

LOO REE

By Zena Henderson

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LOTS of children have imaginary playmates. You probably had one yourself if you were an only child or a lonesome one. Or if you didn't, you've listened to stories about children who cried because Daddy shut the door on Jocko's tail or Mommie stepped right in the middle of Mr. Gepp while he was napping on the kitchen floor. Well, being a first-grade teacher, I meet some of these playmates occasionally, though they stay home more often than not. After all, when you start to school, you aren't alone or lonesome any more. I've seldom known such a playmate to persist at school for more than a week or so. And yet—there was Loo Ree.

Of course I didn't see Loo Ree. I didn't even know Loo Ree was there when Marsha came to register the Saturday before school began. Marsha and her mother sat down across the cafeteria table from me as I reached for the registration material stacked in front of me in anticipation of the morning rush.

I said, "Good morning," to the nervous parent and smiled at the wide-eyed eager little girl who sat a seat removed from her mother.

"Wouldn't you like to move over closer?" I asked.

"No, thank you." Marsha sighed a sigh of resigned patience. "Loo Ree doesn't like to be crowded."

"Marsha!" Her mother shook a warning head.

"Oh?" I said inanely, trying to read mother's eyebrows and Marsha's eyes and the birth certificate in front of me all at the same time. "Well! So Marsha's six already. That's nice. We like them that old. They usually do better."

As casual as that was the advent of Loo Ree to my classroom. But it didn't stay casual for long. In fact, the second day, as the children lined up to come in at noon, I heard the spat of an open-handed blow and a heart-broken five-and-a-half-year-old wail.

"What's the matter, Stacy? What happened?" I knelt beside the pigtailed, blue-tinghamed little girl who was announcing to high heaven her great grief.

"She hit me!" An indignant tear-wet finger was jabbed at Marsha.

"Why, Marsha!" I applied Kleenex vigorously to Stacy's eyes and nose. "We don't hit each other. What's wrong?"

"She crowded in where Loo Ree was supposed to be."

"Loo Ree?" I searched the faces around me. After all, I had thirty-four faces to connect with thirty-four names, among which were Bob, Bobby, Bobette, Karen, Carol, Carolyn, and Carl.

"Yes." Marsha's arm curved out in a protective gesture to the empty air beside her. "Loo Ree's supposed to be by me."

"Even so, Marsha, you shouldn't have hit Stacy. In the first place, she's smaller than you and then hitting is no way to settle anything. Stacy didn't know Loo Ree was there, did you, Stacy?"

"No." Stacy edged away from Marsha warily.

"Did Loo Ree tell you to hit Stacy?" I asked, because it was so very real to Marsha.

Marsha shook her head and looked at her bent arm questioningly. Then shamed color swept up her face. "No, ma'am, and Loo Ree says I wasn't nice. I'm supposed to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Stacy."

"Well, that's the way polite children talk. Now, where's our straight lines so we can come in?"

As the boy line and the girl line clattered past me into the room, I heard Bob, skidding in his new shoes, mutter to Bobby, barefooted and ragged, "I don't see no Loo Ree. Do you?"

"School's funny," reminded Bobby.

"Oh," said Bob.

In the weeks that followed, Loo Ree did not fade out as other imaginary playmates have done in the past. Rather, Loo Ree became quite a fixture in our room. Bob was

taught, the hard way, to respect Marsha's good right fist and Loo Ree's existence when Marsha bloodied his nose all down the front of his Hopalong Cassidy shirt for saying Loo Ree was a lie. And poor little Bobby—he of the rusty, bare feet, the perpetually runny nose, the pinched blue look of chronic hunger and neglect—he sat all one morning staring at the chair where Marsha said Loo Ree was sitting. I saw the sunrise in his face when he suddenly leaned over and smoothed one grimy hand apparently down Loo Ree's hair and smiled shyly.

“Loo Ree,” he stated to the room and, for an astonishing minute, looked fed and cared-for and loved.

The children learned—by, I fear, punching, poking and many heated words from Marsha—not to sit down on Loo Ree in the chair by the corner table where crayons and paper were kept. They learned so well that once, when a visiting mother lowered her not inconsiderable bulk into the chair, the concerted horrified gasp from the room turned to relieved smiles only when Marsha finally nodded. Loo Ree had slipped out from under in time. So the children slowly accepted Loo Ree and out on the playground, they solemnly turned the jumping rope, chanting the jumping rhyme for Loo Ree and Loo Ree never missed.

Loo Ree was as real and immediate to them as Santa Claus or Roy Rogers and far less exotic than Batman or Tarzan. One Monday morning when the week's paper monitors were being appointed, the children even insisted that it was Loo Ree's turn to be monitor of row five. There were the makings of a small riot until Marsha stood up and said bluntly, “Loo Ree isn't any monitor. Loo Ree is—is something special.” And that settled that.

It was toward the end of the first six weeks of school that Marsha came up to my desk, her left hand trailing behind her, leading Loo Ree. She leaned on the corner of my desk.

“Loo Ree wants to know when we're going to start reading,” she said.

“Well, Loo Ree should know that we have been doing a lot of reading already. But if she means when will we start in our books, tell her that as soon as your group learns the word cards, we'll get our little red books.”

Marsha looked disturbed. “But, Teacher, I don't have to tell Loo Ree. You already did.”

“I’m sorry, Marsha. Remember, I can’t see Loo Ree. Is Loo Ree a boy or a girl?” Marsha inspected the air at her left thoughtfully.

“Loo Ree’s got long, gold hair. Well, not exactly hair. But it’s real gold like Mommie’s ring. Loo Ree’s got a long dress. Well, not exactly a dress—” Marsha stopped, baffled. “Loo Ree, which are you?” Her eyes focused about a foot away. Then she wrinkled her forehead. “Loo Ree says she isn’t either one, but we can say she’s a girl because she stays mostly with me.”

“Good,” I said, my head whirling in perfect figures of eight. “Well, then, as soon as we know our words, we’ll get our books. Now you go back to your seat and draw me picture of Loo Ree so I’ll know what she looks like.”

I forgot about the picture until just before lunch. Marsha came up with a piece of manila paper.

“Teacher, I couldn’t do it very good because Loo Ree doesn’t look the same all the time.”

I looked at her picture. There were wavering lines of yellow and orange and round little circles of blue, vaguely face-like in arrangement. “I suppose it would be hard,” I said. “What’s that other one?”

“Loo Ree drew it with her finger. She says you’ll have to look fast because your eyes will make it go away.” She gave the paper to me and went to her seat.

I glanced down, expecting some more of Marsha’s unformed figures, but instead, my eyes dazzled and contracted before a blinding flare of brightness. I blinked and caught the after-brightness behind my eyelids. All I had distinguished was a half-halo of brilliance and a feeling of—well, I almost said “awe.” I looked at the paper again and there was nothing on it. I rubbed my hand across it and felt a fading warmth against my palm.

It was the next day, after the dismissal bell had rung and the thirty-four restless occupants of my room exploded out the door and into the buses, that the next chapter of Loo Ree began.

I was trying to straighten out my front desk drawer into which I dump or cram anything and everything all day long, when I heard, “I want to learn to read.”

“Why of course you do,” I said automatically, not looking up. “It’s fun and that’s why we come to school. But you scoot now or the bus will go off without you.”

“I want to learn to read *now*.”

I sorted out six thumb tacks, a hair ribbon, a piece of bubble gum and three marbles before I looked up.

“It takes time—”

I stopped. No one was in the room. Nothing was there except the late sun slanting across the desks and showing up the usual crushed Crayolas on the floor around Bob’s desk. I rubbed one grimy hand across my forehead. Now wait a minute. I know I’ve been teaching for a quite a spell, but heavens to Hannah, not *that* long. Hearing voices is just about the last stop before the genteel vine-covered barred window. I took a deep breath and bent to my task again.

“Teacher, I must learn to read.”

My hands froze on the tangled mass of yo-yo strings and Red Cross buttons. The voice was unmistakable. If this was hallucination, then I’d gone too far to come back. I was afraid to raise my eyes. I spoke past my choked throat.

“Who are you?”

There was a soft, musical laugh. “I drew my picture for you. I’m Loo Ree.”

“Loo Ree?” My palsied fingers plucked at the matted strings. “Then if I look, I can’t see you?”

“No, probably not. Your eyes are limited, you know.” The voice had nothing childish about it, but it sounded very young—and very wise.

“Can Marsha see you?” Nothing like satisfying my curiosity, now that some of the shock was wearing off.

“Not really. She senses me and has made an image to satisfy her, but as she told you, I seem to change all the time. Her concept of me changes.”

“Why?” A thousand questions piled up behind my tongue, but part of my mind was still shrieking, hallucination! hallucination! Finally I managed, “Why are you here?”

“I must go to school and learn to read and I can’t take the time to pace myself to Marsha’s speed. Could you help me?”

“Why yes, I suppose so,” I replied absently, as I tried to decide if the voice was like the taste of sweet music or the sound of apple blossoms. “But you know the language—your vocabulary is so—”

“I can get all the oral coaching I need, without help,” said Loo Ree. “But I must attend school and learn from this level because it is very necessary that I know not only the words, but that I also get the”—she paused—“the human concept and background that goes with them.”

“But why do you have to learn to read? Why come to me? After all, to teach someone—or something—I can’t see! Who are you?”

Loo Ree’s voice was infinitely patient. “It doesn’t matter who I am and it isn’t just the mechanics of reading I need. But it is important to you and to your world that I learn what I must as soon as possible. It’s not only important, it’s vital.”

I quivered under the urgency of her voice, the voice that I seemed to feel more than actually hear. I pressed my hands down hard on the edge of my desk, then I picked up the sight-word cards for the first pre-primer. “Okay. Let’s go over these words first.”

So it was that my principal, little dried-up Mr. Grively, brisk, efficient and utterly at sea when it came to the primary age levels, bounced into my room and found me briskly flashing word cards and giving phonetic cues to a reading circle of empty first grade chairs. For a moment he seemed to visualize the vine-covered bars too, then he smiled into my embarrassed confusion.

“Preparing your lessons for tomorrow, I see!” He beamed. “How I wish all of my teachers were as conscientious!” And he bounced out again.

Loo Ree and I laughed together before we went back to our words, *come oh, Mother*—

Whatever Loo Ree was—it wasn’t stupid. Before I went home at four thirty, she had mastered the words for the three pre-primers and I left her vocalizing in the shadowy class room, the pages of the open little blue book, third of the series, fluttering to

*Mother said, “Come, come.
Come and help me work.”*

In the weeks that followed Loo Ree finished, either by herself or to me, every reader and supplementary reader in my book closet. Then she went on up through the grades, absorbing like a blotter, everything in all the available books. She reported to me each afternoon and I worked up quite a reputation among my fellow workers for staying at school after I was free to go home. They couldn't decide whether I was overconscientious, incompetent or crazy. In fact, I began to wonder, myself.

It was several weeks later that I suddenly noticed that all was not well with Marsha. I was conducting the last vocabulary review for Group I before giving them their new books when it dawned on me that Marsha wasn't in Group I anymore. I ran my finger down my reading group schedule and there was Marsha—in Group V! I counted rapidly backwards through the past days and realized with a shamed sinking feeling that Marsha hadn't progressed an inch beyond where she was when I first talked with Loo Ree. And I hadn't even noticed! That was the shameful part. So after Group I returned to their seats, clutching joyfully their new blue books, I sat and looked at Marsha. She was looking across the aisle at Stacy's new book, her face so forlorn that I could have cried.

Group V came up for reading after lunch and Marsha sat there apathetically with Bobby, sniffing with his perpetual cold, and 'Naldo, who 'don't got moch Eenglich, Teesher' and Clyde, whose parents most obviously had lied him a year older than he was to get him into school sooner. She parroted the first pre-primer words only after the others gleefully prompted her and she didn't even care when she called *Dick*, *Mother* and *Spot, Puff*.

I kept her at my desk when the others went to their seats. I put my arm around her and hugged her to me.

“What’s the matter, Marsha! You aren’t learning your words.”

She twisted out of my arm and looked blankly out of the window. “I don’t care.”

“But the children are all getting ahead of you. You don’t even have your red book yet.”

“I don’t care.”

“Oh, Marsha!” I reached for her but she avoided me. “You wanted to learn to reach so much. You and Loo Ree—”

Marsha’s mouth quivered, “Loo Ree—I don’t like Loo Ree anymore.”

“Why?”

“Just ‘cause. She doesn’t like me. She won’t play with me anymore.”

“I am sorry, Marsha, but that’s no reason for you not to learn your words.”

Marsha’s wet eyes blazed at me. “*You* showed Loo Ree how first! Loo Ree can read already. And you didn’t show me!”

Oh lordy, I thought, shame to me. And that Loo Ree. This is all her fault.

I took Marsha’s hands firmly to hold her attention.

“Listen, honey-one. You remember, you told the children that Loo Ree was someone special? Well, she is. She is so special that she learned to read much faster than the other children, but they’re trying and you’re not. Do you want to make Loo Ree ashamed of you?”

She hung her head. “I don’t care. She likes you better anyway.”

“Even if that were so, Marsha—and I don’t think it is—what about your mother and father? Were they pleased when Bob took home his book and you didn’t?”

“No.” Her voice was very small.

“Well, you know,” I said enthusiastically, “you could get your little red book tomorrow, if you knew your words, and then you could go as fast as you could, all by yourself, and maybe catch up with Bob and Stacy pretty soon. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Marsha’s face brightened, “Uh huh!”

“Of course you would. Here, let’s see how many more words you have to learn.”

Marsha sat down on the little chair and, taking a deep breath, read every flashed word in the first bunch of cards without error.

“Why, Marsha!” I cried, my aching conscience easing a little. “Of course you’re ready for the little red book.”

And after we rejoiced together and wrote her name neatly inside the cover, Marsha sailed proudly back to her seat, both hands clutching the thin, paperbacked little red book.

The next afternoon when Loo Ree came to me with a tool catalog she had found in the janitor’s supply closet, asking for explanation of things as foreign to me as the azimuth of the subdeclension if there is such a thing, I exploded.

“Foof to this whole deal!” I flung down a piece of chalk so hard that it bounced. “I think I’m just plain nuts, staying after school like this when I’m sagging with exhaustion, and for why? To talk to myself and wave my arms around at nothing. And it’s your fault I’m neglecting my kids—and poor Marsha! You should be ashamed of yourself, dropping the poor baby like that and breaking her heart! Well, goodbye, whatever you are, if you are anything! I’m going home!”

“But, teacher, please!”

“Please, nothing. End of the line. All out.” And I slammed the door so hard that the glass quivered. I drove home, defiantly running a boulevard stop at Argent Avenue and getting a ticket for it.

That night I got a telephone call from Marsha’s mother. She wanted to know if Marsha had got into trouble at school.

“Why no,” I said. “Marsha hasn’t been very happy but she’s one of my best behaved children. I’ve been a little worried about her reading but she got her book today. Why?”

“Well,” her mother hesitated. “You do know about Loo Ree, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do,” I replied, maybe a little heatedly.

“Well, a while back, Marsha said Loo Ree was too busy to play with her much anymore. I was relieved, because well—” She laughed awkwardly. “Anyway, she hardly ever mentioned her again, except when she was very unhappy, but tonight she told me Loo Ree was back and Marsha’s spent the whole evening reading to her out of her new book.” Again the embarrassed laugh. “You’d almost swear Loo Ree was prompting her. Everything’s been all right here at home, so I wondered if at school—.”

“Why no, Mrs. Kendall. Marsha’s doing fine now.”

After some more usual teacher-parent chitchat, I hung up.

I don’t know whether it was my conscience or Loo Ree that sat heavy on my chest all night and read choice selections from *A Survey of Hiroshima*, *Dante’s Divine Comedy* and *Ostermeir’s Morbid Pathology*, all complete with technicolor illustrations. Anyway, next afternoon I was sitting behind my desk again, propping my heavy head up on one hand while Loo Ree read from *The Koran* to me. She had unearthed it in a pile of books contributed to the last library drive at school.

So time went on and Marsha didn't mention Loo Ree again. I could tell she was still unhappy and felt left out and she too often moped by herself on the playground instead of leading the games as she used to. I was worried about her but I couldn't set my mind to her problem while the lessons with Loo Ree went on and on, sandwiched between Christmas program rehearsals, a combination that left me dragged out and practically comatose when the week before Christmas vacations arrived.

Loo Ree was reading *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and I was thanking heaven that there was a glossary of sea life terms in the back of the book. I was supporting my weary head as usual and I let the sound of her voice flow over me like a shadowy river and must have dozed because my cheek slipped from my hand and I caught myself just in time to keep my head from thumping on the desk.

And there was Loo Ree, standing by me, holding the place with her finger closed inside her book. I must have a beautiful imagination because she was—I have no words for her beauty. Even if I tried, I could only compare her to what I have experienced—and she was way outside any of my experiences, but I can remember her eyes—

Loo Ree smiled. "I have learned to read."

I gaped at her, still sluggish with the cumulative weariness that teachers everywhere will understand.

Loo Ree spoke again. "I've finished, teacher. I've learned what I had to learn."

I should have skipped on the high hills and leaped from leaf blade to leaf blade with delight and relief but instead, my heart lurched and slowed with dismay.

"You're finished? How come? I mean, how do you know?"

"I just know." Loo Ree put the book down gently, sliding her finger out reluctantly, it seemed to me. "It would be useless to try to thank you for the help you have given me. There's no way to repay you and you will never know how far your influence will be felt."

I smiled ruefully. "That's nothing new to a teacher. Especially a first grade teacher. We're used to it."

"Then it's goodbye." Loo Ree began to fade and pale away.

"Wait!" I stood up, holding tight to my desk. My weariness set tears in my eyes and thickened my voice. "All my life I'll think I was crazy these past few months. I'll wonder and wonder what you are and why you are, if you don't—it seems to me the

least you can do is tell me a little bit. Tell me something so I'll be able to justify to myself all this time I've spent on you and the shameful way I have neglected my children. You can't just say goodbye and let it go at that." I was sobbing, tears trailing down my face and smearing the bottoms of my glasses.

Loo Ree hesitated and then flooded back brighter.

"It's so hard to explain—"

"Oh, foof!" I cried defiantly, taking off my glasses and smearing the tears across both lenses with a tattered Kleenex. "So I'm a dope, a moron! If I can explain protective coloration to my six-year-olds and the interdependence of man and animals, you can tell me something of what the score is!" I scrubbed the back of my hand across my blurry eyes. "If you have to, start out 'Once upon a time.'" I sat down—hard.

Loo Ree smiled and sat down, too. "Don't cry, teacher. Teachers aren't supposed to have tears."

"I know it," I sniffed. "A little less than human—that's us."

"A little more than human, sometimes." Loo Ree corrected gently. "Well then, you must understand that I'll have to simplify. You will have to dress the bare bones of the explanation according to your capabilities.

"Once upon a time there was a classroom. Oh, cosmic in size, but so like yours that you would smile in recognition if you could see it all. And somewhere in the classroom something was wrong. Not the whispering and murmuring—that's usual. Not the pinching and poking and tattling that goes on until you get so you don't even hear it."

I nodded. How well I knew.

"It wasn't even the sudden blow across the aisle or the unexpected wrestling match in the back of the room. That happens often, too. But something else was wrong. It was an undercurrent, a stealthy, sly sort of thing that has to be caught early or it disrupts the whole classroom and tarnishes the children with a darkness that will never quite rub off.

"The teacher could feel it—as all good teachers can—and she spoke to the principal. He, being a good principal, immediately saw the urgency of the matter and also saw that it was beyond him, so he called in an Expert."

"You?" I asked, feeling quite bright because I had followed the analogy so far.

Loo Ree smiled. "Well, I'm part of the Expert." She sobered. "When the Expert received the call, he was so alarmed by the very nature of the difficulty that he rushed in with a group of investigators to find where the trouble lay." Loo Ree paused. "Here I'll have to stretch my analogy a little.

"It so happened that the investigators were from another country. They didn't know the language of the school or the social system that set up the school—only insofar as its resultant structure was concerned. And there was no time for briefing the investigators or teaching them the basics of the classroom. Time was too short because if this influence could not be changed, the entire classroom would have to be expelled—for the good of the whole school. So it had to be on-the-job training. So—"

Loo Ree turned out her hands and shrugged.

"Gee!" I let out my breath with the word and surreptitiously wiped my wet palms against my skirt. "Then you're one of them, finding out about our world."

"Yes," Loo Ree replied. "And we believe now that the trouble is that the balance between two opposing influences has been upset and, unless we can restore the balance—catastrophe."

"The Atom Bomb!" I breathed. "The principal must have found radioactivity in our atmosphere—" I gleaned wildly from my science fiction.

"Atom bomb?" Loo Ree looked puzzled. "No. Oh, no, not the atom bomb. It is much more important than that. Your world really ought to get over being so scared of loud noises and sudden death. If you would all set your minds to some of the more important things in your life, you wouldn't have such loud noises and so many sudden deaths to fear."

"But the hydrogen bomb—"

"At the risk of being trite," smiled Loo Ree, "there are fates worse than death. It's not so important how you die or how many die with you. Our group is much more concerned with how you live and how many live as you do. You should be more concerned with living. I think you are, individually, because I have seen you, in your classroom, distressed by a symptom of this unbalance. Or rather, by symptoms of symptoms of the unbalance.

"Anyway, in the course of my assignment, I followed Marsha to you. Of course the mere mechanical learning to read was no problem, but I needed to learn all the extra,

unwritten things in the use of a language that give it its meat and motive power in society.

“Besides that, you know that school is usually the first experience of a child outside the home environment. His first school years are a large factor in determining his adjustment to society. So I have been observing, first hand, the classroom procedure, the methods—”

“You’ve been observing!” I gasped. “Oh lordy, why didn’t you warn me?”

“The results would have been invalid if I had,” smiled Loo Ree.

“But the times I’ve hollered at them—that I’ve lost my temper—that I’ve spanked—that I’ve fallen so short”

“Yes, and the times you’ve comforted and wiped noses and answered questions and tied hair ribbons and fed the hungry wonder in their eyes.

“However, I am ready to submit my data now. We might be able to start the turning of the balance because of what I have learned from you. You’d better pray, as I do, that we can get started before the unbalance becomes irreversible. If that happens—” Loo Ree shivered and stood up. “So there it is, teacher and I must go now.”

“But wait. What shall I do about Marsha? You know what has been happening to her. What can I do to help her? I know that she’s awfully small compared to a world or a cosmos, but she is lost and unhappy—”

“A child *is* a cosmos and a world,” said Loo Ree. “But you have handled such problems before and you don’t really need my help. The trouble would have arisen even if I hadn’t come. She just happened to choose me to express her difficulty. You can handle it all right.

“Good-bye, teacher.”

“I’m glad you came to me,” I said humbly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said Loo Ree.

She was suddenly a tall pillar of light in the dusky room. As natural as breathing, I slid to my knees and bowed my head above my clasped hands. I felt Loo Ree’s hand briefly and warmly on my head and when I looked up, there was nothing in the room but the long, long shadows and me.

The next morning, I sat at my desk, feeling so empty and finished inside that it seemed impossible to go on. Loo Ree had been more of my life than I had known. All this time she had been giving more to me than I to her. Now I felt as lost and weak as a convalescent trying to walk alone after months in bed.

The children felt my abstraction and, stimulated by the nearness of the holidays, got away with murder all morning. Just before recess the whole situation erupted. Marsha suddenly threw herself across the aisle at Stacy and Bob who had been teasing her. She hit Stacy over the head with a jigsaw puzzle, then she dumped her brand-new box of thirty-six Crayolas over Bob's astonished head and jumped up and down on the resultant mess, screaming at the top of her voice.

Awed by the size and scope of the demonstration, the rest of the class sat rigid in their seats. A red Crayola projected from the back of the neck of Bob's T-shirt and Stacy, too astonished to cry, sat looking down at a lap full of jigsaw pieces.

I gathered up the shrieking, board-stiff Marsha and dismissed the class, apprehensive row by apprehensive row, then I sat down on the little green bench and doubled Marsha forcibly to a sitting position on my lap. I rocked her rebellious head against my sweatered shoulder until her screams became sobs and her flailing feet drooped laxly against my skirt. I pressed her head closer and bent my cheek to her hair.

“There, there, Marsha. There, there.” I rocked back and forth. “What’s the matter, honey-one, what’s the matter?”

Her sobs were hiccoughy gasps now. “Nobody likes me. Everybody’s mean. I hate everybody.” Her voice rose to a wail.

“No, you don’t, Marsha. You don’t hate anybody. Is it about Loo Ree?” Her sobs cut off abruptly. Then she was writhing in my arms again, her voice rising hysterically.

“Marsha!” I shook her, with no effect, so I turned her over briskly and spatted her good and hard a couple of times across her thighs just below her brief skirts, then turned her back into my arms.

She burrowed into my shoulder, her two arms hugging one of mine tight.

“Loo Ree’s gone away,” she sobbed.

“I know,” I said, and one of my tears fell on her tumbled hair.

“She was my friend, too. I feel bad, too.”

Marsha knuckled her eyes with one hand.

“She was my most special friend, and she went away.”

“She had to go,” I soothed. “She was so special she couldn’t stay.”

“But I didn’t want her to go,” cried Marsha.

“Neither did I,” I patted her back.

“She told me lotsa stories.” Marsha struggled to a sitting position. “She showed me pretty things. She loved me.”

“Yes, she loved us. And just think, we can remember her all our lives. When you grow up, you can tell your children all about her.”

“I’ll tell them all about her,” sighed Marsha, leaning against me and shutting her eyes. “When I grow up.”

“When you grow up,” I whispered, looking past her head and through the schoolroom wall out into the troubled world. “When you grow up.”

I hugged her head to me tight and listened and listened for the creak of a changing balance wondering, with a catch in my heart for all the Marshas and Bobs and their growing up—Which way is it tipping?