

Daddy"s Caliban

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As previously mentioned, I'm am now posting occasional reprints of my fiction here on this blog. Watch for the tag "fiction," as in <http://jaylake.livejournal.com/tag/fiction>. The current installment in this series is a novelette entitled "Daddy's Caliban."

This originally appeared in issue 39 of *The Third Alternative* [[SF Site Review](#) | [TTA Press](#)]. It was reprinted in my 2004 collection from Wheatland Press, *American Sorrows* [[Tangent Online Review](#) | [Wheatland Press](#)]. This story is 10,400 words long. I consider this post-Industrial fantasy. The reader is as always encouraged to draw their own conclusions. If you like this story, please consider supporting Wheatland Press with a purchase of the collection.

Daddy's Caliban

by Jay Lake

Mommy always told me and Cameron not to go looking for ways to reach the Old Tower. “There’s ghosts and worse over there, Henry,” she’d say. “You boys got to go wandering, fine, you’re boys. But our people stay on this side of the river. Better yet, stick to the park.”

The park was safe but dorky. When we were seven, that was okay.

This side of the river was home, Mabton and everything that was ordinary. When we were ten, that was okay.

Summer we both turned thirteen, well, there was nowhere else to go but across the water and up the hill. Mama must have known that — all us Puca boys got the wander in us, as Daddy says, but she just wagged her finger and warned us off, then packed sandwiches and said to stay out until dark.

*

Daddy worked in one of the mills north of town, where the river drops through a series of falls and they could put in big waterwheels a hundred years ago. It was all steam engines and belts now, but that was where the buildings still were. He was a shift supervisor at Caliban Products, which meant he hassled the other kids’ moms and dads about being late or taking too long in the can.

Mommy don’t work. Daddy said she couldn’t work down at Caliban, against the rules, and he wouldn’t let her work for the competition, so she stayed home and ground peanut butter to sell at the farmer’s market on Sundays and knit scarves longer than Daddy’s pickup truck for church sales. She liked to spend her free time hollering at me for tracking mud in the house and such like.

Cameron wasn’t exactly my brother, really. He was Mommy’s sister’s kid, her twin that run off before I can remember, but nobody would ever say who his father was or even talk about him really was so I figured maybe it was Daddy. Me and Cameron looked a lot like twins ourselves.

Cameron lived in a little room in our basement, and never sat down to dinner with us, though Mommy left food out for him. She always shushed me when I talked about him around other people. He wasn’t allowed to go to school with

me, either. Which always seemed weird, because wasn't like there were a lot of kids in Mabton to start with. It's town full of grown-ups. There were plenty of empty desks down at the school.

Somehow, though, when Daddy got me a bike down at the People's Collective, he always came home with two. Somehow when Mommy finished going through the shoe bin down at Ladies' Aid, there was always a pair for Cameron.

He was the kid who wasn't there. Mommy said I was the kid who was never anywhere else. Maybe that was why me and Cameron got along so well. We were like ink and paper.

*

River's hard to get across. Ain't no bridges to the other side. Every now and then somebody ran a piece in the *Argus-Intelligencer* complaining of the fallow fields that glisten with morning dew, or the woodlots just waiting to be put to the axe, and maybe we should have a ferry or something, but there's 'reasons.' The kind of reasons nobody told kids like me about, not even in school. They sort of oozed into me anyway, on account of those reasons were as deep in the bones of Mabton as the old trolley tracks under the street pavement.

Mostly, though, that river was out of mind. Except where the land flattened out downstream by the mills, there was a bluff right along the riverbank that sloped back down into town. Like maybe the river's course had been through the middle of town once and that bluff was an island. I guessed that's what kept it out of the Letters page of the paper — too much trouble for most people to bother with after a hard day's work. You had to climb the bluff to get a good look at the river and the fields beyond, and the hill above the fields, and the Old Tower high on the hill. Except for the Old Tower, gray stone with no roof poking above it, tilting slightly as if the tower had cause to fight the wind, the other bank of the river could have been the Garden Beneath like we hear in the stories at Saturday School.

Me and Cameron liked to sit inside the rhododendrons up on the bluff and spy on the deer that come down to drink in the river on the other side. Some of them were white as hutch rabbits, the bucks with racks wider than we were tall. Them pale deer wouldn't last a season on this side of the river what with rifles and hunting licenses. Over there...well, I believed it just might be the Garden

Beneath, like Mother Arleigh always read to us about. Except in real life no one ever seemed to cross back into the Lands of Promise.

That didn't stop us. We sat in the bushes and whispered plots against the river.

"Maybe we could just swim."

"Current's too strong."

"How do you know?"

"Throw a stick in, dumb butt." Twinsies or not, Cameron had a harder mouth than me. Maybe that came of living next to the furnace. "Watch it go. That'd be you, screaming all the way down to the mill dams and the water falls."

Cameron was smarter than me, too. I wouldn't have thought of that thing with the stick. I worked at the idea a bit. "What if we start real far upstream?"

"Don't matter if you can't swim hard enough to cross the current."

"Ropes."

"What good's a rope unless you can tie it off on the other side? Where we ain't. Besides, where would we get ropes that long?"

He was right about that, too. The river was a hundred yards wide if it was an inch, counting the swampy bits at the foot of the bluff on our side, and the dark pools at the feet of the willows on the other.

"Rafts," I finally said. I was proud of that one. "We could build a raft."

Then the afternoon whistle blew down at the Boott Mills, always seven seconds ahead of the hour as Daddy liked to complain, followed by Caliban and the other mills. The busses began to grind people home in slow blocks as we ran back, me to Mommy cooking dinner in the kitchen and Cameron to his saucer of milk and plate of warmed-over scraps in the basement.

*

Mother Arleigh had a face like a peachpit, but she was sweet as ice cream most

of the time. Her wimple never seemed to fit her right, and I always figured deep inside all that service to the Lady and prayer and everything was some ancient little kid who wanted to ride the swings right past the puking point just like the rest of us. Sad part was, that same lost kid part made her bitter-mean when she wasn't set to be kind. Like Mommy's blender, Mother Arleigh only had two settings.

That Saturday she was on the bad one.

“Suffer the little children,’ it says here,” she screeched, banging the Scriptures so hard that her lectern wobbled. One of the felt angels slid off the teaching board behind her. “Well, I’m not going against the Lady’s word.” Her voice dropped to a hiss. “So which one of you little apes put soap in the tea kettles in the church kitchen?”

To a kid, the eight of us giggled.

I mean, who wouldn't?

The church bulletin from last Saturday had said this week's Saturday School lesson was the Seven Secondary Virtues. I had spent all week memorizing them, writing the list of Virtues out on the backs of gum wrappers and inside the folds of those little napkins from the ice cream truck. Soap in the tea kettles wasn't a virtue of any kind, but it was still pretty funny.

“Smart alecks,” Mother Arleigh snarled. “Ruined six ounces of perfectly good Siamese green.” She banged the lectern again. “*This* isn't what the Lady meant when she told us to keep clean tongues in our heads.”

She didn't intend the joke, but we all fell out laughing just the same. Mother Arleigh's pinched face turned the color of my old wagon, and she commenced to whaling into us with the pointer she used for the felt board lessons. “I will teach you all to mind!”

The pointer got me hard on the elbow and I busted out into a shriek despite my desperate thirteen-year-old resolve to be cool. Mother Arleigh immediately dropped to her knees and gathered me in an awkward hug. “Henry, Henry, please forgive me my boy,” she said, her voice a whisper burred by tears.

She wasn't angry no more.

“Hey,” I said, trying to push her away, but Mother Arleigh grabbed on to me harder, until the other kids laughed at *that*.

Instead of blushing into her scratchy old wimple, I concentrated on the Seven Secondary Virtues — evenhandedness, punctuality, orderliness, patriotism, thrift, industry and cleanliness. Their first letters made a little word that helped me remember them in order. “I am epoptic,” I whispered, as Mother Arleigh’s dry old lips smothered me with kisses and she wept like I was her own baby lost.

*

Later, we had services. Daddy wasn’t there, and of course Cameron never came, but Mommy smiled up at me in the men’s gallery from her seat in the front row.

Sometimes, at services, and once in a while at home, I would catch her in the corner of my eye and see someone else. It was like Mommy was bigger than she was, something huge and substantial that had set a fingertip down into this world.

Then she’d laugh, or roll her eyes at some monkey-clowning of mine, and she was just Mommy again.

That day at church, she was big every time I looked away from her. It was like having an invisible mammoth in the room, huge and hairy and warm, with tusks longer than an automobile and breath like a dying swamp, but you never could quite see it, even when you had to step around it.

Maybe it was Mother Arleigh’s homily. She had her vestments on now, white robes trimmed with gold, her silver athame and her golden sickle dangling from her belt. Her pinched little face glowed with the light of the Lady as she talked about the Lands of Promise and the fate of the Lady’s people.

“When we left the Garden Beneath, we were wrong.” Her voice was sweet and smooth, like honey on bone china at solstice feast. She paused, staring out over the women of the congregation on their crowded benches, all dressed in their Saturday best, then up at us in the men’s gallery.

Though ‘us’ was just the few boys from Saturday School and a pair of truckers in from their long-haul sheep run looking for their Saturday prayers. Local men didn’t like the services much. There weren’t enough local boys for me to get

away with skipping.

“Not many are left of us who can recall the Bright Days, let alone the Garden Beneath. There are few enough who have even heard the stories first hand. Our people did only one thing *right*.” She banged her fist against the pulpit, which boomed like a drum.

“We asked the Lady for a promise. In Her wisdom, She heeded our prayers. Even though...” Another round of staring. “Even though we were fools!”

“Fools!” shouted some of the women below. Mommy just wore her little smile.

Mother Arleigh raised her hands in burgeoning ecstasy. “Who remembers the brilliant banners, the horses running like wind before a storm?”

“I do,” called old Mrs. Grimsby, who most days couldn’t remember to wear her underthings on the inside of her clothes.

“Who remembers the days of our power, when the swords of our men and the words of our women were the writ unto the uttermost corners of the sea?”

“Yes!” screamed one of the women. “I do! I have dreamed on it!”

I didn’t know her, but I was fascinated when she jumped up out of her pew and began rolling in the aisle.

“We were there. We were all there. Na ba lo ka ti ko na! Hai ba la ba ko na!” She commenced to shrieking and crying.

“Miss Blackthorn has been touched by the spirit of the Lady,” said Mother Arleigh, settling her hands back to the pulpit. Her voice was almost normal. I realized she didn’t want to compete. I’d never considered services that way before, and it made me uncomfortable.

We all watched Miss Blackthorn writhe around shouting for a while. She slipped almost out of her clothes, which I thought was the most interesting part, then two of the other ladies finally led her away.

Mother Arleigh looked around. Her fingers drummed on her pulpit like a death march. Mommy still had her little smile though most of the women were

downcast now. I kept seeing my mother's flickering hugeness in the corner of my eye. Was it the homily? Or was something wrong with me?

"We all know the promise. We all know what was given to us, to our ancestors, to *you*, Mrs. Grimsby."

"Praise the Lady!" shouted Mrs. Grimsby.

"Praise the Lady," echoed Mother Arleigh. "We were given what?"

"The Lands of Promise," all the women shouted, even Mommy. Some of the boys around me started giggling, but not me. This was the best kind of service, on those rare weeks when they really got going like this.

"When was it given to us?" Mother Arleigh called.

"When the end began!" they responded.

"When will we receive it?"

"When we have earned it!"

"And have we earned it yet?"

The women burst into such a lot of howling and cursing that it was fit to deafen me. 'Caterwauling,' Daddy called it, which was why he mostly went down to the Switchman's Rest and drank with the rail workers on Saturday morning. He didn't hold with mixing with his mill workers.

I watched Mommy, who sat still smiling as the rest of the women were on their feet, shaking loose their hair and tearing at their clothes, wailing death chants and curses. Mommy seemed bigger then, right before my eyes instead of in their corner, but at that moment Peggy the altar girl tugged the curtain into place and shooed us all out of the men's gallery while the women practiced their ancient mysteries to much screaming and howling hidden from us below.

Danny Elphinstone had tried to peek in the church windows once, when the services had gotten hot and heavy like today. He'd been struck blind and dumb and had to be sent away for three months to recover. When he came back he didn't remember none of his friends. Like a whole new kid, with blank spots.

Me, I scampered home to Cameron to plot against the river. When I got back, there was note on the nail on the back door, in Mommy's handwriting.

Henry — Baked potatoes in the bucket on the stove. Make the best of your day. Don't go near the Old Tower.

*

"Rowboats," Cameron said as he gnawed on a scrap of potato skin.

"Rowboats?" We'd been counting the fish jumping on the river, in between straining our eyes for the distant, snow-capped peaks that could sometimes be glimpsed rising above the hills on the west bank when the weather was just right and the air was heartache-clear.

"We could get across in a rowboat."

"That ain't no different than a raft," I complained.

"Sure it is." He grinned, his clever-ape grin that let me forgive him any annoyance, then held up two fingers. "First, we don't have to build it like we'd have to build a raft. Second, rowboats have oars. We could get across the current."

"And where are we going to get a rowboat?"

He just stared at me, still grinning. It was something obvious, something he knew and I should have known.

Then I shivered. The mills.

Some of the mills, Daddy's Caliban included, kept little boats for inspecting their discharge pipes and checking the surviving old waterwheels that sometimes still creaked like the walking dead.

"We can't do that," I said.

"Why not? We stole Timmy Grapevine's scooter last spring."

"Yeah, but we gave it back three days later. And Daddy doesn't work at Timmy

Grapevine's *house*."

If we stole from the mills, any of them, not just Caliban, and got caught... I couldn't even imagine the shame. Or the beating Daddy would give me. And for something like that, Mommy wouldn't stir to stay his hand. She'd just smile and shake her head. I could foresee the consequences of failure with the same certainty that I could foresee the sun rising tomorrow.

"So you're soft now, Henry?" Cameron leaned close, until I could smell the sour milk and coal dust on his breath. The warmth of him made the little hairs on my arm tingle. "River's too much for you, got you scared."

"No." I pushed him away, hands to his chest. A spark popped between us, like winter static, a tiny glare of blue that surprised me though he didn't seem to notice. "I ain't scared. I'm sensible. Besides, we can't take a boat from the mills. We'd have to haul it two or three miles upstream to be sure of getting across before the current took us down to the mill dams and waterfalls."

Cameron's grin stretched so wide it threatened to split his face in two. "Bluff'll hide us from view, once we get away from the mills."

"We don't have the keys," I said. My ground was getting weaker, I knew. "Those fences are topped with razor wire."

"Your Daddy's got the keys to Caliban."

Our Daddy I thought. On days like this, Cameron was like me in a black mirror, every nasty thought I ever had seeming to fill his head.

"We'll be lucky if he kills us."

"Then we just won't get caught, will we?"

The other side of the river. I looked across the water. The fields gleamed in sunlight, the forests beckoned with their cool green halls. Above it all the Old Tower rose like a finger pointed toward Father Sun. In that moment, I could even see the crisp snowcaps of those distant mountains to the west. Something glinted from high up in the Old Tower.

That decided me.

“I know where Daddy keeps his work keys on the weekend,” I said.

Cameron hugged me. “That’s my Henry.”

Did I love him or hate him, my almost-brother? I couldn’t say as I gathered the pail and the napkin and picked my way down the slope, through the scrubby forest of little, twisted pines and silver-barked aspen toward the streets of Mabton and our small house.

*

Our family lived in a frame house on a brick foundation. The basement was low-ceilinged, dirt-floored except for the brick pad under the furnace and the little utility rooms where Cameron lived and where Daddy stored his tools. Everything else was a domain of sacks of half-rotted root vegetables, old crates and straw bales and an endless war between rats and cats.

Where the underside of the house was like a little nightmare with Cameron as the demon at its heart, upstairs was pin-neat and ruler-straight. Mommy didn’t believe in dirt. With the time Daddy’s job forced upon her she proselytized mightily for the forces of cleanly order. She was the Seven Secondary Virtues in the flesh.

It wasn’t a big house — two bedrooms, a main room and the tiny kitchen, plus the indoor bathroom that had once been a porch and was now Mommy’s pride. I knew other kids, like Peggy, lived in brick houses with two or even three bathrooms that had heat in them in the winter, but her father was a judge and things were different for people like that.

We were proud of who we were and what we had. Mommy filled the place with flowers and curious, twisted sticks and odd charms that people like old Mrs. Grimsby made her, plus the curious little misfirings that came from the china works at the clay pits east of town. Mommy had a passion for strange and broken things, as long as they were clean, neatly presented and well arranged. Daddy sometimes complained about it, but not much.

It was his complaining that led me to knowing about where Daddy hid his work keys. They’d had one of their rare fights, and Mommy had said, “It’s no worse than your closet of glory, Jack Puca.”

Then they'd both glanced at me, Daddy shamefaced and Mommy with a sly wink, and gone on to discuss other things.

Well, I knew there weren't any spare closets in the house. It wasn't like we had much spare of anything, unless you counted Cameron as a spare for me. So one time when Mommy and Daddy were both out, at a ward meeting I think, I looked in their room real good, until I found a trapdoor above their tiny clothes closet. The trap was hard to see in the boards of the ceiling but I'd been looking closely for just such a thing.

Once found, it wasn't difficult to open. I'd climbed up on top of Mommy's wool basket and chinned myself into the attic space.

I don't know why Mommy called it a closet of glory. It was pretty inglorious. First of all it was small. Daddy had to have bent over to fit up there, with the stuff that was already crowded in. I struck a match to light my candle and see what was at hand.

There was a saddle, like for a horse, though it took me a few moments to realize it wasn't just a badly-made footstool. The leather was old and cracked but it had silver chasing on it in long flowing lines that looked like leaves or narrow-bodied dragons. I bent and looked close. I couldn't see why we were so poor if Daddy had silver hidden away, but then I spotted where there had once been jewels on the saddle, pried out so that only tarnished little prongs remained.

I imagined him up here, stealing his own jewels one by one to stretch his pay packet on a cold winter's week. The thought hurt my heart. I looked around more.

A broken spear lay in three pieces against one corner of the tiny closet. There was big piece of cloth rolled up next to it. I touched that cloth — silk. More stuff, too, a sort of sleeveless shirt of metal rings. It was armor like in the books of old stories. A sword with no grip, just a narrow tongue at the end of the blade. Had Daddy sold that grip off too at some point? A crown of leaves that when I touched them were metal, corroded to black. I rubbed some of the black off to find they were copper.

And junk. Lots of junk.

This wasn't glory. This was shame. He'd fought in the long-ago wars of our

people, then laid down his arms to become a mill worker. What kind of man did that?

As I went to chin myself back down, I noticed that right by the trap door was a little pegboard with hooks. On one of the hooks hung Daddy's work keys.

It was to the closet of glory that I led Cameron that Saturday afternoon.

*

"Gee, your house is so nice *up here*," Cameron said. He was whispering, though.

"Don't track any dirt," I whispered back. At the door to Mommy and Daddy's room, I put my hand up. "Wait here. I'll get the keys."

"I'm coming, butt crack," Cameron hissed, and pushed me into Mommy and Daddy's room ahead of him.

Their bed was almost as high as my chest, with a quilt made from a lot of strange-colored old scraps. It looked like autumn leaves to me sometimes, and sometimes like bloodstains from a secret murder. Two dressers, a lamp made from an old woman's shoe, and a little shelf with a few books. Plus more of Mommy's weird things.

There was an oval mirror and two pictures on the wall. One picture showed a desperate woman in a rowboat, a tapestry trailing into the water over the side. I chose to take that as a sign that we were doing the right thing in stealing Caliban's rowboat.

Borrowing, I corrected myself. We'd put it back when we were though.

The other picture showed a battle, men on horses with long spears and banners flying, flowing over a wall to meet an army with guns and cannon. We were losing. Even though it was only done in shades of gray, by someone who wasn't an expert hand with a pencil, that picture seemed to be a glimpse of a real moment in time.

Was that how Daddy's spear had broken?

It caught Cameron's eye, too, and he stopped to stare. I slipped open the closet

door while he was looking at the wall and fished for the catch to the trapdoor. I didn't really want Cameron to know about Daddy's closet of glory — bad enough that my almost-brother was upstairs in the first place.

Not bad with me, I meant, but bad with Mommy and Daddy. If Cameron was okay, he wouldn't have been living in the basement.

I stopped, one hand brushing the edge of the opening above me. I'd never thought of it that way before. When I was little, I figured everybody had a brother in the basement. Later on, it was just the way things were.

Why *did* he live down there? Like a big rat or something.

Then I hopped up to grip the edge with one hand and reached around for the keys with the other. The effort made the muscles of my arm shiver.

“What you got up there, Henry?” Cameron asked. He startled me and I yelped, dropping to the ground to crush one of Mommy's hatboxes. The keys came with me, but there was a cracking sound above.

“Bones of god,” I cursed — something I almost never did. Cameron was the privy mouth of the two of us.

He jumped up and chinned himself into the closet of glory.

“Get *out* of there,” I almost shouted, tears of frustration standing in my eyes. There was no way I could hide that I'd been in the closet. Now I'd have to think of a really good story to explain why, and I was afraid I couldn't.

Cameron leaned over the opening to look down at me. His eyes and teeth seemed to gleam in the shadows above, which made him a monster version of me. “There's some cool crap up here. How come you never told me about this?”

“Because Daddy would kill us both and tan our hides for seat leather. We're already in deep doo-doo. Get back down here before you make it worse.”

He stuck his tongue out at me, then dropped in a cloud of attic grime and his own special burnt stink of coal dust.

The closet was an unholy mess.

“We’d better clean up here,” I said.

“Rowboat!” Cameron shouted, snatching Daddy’s work keys out of my hand and sprinting for the front door.

It took me a moment to figure out that Cameron with the keys was worse trouble than the mess we’d already made, then I was after him.

*

Midsummer Avenue was the main street on the west side of town, where we lived tucked up against the bluff. It petered out south of Mabton to a gravel lane among orchards of hazelnuts, but in front of our house it was wide enough for mill busses, automobiles and horse carts to all pass each other at once. To the north it ran through downtown, where it acquired a double row of guardian cherry trees, then into the mill district before it ended at the gates of Caliban Products.

When he was feeling proud of his work Daddy liked to say the Puca family needed no other street. If Mommy was around, she would smile at him and remind him that the church was on Oak Street, and didn’t we need that, and that his horrible little tavern was on Coal Street, and he seemed to need that as well against all common sense.

Right then Midsummer Avenue was the Puca family racecourse. Cameron was ahead of me by fifty feet or more. The keys jangled with every slamming step of his feet. I was mortified that I had to chase him down, scared that I wouldn’t catch him, and terrified that someone would see him with that big ring of keys and somehow know what they were. And more to the point, tell Daddy later.

I knew I couldn’t catch my almost-brother by sheer speed. He was always a few steps faster and few punches stronger than me — had been all my life. But even on Saturdays Midsummer Avenue was busy. Cameron was glancing back at me, grinning. I was watching for cross traffic, a turning truck or a horse cart pulling away from a delivery.

Cameron actually ran flat in to a brewery truck emerging from a side street as he looked over his shoulder. He bounced off like rubber ball to make a couple of feet of air before landing on his butt in the gutter. I sprinted and caught up just as he was back on his feet, tackling him to pull him down to the curb.

“Give me the keys right now,” I said, “or it ends here.”

“No boat?” He jangled the keys in front of me, keeping them just outside my reach. “You going to fly across the river, bro?”

“We’re already so busted thanks to that mess you made back at the house. You want the rowboat, we do it my way.”

Cameron laughed, his ape-grin on his face, and tossed me the keys. “Okay, little Daddy. Whatever you say.”

“I say we walk like normal people. Don’t draw no attention to ourselves. And see what’s what when we get down to Caliban.”

“Caliban, Caliban,” Cameron chanted, “I just can’t understand, what it is that any man, would hope to find at Caliban.”

“And shut *up*,” I told him.

Lady, he was annoying. I prayed that never in life would I act like my almost-brother.

*

Caliban Products stood before us, its ash-darkened stacks rising into the sky like three brick fingers echoing the magic of the Old Tower.

The mill was a complex really, spread out across a number of buildings, but it was all centered around the main plant and the powerhouse. The main plant was more than a quarter mile of brick, four or five stories high, though with only one level within — Daddy had given me a tour once, when the management had decided that a Family Day would be good press, he’d told me. Windows like fields of little square panes filled the walls of the main plant though most of the glass had been replaced with wood or cardboard or just painted over. Ornamented eaves hosted tribes of pigeons.

The powerhouse hulked by the river. Windowless as a prison, it gave an impression of bulky age though it was in fact one of the newest buildings. Daddy had explained to me that when the waterwheels were decommissioned and the great steam boilers brought in, Caliban had razed the old millhouse to its

foundations, strengthened the brick and concrete courses where they anchored to the exposed rock of the riverbank, and built it all over again.

That was where we wanted to be. The boathouse would be tucked in to the foundations on the river side of the powerhouse.

I glanced around. We were before the main gate. Though no one seemed to be watching, it struck me as foolish to open that up and march right in. I knew there was a smaller gate to our left where the Caliban property met the Boott property. "Come on," I said to Cameron, and headed that way.

Inside the fence nothing moved. Railroad cars sat heavy and long on their rails, waiting to be drawn within the plant buildings or to carry coal to the powerhouse. Bricks and concrete stamped out any inch of nature that might have once existed. The buildings were all dark and age-grimed as the stacks.

It was like a great prison designed to confine the spirits of men and exclude all of nature.

No wonder Daddy went to drink with the railroad men.

We came to the little gate close by to where the walls joined. There was something carved in the stone arch over the door that I couldn't understand, even if hadn't been badly weathered. "LASCIAE OGEN SPERANZA," it read. Boott had a similar small gate just to the left that also opened onto the broken concrete of Midsummer Avenue's sidewalk. I imagined old man Caliban and old man Boott slinking out here on a stormy day to share cigarettes and plot their business, dividing competition and talking over which troublesome workers should not be further employed in Mabton.

Daddy had a lot of work keys and it took me a nerve-wracking time to find one that would fit the gate. The first I tried wasn't the right one and I had to keep working through different keys. I was afraid of being caught at any moment, a fear that multiplied whenever one of the occasional trucks grumbled past behind me.

The whole time Cameron chattered on about the liberating power of hard labor. As if he'd ever done any work in his life.

Finally we were inside Daddy's Caliban. We sprinted for the powerhouse though

I knew that would mark us as troublemakers to anyone watching. Those banks of grimy windows had become too much like blank eyes to me, and for some reason I feared the ear-splitting shriek of a steam whistle.

All I heard besides the slap of my feet and the banging of my heart within my chest was Cameron laughing like one of the loons that came to the river in late autumn.

*

The boathouse was simple enough, a little shack between two piers of the powerhouse. I could see where the old axles of the mill wheels came out at the top of the foundation course. Before me were the brick shoulders of the now-broken dam that had once held Caliban's waters back. No need for the harness when the horse was gone.

Cameron applied himself to the boathouse lock, so I stared across the water. The river dropped through several stages of rapids or falls here. It was divided at the midpoint by a massive granite shoulder that was a smaller imitation of the bluff separating the bulk of Mabton from the water. That shoulder had allowed Caliban and Boott and the other mill builders to extend their will outward without actually touching the other bank and straying into the Lands of Promise with the dust of work upon them and cold iron in their hands.

I studied the ruined stones of the dams and the odd outcroppings of riverbed. Someone with determination and a good standing broad jump could make it out there, halfway across. Which made me wonder exactly what the river looked like on the other side of that big rock. Had the men who built the dams simply stopped there and turned their backs? Or had they looked onward with hope in their eyes?

Daddy might have been among them. Mommy had told me he'd worked at Caliban since the mill's founding sometime early in the last century. Proud as he was of being a shift supervisor, Daddy didn't talk about his history.

The closet of glory had shown me that.

"Got it," called Cameron behind me.

I turned to see the boathouse door open. He was already stepping into the

shadows within. The lock lay upon the ground, hasp broken free from the old wood.

I could have cursed him for a boggart. We would be discovered *again*. I would be so deep in trouble there would never be another free day at Sunday market for me in my life.

There was nothing for it but to follow him.

The boathouse went far back into the foundations. There were racks like great wooden shelves empty of anything but dust. Cobwebbed ropes and chains hung. A tiny rowboat sat right behind the doors on a little sledge. Two oars stuck up from it like the skeleton of some very simple creature.

“*This* is going to take us across the river?” I couldn’t keep the quaver from my voice.

“Solid as a rock,” Cameron declared.

“Rocks don’t float.”

He grinned, grabbed an oar and banged it against the side of the boat. “See, tight and riverworthy.”

“You knocked a hole in it,” I pointed out, my heart sinking.

“Oh.”

I sat down, exhausted. We’d stolen Daddy’s keys, made a mess at the house and here at the mill. We were going to be caught, half a dozen times over, and in more trouble than I could imagine.

And I wasn’t any closer to the Old Tower.

“Oars are good,” Cameron said.

Oars.

Ropes.

All the things we’d wanted before but lacked.

“Grab them,” I told him, feeling smarter than my almost-brother for once in my life. “Oars, and as much of the rope as we can carry that isn’t already rotten.”

“You building a raft again?” His voice was almost jeering.

“I’m going to *walk* across the river.”

*

The late afternoon light had caught some of the golden glow of the far side of the river. The world was a jewel in amber. Milky white seeds soared on a wind that carried a scent of fresh-blooming flowers.

I stood on a boulder, watching the river drop fifteen or twenty feet just below me, and considered my next jump. Cameron waited two hops behind me with most of our load. He was within an easy rope toss if need be.

If there was ever a day when I would spread wings and fly like Ikarus of the Brass Islands, this was it. I could feel the call of the Old Tower pulling me ahead even as Caliban’s sullen glower pushed me from behind.

In that moment, freed by water and the timeless light, I felt a profound sympathy for my father and all the long, pointless years of his life.

I sucked in my breath and leapt to land square on the wet boulder perhaps five feet ahead of me. With a shout of joy, I leapt to the next one, then the next, scrambling over the river and the remains of the dams in a bounding flight until I reached the granite wall at the center of river. There I stood panting and waited for my almost-brother.

He was not far behind, scrambling up with the ropes and the oars. “You can carry this stuff a while,” Cameron announced. He tossed his load to the scrubby grass at our feet before laying down to rest.

I studied the far side of the granite. There was perhaps forty feet of channel between the cliff below me and the next jumble of rocks. From there it would be another series of hops to the shadowed willows where the fireflies already gleamed even though the westering day was still bright here in the middle of the river.

My heart ached to be across. I would find a way to be on the other side if I had to make the leap from where I stood.

But what a mighty leap that would be. Close to our right on the downstream side was a single fall that accounted for all the distance of the little jumps and rapids and cataracts on the mill side of the river in one great tumbling roar of water that vanished over the edge in rock-filled spray.

I paced the granite shoulder to the south end, upstream farthest away from the pull of the waterfall. It tapered there to a little gravel beach where tiny fish darted among the shallows. The channel was a bit wider at this end. Looking back up the granite slope to where Cameron lay, I saw dozens of cracks and fissures in the old rock.

Oars and rope. I smiled and headed back for Cameron's abandoned load.

*

Of course he followed me down the second time, chattering the whole way. "No boat, no wings, no magic boots. He's going to sail a rope across the river, our Henry is. You're nuts, bro. When we go home, I'm switching with you. You can sweat out your nights to the clanging of the furnace while I sit at the table upstairs. Because I'm the one who can appreciate it. Not you, no, you're the nutter who thinks he's a nixie or something."

He went on like that. I ignored him as I shoved one of the oars deep as it would go into a crack near the south end of the granite. Then I tied off the longest rope we'd salvaged and walked it back up the hill to estimate its length.

Not enough.

Another rope, then, and double-hitch them together. I worked at that a moment as my almost-brother's voice ran down. Stripped my clothes and shoes off and rigged a third rope for a sling around me. Fastened the second rope and my clothing bundle to it. Finally I looked up at him.

Cameron was grinning his ape-grin again. "I'm proud of you, Henry."

"Thanks." I was suddenly struck shy.

“When you drown, can I have your room?”

“I am epoptic,” I told him. “The Lady carries me in Her hands.” Then: “Hang on to this end of the rope. When I get across, I’ll tie down the other end so you can follow.”

He hugged me, quick and rough. “I have always loved you.”

I thought no more upon it. Instead I jumped into the river, which was shocking cold and tasted of the coming evening. Arms wrapped around the paddle, I kicked into the current making for the other side. I would not let the falls just downstream concern me.

*

I had read the books of old stories, of the Bright Days when our people in their glory and their ignorance rode from the Garden Beneath like a storm upon the earth. To me, those stories all had a single point: that the banners were more brilliant, the sword-edges sharper, the loves truer in those old times than any tired modern imitation could be in our world of clocks and hunting licenses and pay packets.

I didn’t know about that. I was a boy, sharing my childhood with Cameron in a town among a people who have few children in their long years. Daddy or old Mrs. Grimsby might have slain gods when they were young, but now we all shopped at Diana’s Market and rode the bus out to the Town Fair on Midsummer’s Day.

But one thing I know from the old stories. There are moments in life when the Lady stays time’s hand and people can see the map of their existence unfolded, all their choices written out in a glowing script.

The river gave me one of those moments.

It was cold, cold as iron in the night. It had a fist that gripped my chest tight as I’d squeezed any frog I’d ever caught. My ribs ached in the first moment. My lungs burned though my head remained above the water. My entire body echoed to the rumble of the falls. That tumbling water called to me with a voice almost as powerful as that of the river’s other side.

I could have let go, slipped my knots, and slid smiling over the precipice into sharp-edged chaos. Only the wonder of that glint high in the Old Tower kept me going at that moment.

Then my purpose reasserted itself and I began to swim in earnest. Rope or no rope this was a perilous crossing. I kept the second oar clutched to my chest as both float and cargo and kicked as hard as if I were fighting Cameron over the last scrap of some sweetmeat. Harder, really, for though he sometimes seemed to have no limits to his ferocity, I never really meant to hurt my almost-brother.

The rope was long enough to let me reach the other side. It was short enough to hold me back from the falls should my strength fail in the cold dark water. But only if the knots held and the oar remained true where I had grounded it in the crevice. Only if Cameron watched over me.

Still, mere seconds had gone by as I thought over my choices and fates. I kicked again. The river was like Mommy, bigger than I could imagine, but close to me every moment. The river was like Daddy, a cold and distant power that drove my life. The river was like Cameron, worrying at my heels to make me stronger and better than I would have become on my own.

The rope jerked then. Cameron? I could not turn to look. He would haul me back if he needed to. I continued to kick.

The cold was getting worse, a wintry iron straining the muscles of my legs and lungs. I had considered the distance and difficulty of the swim but not the temperature. The Old Tower still called me.

Why did Mommy keep warning me away from it? I would no more have thought to cross the river on my own than I would have thought to fly to the moon.

Daddy never spoke of it. Kicking again, I realized Mommy had never spoken of it in Daddy's presence, either.

The rope jerked another time. Not hard, though. That must be Cameron paying the line out. The falls continued to rumble in my bones. My fingers and toes were numb. I wondered if I should have kept my clothes on.

Kick.

Why had no one ever gone to the Old Tower? Daddy and a handful of his drinking partners could have found a way across this channel.

Kick.

Even my thoughts were slowing. The falls called to me in voices of wonder, promising rest. My arms and legs were wood. Lead. Stone.

Kick.

I knew why we had left the Garden Beneath. It was not large enough for our people's honor and glory. The apes had been spreading across the world building villages and temples of their own. We had meant to show them a thing or two.

Kick.

Now we were no different from them.

Another tug upon the rope.

Kick.

My legs were slower. The falls were louder. The Lands of Promise were close. All I had to do was slip the knots.

Kick.

My fingers fumbled at my chest, but the wet ropes defeated them. I found it hard to hold the oar and do that, so I let it go.

Kick.

Where was Cameron, when he should be rescuing me?

Kick.

I began to tumble, nearly in the grip of the falls. Then I hit a rock, bounced off another rock with a bruising jolt to my shoulder. I struck a third with my jaw so that blood bloomed in my mouth.

My hands grabbed on without further thought. Something tugged at my back like

the bite of a fish, then my foot found another rock.

I pulled myself upward, spitting water and blood, until I was wedged above the river though still in the freezing spray. I rubbed sweat and my eyes and looked across the channel.

Cameron stood there hugging Daddy. Another man was close by with a rifle raised to his shoulder. His head was wreathed in smoke.

My father glared at me above my almost-brother's shoulder.

I scrambled up and away as rock chips flew. I heard no shot, but the falls overwhelmed my ears. My foot caught in a cleft, skin scraping to the bone as I pulled it free, but I kept going. Something plucked at my ear, then the rock in front of me exploded. I closed my eyes and kept on climbing, over the top of a boulder and out of sight of the other side of the river.

No, my side of the river.

I was on the other side now.

Back against the rock, coughing up water and blood, I waited for my lungs to work again. When they finally did, I picked at the knots of my rope until my clothes came free, and dressed in the freezing garments. Then I worked my way across the rest of the river for the safety of the willows, away from bullets and not-brothers and un-Daddys and whatever had gone wrong at home.

I slept weeping that night high in a willow tree set back from the bank. Noises echoed from across the river, booms and bellowings and something much like Mommy's voice except far too large and deep in volume. My cold and my fear combined to an exhaustion that ignored all else.

*

Looking through the willow leaves into the orange glare of the rising sun, Daddy's Caliban was a castle of the Bright Days. The smoke-grimed stacks were towers set to challenge the armies of the Earth.

Then I woke a little more and saw only cold iron and failure.

At least no one stood on that granite rock in the middle of the river with rifle in hand.

My entire body ached. My head split with the pain of a river-cold. My nose ran and my eyes were swollen. If this was the Land of Promises, the Lady had lied to us.

I smiled at the thought. What would Mother Arleigh say to me now?

“Get out of that tree, you little ape,” most likely.

So I climbed to the ground. I had to be two or three miles north of the Old Tower, and considerably down hill. Battered and chilled, with no paths through these woods, it would take me most of the morning to reach it.

“Mommy,” I told the indifferent midges that swarmed the riverbank, “I am going where you sent me.”

*

Around noon I walked slowly uphill through the golden fields that I had always been able to see from the top of the bluff. There were no pale stags today. Only the sun’s welcome heat and the cycling buzz of the grasshoppers. The slope stole my energy and gave back only a deep stitch in my side, so I took my rest on a tumbled stone.

As I sat I turned to look across the river. Seen from this side, the bluff was a steep-kneed cliff topped with the rhododendrons and scragged copse of woods I knew so well. There were caves in the face of the cliff, which surprised me. It had never occurred to me such openings might be down there. Did they connect anywhere in the town?

I watched a while. Things moved in the cave shadows. I even glimpsed a glint, an echo of what had finally drawn me to the Old Tower. Binoculars? A camera, maybe.

I began to wave when another thought occurred to me That glint might be the sight of a hunting rifle.

They were watching me. Had they always been watching me?

That ended my rest. I kept walking, zigging across the fields both to lessen the slope and to make myself harder to see from Mabton.

As I climbed the Old Tower rose above me like a thin stone moon. This close I could see that it was built from huge stones much bigger than any single man could lift. Some had shifted or cracked, which lent the Old Tower its distinctive angle.

But it was definitely *built*. It was by far the oldest thing I had ever seen.

Except, I realized, for Mrs. Grimsby. And anyone else in Mabton who could remember the Garden Beneath from their own lifetime.

That made me understand how little my life meant to those people. I was no more than a swamp midge to Mrs. Grimsby, or Mother Arleigh, or even Daddy. To anyone who'd ridden under the brilliant banners of the Bright Days, whether or not they remembered the Garden Beneath.

Only Cameron understood me. And he had betrayed me to Daddy.

I stopped just outside the Old Tower. Was this what the Lady had promised us? Had we earned the Lands of Promise?

And who was I to the Lady anyway?

Builder of bridges, perhaps.

I laughed at myself. These were grand dreams for someone who had been the target of bullets.

I stepped through the high, narrow door into cold shadows.

*

The Old Tower didn't really have stairs. More like climbing blocks set into the wall in a rough spiral. There was a stone floor with a narrow gap like a grave leading downward. The interior of the tower stretched above me, a chimney to a ceiling perhaps forty feet high. There was no sign within of anyone who had ever lived here or held this tower against their enemies.

It might as well have been a cave.

Something gleamed in the gap at my feet. I stepped around to look down a narrow stone stair. A ghostly bluish light shimmered in the dank dark. It was the exact shade of the spark which had passed between me and Cameron.

I squinted. What was I seeing? Armor, maybe. Like grave goods.

Or Daddy's closet of glory.

There were swords there, too, with their own light. Had this been the glint I had seen from the tower walls, some glimpse of martial glory? My blood stirred. The war horns would be brassy and proud. This time we would have guns, too, for we had come to abide the feel of cold iron all too well.

But I was tired and chilled, with no stomach for the darkness beneath the earth. This crypt could not have gleamed to me from across the river, I realized. So I headed for Father Sun instead. As I climbed the tower wall I found that my arms and legs ached from the river. My ears rang, either from my river-cold, or from the close call of the shooting. My breath hurt. But I still climbed, knowing I would find something. Something had glinted from this tower. Something had held Mommy's attention and my imagination all my life.

After a while I came to the ceiling. There was a narrow crack in the capstone which blocked the tower shaft. Sunlight glared through it like a mirror of the grave of glory at the base. I squeezed through, picking up a few more scrapes along the way.

Above was like the battlement of a castle in an old story. There was a wall, varying from knee-high to chest-high in random order as the shapes of the stones dictated. But there was nothing here, either. No glint or goddess or voice out of history.

I leaned against the wall facing the sun and cried for a little while out of frustration.

"I am eoptic," I told the sky, then took a nap in the warm sunlight.

*

Later when I awoke I stood stiff but clear-headed and looked back across the river. The Old Tower was higher than the bluff. I could actually see some of Mabton beyond, as well as the mills downstream to the north. The sun was heading west, already behind me and again the day was filled with long, golden light. The fields and farms east of Mabton seemed enchanted. The ribbon of the railroad headed through them like a highway back to the Bright Days.

Closer to me, the river's edge below the bluffs seemed as mysterious and filled with portent as this side ever had when viewed from over there. The mills almost glowed in the amber light.

Our people have purpose.

The thought surfaced in me like a leaping fish. We no longer die on sword's point. We don't fight wars with the apes or duels with each other. We heed steam whistles and go to church and drink ourselves silly and buy peanut butter at the Sunday market and live out the long days of our lives in something like peace and harmony.

It is the small miracles of kitchen and paycheck that are our Lands of Promise. Not the war horns and bright banners, nor the endless plenty of some mythic paradise.

"Thank you, Lady," I said. I understood Her purpose now, and Her promise as well. I climbed down before daylight fled the tower.

At the bottom, where dusk already gathered among the cold stones, I looked once more into the gap that led to earth below. That blue glow still flickered. It was Oberon's vault, a closet of glory for our entire people. There would be weapons and relics below to stir our people to a revival of the Bright Days once more, however brief and doomed that might be.

Again I could hear the war horns blaring. Had I come here by night I might have first followed that glow down in the earth. I would have missed the Lady's message waiting for me above.

Or perhaps She had prepared more than one message for me.

Did the Lady care which direction her people followed? Or only that we followed some direction.

Outside, Cameron sat on a tumbled stone eating an apple.

I couldn't find it in me to be surprised. "Have you come to kill me?"

He took a huge bite, juice streaming sticky down his chin. After he'd chewed and swallowed Cameron grinned his ape grin. "They think you're me, now. I told Daddy I'd gone crazy, and you'd pushed me into the river."

I? You? "And he brought a rifleman out there just for that."

Cameron shrugged. "He didn't know it was us who'd broken into the mill."

"So what are you doing here now?"

His eyes glinted like stars. "Maybe I'm lying. But not all of time. Not everything I say. Truth, Henry. There's some folks mighty worried about what you might have found or raised over here. Like old man Caliban. Other folks, like Mommy, well...she's sort of holding back the tide right now."

"The caves in the cliff?"

He shrugged again. "Rich people want things, too. All their money can't buy their way into the Lands of Promise. You're the first person to cross the river alive."

"What about you?"

Cameron leaned in close, so that I could smell apple and onions and coal dust. "We're the same person, Henry. Only Mommy ever saw us different. Only Mommy made us different."

The hair on my neck prickled. I remembered her greatness, that vast presence I saw out of the corner of my eye. "You're lying again," I said, but I didn't believe myself.

He shrugged, then dropped the half-eaten apple into his pocket. My almost-brother — perhaps my almost-self — led me down to the river bank where a little boat was wedged into a marshy shallow. He might have come across on it. If he had, he'd made it seem as if the boat had drifted in.

We both got on board. I took the oars to row across. On the way we talked about church and school and the Sunday market and which kind of candy was best at Pinfaire's Emporium. The current caught the boat and pulled it, but I stayed firm on the oars.

When the boat ground into rocks just above Boott's Mill, I was alone. I couldn't remember exactly when Cameron had left. I hadn't heard a splash. A half-eaten apple sat on the boat's other bench. When I picked it up, a blue spark jumped from the apple to me.

My brother had come home.

Then men with guns met me there, and a constable, and Peggy's father the judge, along with Daddy and Mommy both.

"Well," said Daddy in his roughest, you're-going-to-get-a-whipping voice.

"I have seen the Lands of Promise," I answered loudly, so that everyone could hear. Some of the guns clicked as they were cocked. "We are living in them even now, on this side of the river."

*

In the end, no one believed me but Mommy. They all argued a while, for years in fact, but no one else seemed tempted to cross the river to see for themselves.

One night a month or so after I'd returned from the other side, Mommy showed me Her fullness, by way of a parting gift — or perhaps a terror. "I have given you back all of yourself," She told me in a voice like mountains groaning. "I am sorry that I cannot give you back to your mother, too." Then the Lady kissed me and was gone on the autumn wind.

I still see blue sparks among the leaves sometimes in that season, and hints of the banners that would have flown again had I gone down into the earth below the Old Tower. When the leaves burn in piles, I know what would have become of those banners. Just like the picture on the wall of Daddy's room.

Peggy likes me these days. Maybe we'll be together and have a kid of our own sometime in the next century or two. Old man Caliban told Daddy I could have a job in security down at the mill when I finish school. When our paths cross

Mother Arleigh looks at me with a faraway sadness in her eyes. Since Mommy left, she and Daddy drink together down at the Switchman's Rest on Sundays, though they try to hide that from me.

Someday when I am very, very old and all my life's secrets are long past mattering, I will tell Mother Arleigh that I know who she really is and that I love her too.

*

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