

From book:

return from tomorrow

of georg ritchie [\(+video\)](#)

[+ audio book mp3 of clippings from the book, return from tomorrow, of georg ritchies near death experience in the 40s.](#)

[Dk link book](#)

first from his childhood:

Me, me, me, always in the center. Wasn't there any time in my life when I had let someone else stand there?

I saw myself walking forward at a church service at age eleven, asking Jesus to be Lord of my life. But I saw how quickly that first excitement turned into a dull routine of church-on-Sunday. Worse, I saw the smugness and self-esteem that went with it. I was better than the kids who did not come to church. I was even better than lots who did; there was my perfect-attendance pin to prove it.

I started to point out my premed courses, how I was going to be a doctor and help people. But visible alongside the classroom scenes was that Cadillac car and that private airplane, thoughts as observable as actions in that all-pervading Light.

And all at once rage at the question itself built up in me. It was not fair! Of course I had not done anything with my life! I had not had time. How could you judge a person who had not started?

The answering thought, however, held no trace of judgment. Death, the word was infinitely loving, can come at any age.

Well, sure. I knew that babies and little kids died. Somehow I had just always assumed that a full life span was in some way owed me.

"What about the insurance money coming when I'm seventy?" The words were out, in this strange realm where communication took place by thought instead of speech, before I could call them back. A few months ago I had taken out the standard life insurance policy offered to servicemen; in some subconscious part of me, had I believed this piece of paper guaranteed life itself? If I had suspected before that there was mirth in the Presence beside me, now I was sure of it: the brightness seemed to vibrate and shimmer with a kind of holy laughter, not at me and my silliness, not a mocking laughter, but a mirth that seemed to say that in spite of all error and tragedy, joy was more lasting still.

And in the ecstasy of that laughter I realized that it was I who was judging the events around us so harshly. It was I who saw them as trivial, self-centered, unimportant. No such condemnation came from the glory shining round me. He was not blaming or reproaching. He was simply loving me. Filling the world with Himself and yet somehow attending to me personally. Waiting for my answer to the question that still hung in the dazzling air.

What have you done with your life to show Me?

Already I understood that in my first frantic efforts to come up with an impressive answer, I had missed the point altogether. He was not asking about accomplishments and awards.

The question, like everything else proceeding from Him, had to do with love. How much have you loved with your life? Have you loved others as I am loving you? Totally? Unconditionally?

Hearing the question like that, I saw how foolish it was even to try to find an answer in the scenes around us. Why, I had not known love like this was possible. Someone should have told me, I thought indignantly! A fine time to discover what life was all about, like coming to a final exam and discovering you were going to be tested on a subject you had never studied. If this was the point of everything, why hadn't someone told me?

But though these thoughts rose out of self-pity and self-excuse, the answering thought held no rebuke, only that hint of heavenly laughter behind the words:

I did tell you.

But how? Still wanting to justify myself. How could He have told me and I not have heard?

I told you by the life I lived. I told you by the death I died. And, if you keep your eyes on Me, you will see more.,

With a start I noticed that we were moving. I had not been aware of leaving the hospital, but now it was nowhere in sight. The living events of my life that had crowded around us had vanished, too. Instead we seemed to be high above the earth, speeding together toward a distant pinprick of light.

It was not like the out-of-body travel I had experienced earlier. Then, my own thoughts had obsessed me. Then I had seemed almost to skim the surface of the earth. Now we were higher, moving faster; and with my eyes on Him, as He commanded, this mode of movement no longer seemed strange or alarming.

The distant pinprick resolved itself into a large city toward which we seemed to be descending. It was still nighttime but smoke poured from factory chimneys and many buildings had lights burning on every floor. There was an ocean or a large lake beyond the lights; it could have been Boston, Detroit, Toronto, certainly no place I had ever been. But obviously, I thought as we came close enough to see the crowded streets, one where war industries were operating around the clock.

In fact the streets were impossibly crowded. Just below us two men bore down on the same section of sidewalk and an instant later had simply passed through each other. It was the same inside the humming factories and office buildings, where I could see as easily as I could see the streets, too many people at the machines and desks. In one room a grey-haired man was sitting in an armchair dictating a letter onto a rotating cylinder. Standing behind him, not an inch away, another man, maybe ten years older, kept snatching repeatedly at the speaking tube as though he would tear it from the seated man's hand. "No!" he was saying, "if you order a hundred gross they'll charge more. Take a thousand gross at a time. Pierce would have given you a better deal. Why did you send Bill on that Treadwell job?" On and on he went, correcting, giving orders, while the man in the chair appeared neither to see nor hear him.

I noticed this phenomenon repeatedly, people unaware of others right beside them. I saw a group of assembly-line workers gathered around a coffee canteen. One of the women asked another for a cigarette, begged her in fact, as though she wanted it more than anything in the world. But the other one, chatting with her friends, ignored her. She took a pack of cigarettes from her coveralls, and without ever offering it to the woman who reached for it so eagerly, took one out and lit it. Fast as a striking snake the woman who had been refused snatched at the lit cigarette in the other one's mouth. Again she grabbed at it. And again, With a little chill of recognition I saw that she was unable to grip it. I thought of that guy wire on the telephone pole. The sheet on the hospital bed. I remembered myself yelling at a man who never turned to look at me. And then I recalled the people here in this town, trying in vain to attract attention, walking along a sidewalk without occupying space. Clearly these individuals were in the same substanceless predicament I myself was in. Like me, in fact, they were dead. But, it was so very different from the way I had always imagined death. I watched one woman of maybe fifty following a man of about the same age down the street. She seemed very much alive, agitated and tearful, except that the man to whom she was addressing her emphatic words was oblivious to her existence.

"You're not getting enough sleep. Marjorie makes too many demands on you. You know you've never been strong. Why aren't you wearing a scarf? You should never have married a woman who thinks only of herself." There was more, much more, and from some of it I gathered that she was his mother, in spite of the fact that they appeared so nearly the same age. How long had she been following him this way? Was

this what death was like, to be permanently invisible to the living, yet permanently wrapped up in their affairs? "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth! For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also!" I had never been any good at memorizing Scripture, but those words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount sprang into my mind now like an electric shock. Perhaps these insubstantial people, the businessman, the woman begging cigarettes, this mother, although they could no longer contact the earth, still had their hearts there. Did I? With a kind of terror I thought of that Eagle Scout badge. Being a Phi Gam. Getting into med school. Was my heart, the focus of my being, fixed on things like these? Keep your eyes on Me, Jesus had told me as we set out on this extraordinary journey. And when I did, whenever I looked at Him, the terror vanished, although the dreadful question remained.

Without Him before me, in fact, I could not have endured the things He was showing me. As fast as thought, we traveled from city to city, seemingly on the familiar earth, even the part of the earth, the United States and possibly Canada, that I had always known, except for the thousands of non-physical beings that I now observed also inhabiting this "normal" space. In one house a younger man followed an older one from room to room. "I'm sorry, Pa!" he kept saying. "I didn't know what it would do to Mama! I didn't understand." But though I could hear him clearly, it was obvious that the man he was speaking to could not. The old man was carrying a tray into a room where an elderly woman sat in bed. "I'm sorry, Pa," the young man said again. "I'm sorry, Mama." Endlessly, over and over, to ears that could not hear. In bafflement I turned to the Brightness beside me. But though I felt His compassion flow like a torrent into the room before us, no understanding lighted my mind. Several times we paused before similar scenes. A boy trailing a teenaged girl through the corridors of a school. "I'm sorry, Nancy!" A middle-aged woman begging a grey-haired man to forgive

In fact the streets were impossibly crowded. Just below us two men bore down on the same section of sidewalk and an instant later had simply passed through each other. It was the same inside the humming factories and office buildings, where I could see as easily as I could see the streets, too many people at the machines and desks. In one room a grey-haired man was sitting in an armchair dictating a letter onto a rotating cylinder. Standing behind him, not an inch away, another man, maybe ten years older, kept snatching repeatedly at the speaking tube as though he would tear it from the seated man's hand.

"No!" he was saying, "if you order a hundred gross they'll charge more. Take a thousand gross at a time. Pierce would have given you a better deal. Why did you send Bill on that Treadwell job?" On and on he went, correcting, giving orders, while the man in the chair appeared neither to see nor hear him.

I noticed this phenomenon repeatedly, people unaware of others right beside them. I saw a group of assembly-line workers gathered around a coffee canteen. One of the women asked another for a cigarette, begged her in fact, as though she wanted it more than anything in the world. But the other one, chatting with her friends, ignored her. She took a pack of cigarettes from her coveralls, and without ever offering it to the woman who reached for it so eagerly, took one out and lit it. Fast as a striking snake the woman who had been refused snatched at the lit cigarette in the other one's mouth. Again she grabbed at it. And again.

With a little chill of recognition I saw that she was unable to grip it.

I thought of that guy wire on the telephone pole. The sheet on the hospital bed. I remembered myself yelling at a man who never turned to look at me. And then I recalled the people here in this town, trying in vain to attract attention, walking along a sidewalk without occupying space. Clearly these individuals were in the same substanceless predicament I myself was in.

Like me, in fact, they were dead.

But, it was so very different from the way I had always imagined death. I watched one woman of maybe fifty following a man of about the same age down the street. She seemed very much alive, agitated and tearful, except that the man to whom she was addressing her emphatic words was oblivious to her existence.

"You're not getting enough sleep. Marjorie makes too many demands on you. You know you've never been strong. Why aren't you wearing a scarf? You should never have married a woman who thinks only of herself." There was more, much more, and from some of it I gathered that she was his mother, in spite of the fact that they appeared so nearly the same age. How long had she been following him this way? Was

this what death was like, to be permanently invisible to the living, yet permanently wrapped up in their affairs?

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth! For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also!" I had never been any good at memorizing Scripture, but those words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount sprang into my mind now like an electric shock. Perhaps these insubstantial people, the businessman, the woman begging cigarettes, this mother, although they could no longer contact the earth, still had their hearts there. Did I? With a kind of terror I thought of that Eagle Scout badge. Being a Phi Gam. Getting into med school. Was my heart, the focus of my being, fixed on things like these?

Keep your eyes on Me, Jesus had told me as we set out on this extraordinary journey. And when I did, whenever I looked at Him, the terror vanished, although the dreadful question remained. Without Him before me, in fact, I could not have endured the things He was showing me. As fast as thought, we traveled from city to city, seemingly on the familiar earth, even the part of the earth, the United States and possibly Canada, that I had always known, except for the thousands of nonphysical beings that I now observed also inhabiting this "normal" space. In one house a younger man followed an older one from room to room. "I'm sorry, Pa!" he kept saying. "I didn't know what it would do to Mama! I didn't understand."

But though I could hear him clearly, it was obvious that the man he was speaking to could not. The old man was carrying a tray into a room where an elderly woman sat in bed. "I'm sorry, Pa," the young man said again. "I'm sorry, Mama." Endlessly, over and over, to ears that could not hear.

In bafflement I turned to the Brightness beside me. But though I felt His compassion flow like a torrent into the room before us, no understanding lighted my mind.

Several times we paused before similar scenes. A boy trailing a teenaged girl through the corridors of a school. "I'm sorry, Nancy!" A middle-aged woman begging a grey-haired man to forgive her. "What are they so sorry for, Jesus?" I pleaded. "Why do they keep talking to people who can't hear them?" Then from the Light beside me came the thought: They are suicides, chained to every consequence of their act. The idea stunned me, yet I knew it came from Him, not me, for I saw no more scenes like these, as though the truth He was teaching had been learned. Gradually I began to notice something else. All of the living people we were watching were surrounded by a faint luminous glow, almost like an electrical field over the surface of their bodies. This luminosity moved as they moved, like a second skin made out of pale, scarcely visible light. At first I thought it must be reflected brightness from the Person at my side. But the buildings we entered gave off no reflection, neither did inanimate objects. And then I realized that the nonphysical beings did not either.

My own unsolid body, I now saw, was without this glowing sheath. At this point the Light drew me inside a dingy bar and grill near what looked like a large naval base. A crowd of people, many of them sailors, lined the bar three deep, while others jammed wooden booths along the wall. Though a few were drinking beer, most of them seemed to be belting whiskies as fast as the two perspiring bartenders could pour them. Then I noticed a striking thing. A number of the men standing at the bar seemed unable to lift their drinks to their lips. Over and over I watched them clutch at their shot glasses, hands passing through the solid tumblers, through the heavy wooden counter top, through the very arms and bodies of the drinkers around them. And these men, every one of them, lacked the aureole of light that surrounded the others. Then the cocoon of light must be a property of physical bodies only. The dead, we who had lost our solidness, had lost this "second skin" as well. And it was obvious that these living people, the light-surrounded ones, the ones actually drinking, talking, jostling each other, could neither see the desperately thirsty disembodied beings among them, nor feel their frantic pushing to get at those glasses. (Though it was also clear to me, watching, that the non-solid people could both see and hear each other. Furious quarrels were constantly breaking out among them over glasses that none could actually get to his lips.) I thought I had seen heavy drinking at fraternity parties in Richmond, but the way civilians and servicemen at this bar were going at it beat everything.

I watched one young sailor rise unsteadily from a stool, take two or three steps, and sag heavily to the floor. Two of his buddies stooped down and started dragging him away from the crush. But that was not what I was looking at. I was staring in amazement as the bright cocoon around the unconscious sailor simply opened up. It parted at the very crown of his head and began peeling away from his head, his shoulders. Instantly, quicker than I had ever seen anyone move, one of the insubstantial beings who had

been standing near him at the bar was on top of him. He had been hovering like a thirsty shadow at the sailor's side, greedily following every swallow the young man made. Now he seemed to spring at him like a beast of prey. In the next instant, to my utter mystification, the springing figure had vanished. It all happened even before the two men had dragged their unconscious load from under the feet of those at the bar. One minute I had distinctly seen two individuals; by the time they propped the sailor against the wall, there was only one. Twice more, as I stared, stupefied, the identical scene was repeated. A man passed out, a crack swiftly opened in the aureole round him, one of the nonsolid people vanished as he hurled himself at that opening, almost as if he had scrambled inside the other man. Was that covering of light some kind of shield, then? Was it a protection against, against disembodied beings like myself? Presumably these sub-stanceless creatures had once had solid bodies, as I myself had had. Suppose that when they had been in these bodies they had developed a dependence on alcohol that went beyond the physical. That became mental. Spiritual, even. Then when they lost that body, except when they could briefly take possession of another one, they would be cut off for all eternity from the thing they could never stop craving.

"What are they so sorry for, Jesus?" I pleaded. "Why do they keep talking to people who can't hear them?"

Then from the Light beside me came the thought: They are suicides, chained to every consequence of their act.

The idea stunned me, yet I knew it came from Him, not me, for I saw no more scenes like these, as though the truth He was teaching had been learned.

Gradually I began to notice something else. All of the living people we were watching were surrounded by a faint luminous glow, almost like an electrical field over the surface of their bodies. This luminosity moved as they moved, like a second skin made out of pale, scarcely visible light.

At first I thought it must be reflected brightness from the Person at my side. But the buildings we entered gave off no reflection, neither did inanimate objects. And then I realized that the nonphysical beings did not either. My own unsolid body, I now saw, was without this glowing sheath.

At this point the Light drew me inside a dingy bar and grill near what looked like a large naval base. A crowd of people, many of them sailors, lined the bar three deep, while others jammed wooden booths along the wall. Though a few were drinking beer, most of them seemed to be belting whiskies as fast as the two perspiring bartenders could pour them.

Then I noticed a striking thing. A number of the men standing at the bar seemed unable to lift their drinks to their lips. Over and over I watched them clutch at their shot glasses, hands passing through the solid tumblers, through the heavy wooden counter top, through the very arms and bodies of the drinkers around them.

And these men, every one of them, lacked the aureole of light that surrounded the others.

Then the cocoon of light must be a property of physical bodies only. The dead, we who had lost our solidness, had lost this "second skin" as well. And it was obvious that these living people, the light-surrounded ones, the ones actually drinking, talking, jostling each other, could neither see the desperately thirsty disembodied beings among them, nor feel their frantic pushing to get at those glasses. (Though it was also clear to me, watching, that the non-solid people could both see and hear each other. Furious quarrels were constantly breaking out among them over glasses that none could actually get to his lips.)

I thought I had seen heavy drinking at fraternity parties in Richmond, but the way civilians and servicemen at this bar were going at it beat everything. I watched one young sailor rise unsteadily from a stool, take two or three steps, and sag heavily to the floor. Two of his buddies stooped down and started dragging him away from the crush.

But that was not what I was looking at. I was staring in amazement as the bright cocoon around the unconscious sailor simply opened up. It parted at the very crown of his head and began peeling away from his head, his shoulders. Instantly, quicker than I had ever seen anyone move, one of the insubstantial beings who had been standing near him at the bar was on top of him. He had been hovering like a thirsty

shadow at the sailor's side, greedily following every swallow the young man made. Now he seemed to spring at him like a beast of prey.

In the next instant, to my utter mystification, the springing figure had vanished. It all happened even before the two men had dragged their unconscious load from under the feet of those at the bar. One minute I had distinctly seen two individuals; by the time they propped the sailor against the wall, there was only one.

Twice more, as I stared, stupefied, the identical scene was repeated. A man passed out, a crack swiftly opened in the aureole round him, one of the nonsolid people vanished as he hurled himself at that opening, almost as if he had scrambled inside the other man.

Was that covering of light some kind of shield, then? Was it a protection against, against disembodied beings like myself? Presumably these sub-stanceless creatures had once had solid bodies, as I myself had had. Suppose that when they had been in these bodies they had developed a dependence on alcohol that went beyond the physical. That became mental. Spiritual, even. Then when they lost that body, except when they could briefly take possession of another one, they would be cut off for all eternity from the thing they could never stop craving.

An eternity like that, the thought sent a chill shuddering through me, surely that would be a form of hell. I had always thought of hell, when I thought of it at all, as a fiery place somewhere beneath the earth where evil men like Hitler would burn forever. But what if one level of hell existed right here on the surface, unseen and unsuspected by the living people occupying the same space? What if it meant remaining on earth but never again able to make contact with it? I thought of that mother whose son could not hear her. The woman who wanted that cigarette. I thought of myself, caring only about getting to Richmond, unable to make anyone see me or help me. To want most, to burn with most desire, where you were most powerless, that would be hell indeed. Not "would be," I realized with a start. Was. This was hell. And I was as much a part of it as these other discarnate creatures. I had died. I had lost my physical body. I existed now in a realm that would not respond to me in any way. But if this was hell, if there was no hope, then why was He here beside me? Why did my heart leap for joy each time I turned to Him? For He was overwhelmingly the chief impression of the journey. All the sights and shocks assailing me were nothing compared to the main thing that was going on. Which was, quite simply, falling in love with the Person beside me. Whichever way I looked, He remained the real focus of my attention. Whatever else I saw, nothing compared with Him. And that was another of the things baffling me. If I could see Him, why couldn't everyone else? He was too bright for living eyes to look at, that I had realized right away. But surely the living people we passed must somehow sense the love streaming out to them like heat from a mighty fire! And these others, the ones like me who no longer had physical eyes that could be destroyed, how could they not help but see the burning Love and Compassion in their midst? How could they miss Someone closer, more brilliant than the noonday sun?

Unless, For the first time it occurred to me to wonder whether something infinitely more important than I ever believed could have happened that day when at age eleven I walked forward to the altar of a church. Was it possible that I, in some real way, had actually been "born again," as the preacher said, given new eyes, whether I understood any of it or not? Or, could these others see Him now, too, if their attention was not all caught up in the physical world they had lost? "Where your heart is," As long as my heart had been set on getting to Richmond by a certain date, I had not been able to see Jesus either. Maybe whenever our center of attention was on anything else, we could block out even Him.

We were moving again. We had left the Navy base with its circumference of seedy streets and bars, and were now standing, in this dimension where travel seemed to take no time at all, on the edge of a wide, flat plain. So far in our journeying we had visited places where the living and the dead existed side by side; indeed, where disembodied beings, completely unsuspected by the living, hovered right on top of the physical things and people where their desire was focused. Now, however, although we were apparently still somewhere on the surface of the earth, I could see no living man or woman. The plain was crowded, even jammed with hordes of ghostly discarnate beings; nowhere was there a solid, light-surrounded person to be seen. All of these thousands of people were apparently no more substantial than I myself. And they were the most frustrated, the angriest, the most completely miserable beings I had ever laid eyes on. "Lord Jesus!" I cried. "Where are we?" At first I thought we were looking at some great battlefield: everywhere people were locked in what looked like fights to the death, writhing, punching, gouging. It could not be a present-day war because there were no tanks or guns. No weapons

of any sort, I saw as I looked closer, only bare hands and feet and teeth. And then I noticed that no one was apparently being injured. There was no blood, no bodies strewn the ground; a blow that ought to have eliminated an opponent would leave him exactly as before. Although they appeared to be literally on top of each other, it was as though each man was boxing the air; at last I realized that of course, having no substance, they could not actually touch one another. They could not kill, though they clearly wanted to, because their intended victims were already dead, and so they hurled themselves at each other in a frenzy of impotent rage. If I suspected before that I was seeing hell, now I was sure of it. Up to this moment the misery I had watched consisted in being chained to a physical world of which we were no longer part. Now I saw that there were other kinds of chains. Here were no solid objects or people to enthrall the soul. These creatures seemed locked into habits of mind and emotion, into hatred, lust, destructive thought patterns. Even more hideous than the bites and kicks they exchanged were the sexual abuses many were performing in feverish pantomime. Perversions I had never dreamed of were being vainly attempted

space? What if it meant remaining on earth but never again able to make contact with it? I thought of that mother whose son could not hear her. The woman who wanted that cigarette. I thought of myself, caring only about getting to Richmond, unable to make anyone see me or help me. To want most, to burn with most desire, where you were most powerless, that would be hell indeed.

Not "would be," I realized with a start. Was. This was hell. And I was as much a part of it as these other discarnate creatures. I had died. I had lost my physical body. I existed now in a realm that would not respond to me in any way.

But if this was hell, if there was no hope, then why was He here beside me? Why did my heart leap for joy each time I turned to Him? For He was overwhelmingly the chief impression of the journey. All the sights and shocks assailing me were nothing compared to the main thing that was going on. Which was, quite simply, falling in love with the Person beside me. Whichever way I looked, He remained the real focus of my attention. Whatever else I saw, nothing compared with Him.

And that was another of the things baffling me. If I could see Him, why couldn't everyone else? He was too bright for living eyes to look at, that I had realized right away. But surely the living people we passed must somehow sense the love streaming out to them like heat from a mighty fire!

And these others, the ones like me who no longer had physical eyes that could be destroyed, how could they not help but see the burning Love and Compassion in their midst? How could they miss Someone closer, more brilliant than the noonday sun?

Unless, For the first time it occurred to me to wonder whether something infinitely more important than I ever believed could have happened that day when at age eleven I walked forward to the altar of a church. Was it possible that I, in some real way, had actually been "born again," as the preacher said, given new eyes, whether I understood any of it or not?

Or, could these others see Him now, too, if their attention was not all caught up in the physical world they had lost? "Where your heart is, " As long as my heart had been set on getting to Richmond by a certain date, I had not been able to see Jesus either. Maybe whenever our center of attention was on anything else, we could block out even Him.

We were moving again. We had left the Navy base with its circumference of seedy streets and bars, and were now standing, in this dimension where travel seemed to take no time at all, on the edge of a wide, flat plain. So far in our journeying we had visited places where the living and the dead existed side by side; indeed, where disembodied beings, completely unsuspected by the living, hovered right on top of the physical things and people where their desire was focused.

Now, however, although we were apparently still somewhere on the surface of the earth, I could see no living man or woman. The plain was crowded, even jammed with hordes of ghostly discarnate beings; nowhere was there a solid, light-surrounded person to be seen. All of these thousands of people were apparently no more substantial than I myself. And they were the most frustrated, the angriest, the most completely miserable beings I had ever laid eyes on.

"Lord Jesus!" I cried. "Where are we?"

At first I thought we were looking at some great battlefield: everywhere people were locked in what looked like fights to the death, writhing, punching, gouging. It could not be a present-day war because there were no tanks or guns. No weapons of any sort, I saw as I looked closer, only bare hands and feet and teeth. And then I noticed that no one was apparently being injured. There was no blood, no bodies strewn the ground; a blow that ought to have eliminated an opponent would leave him exactly as before.

Although they appeared to be literally on top of each other, it was as though each man was boxing the air; at last I realized that of course, having no substance, they could not actually touch one another. They could not kill, though they clearly wanted to, because their intended victims were already dead, and so they hurled themselves at each other in a frenzy of impotent rage.

If I suspected before that I was seeing hell, now I was sure of it. Up to this moment the misery I had watched consisted in being chained to a physical world of which we were no longer part. Now I saw that there were other kinds of chains. Here were no solid objects or people to enthrall the soul. These creatures seemed locked into habits of mind and emotion, into hatred, lust, destructive thought patterns.

Even more hideous than the bites and kicks they exchanged were the sexual abuses many were performing in feverish pantomime. Perversions I had never dreamed of were being vainly attempted all around us. It was impossible to tell if the howls of frustration that reached us were actual sounds or only the transference of despairing thoughts. Indeed in this disembodied world it did not seem to matter.

Whatever anyone thought, however fleetingly or unwillingly, was instantly apparent to all around him, more completely than words could have expressed it, faster than sound waves could have carried it. And the thoughts most frequently communicated had to do with the superior knowledge, or abilities, or background of the thinker. "I told you so!" "I always knew!" "Didn't I warn you!" were shrieked into the echoing air over and over. With a feeling of sick familiarity I recognized here my own thinking. This was me, my very tone of voice, the righteous one, the award-winner, the churchgoer. At age twenty I had not yet developed any truly changing physical habits, not like the beings I had seen scabbling to get close to that bar. But in these yelps of envy and wounded self-importance I heard myself all too well. Once again, however, no condemnation came from the Presence at my side, only a compassion for these unhappy creatures that was breaking His heart. Clearly it was not His will that any one of them should be in this place.

Then, what was keeping them here? Why didn't each one just get up and leave? I could see no reason why the person being screamed at by that man with the contorted face did not simply walk away. Or why that young woman did not put a thousand miles between herself and the other one who was so furiously beating her with insubstantial fists? They could not actually hold on to their victims, any of these insanely angry beings. There were no fences. Nothing apparently prevented them from simply going off alone. Unless, unless there was no "alone" in this realm of disembodied spirits. No private corners in a universe where there were no walls. No place that was not inhabited by other beings to whom one was totally exposed at all times.

What was it going to be like, I thought with sudden panic, to live forever where my most private thoughts were not private at all? No disguising them, no covering them up, no way to pretend I was anything but what I actually was. How unbearable. Unless, of course, everyone around me had the same kind of thoughts. Unless there was a kind of consolation in finding others as loathsome as one's self, even if all we could do was hurl our venom at each other. Perhaps this was the explanation for this hideous plain. Perhaps in the course of eons or of seconds, each creature here had sought out the company of others as pride-and-hate-filled as himself, until together they formed this society of the damned. Perhaps it was not Jesus who had abandoned them, but they who had fled from the Light that showed up their darkness. Or, were they as alone as at first it appeared? Gradually I was becoming aware that there was something else on that plain of grappling forms. Almost from the beginning I had sensed it, but for a long time I could not locate it. When I did it was with a shock that left me stunned. That entire unhappy plain was hovered over by beings seemingly made of light. It was their very size and blinding brightness that had prevented me at first from seeing them. Now that I had, now that I adjusted my eyes to take them in, I could see that these immense presences were bending over the little creatures on the plain. Perhaps even conversing with them. Were these bright beings angels? Was the Light beside me also an angel? But the thought that had pressed itself so undeniably on my mind in that little hospital room had been: You

are in the presence of the Son of God. Could it be that each of these other human wraiths, wretched and unworthy like me, was also in His presence? In a realm where space and time no longer followed any rules I knew, could He be standing with each of them as He was with me? I did not know. All I clearly saw was that not one of these bickering beings on the plain had been abandoned. They were being attended, watched over, ministered to. And the equally observable fact was that not one of them knew it. If Jesus or His angels were speaking to them, they certainly did not hear. There was no pause in the stream of rancor coming from their own hearts; their eyes sought only some nearby figure to humiliate. It would have seemed to me impossible not to be aware of what were the hugest and most striking features of that whole landscape, except that I myself had stared at them unseeing. In fact, now that I had become aware of these bright presences, I realized with bewilderment that I had been seeing them all along, without ever consciously registering the fact, as though Jesus could show me at any moment only so much as I was ready to see. Angels had crowded the living

all around us. It was impossible to tell if the howls of frustration that reached us were actual sounds or only the transference of despairing thoughts. Indeed in this disembodied world it did not seem to matter. Whatever anyone thought, however fleetingly or unwillingly, was instantly apparent to all around him, more completely than words could have expressed it, faster than sound waves could have carried it.

And the thoughts most frequently communicated had to do with the superior knowledge, or abilities, or background of the thinker. "I told you so!" "I always knew!" "Didn't I warn you!" were shrieked into the echoing air over and over. With a feeling of sick familiarity I recognized here my own thinking. This was me, my very tone of voice, the righteous one, the award-winner, the churchgoer. At age twenty I had not yet developed any truly changing physical habits, not like the beings I had seen scrabbling to get close to that bar. But in these yelps of envy and wounded self-importance I heard myself all too well.

Once again, however, no condemnation came from the Presence at my side, only a compassion for these unhappy creatures that was breaking His heart. Clearly it was not His will that any one of them should be in this place.

Then, what was keeping them here? Why didn't each one just get up and leave? I could see no reason why the person being screamed at by that man with the contorted face did not simply walk away. Or why that young woman did not put a thousand miles between herself and the other one who was so furiously beating her with insubstantial fists? They could not actually hold on to their victims, any of these insanely angry beings. There were no fences. Nothing apparently prevented them from simply going off alone.

Unless, unless there was no "alone" in this realm of disembodied spirits. No private corners in a universe where there were no walls. No place that was not inhabited by other beings to whom one was totally exposed at all times. What was it going to be like, I thought with sudden panic, to live forever where my most private thoughts were not private at all? No disguising them, no covering them up, no way to pretend I was anything but what I actually was. How unbearable. Unless, of course, everyone around me had the same kind of thoughts. Unless there was a kind of consolation in finding others as loathsome as one's self, even if all we could do was hurl our venom at each other.

Perhaps this was the explanation for this hideous plain. Perhaps in the course of eons or of seconds, each creature here had sought out the company of others as pride-and-hate-filled as himself, until together they formed this society of the damned.

Perhaps it was not Jesus who had abandoned them, but they who had fled from the Light that showed up their darkness. Or, were they as alone as at first it appeared? Gradually I was becoming aware that there was something else on that plain of grappling forms. Almost from the beginning I had sensed it, but for a long time I could not locate it. When I did it was with a shock that left me stunned.

That entire unhappy plain was hovered over by beings seemingly made of light. It was their very size and blinding brightness that had prevented me at first from seeing them. Now that I had, now that I adjusted my eyes to take them in, I could see that these immense presences were bending over the little creatures on the plain. Perhaps even conversing with them.

Were these bright beings angels? Was the Light beside me also an angel? But the thought that had pressed itself so undeniably on my mind in that little hospital room had been: You are in the presence of the Son of God. Could it be that each of these other human wraiths, wretched and unworthy like me, was

also in His presence? In a realm where space and time no longer followed any rules I knew, could He be standing with each of them as He was with me?

I did not know. All I clearly saw was that not one of these bickering beings on the plain had been abandoned. They were being attended, watched over, ministered to. And the equally observable fact was that not one of them knew it. If Jesus or His angels were speaking to them, they certainly did not hear. There was no pause in the stream of rancor coming from their own hearts; their eyes sought only some nearby figure to humiliate. It would have seemed to me impossible not to be aware of what were the hugest and most striking features of that whole landscape, except that I myself had stared at them unseeing.

In fact, now that I had become aware of these bright presences, I realized with bewilderment that I had been seeing them all along, without ever consciously registering the fact, as though Jesus could show me at any moment only so much as I was ready to see. Angels had crowded the living

cities and towns we had visited. They had been present in the streets, the factories, the homes, even in that raucous bar, where nobody had been any more conscious of their existence than I myself had. And suddenly I realized that there was a common denominator to all these scenes so far. It was the failure to see Jesus. Whether it was a physical appetite, an earthly concern, an absorption with self, whatever got in the way of His Light created the separation into which we stepped at death.

part 6. We were moving again. Or rather, the scene in front of us was, changing somehow. Opening up. It was the quality of light that was different, as though the air had suddenly become more transparent, enabling me to see what had apparently been there all along. Again, it was as if Jesus could reveal only as much as my mind could grasp. First He had shown me a hellish realm, filled with beings trapped in some form of self-attention. Now behind, beyond, through all this I began to perceive a whole new realm! Enormous buildings stood in a beautiful sunny park and there was a relationship between the various structures, a pattern to the way they were arranged, that reminded me somewhat of a well-planned university. Except that to compare what I was now seeing with any thing on earth was ridiculous.

It was more as if all the schools and colleges in the world were only piecemeal reproductions of this reality. We seemed suddenly to have entered an altogether different dimension, almost another kind of existence. After the clamor of the wartime cities and the shrieking voices of the plain, here was an all-pervading peace. As we entered one of the buildings and started down a high-ceilinged corridor lined with tall doorways, the air was so hushed that I was actually startled to see people in the passageway. I could not tell if they were men or women, old or young, for all were covered from head to foot in loose-flowing, hooded cloaks that made me think vaguely of monks. But the atmosphere of the place was not at all as I imagined a monastery. It was more like some tremendous study center, humming with the excitement of great discovery. Everyone we passed in the wide halls and on the curving staircases seemed caught up in some all-engrossing activity; not many words were exchanged among them.

And yet I sensed no unfriendliness between these beings, rather an aloofness of total concentration. Whatever else these people might be, they appeared utterly and supremely self-forgetful, absorbed in some vast purpose beyond themselves. Through open doors I glimpsed enormous rooms filled with complex equipment. In several of the rooms, hooded figures bent over intricate charts and diagrams, or sat at the controls of elaborate consoles flickering with lights. I had prided myself a little on the beginnings of a scientific education; at the university I had majored in chemistry, minored in biology, studied physics and calculus. But if these were scientific activities of some kind, they were so far beyond anything I knew, that I could not even guess what field they were in. Somehow I felt that some vast experiment was being pursued, perhaps dozens and dozens of such experiments. "What are they doing, Jesus?" I asked.

But although Knowing flamed from Him like fire, though, in fact, I sensed that every activity on this mighty "campus" had its source in God, no explanation lighted my mind. What was communicated, as before, was love: compassion for my ignorance, understanding that encompassed all my non-understanding. And something more. In spite of His obvious delight in the beings around us, I sensed that even this was not the ultimate, that He had far greater things to show me if only I could see. And so I followed Him into other buildings of this domain of thought. We entered a studio where music of a

complexity I could not begin to follow was being composed and performed. There were complicated rhythms, tones not on any scale I knew. Why, I found myself thinking, Bach is only the beginning!

Next we walked through a library the size of the whole University of Richmond. I gazed into rooms lined floor to ceiling with documents on parchment, clay, leather, metal, paper. Here, the thought occurred to me, are assembled the important books of the universe. Immediately I knew this was impossible. How could books be written somewhere beyond the earth! But the thought persisted, although my mind rejected it. The key works of the universe. The phrase kept recurring as we roamed the domed reading rooms crowded with silent scholars. Then abruptly, at the door to one of the smaller rooms, almost an annex: Here is the central thought of this earth. Out we moved again into the hushed and expectant park. Then into a building crowded with technological machinery. Into a strange sphere-shaped structure where a catwalk led us over a tank of what appeared to be ordinary water. Into what looked like huge laboratories and into what might have been some kind of space observatory. And as we went my sense of mystification grew. "Is this heaven, Lord Jesus?" I ventured. The calm, the brightness, they were surely heaven-like!

So was the absence of self, of clamoring ego. "When these people were on earth, did they grow beyond selfish desires?" They grew, and they have kept on growing. The answer shone like sunlight in that intent and eager atmosphere. But if growth could continue, then this was not all. Then there must be something even these serene beings lacked. And suddenly I wondered if it was the same thing missing in the "lower realm." Were these selfless, seeking creatures also failing in some degree to see Jesus? Or perhaps, to see Him for Himself? Bits and hints of Him they surely had; obviously it was the truth they were so single-mindedly pursuing. But what if even a thirst for truth could distract from the Truth Himself, standing here in their midst while they searched for Him in books and test tubes. I did not know. And next to His unutterable love, my own bewilderment, all the questions I wanted to ask, seemed incidental. Perhaps, I concluded at last, He cannot tell me more than I can see; perhaps there is nothing in me yet that could understand an explanation. The central fact, the all-adequate one, remained this Personality at my side. Whatever additional facts He was showing me, He remained every moment the real focus of my attention. Which is why, perhaps, I was not aware of the precise moment when we left the surface of the earth. Up until this point I had had the impression that we were traveling, though in what manner I could not imagine, upon the earth itself. Even what I had come to think of as a "higher plane" of deep thoughts and learning was obviously not far distant from the "physical plane" where bodiless beings were still bound to a solid world. Now, however, we seemed to have left the earth behind. I could no longer see it.

Instead we appeared to be in an immense void, except that I had always thought of that as a frightening word, and this was not. Some unnameable promise seemed to vibrate through that vast emptiness. And then I saw, infinitely far off, far too distant to be visible with any kind of sight I knew of, a city. A glowing, seemingly endless city, bright enough to be seen over all the unimaginable distance between. The brightness seemed to shine from the very walls and streets of this place, and from beings that I could not discern, moving about within it. In fact, the city and everything in it seemed to be made of light, even as the Figure at my side was made of light.

At this time I had not yet read the book of Revelation. I could only gape in awe at this faraway spectacle, wondering how bright each building, each inhabitant, must be to be seen over so many light-years of distance. Could these radiant beings, I wondered, amazed, be those who had indeed kept Jesus the focus of their lives? Was I seeing at last ones who had looked for Him in everything? Looked so well and so closely that they had been changed into His very likeness? Even as I asked the question, two of the bright figures seemed to detach themselves from the city and start toward us, hurling themselves across that infinity with the speed of light. But as fast as they came toward us, we drew away still faster. The distance increased, the vision faded. Even as I cried out with loss, I knew that my imperfect sight could not now sustain more than an instant's glimpse of this real, this ultimate heaven. He had shown me all He could; now we were speeding far away. Walls closed around us. Walls so narrow and boxlike, that it was several seconds before I recognized the little hospital room we had left what seemed a lifetime ago.

Jesus still stood beside me, otherwise consciousness could not have sustained the transition from infinite space to the dimensions of this cell-like room. The glorious city still sparkled and glowed in my thoughts, beckoning, calling. With total indifference I noticed that there was a figure lying beneath the sheet on the bed that nearly filled the minuscule room. But incredibly Jesus was telling me that I belonged somehow with that sheeted form, that His purpose for me involved that lump-like thing as well.

I was moving nearer to it. It was filling my field of vision, shutting off the Light. Desperately I cried out to Him not to leave me, to make me ready for that shining city, not to abandon me in this dark and narrow place. As in a long-ago half-forgotten story, I remembered myself combing the halls and wards of this very hospital, wanting desperately to find the figure on this bed. From that loneliest moment of my existence I had leaped into the most perfect belonging I had ever known. The Light of Jesus had entered my life and filled it completely, and the idea of being separated from Him was more than I could bear. Even as I pleaded I felt consciousness slipping from me. My mind began to blur. I no longer knew what I was struggling for. My throat was on fire and the weight on my chest was crushing me.

So was the absence of self, of clamoring ego. "When these people were on earth, did they grow beyond selfish desires?"

They grew, and they have kept on growing. The answer shone like sunlight in that intent and eager atmosphere. But if growth could continue, then this was not all. Then there must be something even these serene beings lacked. And suddenly I wondered if it was the same thing missing in the "lower realm." Were these selfless, seeking creatures also failing in some degree to see Jesus? Or perhaps, to see Him for Himself? Bits and hints of Him they surely had; obviously it was the truth they were so single-mindedly pursuing. But what if even a thirst for truth could distract from the Truth Himself, standing here in their midst while they searched for Him in books and test tubes.

I did not know. And next to His unutterable love, my own bewilderment, all the questions I wanted to ask, seemed incidental. Perhaps, I concluded at last, He cannot tell me more than I can see; perhaps there is nothing in me yet that could understand an explanation.

The central fact, the all-adequate one, remained this Personality at my side. Whatever additional facts He was showing me, He remained every moment the real focus of my attention.

Which is why, perhaps, I was not aware of the precise moment when we left the surface of the earth.

Up until this point I had had the impression that we were traveling, though in what manner I could not imagine, upon the earth itself. Even what I had come to think of as a "higher plane" of deep thoughts and learning was obviously not far distant from the "physical plane" where bodiless beings were still bound to a solid world.

Now, however, we seemed to have left the earth behind. I could no longer see it. Instead we appeared to be in an immense void, except that I had always thought of that as a frightening word, and this was not. Some unnameable promise seemed to vibrate through that vast emptiness.

And then I saw, infinitely far off, far too distant to be visible with any kind of sight I knew of, a city. A glowing, seemingly endless city, bright enough to be seen over all the unimaginable distance between. The brightness seemed to shine from the very walls and streets of this place, and from beings that I could not discern, moving about within it. In fact, the city and everything in it seemed to be made of light, even as the Figure at my side was made of light.

At this time I had not yet read the book of Revelation. I could only gape in awe at this faraway spectacle, wondering how bright each building, each inhabitant, must be to be seen over so many light-years of distance. Could these radiant beings, I wondered, amazed, be those who had indeed kept Jesus the focus of their lives? Was I seeing at last ones who had looked for Him in everything? Looked so well and so closely that they had been changed into His very likeness? Even as I asked the question, two of the bright figures seemed to detach themselves from the city and start toward us, hurling themselves across that infinity with the speed of light.

But as fast as they came toward us, we drew away still faster. The distance increased, the vision faded. Even as I cried out with loss, I knew that my imperfect sight could not now sustain more than an instant's glimpse of this real, this ultimate heaven. He had shown me all He could; now we were speeding far away.

Walls closed around us. Walls so narrow and boxlike, that it was several seconds before I recognized the little hospital room we had left what seemed a lifetime ago.

Jesus still stood beside me, otherwise consciousness could not have sustained the transition from infinite space to the dimensions of this cell-like room. The glorious city still sparkled and glowed in my thoughts, beckoning, calling. With total indifference I noticed that there was a figure lying beneath the sheet on the bed that nearly filled the minuscule room.

But incredibly Jesus was telling me that I belonged somehow with that sheeted form, that His purpose for me involved that lump-like thing as well. I was moving nearer to it. It was filling my field of vision, shutting off the Light. Desperately I cried out to Him not to leave me, to make me ready for that shining city, not to abandon me in this dark and narrow place.

As in a long-ago half-forgotten story, I remembered myself combing the halls and wards of this very hospital, wanting desperately to find the figure on this bed. From that loneliest moment of my existence I had leaped into the most perfect belonging I had ever known. The Light of Jesus had entered my life and filled it completely, and the idea of being separated from Him was more than I could bear.

Even as I pleaded I felt consciousness slipping from me. My mind began to blur. I no longer knew what I was struggling for. My throat was on fire and the weight on my chest was crushing me.

I opened my eyes but there was something in front of my face. I groped about the blankets, trying to find what was covering me, but moving my arms was like trying to lift lead bars. At last my fingers closed upon each other. With my right hand I touched a circular band with an oval stone on the ring finger of my left hand. Slowly I twisted it round and round, as blackness closed over me.

part 7. It had taken four sessions to relate this much of my story to Fred Owen. Throughout, he had stopped me to ask questions or offer interpretations, and to let me know he was not necessarily buying a word of it. Now, however, he sat absolutely still, while on my desk the numbers on the digital clock flipped over. I heard the outer door open and close as my next patient arrived. I looked at the clock: we had ten more minutes. "You had, returned to your body?" Fred asked at last. "That's the way I interpret it now," I said. "At the time I didn't know much of anything. For the next two or three days I was pretty much unconscious. Just some feverish, nightmarish kinds of dreams, the kind of thing you'd expect with a serious illness."

That was the main thing, I told him. When I began to be conscious again, I was mostly conscious of being sick. My physical problems crowded everything else out of my head. But while I had been, out of the body? I did not know how else to describe it, there was no pain. No physical feeling of any kind. The next thing I could recall for sure, I went on, was opening my eyes with a mammoth headache and seeing a nurse smiling down at me. "It's good to have you back with us," she said. "For a while there we didn't think you were going to make it." I licked my fever-cracked lips. "What day is this?" I rasped out.

"This is Christmas Eve, Private Ritchie." Holiday leave for the hospital staff had been cancelled, she added, because of the influenza epidemic and a heavy incidence of pneumonia in the camp. I tried to think of another question so she would not leave. Somehow I had to communicate to her the thing that had happened to me. Yes, she said, they had had snow almost every day. Her name, she told me, was Lieutenant Irvine. "I've just had the most astounding experience," I plunged in. "Something everyone on earth has to know about." A coughing attack seized me. Lieutenant Irvine had to get her arm under my back and prop me up to give me a drink of water. "Don't talk any more now," she said. "I'll look in on you later." And actually, I wondered, what was I going to say? "I've just seen God"? "I've been to hell"? "I've had a glimpse of heaven"? She would think I was crazy. All that week, whenever anyone came into that little room, I tried to describe the Light that had filled this very space, and the all-essential question He had asked. I never got beyond the first few words. "Get some rest now. Don't try to talk," the doctor or nurse would say, and indeed my voice was no more than a gasping croak.

The staff was obviously more interested in matters like my metabolic rate, my temperature, the amount of intravenous fluid I was getting. It was evident from the attention I was getting that this was considered more than a routine case. And gradually, as the days passed, I pieced together what had happened on the hospital floor during the time when I, on my side of the event, was meeting Jesus. "Our time's up for today," I told Fred, "but tomorrow if you like I'll tell you what I found out from the doctors." Fred was coming daily now, though even the short walk from the parking lot left him breathless. So it was the following afternoon that I resumed my story.

It had taken four sessions to relate this much of my story to Fred Owen. Throughout, he had stopped me to ask questions or offer interpretations, and to let me know he was not necessarily buying a word of it.

Now, however, he sat absolutely still, while on my desk the numbers on the digital clock flipped over. I heard the outer door open and close as my next patient arrived. I looked at the clock: we had ten more minutes.

"You had, returned to your body?" Fred asked at last.

"That's the way I interpret it now," I said. "At the time I didn't know much of anything. For the next two or three days I was pretty much unconscious. Just some feverish, nightmarish kinds of dreams, the kind of thing you'd expect with a serious illness."

That was the main thing, I told him. When I began to be conscious again, I was mostly conscious of being sick. My physical problems crowded everything else out of my head. But while I had been, out of the body? I did not know how else to describe it, there was no pain. No physical feeling of any kind.

The next thing I could recall for sure, I went on, was opening my eyes with a mammoth headache and seeing a nurse smiling down at me.

"It's good to have you back with us," she said. "For a while there we didn't think you were going to make it."

I licked my fever-cracked lips. "What day is this?" I rasped out.

"This is Christmas Eve, Private Ritchie." Holiday leave for the hospital staff had been cancelled, she added, because of the influenza epidemic and a heavy incidence of pneumonia in the camp.

I tried to think of another question so she would not leave. Somehow I had to communicate to her the thing that had happened to me. Yes, she said, they had had snow almost every day. Her name, she told me, was Lieutenant Irvine.

"I've just had the most astounding experience," I plunged in. "Something everyone on earth has to know about."

A coughing attack seized me. Lieutenant Irvine had to get her arm under my back and prop me up

to give me a drink of water. "Don't talk any more now," she said. "I'll look in on you later."

And actually, I wondered, what was I going to say? "I've just seen God"? "I've been to hell"? "I've had a glimpse of heaven"? She would think I was crazy.

All that week, whenever anyone came into that little room, I tried to describe the Light that had filled this very space, and the all-essential question He had asked. I never got beyond the first few words.

"Get some rest now. Don't try to talk," the doctor or nurse would say, and indeed my voice was no more than a gasping croak. The staff was obviously more interested in matters like my metabolic rate, my temperature, the amount of intravenous fluid I was getting. It was evident from the attention I was getting that this was considered more than a routine case. And gradually, as the days passed, I pieced together what had happened on the hospital floor during the time when I, on my side of the event, was meeting Jesus.

"Our time's up for today," I told Fred, "but tomorrow if you like I'll tell you what I found out from the doctors."

Fred was coming daily now, though even the short walk from the parking lot left him breathless. So it was the following afternoon that I resumed my story.

part 8.

After I collapsed in front of the X-ray machine, I learned I had been taken to a small isolation room in a nearby ward where my condition was diagnosed as double lobar pneumonia. Over the next 24 hours, in spite of all the hospital could do, in 1943 "miracle drugs" were still in their infancy, my condition deteriorated. Early in the morning of December 21, 24 hours after I had been carried unconscious to the little room, the ward boy making his regular rounds to hand out medication, arrived at my little cubicle and failed to find a pulse. He checked my respiration rate. None. Next he took my blood pressure. Again, none, at which point he went running for the officer on duty.

The O.D. arrived on the double and re-ran the tests himself with the same results. At last he straightened up. "He's dead, all right," he told the ward boy. "When you finish your rounds get him ready for the morgue." He spoke heavily; already there had been a number of deaths at Camp Barkeley that month. Reluctantly he straightened my arms along the blankets, pulled the sheet up to cover my face, and returned to the ward to do what he could for the living. The ward boy, too, continued on his rounds. And that must have been the point at which I, in my desperate disembodied search, arrived back at that little room and saw a figure covered with a sheet. Approximately nine minutes later, according to the hospital records, the ward boy returned to the little room to begin prepping the body for transfer to the morgue. But, surely that hand on the blanket has moved? Again the ward boy went galloping for the O.D.

The officer returned with him, examined me a second time, for the second time pronounced me dead. Doubtless the young orderly on the long, lonely night shift was imagining things. And then occurred the event the full impact of which only registered with me years later. At the time I learned of it I was surprised certainly, but not dumfounded as I am today each time I think of it. The ward boy refused to accept the verdict of his superior officer. "Maybe," he suggested, "you could give him a shot of adrenalin directly into the heart muscle." It was unthinkable, in the first place, for a private to argue with an officer, especially on a medical matter when the private was an untrained ward boy and the officer a licensed physician. In the second place what the ward boy was suggesting was medically ridiculous. In those days before widespread use of cardiac massage and electric shock, adrenalin injected into the heart was, it is true, occasionally attempted in cases of heart arrest.

But this was only done when the heart had stopped because of some trauma to a basically healthy patient, like a drowning accident, where getting the heart started again holds out some hope for ultimate recovery. But when the entire system has deteriorated from an illness like pneumonia, simply getting the heart muscle to contract a few more times achieves nothing. Technically you may get a heartbeat for a few minutes, but you have not altered the overall condition. Indeed my condition, any medical man would have known, was totally irreversible; after so long without oxygen the brain would be hopelessly damaged. And yet this knowledgeable O.D., fully aware of the unreasonableness of what he was doing, accepted the suggestion of the uninformed enlisted man at his side. "Get a sterile pack from the supply room!" he told him. When the ward boy reappeared, the officer filled the hypodermic from a vial of adrenalin, then plunged the hollow needle into my heart. Erratically at first, beating resumed.

Then as the two watched, incredulous, it settled into a rhythmic pulse. A moment later respiration commenced. My blood pressure rose. My breathing grew stronger. It was by no means an instant recovery. It was three days before I was conscious, five before I was off the critical list, two weeks before I was walking. But only now, with 27 years of my own medical practice behind me, can I appreciate the bewilderment with which the staff must have followed my progress. By the time I was well enough to ask questions, both the officer on duty that night, and the ward boy whose unaccountable hunch proved correct, had shipped with a unit bound over-seas. But I received a personal visit from Dr. Donald G. Francy, the commanding officer to whom the O.D. had reported the events of the evening. Dr. Francy called my recovery "the most amazing medical case I ever encountered," and in a notarized statement years later wrote, "Private George G.

After I collapsed in front of the X-ray machine, I learned I had been taken to a small isolation room in a nearby ward where my condition was diagnosed as double lobar pneumonia. Over the next 24 hours, in spite of all the hospital could do, in 1943 "miracle drugs" were still in their infancy, my condition deteriorated.

Early in the morning of December 21, 24 hours after I had been carried unconscious to the little room, the ward boy making his regular rounds to hand out medication, arrived at my little cubicle and failed to find a pulse. He checked my respiration rate. None. Next he took my blood pressure. Again, none, at which point he went running for the officer on duty.

The O.D. arrived on the double and re-ran the tests himself with the same results. At last he straightened up. "He's dead, all right," he told the ward boy.

"When you finish your rounds get him ready for the morgue."

He spoke heavily; already there had been a number of deaths at Camp Barkeley that month. Reluctantly he straightened my arms along the blankets, pulled the sheet up to cover my face, and returned to the ward to do what he could for the living.

The ward boy, too, continued on his rounds. And that must have been the point at which I, in my desperate disembodied search, arrived back at that little room and saw a figure covered with a sheet.

Approximately nine minutes later, according to the hospital records, the ward boy returned to the little room to begin prepping the body for transfer to the morgue. But, surely that hand on the blanket has moved?

Again the ward boy went galloping for the O.D. The officer returned with him, examined me a second time, for the second time pronounced me dead. Doubtless the young orderly on the long, lonely night shift was imagining things.

And then occurred the event the full impact of which only registered with me years later. At the time I learned of it I was surprised certainly, but not dumfounded as I am today each time I think of it.

The ward boy refused to accept the verdict of his superior officer. "Maybe," he suggested, "you could give him a shot of adrenalin directly into the heart muscle."

It was unthinkable, in the first place, for a private to argue with an officer, especially on a medical matter when the private was an untrained ward boy and the officer a licensed physician. In the second place what the ward boy was suggesting was medically ridiculous. In those days before widespread use of cardiac massage and electric shock, adrenalin injected into the heart was, it is true, occasionally attempted in cases of heart arrest. But this was only done when the heart had stopped because of some trauma to a basically healthy patient, like a drowning accident, where getting the heart started again holds out some hope for ultimate recovery.

But when the entire system has deteriorated from an illness like pneumonia, simply getting the heart muscle to contract a few more times achieves nothing. Technically you may get a heartbeat for a few minutes, but you have not altered the overall condition. Indeed my condition, any medical man would have known, was totally irreversible; after so long without oxygen the brain would be hopelessly damaged.

And yet this knowledgeable O.D., fully aware of the unreasonableness of what he was doing, accepted the suggestion of the uninformed enlisted man at his side. "Get a sterile pack from the supply room!" he told him. When the ward boy reappeared, the officer filled the hypodermic from a vial of adrenalin, then plunged the hollow needle into my heart.

Erratically at first, beating resumed. Then as the two watched, incredulous, it settled into a rhythmic pulse.

A moment later respiration commenced. My blood pressure rose. My breathing grew stronger.

It was by no means an instant recovery. It was three days before I was conscious, five before I was off the critical list, two weeks before I was walking. But only now, with 27 years of my own medical practice behind me, can I appreciate the bewilderment with which the staff must have followed my progress. By

the time I was well enough to ask questions, both the officer on duty that night, and the ward boy whose unaccountable hunch proved correct, had shipped with a unit bound overseas. But I received a personal visit from Dr. Donald G. Francy, the commanding officer to whom the O.D. had reported the events of the evening. Dr. Francy called my recovery "the most amazing medical case I ever encountered," and in a notarized statement years later wrote, "Private George G. Ritchie's virtual call from death and return to vigorous health has to be explained in terms of other than natural means.

9 At the time, however, I told Fred Owen, the details of my recovery interested me very little. I regarded my return to this life as a calamity; would have been angry, if I had had the strength, with those who labored to revive me. Mostly I just lay in bed, a very sick young man, wrestling with the immense Encounter I had had in that very cubicle. Thinking of Jesus. Wishing I knew how to tell others about Him. Wondering how I could live where I could not see Him. The times when my separation from Him seemed easiest to bear were when somebody came into the room.

Ward boys, nurses, doctors, it did not matter, my heart gave a leap whenever someone appeared. Lieutenant Irvine, Retta was her first name, I found out, though of course I never dared use it, was especially faithful about "looking in" as she put it, and each time I tried again to tell her what had happened to me. "It was like the brightest sun you've ever seen, only not a burning sun. . . ." The trouble was I lacked words to express even the faintest part of it, and I could see that my attempts only puzzled her. Thinking back I realize Retta Irvine could not have been more than 26 or 27, a pretty blonde with a trim figure and a delectable smile, but to my young eyes she seemed practically middle-aged, an older woman to whom I could pour out my troubles. Since I could not make her understand about the Light and the worlds He had shown me, I told her about med school and how I was to have started classes three weeks before. That she sympathized with at once. It was great, talking to her.

To look in a human face and have her look at me, to speak and see her react, why hadn't I realized the wonder of it before? As soon as I was able to totter unsteadily out to the main ward, my spirits improved still more, and I began to pester them into moving me to one of the regular beds where I would have people on both sides of me. I was amazed, remembering myself as I had been up to this experience: a shy, rather introverted person. Only in scouting and in the Phi Gams had I been at ease with other people, and that was because I had been with the same group, day after day. Now suddenly I found myself greeting total strangers like lifelong buddies. The utter aloneness I had known as I roamed these same wards unseen, unthought of, had made a deep turnabout change in me.

When lights went out each night and conversation died away, I would lie staring at the row of night-lights across the aisle, thinking back over every detail of that extraordinary night when Light itself had entered this drab wooden barracks. Was He still here? I wondered. Was it only because He was too dazzling for physical eyes that none of us could see Him? I had grown discouraged about even attempting to tell others what I had seen. Discouraged and a little self-protective, too. I was enjoying the newfound companionship of the ward too much to risk being ostracized as an oddball. But for hours each night, I would recall every sight, every sound of that incredibly vivid time. First that hellish realm, where I had been permitted to look longest. Where people who no longer belonged to the earth could not escape it either, could not escape the involvements, the hungers, the pride they had allowed to dominate them here. Then the brief visit to a realm where ego had been left behind, where all was selfless search for truth. Where I might almost have thought myself in heaven except for the final fleeting revelation.

The glorious city. I had seen it for an instant only, yet of the whole experience it stood out clearest. Most achingly. What did it all mean? Why should such things have been shown to me, of all people? Above all, what was I supposed to do about it now? That was the question Fred Owen was asking, slumped in the armchair next to mine, timing his words between labored breaths. "Did it make any real difference? In your life, I mean. In what you did. Otherwise it's all very fascinating, having an inside track to God and all that, but I can't see that it matters very much." An inside track, Did I detect a note of, envy, in those words? If so, it was obvious I had failed to get across the essence of the experience. This was no round-trip to heaven, I reminded Fred. If I saw heaven at all, it was only at an enormous distance, unattainable by the person I then was, or could conceive of becoming. Nor did I believe that as a boy of twenty I had peered into the depths of hell; I had not seen, for instance, the lake of fire recorded in the Bible. But what I saw of the next life, as it was apparently being experienced by people very like myself, was hell enough. Enough to fill me with a lifelong terror of any attitude, habit, priority that would

At the time, however, I told Fred Owen, the details of my recovery interested me very little. I regarded my return to this life as a calamity; would have been angry, if I had had the strength, with those who labored to revive me.

Mostly I just lay in bed, a very sick young man, wrestling with the immense Encounter I had had in that very cubicle. Thinking of Jesus. Wishing I knew how to tell others about Him. Wondering how I could live where I could not see Him.

The times when my separation from Him seemed easiest to bear were when somebody came into the room. Ward boys, nurses, doctors, it did not matter, my heart gave a leap whenever someone appeared. Lieutenant Irvine, Retta was her first name, I found out, though of course I never dared use it, was especially faithful about "looking in" as she put it, and each time I tried again to tell her what had happened to me. "It was like the brightest sun you've ever seen, only not a burning sun., " The trouble was I lacked words to express even the faintest part of it, and I could see that my attempts only puzzled her.

Thinking back I realize Retta Irvine could not have been more than 26 or 27, a pretty blonde with a trim figure and a delectable smile, but to my young eyes she seemed practically middle-aged, an older woman to whom I could pour out my troubles. Since I could not make her understand about the Light and the worlds He had shown me, I told her about med school and how I was to have started classes three weeks before. That she sympathized with at once. It was great, talking to her. To look in a human face and have her look at me, to speak and see her react, why hadn't I realized the wonder of it before?

As soon as I was able to totter unsteadily out to the main ward, my spirits improved still more, and I began to pester them into moving me to one of the regular beds where I would have people on both sides of me. I was amazed, remembering myself as I had been up to this experience: a shy, rather introverted person. Only in scouting and in the Phi Gams had I been at ease with other people, and that was because I had been with the same group, day after day. Now suddenly I found myself greeting total strangers like lifelong buddies. The utter aloneness I had known as I roamed these same wards unseen, unthought of, had made a deep turnabout change in me.

When lights went out each night and conversation died away, I would lie staring at the row of night-lights across the aisle, thinking back over every detail of that extraordinary night when Light itself had entered this drab wooden barracks. Was He still here? I wondered. Was it only because He was too dazzling for physical eyes that none of us could see Him?

I had grown discouraged about even attempting to tell others what I had seen. Discouraged and a little self-protective, too. I was enjoying the newfound companionship of the ward too much to risk being ostracized as an oddball. But for hours each night, I would recall every sight, every sound of that incredibly vivid time. First that hellish realm, where I had been permitted to look longest. Where people who no longer belonged to the earth could not escape it either, could not escape the involvements, the hungers, the pride they had allowed to dominate them here. Then the brief visit to a realm where ego had been left behind, where all was selfless search for truth. Where I might almost have thought myself in heaven except for the final fleeting revelation. The glorious city. I had seen it for an instant only, yet of the whole experience it stood out clearest. Most achingly.

What did it all mean? Why should such things have been shown to me, of all people? Above all, what was I supposed to do about it now?

That was the question Fred Owen was asking, slumped in the armchair next to mine, timing his words between labored breaths.

"Did it make any real difference? In your life, I mean. In what you did. Otherwise it's all very fascinating, having an inside track to God and all that, but I can't see that it matters very much."

An inside track, Did I detect a note of, envy, in those words? If so, it was obvious I had failed to get across the essence of the experience.

This was no round-trip to heaven, I reminded Fred. If I saw heaven at all, it was only at an enormous distance, unattainable by the person I then was, or could conceive of becoming. Nor did I believe that as a boy of twenty I had peered into the depths of hell; I had not seen, for instance, the lake of fire recorded in the Bible.

But what I saw of the next life, as it was apparently being experienced by people very like myself, was hell enough. Enough to fill me with a lifelong terror of any attitude, habit, priority that would shape me for an existence like some of those I had seen. There had been no casual events for me since that night in Texas, I told Fred, no "unimportant" encounters with people.

Every minute of every day since that time, I had been aware of the presence of a larger world. And strangely enough, it was the glory of that world, not the terror, that made my return to this life so hard. The contrast between the love of Jesus and the world in which I found myself having to go on living made the year following my illness the most difficult of my life. "What difference has it made?" Fred was asking me. To play it straight with him, as I agreed to do, I knew I would have to tell Fred, and tell him honestly, about what happened next.

10 It was three weeks after my out-of-the-body encounter with Christ that Lieutenant Irvine stopped at my bed with un hoped-for good news. The Medical College of Virginia had held my entrance position open for me! As soon as I could make the trip east, I was to report for classes! Once again my convalescence became a race against time; every day of missed classes meant more to make up, less chance of staying in the program. "You've got to eat," Lieutenant Irvine would say each time she saw me. "We're not allowed to show patients their charts, but I'll tell you for certain they won't let you out of here until you put on another fifteen pounds." And so I ate, stuffing myself with mashed potatoes that stuck to my dry mouth like library paste, drinking milk until the sight of the metal urn made my stomach rise in my throat. At last, one clear windy day in late January, exactly a month after I had been scheduled to start medical school, I received my official discharge from Camp Barkeley Hospital. I stood staring at the train ticket in my hands. The Army had reserved not just a seat but a sleeping berth for me leaving Abilene the following afternoon, an unheard-of luxury for a private and an indication of the fact that I had a lot of recovering still to do. My discharge weight was on my papers: 134 pounds. Forty-four less than the 178 I had checked in with. And 134, I knew, was at least fifteen pounds higher than it had been.

But the point was, I was going to med school; they had saved my place for me! I telephoned my stepmother to tell her what time the train got to Richmond. She had been writing regularly all the time I was in the hospital, saying she understood I was too ill to feel like answering. I was glad to let it go at that, glad for the hospital office that had kept her informed. I had never been much good at communicating with her. I stared out the window of the Pullman as the countryside rolled past. Texarkana, Little Rock . . . Memphis. Different trains, different engines picking up my coach as it traveled east. In West Virginia we began to climb toward Charleston. And then we were over the state line into Virginia. Covington, Clifton Forge, Waynesboro, how beautiful it all was! The swollen streams, the forests where I had camped with my Scout troop. Then down the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge to Charlottesville, and on at last to Richmond. It was growing dark again when we reached the city, 48 hours after I had boarded the train in Abilene. Below the elevated track, rush hour traffic crawled bumper to bumper through the slushy streets.

Ahead in the early winter twilight I made out the vast redbrick bulk of the Main Street Depot. Heart hammering, I struggled into my overcoat. Whether from weakness or the excitement of being home, my legs were trembling and the weight of the coat nearly dragged me to the floor. Through the train window I could see that the station platform was jammed with travelers, most of them, like me, in uniform. Then I saw my stepmother. Tall, thinner than I remembered her, her waist-length brown hair caught into a bun beneath her hat, she was trotting along the platform, dragging ten-year-old Henry behind her. I dragged my gear from beneath the seat and struggled down the train aisle; in Abilene they had assigned someone to carry the heavy duffel aboard for me. Mother spotted me as I came down the steps. Next moment her arms were around me, while Henry tried to climb up my back. Mother said nothing about my appearance but after a few steps she silently reached over and took the duffel bag from me.

She led us to the elevator, too, instead of taking the stairs down to the street, all the while filling me in on family news. Bruce Gordon was in bed with a cold. Christmas had been lonely with Dad and me away. Mama Dabney 100 had invited me to Moss Side for breakfast next morn-ing, " Batter bread, you can be

sure!", before I had to report to med school at 9:00. Later that night, when Henry and Bruce Gordon were asleep, Mother and I sat in the living room with the Christmas eggnog she had saved till now. "George?" I looked up to find her brown eyes on mine. "Something's happened to you, George. Is it anything you can talk about?" I gave a helpless little shrug. As a child I had always suspected she could read my mind. And all at once, there in that familiar room, with the photo of Dad on the mantel, a curious thing happened. After trying for weeks to describe to someone else my out-of-the-body experience, I suddenly found myself doing it.

Telling my stepmother, this woman with whom I had resisted communicating all my life. Expressing to her what I had not been able to say to anyone else. I heard myself describe how I had jumped out of bed and turned around to find a young man still lying there. I heard myself tell about the frantic flight toward Richmond. About returning to Camp Berkeley and searching for myself. About the Light, and the journey on which we set out. She listened without a word to the entire account, scarcely shifting her position on the couch, searching my face with those eyes that missed nothing. And as I talked I was aware of something just as amazing as this torrent of words from a young man as tongue-tied as I was. It was not that she believed me, though she clearly did. It was something taking place in me, a startling change in viewpoint, so that all at once I was looking not at George Ritchie's stepmother, but at Mary Skeen Ritchie, a person with a life history of her own. For the first time in my life, I was seeing the courageous young woman who had taken on not only the role of mother to Mary Jane and me but disciplinarian as well, in a household where the father was home only on weekends.

Although I continued to speak, I also "heard" something Dad had once told me, something that had never registered before: that it was our stepmother who had insisted on waiting three years before having children of her own, to give Mary Jane and me that long to have her to ourselves. I went on talking, about the heavenly city and how I longed to see it closer. But what I was understanding for the first time was how threatened Mama Dabney had been by Dad's new marriage. Why she had reminded me so often that Mary Skeen was not my real mother. I recalled my teenage withdrawal, my sulks and hostility, but now I was seeing the heartache they had caused to the loving woman sitting in front of me. When I finished my story we were both silent for a long time. "George," Mother whispered at last, "God has entrusted you with enormous truths." He's doing it still! I thought. Even as I talked about the absolute acceptance I had encountered in Him, a brand-new ability to accept Mother for herself was born in me. What was the mysterious power in simply telling about this experience? I had wondered what God expected of me after such an encounter. Was this part of the answer? Just to talk about it?

But if my homecoming was even better than I hoped, starting med school the next day was worse. I was more than a month behind the rest of the class; the pile of books they loaded me down with, I could hardly carry back to the house, let alone hope to read and comprehend. In the lecture sessions that week, the professors tossed out ten-syllable Latin words. All around me students were busy scribbling into notebooks while I was simply trying to understand what the topic was.

My health worked against me, too. Simply walking between buildings on the campus left me exhausted, and concentrating on a lecture for more than a few minutes was impossible. Time after time in the evenings my head would snap erect and I would realize I had been sleeping at my desk.

Each first-year student had been given an ordinary brown paper bag containing an assortment of human bones, rib, vertebra, ulna and radius, with which he was supposed to become familiar. One day I misplaced mine and anxiously retraced my steps to the anatomy lab. "Have you seen a bag of bones?" I asked a student standing in the doorway.

He surveyed my emaciated form. "Sure, bud. Standing in front of me."

Gradually I slid into a destructive cycle. Worry ate into my study time. Then I did poorly and worried even more. The others all seemed so secure, so confident of their facts. As the weeks passed I began to feel like a lone moron surrounded by geniuses.

And then in May something wonderful happened.

I had known Marguerite Shell for a couple of years, ever since her brother Bob joined the Phi Gams at the University of Richmond. Bob Shell quickly became my best friend, and I had first met Marguerite at his home in Lawrenceville, a small town about seventy miles south of Richmond. A petite, brown-haired girl

with blue eyes the color of the sky on an April morning, I thought Marguerite Shell was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. But as for dating her, I knew I did not stand a chance. She was extremely popular; in fact soon after we met she was pinned to another fraternity brother of mine.

Bob Shell was now in the Navy V-12 program at the University of Richmond. One night he phoned with some news: Marguerite and her boyfriend had split up.

That was a surprise, but an even greater one was when I telephoned her for a date and she said

yes. Gasoline was a problem with wartime rationing, but I talked Mama Dabney into loaning me her aqua-colored Oldsmobile and enough gas coupons for the round-trip to Lawrenceville. That 1941 Oldsmobile was one of the prettiest cars ever made, with its streamlined shape and chrome-ringed radiator, and I thought I made a pretty dashing sight as I pulled into the Shells' driveway.

My self-esteem was somewhat flattened when Marguerite looked over my shoulder toward the car door and asked, "Where's Bob?" But though she had obviously been expecting both of us, she came out with me anyway and we had a wonderful evening. After that my spare time was spent begging eight-hour passes from med school and gasoline coupons from the family.

By midsummer I knew that more than I had ever wanted anything I wanted Marguerite to be my wife. I also knew I could not ask anyone to marry me without knowing about the most important event of my life, so several times I tried stumblingly to describe to Marguerite what had happened in the Berkeley hospital. Each time I saw the sparkle die out of her face and her blue eyes grow anxious, and I would hastily change the subject. It was clear that she regarded the whole matter as a mental delusion. Anyhow, like many couples during the war we tried to keep things pretty much on the surface, instinctively shying away from the subject of death and the future.

And then in August, I was summoned to appear before one of the school's administrators. In his airless, small room he told me that unless I made a B in both biochemistry and bacteriology at the end of the current marking period, I would be returned immediately to active duty. He said a lot more, uncomplimentary reflections on the dimensions of my brain and the mental incompetence of whoever had admitted me to the program, while I stood at attention in the three feet between the door and his desk, feeling the last shreds of self-confidence desert me.

I was too wrapped up in my own problems to recognize that this man turned the same sarcastic tongue on all the students, part of a calculated strategy, no doubt, to winnow out before they reached the front as field doctors, all but the tough and self-reliant. To me his assessment was simply the confirmation of my own: I was too dumb to be a doctor.

For the next six weeks as I bent over textbooks and microscopes, his words played like a broken record in my head. My final grades in the two subjects were D and E.

On September 25 I was called again to his office. His first words were crisp and official.

Reassignment to Camp Berkeley, effective immediately. Reclassification for active duty overseas, also effective as of this date. Then he added a personal note: Ritchie, if you get back from this war alive, I personally am going to see to it that you never get admitted into this medical school or any other. You've wasted the time of professors and staff, and you've kept out of the program a student who could have benefited from such an opportunity. I'm going to see that you never again squander the time and resources of the medical profession. I do not remember how I got out into the hallway. I only remember watching busy people passing briskly in front of me, people with places they had to be, and realizing that whether I walked to the right or to the left, up the stairs or down, it would not make the slightest difference to anyone on earth. It was the bleakest day of my life. It was also my 21st birthday.

On the day when life was supposed to begin, mine had lost its purpose. What was left but to go back to drilling in the Texas dust, and eventually to walk into a bullet somewhere in Europe or Asia? Why, Jesus? I kept asking. Why couldn't I have stayed with You in the first place? The worst of it was, Mother was planning a big "surprise" party for me that night. Marguerite, who was working then in Richmond, was coming. My sister Mary Jane, her husband was in the Pacific, would be there, and Marguerite's older

sister and her husband, and lots of others. And there would be gifts and congratulations and cards full of good wishes for the future. I walked slowly to my locker, and took as long as I could about emptying it. Medical texts, note- books full of ink-stained pages, my bag of bones. How could I ask Marguerite to marry me now, when I would have no way to support her after the war, even supposing I got back?

How easy it would be, the thought came, to go up to the chemistry lab and mix a few ingredients in a beaker., I might be too stupid to be a doctor, but I had understood the lectures on poisons well enough, and I would not be the first ex-med student to take this way out. The picture was in my mind for only an instant, crowded out by another one. The suicides I had seen chained for how long in a realm where a minute could last an eternity, to the very situations they had tried to escape. If I could not face Marguerite's disappointment in me that night, how could I bear it for a timeless forever? I saw those tortured eyes, heard their "I'm sorry!" endlessly repeated, never reaching the ears it was meant for, and I knew they would stand forever between me and any serious impulse to take my own life. I went to my birthday party. I blew out the candles on my cake, unwrapped ribbon and tissue paper, and laughed at the jokes about how much money doctors made. Then when the others were gone I told Mother and Marguerite. They were wonderful about it, reminding me that a quarter of the class was always eliminated by that time.

If not me, Marguerite pointed out, someone else would be feeling disappointment. Which only made me feel worse about the girl I was saying goodbye to. Immediately in Army parlance meant, of course, "after an indefinite delay," so it was nearly three weeks before my orders came through to report back to Camp Berkeley. I left early one October morning with three other med students who, like me, had failed to stay in the program. One of the fellows had a car, an old black Plymouth, and we had arranged to drive out together. We were a pretty silent group driving west through the glorious autumn colors. I kept thinking about Dad, somewhere in France.

The great D-day invasion had taken place four months before, and Dad's unit had followed the first forces from the beachheads deep into France. It was during this advance that Dad's great contribution to the war had come. As they retreated, the Germans had had to abandon one of the great natural resources of Europe: the peat bogs of France and Belgium, vast natural reservoirs of fuel. To prevent this wealth from falling into Allied hands, the retreating Germans systematically flooded the low-lying bogs, rendering them, most people believed, unusable for many years. The problem was handed to Dad; within six weeks he had the peat works operational. Dad was a hero, his name mentioned in news stories and official reports. And his son? Heading out to boot camp, exactly where he was thirteen months before. The only bright spot on my horizon that sparkling October day was a letter that had come from France the week before, hinting that Dad might be home by Christmas. Home! The family together! Except by Christmas, where would I be?

Reassignment to Camp Berkeley, effective immediately. Reclassification for active duty overseas, also effective as of this date. Then he added a personal note:

Ritchie, if you get back from this war alive, I personally am going to see to it that you never get admitted into this medical school or any other. You've wasted the time of professors and staff, and you've kept out of the program a student who could have benefited from such an opportunity. I'm going to see that you never again squander the time and resources of the medical profession.

I do not remember how I got out into the hallway. I only remember watching busy people passing briskly in front of me, people with places they had to be, and realizing that whether I walked to the right or to the left, up the stairs or down, it would not make the slightest difference to anyone on earth. It was the bleakest day of my life.

It was also my 21st birthday.

On the day when life was supposed to begin, mine had lost its purpose. What was left but to go back to drilling in the Texas dust, and eventually to walk into a bullet somewhere in Europe or Asia? Why, Jesus? I kept asking. Why couldn't I have stayed with You in the first place?

The worst of it was, Mother was planning a big "surprise" party for me that night. Marguerite, who was working then in Richmond, was coming. My sister Mary Jane, her husband was in the Pacific, would be

there, and Marguerite's older sister and her husband, and lots of others. And there would be gifts and congratulations and cards full of good wishes for the future.

I walked slowly to my locker, and took as long as I could about emptying it. Medical texts, notebooks full of ink-stained pages, my bag of bones. How could I ask Marguerite to marry me now, when I would have no way to support her after the war, even supposing I got back?

How easy it would be, the thought came, to go up to the chemistry lab and mix a few ingredients in a beaker., I might be too stupid to be a doctor, but I had understood the lectures on poisons well enough, and I would not be the first ex-med student to take this way out.

The picture was in my mind for only an instant, crowded out by another one. The suicides I had seen chained for how long in a realm where a minute could last an eternity, to the very situations

they had tried to escape. If I could not face Marguerite's disappointment in me that night, how could I bear it for a timeless forever? I saw those tortured eyes, heard their "I'm sorry!" endlessly repeated, never reaching the ears it was meant for, and I knew they would stand forever between me and any serious impulse to take my own life.

I went to my birthday party. I blew out the candles on my cake, unwrapped ribbon and tissue paper, and laughed at the jokes about how much money doctors made. Then when the others were gone I told Mother and Marguerite.

They were wonderful about it, reminding me that a quarter of the class was always eliminated by that time. If not me, Marguerite pointed out, someone else would be feeling disappointment. Which only made me feel worse about the girl I was saying goodbye to.

Immediately in Army parlance meant, of course, "after an indefinite delay," so it was nearly three weeks before my orders came through to report back to Camp Berkeley. I left early one October morning with three other med students who, like me, had failed to stay in the program. One of the fellows had a car, an old black Plymouth, and we had arranged to drive out together.

We were a pretty silent group driving west through the glorious autumn colors. I kept thinking about Dad, somewhere in France. The great D-day invasion had taken place four months before, and Dad's unit had followed the first forces from the beachheads deep into France. It was during this advance that Dad's great contribution to the war had come. As they retreated, the Germans had had to abandon one of the great natural resources of Europe: the peat bogs of France and Belgium, vast natural reservoirs of fuel. To prevent this wealth from falling into Allied hands, the retreating Germans systematically flooded the low-lying bogs, rendering them, most people believed, unusable for many years.

The problem was handed to Dad; within six weeks he had the peat works operational. Dad was a hero, his name mentioned in news stories and official reports.

And his son? Heading out to boot camp, exactly where he was thirteen months before.

The only bright spot on my horizon that sparkling October day was a letter that had come from France the week before, hinting that Dad might be home by Christmas. Home! The family together! Except by Christmas, where would I be?

We got as far as Cincinnati that first night, not talking much, each of us probably wrestling with thoughts about like mine. By the next day we relaxed a little, taking turns at the wheel, talking about our girlfriends, the World Series, the fishing we had done or had not done over the summer, everything except med school and the war. Louisville, Memphis. The afternoon of the third day we reached the Mississippi and drove south along the east bank, heading for the river crossing at Vicksburg. On both sides of the river stretched empty corn and sugar fields, miles and miles of brown stubble in the fall sunshine; ahead of us Vicksburg, Mississippi, on its high plateau. Pete was at the wheel, the rest of us watching for signs to the bridge that showed on our map. In the city Pete took a street leading down toward the river. "See any signs?" he asked me over his shoulder.

From my position in the backseat I was supposed to keep an eye out the left-hand window. I did not answer. For the last mile my mouth had been feeling dry, my stomach tight. Something about the layout of this town seemed strangely, impossibly familiar. I knew I had never been there before, and yet I knew exactly how the shoreline would look around the next curve. How the streets would intersect. There! Just as I had known they would! And all at once I knew for sure that straight ahead on that very street we would come in a few blocks to a white frame building with a red roof and the word Café in neon letters over the door. "There it is! To the left!" The guy in the front next to Pete pointed to a small sign at the corner. "The bridge must be back up that way." Pete slowed the car and put out his hand to signal a left-hand turn. "Please!" My voice was harsh. "Don't stop, Pete! Keep going straight." The guy who had seen the sign turned around to stare at me. "The sign points up that way."

"I know. I, I'd just like to drive another couple of blocks in this direction, that's all." Everyone in the car was looking at me now. "I thought I recognized something," I said. Pete shrugged and straightened the wheel. "How much farther?" he said, driving slowly ahead. My heart was hammering too hard to speak. A block ahead, on my side of the car, on the corner, was a white all-night café with a red roof. The neon letters over the door were turned off in the bright daylight but the Pabst sign was still propped in the right-hand window.

There was the sidewalk where I walked beside a man who could not see me. There was the telephone pole where I had stood so long, how long? In what kind of time and what kind of body? "Stop!" I cried. For Pete was passing the little restaurant. Pete pulled over to the curb and again I was aware of the stares of the others. It was a perfectly ordinary street, like a dozen others we had driven down since leaving Richmond. "I thought you'd never been in Mississippi?" Pete said. My hand was sweaty on the door handle. I longed to leap out of that car, to run across the street to that phone pole, to grab that guy wire, grab it and shake it. To open the door to that café and walk in and watch whoever was in there look up. To ask a question: What time is it? Anything, just to hear my own voice and hear them answer. I let go of the handle and forced my eyes away from the white café on the corner. "I didn't think I had, either," I said. What else could I say? I was here one night when I was also lying in a hospital bed in Texas? Pete twisted the wheel impatiently and followed the signs back up the sloping streets to the bridge. But on the map on my lap, my finger traced a line: Abilene, Texas, across Arkansas, across Louisiana, a straight line due east from Abilene to Vicksburg, Mississippi. As we drove across the broad, brown expanse of water a voice inside me was shouting. So it was here! Vicksburg, Mississippi. Here was where I stopped in that headlong bodiless flight. Here I stopped, and thought, and turned back.

We got as far as Cincinnati that first night, not talking much, each of us probably wrestling with thoughts about like mine. By the next day we relaxed a little, taking turns at the wheel, talking about our girlfriends, the World Series, the fishing we had done or had not done over the summer, everything except med school and the war.

Louisville, Memphis. The afternoon of the third day we reached the Mississippi and drove south along the east bank, heading for the river crossing at Vicksburg. On both sides of the river stretched empty corn and sugar fields, miles and miles of brown stubble in the fall sunshine; ahead of us Vicksburg, Mississippi, on its high plateau. Pete was at the wheel, the rest of us watching for signs to the bridge that showed on our map.

In the city Pete took a street leading down toward the river. "See any signs?" he asked me over his shoulder. From my position in the backseat I was supposed to keep an eye out the left-hand window.

I did not answer. For the last mile my mouth had been feeling dry, my stomach tight. Something about the layout of this town seemed strangely, impossibly familiar.

I knew I had never been there before, and yet I knew exactly how the shoreline would look around the next curve. How the streets would intersect. There! Just as I had known they would! And all at once I knew for sure that straight ahead on that very street we would come in a few blocks to a white frame building with a red roof and the word Café in neon letters over the door.

"There it is! To the left!" The guy in the front next to Pete pointed to a small sign at the corner. "The bridge must be back up that way."

Pete slowed the car and put out his hand to signal a left-hand turn.

"Please!" My voice was harsh. "Don't stop, Pete! Keep going straight."

The guy who had seen the sign turned around to stare at me. "The sign points up that way."

"I know. I, I'd just like to drive another couple of blocks in this direction, that's all."

Everyone in the car was looking at me now. "I thought I recognized something," I said.

Pete shrugged and straightened the wheel. "How much farther?" he said, driving slowly ahead.

My heart was hammering too hard to speak. A block ahead, on my side of the car, on the corner, was a white all-night café with a red roof. The neon letters over the door were turned off in the

bright daylight but the Pabst sign was still propped in the right-hand window.

There was the sidewalk where I walked beside a man who could not see me. There was the telephone pole where I had stood so long, how long? In what kind of time and what kind of body?

"Stop!" I cried. For Pete was passing the little restaurant.

Pete pulled over to the curb and again I was aware of the stares of the others. It was a perfectly ordinary street, like a dozen others we had driven down since leaving Richmond.

"I thought you'd never been in Mississippi?" Pete said.

My hand was sweaty on the door handle. I longed to leap out of that car, to run across the street to that phone pole, to grab that guy wire, grab it and shake it. To open the door to that café and walk in and watch whoever was in there look up. To ask a question: What time is it? Anything, just to hear my own voice and hear them answer.

I let go of the handle and forced my eyes away from the white café on the corner. "I didn't think I had, either," I said.

What else could I say? I was here one night when I was also lying in a hospital bed in Texas?

Pete twisted the wheel impatiently and followed the signs back up the sloping streets to the bridge. But on the map on my lap, my finger traced a line: Abilene, Texas, across Arkansas, across Louisiana, a straight line due east from Abilene to Vicksburg, Mississippi. As we drove across the broad, brown expanse of water a voice inside me was shouting.

So it was here! Vicksburg, Mississippi. Here was where I stopped in that headlong bodiless flight. Here I stopped, and thought, and turned back.

12 I stayed only two weeks, this time, at Camp Barkeley. The soldiers I had trained with were gone, of course, shipped to battlefronts all over the world, and other trainloads of recruits had come and gone since then. Because of my partial medical training, I was assigned to the Medical Administrative Corps and put in a holding company waiting assignment to a field hospital. Meanwhile the routine at Camp Barkeley was the same as for everyone else: marching, ten hours a day, in the eyestinging, throat-clogging dust. On my first time off I hitched a ride over to the hospital and looked up Lieutenant Irvine. "Bad break," she said when I told her about my poor performance in med school. "You weren't really back to normal, you know, when you left here. You'll do better next time, after the war."

She seemed so full of confidence in me that I did not tell her what the school official had said. I wished I could tell her, though, about driving through Vicksburg and seeing a café where I had stood while my physical body lay in that very hospital ward. But my disastrous attempts to describe the experience to Marguerite had taught me something. Talking about the events of that night had a strange power, a power God could use. But it must be at His timing, as it had been with Mother, in our living room, the night I returned to Richmond. It was not something I could simply take on myself to talk about for reasons of my own. Then, as I had with Marguerite, I would make a total mess of it. In early November I

was sent to Camp Rucker, Alabama, for training as a medical and surgical technician with the 123rd Evacuation Hospital. The Battle of the Bulge was underway in Europe, and units like the 123rd were being assembled and shipped to the front as rapidly as personnel could be found. I got only one weekend pass, just before Thanksgiving, for a swift trip from Alabama to Virginia and a brief visit with Marguerite and my family. Mother still expected Dad home by Christmas, and now all my hopes centered on seeing him before I myself sailed for France. The 123rd boarded the train at Camp Rucker on Christmas Eve, 1944, bound for Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and embarkation. That night, trying to sleep in the upright seat, my thoughts kept going back to the previous Christmas Eve when I awoke in a hospital bed with a pain in my chest and a memory of the most loving Presence I had ever known.

Where had He been in the year since then, this Jesus I had met? He could not have changed or gone away, that Light was too all-penetrating for me to imagine any time or place that He did not fill. But that, now, was simply head knowledge. Why wasn't He making more difference in the way I handled things? You would expect, I told myself, that anyone who had had an experience like mine, anyone who had glimpsed even dimly the Love behind the universe, would no longer get upset by external things that happened. But I was. Terribly. I was riled by the blustering sergeant sitting three seats ahead of me now, the smell of his black cheroot filling the coach. I was bothered when the men in the 123rd, mostly Northerners from big cities, made fun of my Southern accent and small town ideas. Instead of being able, now, to shrug such things off, I found them bothering me more than they ever had. Toward morning the train stood for a long time on a dark stretch of tracks somewhere. There was a road nearby; occasionally I saw car headlights crossing an overpass up ahead. Then a wintry dawn broke and a great lump came into my throat. We were at the Acca switchyards just outside Richmond, Virginia, less than one mile from my home! There was the engine house of the old Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad, where Papa Dabney used to bring me down to watch the trains. And that bridge! I must have pedaled my bicycle a thousand times over that road between my folks' place and Moss Side. It was Christmas morning and my family was just one mile on the other side of those trees. The homesickness I had been fighting down rose up in a flood. I wondered if Henry and Bruce Gordon were awake yet, they were always the first ones up on Christmas morning. Had Dad gotten home yesterday? After being separated by thousands of miles and a world war, were we within a mile of each other at this moment?

About 7:00 a.m. there was a jerk and a grinding of wheels and the train began to move again. Speeding up, slowing, stopping, it took all day to reach Camp Kilmer, the longest Christmas of my life. From a phone booth, somewhere in the camp, I talked to my family. Dad had been home; he had reached Richmond on Christmas Eve. Our sailing date was not known, of course, but they were issuing twelve-hour passes for the 28th. That was not time enough to get down to Richmond, but I could make it as far as Washington and back. And so the family took a train from Richmond up to Washington, and I took one down from New Jersey. I saw them standing on the platform at Washington's Union Station before my coach even came to a stop, though it was a moment before I recognized the grey-haired man standing next to Mother. When he left for Europe Dad's hair had been jet-black. His hair and the lines in his face spoke of what he had been through; he himself talked only of cheerful things, how good his family looked, how much I was going to enjoy the beautiful countryside of France. We had half an hour, sitting on a bench in the crowded waiting room. Then my return train was called and I waved from the window until I lost them in the crowd of other wartime farewells.

13 The 123rd Evac Hospital boarded the SS Brazil on New Year's Day, 1945, while the Red Cross dispensed doughnuts on the pier and a band played "My Mama Done Tol' Me." Three days out, the convoy was struck by a savage North Atlantic storm. The 123rd was berthed on the highest deck on the ship, just below the Captain's bridge, but high as we were, for two days waves smacked against the deckhouses and seeped under doorways. Under these conditions hard-boiled eggs seemed to be the only food the galleys could send up, but most of us were too seasick to eat anyway. In spite of the storm there were apparently submarines in the area. For tension-racked hours we sat on our crazily rocking bunks, stacked four high, one above the other, listening to the depth charges drop from the lower decks and explode in the water far beneath us. Looking at the strained faces around me, I realized two things about my own feelings.

About the prospect of being torpedoed and having to take to lifeboats in that icy gale, I was as terrified as the next guy. The mechanics of dying, the pain and panic, were as frightening to me as they had ever been. But as for death itself, I not only felt no fear of it, I found myself wishing it would happen. Then I would be with Him! I would be out of this miserable world where men crossed an ocean to kill other men and where even among ourselves there was so little love. At 4:00 a.m. on January 16th the SS Brazil anchored in a thick fog outside the French port of Le Havre. As it grew light we crowded the railings to

catch our first look at Europe. Slowly the grey mist lifted: twisted steel hulks that had once been ships, a single wall where a block of buildings had stood, no newsreel had prepared me for my first view of a bombed-out city. The harbor was too choked with wreckage for our ship to get closer and we were brought ashore in small landing craft, then marched to a row of open trucks for transport to Camp Lucky Strike, a staging point some sixty miles inland.

The two-inch snowfall in the back of the trucks swiftly turned to ice as we trampled it with our boots. Most of the soldiers crouched down by the sides of the truck to get out of the piercing wind but I stood transfixed as we lumbered through the city, past gutted homes where shreds of bright wallpaper fluttered in the wind. I kept thinking of Dad with his lined face and grey hair, understanding better what the invasion had been like. At Lucky Strike we put up our tents and then sat on our cots, trying to rub some feeling back into

our feet. We were standing in the chow line the next morning when a jeep tore into the camp, the driver shouting something about a train wreck. We piled into every available vehicle and on the way got fragments of the story. It was American troops from our own SS Brazil who were aboard the train; sabotage by Vichy French forces was suspected. Apparently our unit, on the highest deck, had been the first to be debarked from the ship and the only one to be sent on to Camp Lucky Strike by road. The entire rest of the ship, several thousand troops, had been loaded throughout the day and the evening onto a train of "forty and eight's," small French baggage cars built to carry either forty men or eight horses. It was after midnight before they were all aboard and the slow trip over the disrupted French rail system began. Approaching the nearby station of St.-Valery-en-Caux, the train was mysteriously switched to a little-used side track terminating at the station house. Traveling full speed, the train crashed into the brick wall of the building. I had never seen or imagined such a scene of carnage. Some of the men had been killed outright, many more were pinned inside the wreckage, crying out for help.

We stepped over severed arms and legs, we wrestled with tangled metal keeping us from reaching our shipmates. I found myself assigned to a captain working in an improvised first-aid tent. But our medical supplies were not yet unloaded from the ship; for a long time between the doctor and me we had one pair of nurse's bandage scissors, a needle and thread, and a few emergency shots of morphine. It was my first exposure to human suffering on a large scale. I had once thought I wanted to help people in pain. But I had been thinking of natural problems like Papa Dabney and his arthritis. What was facing us today was suffering deliberately inflicted by one group of people on another. If hatred could grow this powerful, for we were preparing to do the same thing to them, who wanted to live in such a world? At the end of the nightmare day, when the last casualty had been sent by ambulance to the nearest hospital, I found myself brooding on the fact that others had been permitted to leave this existence while I was condemned to stay. I had seen fellows my age die that day, and except for their suffering, felt a pang of envy for them. Why had our unit been the only one that was not aboard that train?

13

The 123rd Evac Hospital boarded the SS Brazil on New Year's Day, 1945, while the Red Cross dispensed doughnuts on the pier and a band played "My Mama Done Tol' Me." Three days out, the convoy was struck by a savage North Atlantic storm. The 123rd was berthed on the highest deck on the ship, just below the Captain's bridge, but high as we were, for two days waves smacked against the deckhouses and seeped under doorways. Under these conditions hard-boiled eggs seemed to be the only food the galleys could send up, but most of us were too seasick to eat anyway.

In spite of the storm there were apparently submarines in the area. For tension-racked hours we sat on our crazily rocking bunks, stacked four high, one above the other, listening to the depth charges drop from the lower decks and explode in the water far beneath us. Looking at the strained faces around me, I realized two things about my own feelings. About the prospect of being torpedoed and having to take to lifeboats in that icy gale, I was as terrified as the next guy. The mechanics of dying, the pain and panic, were as frightening to me as they had ever been.

But as for death itself, I not only felt no fear of it, I found myself wishing it would happen. Then I would be with Him! I would be out of this miserable world where men crossed an ocean to kill other men and where even among ourselves there was so little love.

At 4:00 a.m. on January 16th the SS Brazil anchored in a thick fog outside the French port of Le Havre. As it grew light we crowded the railings to catch our first look at Europe. Slowly the grey mist lifted: twisted

steel hulks that had once been ships, a single wall where a block of buildings had stood, no newsreel had prepared me for my first view of a bombed-out city.

The harbor was too choked with wreckage for our ship to get closer and we were brought ashore in small landing craft, then marched to a row of open trucks for transport to Camp Lucky Strike, a staging point some sixty miles inland. The two-inch snowfall in the back of the trucks swiftly turned to ice as we trampled it with our boots. Most of the soldiers crouched down by the sides of the truck to get out of the piercing wind but I stood transfixed as we lumbered through the city, past gutted homes where shreds of bright wallpaper fluttered in the wind. I kept thinking of Dad with his lined face and grey hair, understanding better what the invasion had been like.

At Lucky Strike we put up our tents and then sat on our cots, trying to rub some feeling back into

our feet. We were standing in the chow line the next morning when a jeep tore into the camp, the driver shouting something about a train wreck. We piled into every available vehicle and on the way got fragments of the story. It was American troops from our own SS Brazil who were aboard the train; sabotage by Vichy French forces was suspected.

Apparently our unit, on the highest deck, had been the first to be debarked from the ship and the only one to be sent on to Camp Lucky Strike by road. The entire rest of the ship, several thousand troops, had been loaded throughout the day and the evening onto a train of "forty and eight's," small French baggage cars built to carry either forty men or eight horses. It was after midnight before they were all aboard and the slow trip over the disrupted French rail system began. Approaching the nearby station of St.-Valery-en-Caux, the train was mysteriously switched to a little-used side track terminating at the station house. Traveling full speed, the train crashed into the brick wall of the building.

I had never seen or imagined such a scene of carnage. Some of the men had been killed outright, many more were pinned inside the wreckage, crying out for help. We stepped over severed arms and legs, we wrestled with tangled metal keeping us from reaching our shipmates. I found myself assigned to a captain working in an improvised first-aid tent. But our medical supplies were not yet unloaded from the ship; for a long time between the doctor and me we had one pair of nurse's bandage scissors, a needle and thread, and a few emergency shots of morphine.

It was my first exposure to human suffering on a large scale. I had once thought I wanted to help people in pain. But I had been thinking of natural problems like Papa Dabney and his arthritis. What was facing us today was suffering deliberately inflicted by one group of people on another. If hatred could grow this powerful, for we were preparing to do the same thing to them, who wanted to live in such a world?

At the end of the nightmare day, when the last casualty had been sent by ambulance to the nearest hospital, I found myself brooding on the fact that others had been permitted to leave this existence while I was condemned to stay. I had seen fellows my age die that day, and except for their suffering, felt a pang of envy for them. Why had our unit been the only one that was not aboard that train?

The question came back to torment me over and over in the weeks that followed, as time after time I found myself a few tents, a few yards, a few feet away from the leap into His presence we bodily creatures call death. From Camp Lucky Strike, the 123rd Evac traveled to Rethel, France, 350 miles east, where we could service troops from the combat zones. We set up our tent city, hospital, sleeping quarters, mess, on the grounds of an abandoned chateau, its tall windows broken and dark, weeds growing in the circular driveway. And there as we cared for the injured and dying, my longing for death became an obsession. I saw the fact of physical survival as a judgment on me, a rejection of me by the Person whose love meant everything. I was sitting on a tree stump behind the chateau one afternoon, asking again to be allowed into His presence, when a master sergeant came running through the yard. "On your feet, soldier!" he barked. "An Air Force sergeant's in C-tent with his knee darn near blown away." Inside C-tent I spotted him right away. An Air Force jacket lay on the footlocker, and when I saw it my whole body went tense. Three stripes above, three stripes below, a diamond in the middle: The guy was not only a sergeant, he was a top sergeant, and every top sergeant I had known was a foul-mouthed, small-minded, bullying, "Hi! My name's Jack Helms. What's yours?"

Looking up from the cot through eyes glazed with pain and morphine was a fellow around my own age. He was obviously hurting badly, but when I had told him my name he wanted to know a lot of other things about me, where I was from, what kinds of things I liked to do, did I have brothers and sisters. Talking helped keep his mind off the pain, he said. In spite of myself, as I changed his dressing, I found myself asking him questions, too. He told me he was from El Dorado, Arkansas, that he had been working as a carhop in a restaurant there. That morning the jeep he'd been driving had hit a land mine; luckily his had been the only injury. A doctor came in to examine the injury and give me instructions for keeping it clean. When I had done what he told me there was no reason to stay, but I kept hanging around the bed. There was something about Jack, he did not like to be called Sergeant, that made you want to be near him. He reminded me of somebody, but I could not think who. He was a big, good-looking fellow with a deeply tanned face and dark brown eyes, but it was his smile that was unforgettable.

It split his face from ear to ear and enveloped you and the big green tent and the whole muddy Evac hospital in a glow of appreciation. I had treated knee injuries before and I knew they kept on being painful. But Jack never mentioned this; he seemed more concerned about my problems than his own. When he heard about the med school fiasco, he was on fire with eagerness for me to go back, after the war, and try again. All he would talk about was my great future as a doctor. When I told him about the guy who was going to keep me out of school, he broke into one of his sunburst smiles. "People say a lot of things. If my guess is right, he won't even be at that school when you get back." As a medical tech my job included everything from carrying trays and bedpans to giving shots and running errands to the PX. Like the other techs I had pretty much been putting in time until my shift was over. Now to my surprise I found myself staying late, working extra hours. Who was it Jack reminded me of, and why did I feel so good when I was with him? I was curious, his second day in the hospital, when an Air Force major showed up asking for Sergeant Helms. In the rigid caste systems of the services, officers and enlisted men had little off-duty contact. When I led him to C-tent, however, the major sat down at the foot of Jack's cot and chatted for half an hour. Jack told me later that this was the officer he had been driving when their jeep hit the mine and overturned. "So it's natural that he would feel concerned about me."

Already I was discovering that behavior that was "natural" around Jack was somehow different from ordinary behavior. To me the most remarkable part of the major's continuing visits was not the greeting Jack gave him, but that he gave the same greeting to anyone who stopped to talk to him, including me. Jack seemed to make no distinction between the major or the surgeon who operated on his knee, and the lowly tech who changed his bed sheets. Within a week Jack was hobbling about in a cast, and now whenever I was not on duty we would take a walk together, at first just around the grounds of the chateau, picking our way through the weeds of what had once been a sunken garden, then out along the road that led to Rethel. Ostensibly I was helping a wounded airman make a recovery. But I was aware, and I suspected Jack was,

The question came back to torment me over and over in the weeks that followed, as time after time I found myself a few tents, a few yards, a few feet away from the leap into His presence we bodily creatures call death. From Camp Lucky Strike, the 123rd Evac traveled to Rethel, France, 350 miles east, where we could service troops from the combat zones. We set up our tent city, hospital, sleeping quarters, mess, on the grounds of an abandoned chateau, its tall windows broken and dark, weeds growing in the circular driveway.

And there as we cared for the injured and dying, my longing for death became an obsession. I saw the fact of physical survival as a judgment on me, a rejection of me by the Person whose love meant everything.

I was sitting on a tree stump behind the chateau one afternoon, asking again to be allowed into His presence, when a master sergeant came running through the yard. "On your feet, soldier!" he barked. "An Air Force sergeant's in C-tent with his knee darn near blown away."

Inside C-tent I spotted him right away. An Air Force jacket lay on the footlocker, and when I saw it my whole body went tense. Three stripes above, three stripes below, a diamond in the middle: The guy was not only a sergeant, he was a top sergeant, and every top sergeant I had known was a foul-mouthed, small-minded, bullying,

"Hi! My name's Jack Helms. What's yours?"

Looking up from the cot through eyes glazed with pain and morphine was a fellow around my own age. He was obviously hurting badly, but when I had told him my name he wanted to know a lot of other things about me, where I was from, what kinds of things I liked to do, did I have brothers and sisters. Talking helped keep his mind off the pain, he said.

In spite of myself, as I changed his dressing, I found myself asking him questions, too. He told me he was from El Dorado, Arkansas, that he had been working as a carhop in a restaurant there. That morning the jeep he'd been driving had hit a land mine; luckily his had been the only injury.

A doctor came in to examine the injury and give me instructions for keeping it clean. When I had done what he told me there was no reason to stay, but I kept hanging around the bed. There was something about Jack, he did not like to be called Sergeant, that made you want to be near him. He reminded me of somebody, but I could not think who. He was a big, good-looking fellow with a deeply tanned face and dark brown eyes, but it was his smile that was unforgettable. It split his face from ear to ear and enveloped you and the big green tent and the whole muddy Evac hospital in a glow of appreciation.

I had treated knee injuries before and I knew they kept on being painful. But Jack never mentioned this; he seemed more concerned about my problems than his own. When he heard about the med school fiasco, he was on fire with eagerness for me to go back, after the war, and try again. All he would talk about was my great future as a doctor.

When I told him about the guy who was going to keep me out of school, he broke into one of his sunburst smiles. "People say a lot of things. If my guess is right, he won't even be at that school when you get back."

As a medical tech my job included everything from carrying trays and bedpans to giving shots and running errands to the PX. Like the other techs I had pretty much been putting in time until my shift was over. Now to my surprise I found myself staying late, working extra hours. Who was it Jack reminded me of, and why did I feel so good when I was with him?

I was curious, his second day in the hospital, when an Air Force major showed up asking for Sergeant Helms. In the rigid caste systems of the services, officers and enlisted men had little off-duty contact. When I led him to C-tent, however, the major sat down at the foot of Jack's cot and chatted for half an hour. Jack told me later that this was the officer he had been driving when their jeep hit the mine and overturned. "So it's natural that he would feel concerned about me."

Already I was discovering that behavior that was "natural" around Jack was somehow different from ordinary behavior. To me the most remarkable part of the major's continuing visits was not the greeting Jack gave him, but that he gave the same greeting to anyone who stopped to talk to him, including me. Jack seemed to make no distinction between the major or the surgeon who operated on his knee, and the lowly tech who changed his bed sheets.

Within a week Jack was hobbling about in a cast, and now whenever I was not on duty we would take a walk together, at first just around the grounds of the chateau, picking our way through the weeds of what had once been a sunken garden, then out along the road that led to Rethel. Ostensibly I was helping a wounded airman make a recovery. But I was aware, and I suspected Jack was,

too, that the greater healing was taking place in me. We talked about everything on those walks, school, childhood, careers, and all the time the feeling grew that I had known Jack Helms before. He was a deeply committed Christian, I learned, a Protestant, although he attended church with the Catholic family who had adopted him and shown him great kindness. And all at once one day, without intending to any more than I had intended talking to my stepmother, I found myself telling him about the night I had come out of a hospital movie theater and asked a ward boy for some aspirin. As they had been the earlier time, the words were simply there. I told him all of it: the ambulance ride to the X-ray section, waking up in a strange small room to find someone else in my bed, walking down a street in Vicksburg, Mississippi, trying to get a passerby to listen to me. It was the second time I had been able to talk about my experience. I could tell by the wonderment in Jack's face that he had never heard anything even remotely like what I

was describing. I could also see by his expression that not for an instant did he doubt what I was saying. I described the Light that had entered the little cubicle.

How my whole life had somehow entered at the same time, lit up by a love such as I had never, I stopped, staring at Jack. That nagging feeling that I had known him before. That strange sense I had had the very first day of being in the presence of a familiar friend. It was Christ who all this time had been looking at me out of Jack Helms's eyes. The acceptance. The caring. The joy. Of course I recognized these things! I had encountered them in a hospital room in Texas, and now, five thousand miles away, I had met them again on a hillside in France. They were echoes only, this time, imperfect, transmitted through a fallible human being. But at least I knew now from Whom the message was coming. So much was falling into place as we turned around on the road and headed back toward camp.

For once neither of us spoke. Jack did not press me to continue my interrupted story; he seemed in his perceptive way to know that I was working something out in my mind. The lonesomeness I had felt that year, the alienation from the world and the things that went on here, wasn't it all a longing to go back to the time when I had stood in His presence? But could you ever find Him, I wondered as we crested a hill, by going backwards? The very nature of the Person I had met was His now-ness. He was overwhelmingly and everywhere Present, so that no other time could even exist where He was. It was no good, I suddenly saw, looking for Him in the past, even when that past was only fifteen months before. I knew that afternoon, on the road from Reethel, that if I wanted to feel the nearness of Christ, and I did want that, above everything else, I would have to find it in the people that He put before me each day.

We had reached the chateau grounds as these thoughts went whirling through my head. We walked around in back; there was the tree stump on which I had sat, only a little over two weeks before, praying to be allowed to die. And all at once I knew something else, on this day of new insights. That prayer had been answered. In a sense in which I never meant it, I had indeed died. For the first time in many months I had put aside my self-pity, my self-incrimination, all thoughts of any kind about myself, long enough to get involved with someone else. Jack's injury and his healing had been the one thing on my mind those last two weeks; in caring for him I had lost sight of myself. And in losing myself, I had discovered Christ. It was strange, I thought: I had had to die, in Texas, too, to see Him. I wondered if we always had to die, some stubborn part of us, before we could see more of Him.

Jack stayed only another week in the hospital before returning to his air base, but in that week we cemented a friendship that has lasted thirty years. Because he lives today in Malibu Beach, California, and I in Irvington, Virginia, we do not see each other often, but every visit picks up as though we had just strolled off a country road in France. That was the beginning, for me, that country walk, the moment when I began to integrate the near-death experience in Berkeley, Texas, with all the rest of my life. The first step, I realized, was to stop trying to recapture that otherworldly vision of Jesus, and start looking for Him in the faces across the mess table. That was not easy for a young soldier who had spent all his life in a small Southern city. Roman Catholics, Jews, African Americans, I had grown up believing these people were not only different from me, but not as good. And so Jesus in His mercy had put me in the 123rd Evac. He let me start too, that the greater healing was taking place in me.

We talked about everything on those walks, school, childhood, careers, and all the time the feeling grew that I had known Jack Helms before. He was a deeply committed Christian, I learned, a Protestant, although he attended church with the Catholic family who had adopted him and shown him great kindness. And all at once one day, without intending to any more than I had intended talking to my stepmother, I found myself telling him about the night I had come out of a hospital movie theater and asked a ward boy for some aspirin. As they had been the earlier time, the words were simply there. I told him all of it: the ambulance ride to the X-ray section, waking up in a strange small room to find someone else in my bed, walking down a street in Vicksburg, Mississippi, trying to get a passerby to listen to me.

It was the second time I had been able to talk about my experience. I could tell by the wonderment in Jack's face that he had never heard anything even remotely like what I was describing. I could also see by his expression that not for an instant did he doubt what I was saying. I described the Light that had entered the little cubicle. How my whole life had somehow entered at the same time, lit up by a love such as I had never,

I stopped, staring at Jack. That nagging feeling that I had known him before. That strange sense I had had the very first day of being in the presence of a familiar friend.

It was Christ who all this time had been looking at me out of Jack Helms's eyes.

The acceptance. The caring. The joy. Of course I recognized these things! I had encountered them in a hospital room in Texas, and now, five thousand miles away, I had met them again on a hillside in France. They were echoes only, this time, imperfect, transmitted through a fallible human being. But at least I knew now from Whom the message was coming.

So much was falling into place as we turned around on the road and headed back toward camp. For once neither of us spoke. Jack did not press me to continue my interrupted story; he seemed in his perceptive way to know that I was working something out in my mind.

The lonesomeness I had felt that year, the alienation from the world and the things that went on here, wasn't it all a longing to go back to the time when I had stood in His presence? But could you ever find Him, I wondered as we crested a hill, by going backwards? The very nature of the Person I

had met was His now-ness. He was overwhelmingly and everywhere Present, so that no other time could even exist where He was. It was no good, I suddenly saw, looking for Him in the past, even when that past was only fifteen months before. I knew that afternoon, on the road from Rethel, that if I wanted to feel the nearness of Christ, and I did want that, above everything else, I would have to find it in the people that He put before me each day.

We had reached the chateau grounds as these thoughts went whirling through my head. We walked around in back; there was the tree stump on which I had sat, only a little over two weeks before, praying to be allowed to die. And all at once I knew something else, on this day of new insights.

That prayer had been answered.

In a sense in which I never meant it, I had indeed died. For the first time in many months I had put aside my self-pity, my self-incrimination, all thoughts of any kind about myself, long enough to get involved with someone else. Jack's injury and his healing had been the one thing on my mind those last two weeks; in caring for him I had lost sight of myself.

And in losing myself, I had discovered Christ. It was strange, I thought: I had had to die, in Texas, too, to see Him. I wondered if we always had to die, some stubborn part of us, before we could see more of Him.

Jack stayed only another week in the hospital before returning to his air base, but in that week we cemented a friendship that has lasted thirty years. Because he lives today in Malibu Beach, California, and I in Irvington, Virginia, we do not see each other often, but every visit picks up as though we had just strolled off a country road in France.

That was the beginning, for me, that country walk, the moment when I began to integrate the near-death experience in Barkeley, Texas, with all the rest of my life. The first step, I realized, was to stop trying to recapture that otherworldly vision of Jesus, and start looking for Him in the faces across the mess table.

That was not easy for a young soldier who had spent all his life in a small Southern city. Roman Catholics, Jews, African Americans, I had grown up believing these people were not only different from me, but not as good. And so Jesus in His mercy had put me in the 123rd Evac. He let me start

with Jack because Jack was easy; you had to see the Christ in Jack. But before long I started seeing Jesus in a Jew from New York, an Italian from Chicago, an African American from Trenton. I discovered something else and at first it puzzled me. The more I learned to see Christ in other people, the less I was crushed by the death and suffering our unit dealt with. It seemed like it would be the opposite: The more you found to love in people, the harder it would be to see their pain. It never got easy, of course, but it became somehow bearable, and again I found myself thinking back to the Texas experience. I had been glamorizing that memory, I realized, dwelling only on the joy of His presence. But when I recalled it honestly there had been much in that "other realm" that was frankly hideous, scenes of agony worse than anything even in the train wreck at St.-Valery. I had told myself I wanted to leave this earth because I had

seen a better place. But that was not true, I began to realize; the afterworld I had glimpsed was both infinitely brighter than this one, and infinitely more savage and terrible.

Why hadn't the evil side of that world crushed my spirit, as the negatives of this world had done? I had started reading the Bible, back in my tent, and one day I came to a psalm that seemed to help. "If I ascend up into heaven," I read in Psalm 139:8, "thou art there: If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou art there." Of course, that was the answer: Jesus had been there, in those scenes of Sheol. It was His light, His compassion in which I was seeing the awfulness, and that shed a ray of hope, even in hell. When the war in Europe ended in May 1945, the 123rd Evac entered Germany with the occupying troops. I was part of a group assigned to a concentration camp near Wuppertal, charged with getting medical help to the newly liberated prisoners, many of them Jews from Holland, France, and eastern Europe. This was the most shattering experience I had yet had. I had been exposed many times by then to sudden death and injury, but to see the effects of slow starvation, to walk through those barracks where thousands of men had died a little bit at a time over a period of years, was a new kind of horror.

For many it was an irreversible process; we lost scores each day in spite of all the medicine and food we could rush to them. Now I needed my new insight indeed. When the ugliness became too great to handle, I did what I had learned to do. I went from one end to the other of that barbed wire enclosure, looking into men's faces until I saw looking back at me the face of Christ. And that is how I came to know Wild Bill Cody. That was not his real name. His real name was seven unpronounceable syllables in Polish, but he had a long drooping handlebar mustache like pictures of the old western hero, so the American soldiers called him Wild Bill. He was one of the inmates of the concentration camp, but obviously he had not been there long: his posture was erect, his eyes bright, his energy indefatigable. Since he was fluent in English, French, German and Russian, as well as Polish, he became a kind of unofficial camp translator. We came to him with all sorts of problems; the paperwork alone was staggering in attempting to relocate people whose families, even whole hometowns, might have disappeared. But though Wild Bill worked fifteen and sixteen hours a day, he showed no signs of weariness. While the rest of us were drooping with fatigue, he seemed to gain strength. "We have time for this old fellow," he would say. "He's been waiting to see us all day." His compassion for his fellow prisoners glowed on his face, and it was to this glow that I came when my own spirits were low. So I was astonished to learn, when Wild Bill's own papers came before us one day, that he had been in **Wuppertal** since 1939! For six years he had lived on the same starvation diet, slept in the same airless and disease-ridden barracks as everyone else, but without the least physical or mental deterioration.

Perhaps even more amazing, every group in the camp looked on him as a friend. He was the one to whom quarrels between inmates were brought for arbitration. Only after I had been at Wuppertal a number of weeks did I realize what a rarity this was in a compound where the different nationalities of prisoners hated each other almost as much as they did the Germans.

As for Germans, feeling against them ran so high that in some of the camps liberated earlier, former prisoners had seized guns, run into the nearest village and simply shot the first Germans they saw. Part of our instructions were to prevent this kind of thing, and again Wild Bill was our greatest asset, reasoning with the different groups, counseling forgiveness.

"It's not easy for some of them to forgive," I commented to him one day as we sat over mugs of tea in the processing center. "So many of them have lost members of their families."

Wild Bill leaned back in the upright chair and sipped at his drink. "We lived in the Jewish section of Warsaw," he began slowly, the first words I had heard him speak about himself, "my wife, our two daughters, and our three little boys. When the Germans reached our street they lined everyone against a wall and opened up with machine guns. I begged to be allowed to die with my family, but because I spoke German they put me in a work group." He paused, perhaps seeing again his wife and five children. "I had to decide right then," he continued, "whether to let myself hate the soldiers who had done this. It was an easy decision, really. I was a lawyer. In my practice I had seen too often what hate could do to people's minds and bodies. Hate had just killed the six people who mattered most to me in the world.

I decided then that I would spend the rest of my life, whether it was a few days or many years, loving every person I came in contact with." Loving every person, this was the power that had kept a man well in the face of every privation. It was the Power I had first met in a hospital room in Texas, and was

learning little by little to recognize wherever He chose to shine through, whether the human vehicle was aware of Him or not. I returned to the States from occupation duty in Germany in the spring of 1946, and Marguerite and I were married the following year. When the moment came to tell her about the Texas experience, it happened, as it had the two previous times, naturally, almost effortlessly on my part, helping the love between us grow. Meanwhile Jack Helms' hunch had proved correct: The administrator who had sworn to keep me out of there was no longer connected with the Medical College of Virginia. The man who went to bat to get me readmitted was Dr. Sidney Negus, the professor who had given me the D in biochemistry.

This time I was determined not to make the mistake I had made before. My trouble began, I saw now, when I took my eyes off Jesus and onto myself. This time I did not worry about my stupidity or my poor record, and I got through school without difficulty. From the outset of my career, however, I discovered what all doctors know: medicine does not have all the answers. When stumped, as I often was, I would pray for my patient, silently, under my breath, asking Jesus' help in making the right diagnosis, prescribing the right treatment. In addition Marguerite and I formed the habit of praying together for patients every evening.

I continued to read the Bible. It was funny, in Sunday school the Bible had seemed to me both boring and difficult. Since Texas it had become simply a factual description of life. When Jesus said to some fishermen on a lakeside, "Follow Me," of course they dropped everything and hurried after Him, who could resist? When He said, "I am the Light of the World," it was simply an observable fact. But if my experience made the Bible comprehensible, much more so, as I now began to read it systematically after the war, it was the Bible that helped me understand the experience. Reading over and over the accounts of the crucifixion, I understood at last where that certainty had come from, in His presence, that I was not condemned, in spite of the ugly actions I had committed that were paraded in plain view before us. It was His death, I came to see, that had already paid for these things, the light of His resurrection in which we stood. Why these cosmic acts should have applied to me, whether I could somehow have appropriated them in that church service at age eleven?, I did not know. But I began to understand, reading the Bible, how all-important our lives on this earth are, in His plan. How terribly wrong I had been, on the SS Brazil, at St.-Valery, in Rethel, to detest mine, to ask Him to take me out of this world before His work in me here was done. I thought of the wretched souls I had seen in that first post-earthly realm, trapped in hatreds and lusts, fixed on material things forever out of reach. Somehow none of them had finished growing up in their time on earth, whether it had been long or short. I had no trouble believing that some of the teenagers I had seen blown to bits in Europe had accomplished already the goals God had for them on earth, were well-prepared to graduate to some sphere nearer Him. But I certainly had not been. With my self-centeredness, my prejudices, my self-righteousness, how had I dared ask to die! In yearning for Jesus had I forgotten what He showed me? That plain, crawling with the unhappiest beings I had ever seen, each insisting on his own superiority to the annihilation of everybody else, had I seriously wanted an eternity in some existence like that? Would I ever, in fact, reach the point where I would be willing to say, on my own, I have done what I am supposed to do on earth?

Wild Bill leaned back in the upright chair and sipped at his drink. "We lived in the Jewish section of Warsaw," he began slowly, the first words I had heard him speak about himself, "my wife, our two daughters, and our three little boys. When the Germans reached our street they lined everyone against a wall and opened up with machine guns. I begged to be allowed to die with my family, but because I spoke German they put me in a work group."

He paused, perhaps seeing again his wife and five children. "I had to decide right then," he continued, "whether to let myself hate the soldiers who had done this. It was an easy decision, really. I was a lawyer. In my practice I had seen too often what hate could do to people's minds and bodies. Hate had just killed the six people who mattered most to me in the world. I decided then that I would spend the rest of my life, whether it was a few days or many years, loving every person I came in contact with."

Loving every person, this was the power that had kept a man well in the face of every privation. It was the Power I had first met in a hospital room in Texas, and was learning little by little to recognize wherever He chose to shine through, whether the human vehicle was aware of Him or not.

I returned to the States from occupation duty in Germany in the spring of 1946, and Marguerite and I were married the following year. When the moment came to tell her about the Texas experience, it happened,

as it had the two previous times, naturally, almost effortlessly on my part, helping the love between us grow.

Meanwhile Jack Helms' hunch had proved correct: The administrator who had sworn to keep me out of there was no longer connected with the Medical College of Virginia. The man who went to bat to get me readmitted was Dr. Sidney Negus, the professor who had given me the D in biochemistry. This time I was determined not to make the mistake I had made before. My trouble began, I saw now, when I took my eyes off Jesus and onto myself. This time I did not worry about my stupidity or my poor record, and I got through school without difficulty.

From the outset of my career, however, I discovered what all doctors know: medicine does not have all the answers. When stumped, as I often was, I would pray for my patient, silently, under my breath, asking Jesus' help in making the right diagnosis, prescribing the right treatment. In addition Marguerite and I formed the habit of praying together for patients every evening.

I continued to read the Bible. It was funny, in Sunday school the Bible had seemed to me both boring and difficult. Since Texas it had become simply a factual description of life. When Jesus said to some fishermen on a lakeside, "Follow Me," of course they dropped everything and hurried after Him, who could resist? When He said, "I am the Light of the World," it was simply an observable fact.

But if my experience made the Bible comprehensible, much more so, as I now began to read it systematically after the war, it was the Bible that helped me understand the experience. Reading over and over the accounts of the crucifixion, I understood at last where that certainty had come from, in His presence, that I was not condemned, in spite of the ugly actions I had committed that were paraded in plain view before us. It was His death, I came to see, that had already paid for these things, the light of His resurrection in which we stood.

Why these cosmic acts should have applied to me, whether I could somehow have appropriated them in that church service at age eleven?, I did not know. But I began to understand, reading the Bible, how all-important our lives on this earth are, in His plan. How terribly wrong I had been, on the SS Brazil, at St.-Valery, in Rethel, to detest mine, to ask Him to take me out of this world before His work in me here was done.

I thought of the wretched souls I had seen in that first post-earthly realm, trapped in hatreds and lusts, fixed on material things forever out of reach. Somehow none of them had finished growing up in their time on earth, whether it had been long or short. I had no trouble believing that some of the teenagers I had seen blown to bits in Europe had accomplished already the goals God had for them on earth, were well-prepared to graduate to some sphere nearer Him. But I certainly had not been. With my self-centeredness, my prejudices, my self-righteousness, how had I dared ask to die! In yearning for Jesus had I forgotten what He showed me? That plain, crawling with the unhappiest beings I had ever seen, each insisting on his own superiority to the annihilation of everybody else, had I seriously wanted an eternity in some existence like that? Would I ever, in fact, reach the point where I would be willing to say, on my own, I have done what I am supposed to do on earth?

14 One winter evening in 1952, it was around the middle of December because we had just had our annual Christmas party at the Richmond Academy of Medicine that I had recently joined, I sat in the living room reading a copy of Life magazine. The issue was full of ads for brand-name turkeys and hams, with jolly Santas on every other page, and I was flipping through it without much interest when suddenly my fingers tightened. On the page in front of me was a drawing of a gigantic sphere-shaped structure cut away to reveal men and machines inside it. There was a kind of traveling crane mounted on steel girders, turbines, a huge circular tank, stairs, catwalks, down in one corner a small control room. What set my heart pounding in my throat was not the strange futuristic appearance of these objects but the certainty that I had seen all this before. Not recently, either.

Somehow, years ago, I had stood staring not at a drawing of this enormous sphere but at the thing itself. I had wandered about that peculiar interior, too; I had seen the stairway just there, peered into that vast tank of water. But I couldn't have! Skimming the text I saw that what I remembered was impossible: Last week the Atomic Energy Commission partially lifted its veil of secrecy and allowed Life's artists to make a drawing of some details of the prototype of the second US atomic submarine engine and the strange

house that holds it. The building, now going up near Schenectady, N.Y., will be the world's largest man-made sphere, a \$2-million, two hundred and twenty-five foot steel shell.

The article went on to say that to avoid possible radioactive contamination scientists, would build the submarine engine inside the sphere, then submerge it for tests in the giant tank. Baffled, I lowered the magazine to my lap. I had felt so certain I had seen this whole operation, yet I had never been to Schenectady. Anyhow, what I recalled was some time ago and this was just now being built. The thing I had seen was finished and operating, though I had not had any idea what, Then I remembered. It was in that tranquil campus-like realm inhabited by beings wrapped in thought as monks are wrapped in robes, that I had stood in 1943 as the earth measures time, staring at a huge sphere-shaped building, walking through its intricate fittings. What was that realm? In what mysterious way was it related to the life and thought of the world where I sat in 1952, with Marguerite talking on the telephone in the hall and Christmas cards lining the mantelpiece? I did not think about it very long, except to wonder if philosophers are right when they say that certain ideas seem to drop into widely scattered areas of the world from "somewhere" simultaneously. I had grown wary of inquiring into superterrestrial areas on my own. As long as Christ had been my guide, there had been nothing to fear.

But since my out-of-the-body experience, nine years before, I had come across individuals who had become so fascinated by the "spirit" world that they seemed to have lost sight of the Spirit Himself. All I was sure of as I sat in the living room that evening was that the time had come to start talking far more publicly than I had until then about my encounter with Christ. If we were truly entering the age of atomic power, without knowing the Power that created it, then it was only a matter of decades until we destroyed ourselves and our earth as well. It was not enough for professional clergy to speak out; everyone who had any experience at all of God, it seemed to me, had a responsibility. And it must again have been His timing: I who could never string two words together found myself talking to youth groups, clubs, churches, anyone who would listen to the message that God is love, and all else is hell. Professionally, of course, I was sure this meant the ruin of me, and doubtless I did lose some patients who were not willing to entrust themselves to a "religious fanatic." But it was odd: The people whose scorn I feared most were often the most accepting. When I applied for my residency in psychiatry at the University of Virginia Hospital I was advised by a friend on the staff not to mention my experience, since he did not know how the others might take this. The very first person to interview me turned out to be Dr. Wilfred Abse, Professor of Psychoanalysis and Analytical Psychotherapy in the Department of Psychiatry, and one of the top men in the Virginia Psychoanalytic Society. I had no sooner stepped into his office than Dr. Abse confronted me with, "Well, Dr. Ritchie, I understand that you feel that you have met the Christ." I saw my chances at the University of Virginia floating out the window.

Dr. Abse was a Jew, a Freudian analyst, and he was asking me a direct question that demanded an answer. Under my breath, as I had done so often, I turned to Jesus: "Lord, what do I say now?" Deny Me before man, the words seemed almost audible, and I will deny you before My Father. To Dr. Abse I said, "I can no more deny the reality of what happened to me in Barkeley, Texas, than Saul of Tarsus could deny what happened to him on the road to Damascus." And that was that, I thought, for my chances of becoming a psychiatrist. Imagine my surprise, a couple of weeks later, to receive a letter telling me that I had been accepted unanimously by the examining staff.

Years later, when Dr. Abse and I had become good friends, he told me that that particular conversation had been critical indeed. "All of us up here knew that you claimed to have had an out-of-the-body experience. If you'd pretended with me even for a moment that it had not happened, I would have put you down as a deeply insecure person, and most probably an emotionally disturbed one who couldn't distinguish between fact and fancy." In the consulting room itself, of course, in keeping with sound psychiatric practice, I seldom mention my personal views of God. Only where the need is extreme, as with Fred Owen, do I violate that professional silence. "Do you know why I come to the office early each morning?" I asked him one day when we were discussing the effects in my life of the Texas experience. "Before the other doctors and staff get here? It's because I use that time to pray for each of the patients I will see that day. I believe Jesus has an agenda and a timetable for each of us, and I pray that with His help the patient and I may discover it together."

If Jesus was giving Fred Owen only weeks on earth instead of decades, "It's because He knows you can finish your work here in weeks. You can forgive and receive forgiveness. You can free yourself of addictions and angers, any baggage you don't want to carry into a realm where everything is Light." I do not know, of course, what went on in the innermost recesses of Fred Owen's heart; psychiatry at best is

limited by what the patient shares with us. I do know that the man who came into my office on May 9, 1977, for what turned out to be our final session, was a very different person from the man I had first seen in December. Physically he was weaker, of course. In fact, a neighbor had to drive him, and Fred lay on the yellow sofa throughout the session. But the things he said between the labored breaths, and the peace, even humor, in his eyes, filled me with joy. He had been battling with his former employers to get his hospital bills included under their health plan; I had filled out a number of forms in the case myself. That week he had received final notification that his claim had been denied, on the grounds that he had quit work without the required notice. "You know what?" he told me. "They're right. I quit because I was mad and I wanted to make problems for them. Only now I'm the one with the problems."

He gave a laugh that was interrupted by a cough, but the sound was beautiful to me because it was a real laugh, a heart-laugh, without a trace of bitterness in it. "It's like what we were reading, right, Doc? 'As you sow, so you reap.' If I've learned that in time, then losing the insurance was cheap. "You know what I do now that I'm not sleeping so well at night?" he went on. "I pray for those guys at work, that the shop will have a real good year, more business and profits than they know what to do with." No man, of course, may speculate on another man's experience beyond the grave, but when that same neighbor telephoned to tell me about Fred Owen's death on May 24, I had no trouble picturing, at least, that moment of astonished transition. The growing Light. The joy in the heart of a man who had done his homework well. God is busy building a race of men who know how to love. I believe that the fate of the earth itself depends on the progress we make, and that the time now is very short. As for what we will find in the next world, here, too, I believe that what we will discover there depends on how well we get on with the business of loving, here and now.

the end.