a lot of life's questions were answered. I had no desire to do great things or to be a hero. I simply wanted to tend the sheep...simply to serve. My future was to be a shepherd, living out in the open, out in the fresh air and sun light.

I hadn't known a father or a mother, and Ann and Elvin had always treated me as a farm hand growing up on their place, yet, I had no wish for it to be otherwise. The light that my angel Gretchen had brought me was enough. I was filled with light and love enough.

Ann and Elvin were old now, and I thought they wouldn't mind having another hand to help on the farm. But when I got there, I found Allen in charge and Ann and Elvin were retired. They had a large porch built onto their place, but they were usually gone on vacation. Their daughter was married and gone, so all of their children were gone and married and raising children of their own.

Allen told me that he was to be living in the big house and his new wife was to be there to take care of Ann and Elvin on their return. I told him he was an old son of a gun, and that congratulations were in order. I asked who the lucky girl was, but he wanted to surprise me. He told me that now that I was here, he wanted me to round up the sheep on the north slopes and herd them south into the valley. I knew the routine by heart. He gave me a wagon and a dog and we headed out. He said he would be visiting me with the misses in a few days.

It didn't take me long to round up the sheep with Trick along. That was the name of my new dog. He was a natural. He knew

everything to know about sheep herding, and he was very obedient. Allen said that he was taught by the best. So, we headed the sheep down into the valley where there was a small grove of very old oak trees, bent and gnarled, with a winding brook running by. There was a bridge for the sheep and the wagon to cross over, and they didn't seem to mind crossing that bridge at all. They were well trained also.

I had been camped there for several days and had been taking a snooze under one of the old trees. I opened my eyes and saw a woman with an easel and a canvas painting a picture. I thought I must have been sleeping a long time not to have noticed someone else here. I thought I would get up and introduce myself to Allen's new wife. I knew that was who it was because I could hear Allen talking to her. He must have been on the other side of the tree she was standing by.

It was Bo.

I was quite startled, but after remembering that she had intimated at the hospital that she had feelings for Allen, and I know I didn't pay any attention to her hinting at that, and I loved both of them, I just smiled and offered my congratulations.

"Well, Bo," I sort of laughed because I was embarrassed at both of us loving Bo, and now she was back in my life when I thought the whole thing was settled with me. I offered my hand and said, "I want to congratulate you and Allen. I think you will make a nice couple."

I think Bo stood there as startled as I was while I heard another female voice her opinion. She must have been behind the tree with Allen.

"I don't think so," she said, standing up and coming around the tree for me to see her. "I think they would make a lousy couple," and they all three laughed.

Allen stood up and said, putting his arm around the artist, shaking her a little, "Bucky, you don't marry your sister! Besides, I've already got a wife."

He put his other arm around his wife and said, "Bucky, I would like you to meet Terresa. She was one of the nurses at the hospital. Bo introduced us."

I know my face was as red as a beet. I could feel the heat emanating from it.

"You and Bo, brother and sister?" I stammered. "You never told me."

"You never asked," Allen answered.

"Let me get back to my painting! All of you!" commanded Bo. "You've spoiled the whole thing. Now, Buck, if you will go back to napping, and you two sit back down..."

I had to see what she was painting. She reluctantly showed me. We were attracted like two magnets and stayed together the rest of the afternoon. She finished painting Allen and Terresa, but she had to use her imagination to finish painting me snoozing under the tree. We had a picnic lunch and chatted until it was time for them to go.

I didn't know what change had come over Bo, but I soon found out that she was in love with me and had been ever since she first saw me, but there had to be a change in each of us before our love for each other could ripen into something that would last. I guess we had to grow up first. If we had gotten married when we were younger it wouldn't have lasted. We were both too selfish. As it turned out, we had something to give to each other, not thinking of ourselves so much as of each other...doing things for each other, serving one another.

I asked her why she went away and waited so long. She said, "I had to wait for you to grow up."

After the sheep were fattened up and harvest was over, Bo and I got married. We built us a little cottage by that grove of oak trees. I became prosperous in the sheep and wool business, and she became a well known artist. We had lots of children. Each one has their own story to tell. **THE END**

