

Chapter 1: My Kingdom for a Sword

In 1965, on the last day of school, I was standing in the hall outside my seventh grade classroom, supposedly *thinking about what I had done*. Inside, Mr. Martin was giving a talk on “Not Wasting Your Summer” to the rest of the kids. As I rehearsed what I was going to say to my parents when I got home, I recalled my crime: I had made darts out of straight pins and masking tape, which I had then thrown, with a lot of luck, into the back of Mr. Martin as he stood writing on the blackboard.

Mr. Martin always wore black: not in a cool way, as Johnny Cash did; but in a nerdy way, complete with skinny black tie. With a dandruff problem equal to the snowfall on Mt. Kilimanjaro, you’d think he’d have chosen a different signature color. But he didn’t “get it.” That was obvious from the fact that he slicked down his black hair with enough grease to lube every car in the Charlotte 500. He was a true “greaser.” And now, with his back full of homemade darts, he looked like a skinny black pincushion with dandruff.

From the beginning of the year, we had perceived that Mr. Martin was a country bumpkin and a greenhorn, and had treated him so. Fresh out of college, he could even have been a lot like Abe Lincoln starting out. (I imagine Mr. Lincoln had ears that stuck out and a bashful laugh as well.) But we were silly, bored, adolescent boys, and probably wouldn’t have respected him either. What we needed was strong male leadership we could look up to, who would take an interest in us and guide us into the paths of manhood. But real men who would spend time with boys were a little hard to come by.

Most of our dads worked long hours. And when they weren’t working, they were on the golf course or hunting. They were all veterans of World War II, and had plunged right into working for the American dream. Most had finished college in three years, thanks to the GI Bill. Then they had gotten married, gone to work and bought houses that all looked pretty much the same. Their three or four children had been appropriately spaced, based on the advice of Doctor Spock and Planned Parenthood. Life was predictable and uncomplicated for these men. They trusted tradition and authority, and didn’t think too much about why things were the way they were or if they should stay that way.

My dad was a salesman. He had started out in our family’s car dealership; but, when times got tough, the business had to be sold, and he went to work for the mirror plant in town selling glass and mirrors to the big furniture companies. His territory covered four

states, so I didn't get to see him much. He would usually leave home on Monday morning and return Friday afternoon. That gave me a little more than two days to be with him.

My dad was something of a celebrity in our town: he had looks, personality and athletic ability. People said he looked like Paul Newman, with his pale blue eyes. He was a gentleman if he was anything; but he also loved pulling people's legs and telling jokes. I guess he was a true good ol' boy. And as far as athletics, he played everything well. In High School, he was the star of the football team and one of the most valuable players in basketball and baseball. He trained and showed horses, as well as dogs, and was an intrepid hunter. I guess you could also say he was a man's man.

Having such a paragon of male virtue for a father was a little intimidating to an insecure adolescent like myself. He was a chip off his father's block, so he came by it honestly. As a matter of fact, if the entire Smith clan, of which we were a part, were to line up for a virility test, the rest of the men would measure up pretty much like my dad. I was a member of one of the bastions of manhood in our town.

Unfortunately – at least as far as my dad was concerned – I seemed to take more after my mom's side of the family in everything except possibly my looks. I wasn't particularly athletic, although I could have been if I had been interested in it. But I was a dreamer. Not surprisingly, that was just what I was doing when Mr. Martin came out into the hall and said, "Ready to come back in?"

"Yes, sir," I muttered.

"I'm not going to paddle you, Waitzel, since this is the last day of school. But I hope over the summer you'll change. Waitzel, you've got too much ability to waste it being the class clown." He was almost straining to get this out. "If you'll take school and life more seriously, someday you'll make a fine man. Okay, come back in. Actually, we're getting ready to go outside."

Outside – one of my favorite words. To me, it was synonymous with "freedom."

The class was going out on the playground for recess. We filed out – as much as thirteen year olds could file – and walked up to the crest of a hill overlooking the baseball field. It was a gorgeous day, somewhere between spring and summer. Everyone was full of excitement and ready for the bell to ring, signaling the end of school and the beginning of summer vacation.

We were standing around, talking about all the things we hoped to do over the course of the summer, when who should walk up but the town "character," Billy. He was a

strange young man, known to dress up in a variety of costumes, including women's clothes, and show up in the oddest places, impersonating whomever he was dressed as. Today, he was in the getup of an Indian chief and was trying to talk like a movie Indian.

"Good land," he said, gesturing out across the baseball field.

"Sure is, Billy. You want to buy it?" one of the boys said.

"You sell cheap?" Billy asked.

"Real cheap. Let's see... How about five hundred dollars?"

"Heap too much. You try to cheat honest Injun."

"Well, how much have you got?"

"Heap wampum."

"Let's see it."

"No. No trust white man."

"Aw, you haven't got any wampum, Billy. You haven't even got a horse." We all laughed.

"Now you call me liar. Make mad." Billy pulled an arrow out of the quiver slung over his shoulder and proceeded to string it.

"What are you going to do with that, Billy?" asked one of the boys, nervously.

"Me show." He aimed toward an open area of grass and let it fly.

"Not bad, Billy. Can I try?" One of the boys ran to fetch the arrow.

"You white man. No shoot arrows."

"Sure we do. Haven't you ever heard of Robin Hood? Here, let me try."

"No. No trust white man."

"Aw, come on. I'll give you the basketball court."

Billy thought for a moment, eyeing the court, then said, "Fine."

The boy took the bow and one of Billy's arrows and shot it over the crest of the next hill. This seemed to upset Billy, who violently took back his bow.

"No more shoot. You too good. *Me* need practice."

"All right, you do that, Billy. Come back when you're a better shot." We all laughed.

Then we engaged in small talk while Billy went off to find his arrow.

Pretty soon, it was time to go back inside, so we all made our way back down the hill and into the classroom.

Once inside, Mr. Martin said, "Where are the rest of the boys?" No one knew. It looked like several were missing.

Just then, one of them came running in gasping, “Billy’s got Jimmy and Bobby treed up the basketball goal, and he’s going to shoot them!”

Mr. Martin and most of the class went running back out onto the playground. Sure enough, there was Billy doing a war dance around the base of the basketball goal, whooping and hollering, brandishing his bow and arrow toward the two helpless victims perched high up on the basketball hoop. We all died laughing. The boys up top were screaming for their lives, as if Billy were really going to shoot them. Mr. Martin started yelling for the boys to come down while he tried to get Billy to stop dancing and especially to stop waving that bow and arrow around. We thought the whole scene was a hoot, and the perfect way to end the year.

It took Mr. Martin up until the bell rang to get the boys back inside. Then he stood before the class, looking like an undertaker, and said, “It’s been an interesting year, class.” Didn’t we know it. He wiped his brow with a neatly folded handkerchief and forced a tight-lipped smile. “We’ve had our ups and downs –” he glanced at me – “but, overall, I think it’s been enjoyable.” Not the word I thought he would have chosen. “Thank you for being such a good class.” He almost choked on that part. “I hope you all have a wonderful summer. Class dismissed.”

We practically fled from the classroom, down Davenport Hill, and then scattered in all directions, yelling our goodbyes as we went.

I almost always walked home from school when the weather was nice like that. I sprinkled my walk with laughter as I recalled Billy holding the two boys at bay with that silly bow and arrow, and poor Mr. Martin – not exactly a man of action – trying to get them down. If only school could always be that eventful.

On my way home, I stopped by my favorite candy store. It was halfway along my route, perched on top of a hill, and made of weathered boards, hardly bigger than a woodshed – built about like one, too. It was a strange mixture of the cute and the scary. The creaky little screened door through which we had to enter added to the curious ambiance, as did the old glass display cases that contained the candy.

Everything inside that store was dark: the woodwork, the lighting – only the natural light from the front window and screened door illuminated it; except on rainy days, when the owner would turn on the dim fluorescent lights in the ceiling. I couldn’t say what else

was in there, because all I ever saw once I got inside was the candy. For all I knew, it could have been a shrunken head shop, which wouldn't have surprised me.

But there was the candy: laid out so beautifully in all their glorious colors and fragrances – and most, just a penny! There were Fireballs, Red Hots, SweetTarts, PEZ, Starbursts, little wax bottles full of flavored syrup and straws filled with powdered candy, baseball cards with bubble gum, Bazooka and Double Bubble Gum, different flavors of jawbreakers – my favorite being the tartly sour yellow ones with red dots – bubblegum cigars, Lucky Strike candy cigarettes, wax whistles you could chew, wax lips, licorice, peppermint sticks, Peppermint Patties, Mallo Cups, Peanut Butter Cups, Brown Cows, Sugar Daddies, Sugar Babies, Milk Duds, Bit O Honeys, Bit O Peanut Butters, Mary Janes, Kits (4 pieces for a penny!), BB Bats, malted milk balls, Hershey kisses, M&M's, Raisinets, Goobers, Turkish Taffy, caramel creams, Tootsie Rolls, Tootsie Roll Pops, Charms Pops, Safe-T-Pops, Lifesavers, root beer barrels, rock candy, giant swirled lollipops, a jar of sugar cookies and more. If you really wanted to be boring, you bought a Moonpie and a Dr. Pepper. But the more imaginative souls walked away with a little brown paper sack stuffed to the brim with penny candy.

“What'll it be?” asked the man behind the counter. He was short, thin and wrinkled, with a look of contempt on his face. I hoped his appearance wasn't the result of eating too much candy.

I leaned against the glass, debating my choices: “How about the wax whistle...” It was yellow for summer. At Halloween, it would be orange.

“That's a nickel, y'know.”

“I know. Fifteen – no, ten – Fireballs...five of the yellow and red jawbreakers...
hmm...”

“That's twenty cent so far.” He began dropping the items into a little brown paper sack.
How come country folk never put the “s” on the end of “cents?” “...five malted milk balls and five Bazooka Bubble Gum.”

“Is that it? That'll be thirty cent.”

I reached into my pants pocket to pull out my money – but it was gone!

“What's wrong?” he asked, still eyeing me with what now looked like disdain, as he placed the little sack on the counter.

“My money's gone!” *Did I forget and spend it at lunch?*

“Too bad.” He shook his head and snorted in disgust: “Have to come back tomorrow.” Then he began putting the candy back in the glass case.

“Tomorrow?! No...no, no. C-couldn't you let me have the candy t-today, and I'll pay you t-tomorrow?” I knew I sounded desperate – and I was!

“Sorry. I don't know you. If I did, I might.”

“Whadaya mean you don't know me?! I come in here practically every day!”

He leaned across the counter to give me a closer look; I smiled hopefully. Then he drew back and continued putting the candy away.

“Sorry. All you kids look alike to me.”

My countenance hit the dusty wooden floor in front of the display case. I turned and began dragging my feet toward the door, lost in disappointment. As I reached for the screen, I heard someone clear his throat.

“Come back here,” a voice said.

I turned around. Someone had been standing back in the shadows, just out of sight. Now he moved forward into the light, what there was of it. It was a woman, equally short, thin and wrinkled; she was smoking a cigarette.

“I remember you: you *do* come in here a lot. My name's Mrs. Sutton, and this here's *my* store.” She sounded almost friendly.

“Hey. I'm Waitzel.”

“Hello, Wetzel.” She reached out her hand and we shook. “Well, now that I know you, why don't you take five a' them Fireballs and pay me tomorrow?”

“Really?” I wasn't quite sure if I should believe her.

The man behind the counter eyed her questioningly as he counted out the candy, dropping it into the sack, then pushed it across the glass toward me – all with that same familiar look.

“Thanks,” I said. “I appreciate it.”

“Don't mention it.” Was she trying to smile? “You come back and see me tomorrow, okay?”

“Yes, ma'am.” I grabbed the bag and headed out the door. “See ya! Thanks!” As I emerged from the store back into the sunlight, I almost ran into a boy pulling up to the door on his bicycle.

Walking home, I thought about the summer ahead as I sucked on a fireball. Summer offered many possibilities, both for adventurers and entrepreneurs. One summer, our next-door neighbors, whom we considered to be rich, were moving and had a big dump truck parked in their driveway for about a week, as they went through their house throwing stuff out. My friends and I rummaged that truck thoroughly. We found some terrific toys, packages of old pudding and other treats, all kinds of gadgets and other interesting objects. It was like discovering a giant treasure chest on wheels.

Another summer, all the kids in the neighborhood put on a show, to which we sold tickets. One side of a friend's front yard was the stage and the other was the "house," which we filled with lawn chairs. The curtain ran along the front walk. Some of the older girls were extremely good actresses, and we had a pretty good script, to which I had contributed modestly.

Unfortunately, just as the curtain opened, an odd assortment of neighborhood dogs took off in a pack with some of the girls' costumes in their mouths. Several of the girls burst into tears; but the rest of us took off after the dogs, which only caused them to run harder. Before the evening was over, there were torn costumes strewn all over the neighborhood. But that didn't seem to phase the audience, who considered themselves sufficiently entertained, and continued to sit around talking and laughing for the remainder of the evening.

One of my summer business ventures involved my buddies and I collecting empty soda pop bottles and turning them in at the grocery store for cash. We then converted the cash to candy, which we gave away as prizes in a carnival we designed that included a midway and even some crudely built "rides." Another summer, we produced a haunted house in our unfinished basement, complete with "dead bodies," which were really some of the kids laid out in my dad's hunting clothes covered with ketchup. We probably could have foregone the haunted house idea and just charged kids to go into our basement – it was that scary. Another time we opened a movie theatre in a friend's garage, with me showing the "movies" on my Kenner Give-A-Show Projector. Then there was the three-hole golf course we built in an empty field. Other kids may have spent their summers playing baseball and swimming, but we spent ours in pursuit of dreams.

Our town of Lenoir was small and nestled at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains in western North Carolina. It was known for furniture manufacturing, with companies like Broyhill and Bernhardt helping to put it on the map. People began building furniture

factories near the end of the nineteenth century, right after the coming of railroads. Before that, Lenoir was a farming community with a reputation for cultural and educational opportunities, boasting one of the first colleges for women in the state – Davenport Ladies College. When the college was moved to Greensboro and became Women’s College, the buildings were converted to Davenport Junior High, which is where I went to school.

Most of the houses in town looked like bungalows or cottages, because that was all most factory workers could afford. My family was lucky because Dad was a salesman. Still, our house looked pretty much like everyone else’s. It was made of white ceramic shingles with large picture windows in the living and dining rooms, and corner windows in the bedrooms. My mom’s blue and white Olds was parked in the driveway, which was gravel and ran uphill, so that our yard was elevated above and separated from the street with a rock wall. Our front yard was mostly large oak trees, with one magnolia in the center.

That evening, my parents and I were in the kitchen talking after supper. My two sisters, Debbie and Linda, had gone into the living room to watch television, and Dad had begun his evening ritual with the molasses. Almost every night after supper, he would go over to the cabinet beneath the sink and pull out the Mason jar of molasses, a large helping of which he would pour into the center of his dirty plate. To that he would add a large chunk of white butter, which he would mash up with his fork until he had a creamy, golden mixture in which to dip biscuit or bread, whichever we had with our meal that night. The expression of satisfaction on his face, as he took his first bite of that rich, dripping concoction, was unforgettable.

But that night, near the end of this ceremony, something happened that would change my life. I had already told my parents about my episode at school. They had received the news with surprising tranquility. Now Dad was asking me how I planned on spending my summer vacation.

Evidently my answers weren’t satisfying him because, right in the middle of a particularly large bite of biscuit and molasses, he lashed out at me – spraying chunks of the confection in my direction – and said, “Waitsel! You’ve got to take on some responsibility, son! You’re thirteen years old now – almost a man! You need to be doin’ things around here to help your mother! Instead, you’re makin’ her a nervous wreck! I come home at the end of the week and she tells me you haven’t been doin’ what she asked, you’ve been talkin’ back to her and aggravatin’ your sisters...!”

As I picked a piece of sticky biscuit off my shirt, I blurted out, “They aggravate *me!* And I *do my chores!*”

“Your teachers say you don’t pay attention in school, you talk and cut up and get into trouble...!”

“I’m not the only one...” I mumbled.

“The other parents aren’t called in like we are,” Mom added in a quiet voice.

“That was last year...”

“It’s this year, too,” Dad said firmly. “I don’t wanna keep whippin’ you, son, but you don’t leave me much choice!”

I could feel him grabbing me up and doing it right then. I had watched him whip his bird dogs often enough, and I had felt his belt across my own backside more times than I cared to remember – so I knew he meant business.

I didn’t trust my dad when he got like this: he was like a volcano on the verge of erupting. His face would turn red and he’d get this desperate look in his eye, like any misspoken word on my part would unleash a terror of cataclysmic proportions. I hated him like this.

“Purty soon you’ll be too old for me to whip! Now, you can say that I’m mean, you can think what you like; but I’m tellin’ you for your own good: if you don’t straighten out and start doin’ what your mother and your teachers ask...”

Oh, no. Here it comes: some new punishment he’s come up with.

“...there are places we can send you...”

Places?! What places?

“...that will *make* you behave, where you won’t *have* your daddy and momma to take care of you!”

His words had frozen me. I had never heard of parents sending their children away before. It sounded like something out of a Dickens novel. What, specifically, was he talking about: a workhouse, a prison? How could my parents, who were supposed to love me, talk about sending me away as if...I were *a criminal?!!*

Suddenly the fear and anger welled up inside me: “I hate you!” I stormed and headed out of the room.

“You come right back here, young man! You don’t walk away while I’m talkin’ to you!”

I knew those were the words that usually preceded the introduction of his belt into a conversation, so I reluctantly dragged myself back and slumped against the door jam, waiting to be dismissed.

As I stood there in agony, carefully avoiding his eyes, I let out an impatient sigh. *Uh-oh.*

“Don’t you sigh at me, either!” He jumped up out of his chair, knocking it over, and lunged in my direction. “I’ll knock you down!”

I jumped back.

“That’ll make you feel real big, won’t it?!” I couldn’t believe I had just said that.

“Don’t you talk back to me!?” He drew back his hand, ready to strike me. His face was red and strained, and he had that crazed look in his eyes.

“Bob—” It was Mom’s quiet voice again—“don’t...”

“I don’t know where he’s learned so much disrespect!! I can whip him...” He breathed heavy... “but that doesn’t seem to do any good! When are you gonna change, Waitzel?!”

I stared down at the floor.

“Say?”

“I don’t know.” My voice was small – the way I felt.

Dad just looked helplessly over at Mom, who stared back with motherly concern: “I give up, Rose Ann. I don’t know what else to do.”

“Then let’s all go to bed. We can talk about this some more tomorrow.”

Dad gave me one last frustrated stare then said, “You can go to your room, but I want you to think about what I’ve said. If you don’t straighten out soon, I’ll have to do somethin’...I don’t wanna do. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” I turned around and headed toward my room.

“I’ll come make your bed in a minute,” Mom said behind me.

I could have walked directly from the kitchen into my bedroom, because there was a door between the two rooms; but that would have meant walking around my dad. So, instead, I took the long way around, passing through the living room where the girls were. I didn’t need to look up to know that they were smirking.

As I entered my room, I wanted to slam the door behind me; but, instead, I closed it civilly. *Wise choice.* Unfortunately, I had a second door to close – the one leading into the kitchen. I pulled it shut with special care without looking up. Then I walked over to my red vinyl armchair and plopped down.

That was where I felt safest, and where I did most of my sulking – er, thinking. The cushions let out sighs of sympathy as the arms enfolded me in a compassionate hug. Inside, I could feel the rage building, like a volcano ready to erupt – my dad and I had similar tempers – and a chasm of pain opening up in my heart.

The first tears and expressions of hurt came out as a trickle then exploded into a cascade of alternating sobs and accusations. *How could he talk to me like that? He's the reason I'm the way I am!* (Sob!) *He's never around when I need him! What am I supposed to do?!* (Sob!) *I don't care if he is on the road with his job – I need him here!* (Sob!) *But when he is here, he's never around. He'd rather be with his buddies, hunting or playing golf!* (Sob!) *I don't think he even likes us! He seems to like his bird dogs more than us!* (Sob!) *And I don't like being the only male in the house! They gang up on me!* (Sob!) *I'm tired of women! I need another man around! I need a dad!* (Sob!) *But he doesn't care! He won't even let me have a dog!* (Snivel!) *I hate him!!*

Then, suddenly, I became calm. *Did he mean what he said? Would he really send me away? How am I supposed to change when there's no one to show me? I wish I had someone...who loved me.*

I wasn't interpreting my parents' efforts as love. It seemed to me like they hated me. They certainly didn't understand what I was going through. It wasn't easy being a thirteen-year-old boy, and they were just making it worse. They had no patience, no sympathy, no understanding. Where could I find someone who understood what I was going through...before it was too late?

I stared at the desk in front of my curtains. It was an antique oak desk used by my granddaddy Smith when he taught school. The curtains behind it had a pattern of oak trees and English knights on horseback.

I wish I could open those curtains and there would be another world on the other side. I'd run away to it! I'd leave this place where I'm not loved! (If only I had someone to help me get there.)

Suddenly, some of the trees on the curtains burst into flames! *Holy smoke!* Then, just as suddenly, the flames subsided and disappeared. *Huh?*

I got up and walked over to my curtains to examine them – they seemed unchanged. Then I stuck my head through and looked at the window on the other side. Finally, I cupped my hands around my face and leaned against the glass, peering out into the moonlit backyard – but nothing seemed unusual. *That's weird.*

My bedroom, which doubled as the family's den during the day, had knotty pine paneling with built-in bookshelves that held my library of mystery and adventure books, as well as my collection of hot rod model cars with wacky monsters as drivers. I had hand-painted them, and they were among my most prized possessions. It was too bad they couldn't speak, or I would have poured out my heart to them. Even with their bulging eyes, wagging tongues and deliriously freakish expressions, they seemed more friendly and sympathetic than my dad.

If only things were different. If only inanimate objects, like my wacky monsters, could move and talk the way they did in Disney movies. If only cartoon characters were real the way Walt Disney and other animators made them seem. "When you wish upon a star..." *Fooy!* They had given us the false hope that somewhere out there was a world where kids fit in: a magical world of wonder and excitement that we could relate to. And then, one day, each of us had to realize it was all a hoax: made up – just something to keep us entertained until we reached adulthood.

There really was no Neverland where you didn't have to grow up. There was no Mary Poppins to take you on adventures in sidewalk paintings made by Burt. There was no Narnia or Middle-Earth, no Camelot – only school and parents and puberty and the feeling of not belonging, of not measuring up. One day, each of us had to face the fact that childhood was over, and all that lay ahead was the bleak, dreary prospect of being an adult.

Maybe *that's* what all this was about: a call to grow up. *Well, I'm not ready! I still have things I'd like to do as a kid! I still want to dream about knights and castles and beautiful princesses...*

"You can," a voice seemed to whisper. "You don't have to stop dreaming."

What?

"You can still dream, even when you're grown. No one's going to stop you from doing that...unless you stop yourself."

Huh? Suddenly, I felt I wasn't alone. I felt there was someone in the room with me; but I wasn't afraid. Peacefulness and rest had replaced my feeling of desperation. *What's going on?*

After awhile, Mom came in to make my bed. Because my bedroom functioned as a den during the day, each night she would make up the sofa bed for me. Tonight, Mom went about her chore without saying a word. Occasionally, she would glance over at me with an

embarrassed smile. Then, before she left the room, she came over and kissed me on the cheek with tears in her eyes, and said, “We do love you, Waitzel.”

“I know,” I responded awkwardly. The hardest part of any argument with my dad was when Mom would come in afterwards and try to smooth things over. Even though I appreciated her gesture, it always made me feel uncomfortable – partly because she would play on my sympathies.

“Try to change. Will you? For my sake?”

She was playing the “Do it for me” card, which was the ace in a mother’s hand – even higher than the “After all I do for you...” card. A kid hardly has a chance against that.

“I will.”

“We just want you to be a good boy and make us proud of you.” Now the “good boy” card.

“I know.” I felt myself turning red.

“Your father has a hard time understanding you. And when you misbehave, it makes it worse. Please try to do better. Will you?”

“Yes.” I was starting to have mixed feelings – my embarrassment was commingling with a warm, fuzzy feeling.

“Go to bed soon. And don’t stay up reading. Get a good night’s sleep, okay? I love you.” She kissed me again.

“Okay. I love you. ‘Night.”

She left the room and closed the door behind her.

A good boy! That seems to be all that matters to them! Forget that I’m unhappy, that no one understands me, that I’m lost and confused! Forget that I don’t have a dog! As long as I’m good! What good does it do to be good if you’re miserable?!

The peaceful feeling was gone, and I was upset again; but I was too tired to continue sulking, so I finally gave up and climbed into bed. Once settled, I reached over to the night table and retrieved my copy of *King Arthur and His Knights*. It fell open to an illustration by Howard Pyle, the author. It was a pen-and-ink drawing of a lady’s arm coming up out of a lake and holding the sword Excalibur for King Arthur to take. He was in a little boat coming toward her.

What a wonderful sword! If I had a sword like that, I’d fight my way out of this prison and find a place where I’m appreciated! I looked up at the curtains again. If only there were another world besides this one, like the one King Arthur lived in.

Suddenly, the curtains seemed to burst into flames again: only, this time, it was the whole curtain! I lay there staring in wonder, not knowing what to do. Then it disappeared and the curtains were just as before – no ashes, no smoke. I looked back down at the illustration of Excalibur, thinking that crying must have affected my eyes. Bewildered, I closed the book and turned out the light.

Maybe I'm hallucinating. Maybe the stress has gotten to me! Can a thirteen-year-old have a nervous breakdown? The flames were still vivid in my mind's eye as I rolled over and closed my eyes.

One of the neat things about sleep, especially when you're looking forward to something the next day, is that you can close your eyes and, before you know it, it's day. The process seemed almost magical to me. But, recently, I had been having some dreams that had changed all that. They were dreams that, when I woke up the next morning, I could swear had really happened.

As I lay there on this particular night, it soon became apparent that I would not just close my eyes and wake up the next morning. I would toss and turn, thinking back on my dad's words, picturing the horrors of where he might send me, and wondering if I would ever find a place where I fit in. I was so emotionally drained and my eyes were so sore from crying that, after about an hour, I drifted off to sleep.

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