

Title: Caroline Meets the Lion
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Word Count: 58,000

Dedication: To C.S. Lewis, although he has passed on through the heather into the deeper parts of heaven, who through his brilliance and genius brought me to not only meet, but to know, the Lion.

Forward: C.S. Lewis has touched the hearts of millions. Through his fiction, essays, books, lectures, etc. to this day he continues to carry forth brilliant insights into the deeper meaning of our existence and the atoning powers of Christ.

As I read of Narnia I long for more face to face dialogue between Aslan and the children – the Lion of all Lions teaching Lucy and the other children sparkling, divine, and eternal truths.

In this novel Caroline and a lion become the truest of friends, the lion teaching Caroline many important lessons about life and death, love, the meaning of life, etc. Many of the things the lion tells Caroline are the philosophies and ideas of C.S. Lewis, Soren Kierkegaard, and other great Christian minds.

So, let me introduce you to Caroline – a little girl who, like us all, desperately needs the Lion.

Chapter 1

As God does ... if you were to peer down from the bluest sky, past the prettiest clouds, through the tall leafy branches of a certain mulberry tree – and into a particular hospital window – you’d see Caroline Weathersby.

Caroline’s mother, June and her father, Harold, came to visit often.

From the redness of her mother’s eyes, Caroline’s mother looked as if she’d been crying every day for her entire life – although she never let Caroline see her crying. And Caroline’s father looked like he hadn’t slept in weeks from his messy clothes and unshaven face – and the redness in his eyes, too. Caroline’s little sister Maggie, barely three years old, never looked afraid. But on visits, when she looked at her mother’s red eyes she sucked her thumb which she never did at home and held her blanket tightly.

As already mentioned, outside Caroline’s window grew a magnificent mulberry tree. The old tree gave Caroline much joy. Snugly tucked in her hospital bed, glancing up from the pages of her books, Caroline would look out into the tree. With deep fall coming on the giant tree had thousands of red and golden leaves. Often, pretty breasted songbirds perched on the branches, and Caroline would watch them through the window.

And being somewhat of a mischievous child, and although Caroline was not to do this, after the nurses had made their rounds, Caroline would climb out of bed, lift open the window, and breath in the fresh-scented mulberry air.

It smelled so wonderful before mixing with the sterile hospital air in her room. And most exciting of all, the mulberry smell reminded Caroline of the mulberry trees in her own backyard. As the sweet smell entered her nose, colorful and gleeful memories filled Caroline’s mind of days where she once ran and played freely outside her home in the country. But now, all that Caroline could do was to lean on the window sill and look about the hospital yards and gardens below.

But in life, as the forces in the natural world move us along to new adventures, (and maybe that was what God was up to as he peered through the branches of the Mulberry tree into Caroline’s window) as Caroline leaned against the sill enjoying a setting sun through the open window before bedtime (the nurses having made their rounds) Caroline heard a voice coming from inside the red and golden leaves of the mulberry tree.

“A message. Yes, a message. That is why I’m here,” squawked a funny sounding voice.

Her heart racing, Caroline looked quickly into the leaves in the direction of the voice.

“Yes, that is what I am here for,” squawked the voice again.

“Who said that?” asked Caroline looking away from the branches and down to the ground.

But no person stood below on the grassy patch under the mulberry tree.

“Oh bother. Over here,” came the squawky voice growing louder as something neared rustling through the leaves.

Caroline’s head turned quickly. In a great surprise, a blackbird hopped near her. Caroline jumped back frightened. The black glossy saucers of the blackbird’s eyes fixed on Caroline. The blackbird cocked his head.

“He’s looking right at me,” whispered Caroline in the fresh-scented mulberry air.

Then knowing that blackbirds do not speak Caroline looked back to the ground.

“Who’s down there? Who’s speaking?” called out Caroline thinking someone was playing a trick on her and hiding behind the trunk of the tree.

“I guess that’d be me. I’m speaking to you,” said the blackbird ruffling his feathers.

Caroline looked back at the blackbird, her eyes open even wider in surprise. She gulped hard enough she could have swallowed her tongue.

“I’m not trying to trick you. Oh my, I wouldn’t do a thing like that. I’m just a shy blackbird. I’ve never brought someone a message before, and from someone so important.”

“I must be losing my mind,” whispered Caroline staring open-mouthed at the blackbird.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” said the silky blackbird suddenly flapping his wings and landing on the window sill.

At the blackbird’s unexpected closeness Caroline lurched back suddenly.

“You ... You... have a message – a message for me?” asked Caroline in a whisper stepping back even farther into her hospital room.

“It’s a simple message ... Tonight you will dream a wonderful dream.”

“A dream?”

“A wonderful dream. Well, not so much a dream, but it will seem like a dream to you.”

“How do you know I will have a dream?” asked Caroline now both afraid and curious.

“I don’t know exactly come to think of it,” said the blackbird scratching his head with the tip of his wing.

“I’m such a birdbrain. But that is my message ... You will have a dream, a very important and special dream tonight and ...”

“How can you talk?” asked Caroline cutting off the bird midsentence.

“I’ve always been able to talk – well after my mother taught me I suppose.”

“How do you know I will have this dream? Who told you?”

“**Ra’el – the great lion,**” said the blackbird lifting his head nobly in a proud gesture.

“Who’s that?” asked Caroline stepping a little towards the bird on the window sill.

“**Well, I’ll be. You don’t know Greatest Lion of All Lions that Ever Were?**”

“No. I’ve never heard of him before.”

“Well, he sent me to your world. You are going to meet his son and daughter tonight – in what will seem a dream to you, but it will be real.”

“What is in that small leather bag?” asked Caroline having first noticed the bag when the blackbird landed on the window sill.

The blackbird look down his slender leg at the bag.

“Oh my, I nearly forgot. This is important too,” said the blackbird releasing his claw and grasp on a small leather bag.

Caroline watched as the blackbird loosened the draw string with his beak.

“When I open this, you may want to squint a little.”

Curious, Caroline stepped forward to the window sill to look in the bag.

“I’m to pour this all over you.”

“What is it?” asked Caroline intrigued, but somewhat afraid.

“Starlight – starlight from one of the brightest stars ... one of the greatest and most favorite stars of Greatest Lion of All Lions that Ever Were.”

By now the blackbird had opened the bag and Caroline could see a very bright light emitting from the small opening. Then, without asking for her permission, the blackbird shot into the air above Caroline and poured the starlight on her head. Alive and magically, the light of many colors swirled down and all around Caroline. The starlight tickled Caroline as it moved around touching her skin. Caroline let out a laugh, and then another laugh, and another the starlight felt so good.

“Now you will dream this wonderful dream. I can’t believe I almost forgot the starlight. I am such a birdbrain.”

Caroline could not speak she felt so good. All she could do was smile at the blackbird.

“I must be off,” said the blackbird returning Caroline’s smile.

With that the blackbird turned on the window sill and leapt into the air. Caroline watched the blackbird flutter away taking flight into the fading light of the setting sun.

Chapter 2

Finding herself laying in a grassy patch under a grove of trees, Caroline raised her elbow to block the sun streaming through the green leafy branches overhead. She squinted into the brightness and then surveyed her new surroundings.

Where am I, she wondered in astonishment standing and touch the trunk of a tree.

“And what I am wearing?” she asked aloud into the warm air of the place.

Looking down she could see the blue silkiness of a nicely cut dress that fit her perfectly. She smoothed out the wrinkles from laying in the grass and admired the fabric with its yellow daffodils and colorful hyacinth prints. She remembered going to bed in her hospital gray night gown what she assumed was the night before.

This is strange indeed, she thought looking up into leafy branches overhead. Her eyes caught a cluster of some type of fruit she had never seen before hanging down from the branches just out of her reach.

Stepping out from under the trees, Caroline looked up at the blue sky and over at long stretches of field grass moving in the breeze. At the edges thorny brambles hemmed in the fields. Looking at the vines of the bramble reminded Caroline of the blackberry bushes in her mother’s garden, and she felt a pang of homesickness.

Turning, Caroline could hear a brook behind her. Looking through the trees, she could see the brook rippling ever so slightly over polished stones. In places the brook collected in small pools. The water rested there for a time, then swirled into the slow current to travel to yonder portions. Through the trees, Caroline took special notice how the sun glistened on the watery surfaces.

This is a beautiful place, she thought. But where am I?

Caroline noticed that the air was quite warm. There was also a sweetness to it – like when you peel an orange or sniff a glass of lemonade before taking a drink. Caroline also noticed the scent of honeysuckle nearby. She spotted the white flowers mixed with yellow petals of rockrose and thorny broom growing through the lush green vines. The honeysuckle reminded Caroline of her grandmother’s house, and the homesick feeling returned. At grandmother’s house the honeysuckle grew wild over the greying fence in the backyard where Caroline would play on holidays with her sister Maggie.

There’s only one explanation, thought Caroline. The blackbird was right.

Caroline came through the olive trees to the brook. Listening in above the babbling of the water over polished stones, starlings and warblers and goldcrest songbirds chirped in the trees. Caroline stopped and stared up to spot the birds.

Then while looking up she heard someone speak.

“You’re a strange creature.”

Caroline gave a fluttering start and turned to look behind her.

“Hello there.”

Afraid, Caroline stared down into the eyes of the creature. Unable to speak, Caroline very unbravely backed away. Then looking away from the small furry creature, she broke into a run. She came quickly through the

tall grass to the grove. Breathing heavy she hid herself behind a tree. But being bigger than the trunk, this did not work well. So she shut her eyes tightly and held in her breath.

“What’s the matter?” asked the creature coming over.

“You’re ... you’re ... a lion,” said Caroline not looking, her eyes clenched closed.

Several moments going by, and not hearing anything, Caroline peaked around the tree. She spotted the lion several trees over. Fearful, she readied herself to dart right or left to make her escape. But looking closer she felt less fearful and remembered the dream and the blackbird.

He’s a lion cub, thought Caroline now gathering her wits about her. And he does seem quite harmless.

The lion cub seemed to have forgotten about Caroline. He played a short distance away enjoying the sunshine. A butterfly came near him. The lion cub sat back on his hind legs. He clumsily swatted at a butterfly but missed. Then the lion cub came over to lap in the brook, his paws wet as he stood on the stones.

Overhead, a breeze rustled the leaves. Caroline looked up into the tree. She watched the leaves flitting about in gleaming greens with the sunlight upon them. Then turning, she could see the lion cub approaching. Caroline did her best to hide behind the tree again. She watched the lion cub as he neared. He sniffed the air stopping short of the tree where Caroline hid. Caroline tensed her body tightly, expecting a bite.

“You know, I can see you right?” said the lion cub as he sat in the grass looking up at the parts of Caroline not hidden by the slender trunk.

Caroline did not speak. She had seen lions up close before, but at the zoo behind steel and glass.

“I’m friendly.”

“Really? You’re friendly?”

“Yes. You can come out. I won’t hurt you.”

“Promise?” asked Caroline slowly coming out from behind the tree.

“Yes, I promise,” laughed the lion.

“I’m only dreaming anyway. This is all a dream ... this is just a dream ... only a dream,” repeated Caroline in whispers.

Caroline came over to the lion cub. Standing by him, the lion cub appeared small. Caroline could see that he had dark eyes, black as night. No mane yet. His fur sagged as if he needed to grow into it – like when your mother buys clothes a size or two too big. His fur was tan with white markings. It looked soft and enjoyable to touch. His ears were fuzzy and soft looking too. Caroline now felt embarrassed that she had been afraid.

This lion cub looked just like other lions Caroline had seen at the zoo or in books, except for one feature. She tried hard not to stare at this part of the lion. She very much wanted to ask him about it. But Caroline decided it would be best to mind her manners and be polite. To avoid not looking at this part of the lion, Caroline stared into his dark, watery eyes.

“Why do say this is a dream?” asked the lion cub.

“A blackbird landed on my window sill before I went to bed last night. He told me I would have this dream.”

“You’re not dreaming. You’re standing. You don’t sleep when you stand and you need to be sleeping to dream.”

“I’m awake in the dream. The dream is happening now,” said Caroline.

The lion cub gave Caroline a look as if he did not understand. Then all of a sudden Caroline darted behind a tree.

“What’s wrong now? Why are you hiding again?” asked the lion cub looking at Caroline behind the tree.

“Is your father or mother nearby? They are the ones who will eat me,” stated Caroline her voice shaky.

The lion cub laughed. He laughed so hard that he rolled on his back in the grass.

“What are you laughing at?” asked Caroline stepping out a little from behind the tree but still clutching the trunk. “I do not like to be made fun of,” she stamped madly. “What are you laughing at? I don’t like to be laughed at.”

“Don’t be a silly animal.”

“I’m not an animal. I’m a human,” said Caroline matter-of-factly stamping her foot and looking very serious at the lion cub from behind the tree. “And in my world lions would eat me in half a shake of their tail.”

“What’s a human?” asked the lion cub with a curious look.

“A human is a human. Like me. And how do you talk lion?”

“With my mouth,” said the lion with shining innocent eyes.

“I mean how do you talk? Lions do not talk.”

“Yes lions talk. I open my mouth and words come out. How do you talk?”

Feeling dizzy and confused, Caroline sat on a rock to collect her thoughts. The fear of the lion cub, and more importantly his mother or father, had left her. She could see that the lion cub was friendly. Although Caroline would never admit it to the lion cub, she wanted to pull him onto her lap and hold him and pet his soft fur – like she did to her own cat Chester. Caroline also imagined herself rolling the lion cub onto his back and stroking his belly – which Chester enjoyed a great deal.

“So you’re a human. You’re a strange sort of a creature,” said the lion cub examining Caroline from head to toes.

“I’m not a creature.”

“Well, I’ve never seen an animal like you before.”

“An animal? I’m not an animal.”

“You stand on two legs and you have no fur nor feathers. You look quite naked.”

“Naked? I’m wearing a dress.”

“Did someone pluck your feathers or shave your fur?”

“No. I’m a girl. I’m supposed to be this way.”

“You must be some sort of ostrich. Your legs look like ostrich legs.”

“What? I am not an ostrich,” huffed Caroline folding her arms over her chest and stamping her foot again.

“If you had a bill and feathers, and were more round in the middle, you could be an ostrich,” said the lion cub sizing up Caroline.

“I am not an ostrich. I’m a girl.”

“What’s a girl?”

“Oh my,” huffed Caroline again blowing her hair up over her forehead.

“You are rather tall.”

“I’m not tall. I’m a twelve year old girl. I am of normal height for my age.”

Tired of the lion’s questions, Caroline sat back on a stone under the tree.

“Here, let me bite you.”

“Bite me?” shrieked Caroline pulling back from the lion cub. “I knew this would happen. You’ve tricked me.”

“No ... Like when you bite yourself to know if you are dreaming.”

“You mean pinch yourself to know if you are dreaming.”

“I don’t know what pinch is?”

“I guess not. You don’t have fingers and thumbs, only paws with claws.”

The lion cub gave Caroline a glance as if he did not understand finger and thumbs.

“Do you have a name human girl?”

The lion cub’s question made Caroline laugh.

“Yes, my name is Caroline.”

“And I believe that you are a friendly lion,” said Caroline listening to the brook.

The sound of water made Caroline thirsty.

“Lion, may I drink from that brook?”

“Yes,” said the lion cub leaping off a stone into the grass.

Caroline followed the lion cub, his tail cutting a path through the tall grass. Coming to the bank the lion cub crouched and lapped up the water with his tongue. Caroline knelt and cupped the cool delicious water into her mouth.

“I am glad we are friends now,” said the lion cub finishing his drink with his lathery tongue.

“Me too,” smiled Caroline wiping the sweet water from her chin.

Chapter 3

Caroline woke in the morning light of the new day. She turned under the covers in her hospital bed to face the window. Bright yellow sunlight pierced through the glass. She noticed how the sunbeams shone on the tile floor in the angles and shapes of the window panes. Then looking out through the window, in the sun with morning dew on them, the leafy branches of the mulberry tree looked fresh and alive.

“Good morning,” said Caroline’s mother.

“Oh, good morning. How long have you been there?” asked Caroline rubbing her eyes and looking over at her mother seated at her bedside.

“Not long,” smiled Caroline’s mother.

Caroline took notice how lovely her mother looked as she sat in the morning light, the sunlight glinting on her blonde hair.

Caroline sat up in bed. She squinted to look closely at her mother’s eyes. They were red from crying and Caroline assumed that her mother had cried on her way to the hospital or sometime before Caroline had woke.

“How do you feel today, darling?” asked Caroline’s mother, now standing over the bed and touching Caroline’s shoulder.

“Good,” said Caroline, looking up at her mother. “How’s Chester?”

“He’s fine. He misses you.”

“I do miss home and Chester and my bed and my clothes and my yard and my friends and my teacher and my – ...”

“I understand,” interrupted Caroline’s mother reaching for her daughter’s hand. “Would you care for breakfast?”

“Yes, I’m quite hungry.”

“Any sweet dreams?”

“Oh yes,” said Caroline sitting up further in bed remembering the dream of the prior night.

“Do tell. I love sweet dreams.”

“I was in a different place, and there was a lion, well a lion cub – but he had wings. I thought he was going to eat me; or at least take me to his parents who would eat me. But he turned out to be a kind lion. Actually a very unusual lion cub. He was the son of the Greatest Lion of all the Great Lions. I was wearing the most beautiful dress. And I had my hair back, mommy. I had my hair back. It was long and beautiful and soft to touch – just like I remember. I do miss my hair.

“That is quite the dream.”

“It was a wonderful dream. I had my long brown hair back and I didn’t feel sick.”

“I’m glad, dear,” said Caroline’s mother stroking Caroline’s shoulder again.

“Did the lion have a name like Leo or Barnaby?”

“He didn’t tell me his name. I didn’t think to ask.”

“What a strange dream you had my bright shining star,” smiled Caroline’s mother.

“The strangest thing is that the night I had the dream a blackbird hopped onto the window sill and ...”

“And what, dear?”

“Oh never mind. It wasn’t real ... I mean, it wasn’t important.”

“Shall I call the nurse for some breakfast?”

“Yes, that would be nice,” said Caroline watching her mother leave the room.

Caroline looked over at the window sill. She imagined the blackbird speaking to her the night before. She hoped that he would return again that night and tell her about another dream where she would meet the lion again.

Chapter 4

That day in the hospital playroom, Caroline sat at the arts and craft table drawing with the other children. It was a delightfully large room with tall windows. Color paintings of clowns and unicorns and jungle animals hung on the walls. However, besides the paintings everything else about the room was white, sterile, and boring. Some children stood at the tall windows for long periods of time. They stared outside below at the squirrels climbing in the trees and the healthy children flying kites on the green lawn between the tall shrubs in the city park.

In her daydreamy mind, Caroline thought if one were standing on the green lawns outside looking up in the playroom windows, that the sick children looking out must appear as prisoners, the windows panes looking like prison bars. Then deeper in her imagination, as she drew a unicorn, she planned a prison break. First, the children would tie up the nurses and the orderly Mr. Billingsley. Dr. Snodgrass, the smartest of the adults, would need to be tied up first and locked in the janitorial closet. Then Caroline would lead the children outside. They would play freely on the grass chasing the squirrels and climb the mulberry tree like children are supposed to do.

Finishing the point of the unicorn's horn in her drawing, Caroline looked across the table at the other children not speaking. Bored, they busied themselves with crayons and paint brushes and paper mache. Ralph carefully cut strips of newspaper. With a paint brush Lucy applied the paper mache to the strips. With the wet strips of newspapers Sam covered a blue balloon and pushed out the creases.

"Whatcha drawing?" asked a young girl wandering over to Caroline dragging her blanket across the sterile floor that smelled of disinfectant.

The young girl promptly put her thumb in her mouth after asking Caroline her question.

"What do you think it is?" asked Caroline holding up her drawing.

"A lion cub in a forest," said the little girl, first making a popping sound as she removed her wet thumb from her mouth.

"Very good," said Caroline. "What is your name?"

"Margaret."

"Margaret, you have very pretty hair."

"We'll see how long she keeps it," said a bald boy at the opposite end of the table.

"Don't be so cross," shot back Caroline.

"Just setting out the facts. She'll look like the rest of us before too long."

"Don't listen to him," said Caroline turning to Margaret.

"Aw right," said the little girl, tears coming to her eyes.

"What's the matter?" asked Caroline.

"I don't want to lose my hair," said the little girl pouting.

"You may not, it's the medicine they give us. It may or may not make your hair fall out."

"Okay."

"Do you want to see something funny?"

"Yes," said the little girl, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Caroline walked over to a table with arts and craft supplies scattered over it and grabbed a magic marker.

“Follow me,” said Caroline crossing the room.

The little girl followed Caroline across the room dragging her blanket on the sterile floor. Coming to an orderly sleeping in a chair Caroline turned to the little girl.

“You must be very quiet,” whispered Caroline. “Do not laugh. We mustn’t wake him.”

The little girl nodded and then stuck her thumb back into her mouth. Caroline quietly slid a chair behind the orderly and climbed on top. The bald orderly, dressed in his spotlessly clean white pants and shirt, snored a little and then settle back into his sleep. With each breath, his fat round middle rose and fell. Caroline removed the cap from the magic marker and put it in her mouth. She gently drew a small circle on the man’s bald head with a dot in the middle. Then several inches apart she drew another circle with a dot in the middle. Next she drew a nose and a mouth with a tongue sticking out. Underneath the funny face she gently wrote “Dr. Snodgrass.”

Caroline turned on the chair. She looked down to catch the reaction of the little girl. As their eyes met, the little girl unable to contain her silliness any longer, blurted out a laugh. The joyful laugh woke the orderly. Waking abruptly he pushed back in his chair, knocking Caroline off her chair tumbling her to the floor.

“What in the dickens?” asked the sleepy orderly turning to face Caroline sprawled out. “What bit of mischief are you up to?”

“Oh nothing.”

Margaret laughed again. The orderly shot Caroline a glance.

“Something is going on here that ain’t right,” said the orderly.

“Do you see anything wrong?” asked Caroline standing up and brushing herself off.

“No, not yet – at least,” said the orderly turning every which way looking at the children gathered about him laughing.

“Well if you don’t see anything wrong, nothing must be wrong,” said Caroline returning to her seat at the arts and craft table to draw lions and other animals pouring forth from an opening in the blue sky for a feast in the desert.

The little girl – for better or worse – was now Caroline’s constant companion. She came over and sat at the table and admired Caroline drawing. It had been a while since the little girl had laughed, and it still felt good on her insides.

Tired from her medicine, Margaret was soon asleep next to Caroline as Caroline drew picture after picture, enough to fill a book. Lost in her art and flow of creativity from her many muses, Caroline continued to draw not noticing the passing of the afternoon. Then, sensing the presence of someone behind her, Caroline turned. She looked up at the freckled-face Nicholas holding a magic marker. The ghostly muses vanished into the thin air. A silly smiled flashed across Nicholas’ devious face.

“Will you draw a face on the back of my head too?”

“Sure. Turn around and kneel down. Happy or sad?” asked Caroline, the magic marker cap making a popping sound.

“Crazy. Draw a crazy face.”

Nicholas turned and knelt on the ground.

Caroline got to work on the bare skin of his bald head. After some time, and going through many colorful magic markers, Caroline had finished her masterpiece on the boy's bald head.

"What is it? What is it?" asked Nicholas excited and lowering his head for the other children to see.

"Looks like the face of an angry bear crossed with a dragon of sorts," said Mitch.

"Draw on me ... No, draw on me ... Please, draw on me," came the chorus of shouts from the children.

"I will. Just keep an eye out for nurses and all be quiet so the orderly will stay asleep."

On the backs of many heads, Caroline the master artiste drew ogres and princess and butterflies and demons. Then while drawing a clown, the door to the playroom flung open. The orderly woke up with a jolt. Seeing Dr. Snodgrass enter the room, the orderly just about fell off his chair again. Standing quickly, the orderly greeted the doctor. In his white lab coat and holding his clipboard Dr. Snodgrass acknowledged the round bald orderly with a stern but polite harrumph. Then the doctor moved over to the arts and crafts tables.

"Hello children," said Dr. Snodgrass looking up from his clipboard.

A few faint "hellos" ascended up to the tall doctor.

"Why all glum faces children? You look like you've just been caught with your hands in the cookie jar," joked the doctor.

"Oh nothing," said the children returning quickly to their art projects now snickering.

Dr. Snodgrass resumed checking his clipboard as he wandered around the room. Then stopping dead in his tracks, he looked down at the back of Edmund's bald head.

"What on earth?" asked Dr. Snodgrass. "Edmund, what awful thing is that on the back of your head?"

"It was all Caroline's idea. She made me do it," accused Edmund pointing in Caroline's direction.

"No it wasn't," said Caroline upset at Edmund's lie, then standing to expose him. "He asked me to do it."

"What is the meaning of this Mr. Billsley?"

"I'm sorry sir. I must have dozed..."

Then looking at the side of the orderly's head Dr. Snodgrass's eyes widened.

"Turn around Billsley."

Red in the face, Mr. Billsley turned not knowing the face of a silly man labeled Dr. Snodgrass was written on the back of his head.

"There's a face on the back of your head," said Dr. Snodgrass. "And my name's written under it. Is that what I look like?"

Mr. Billsley reached up desperately to feel his head.

"No sir ..."

Silent, and a little afraid, the children watched the doctor tippy toed around the orderly examining Mr. Billsley's head. Then they heard the doctor chuckle. Doctor Snodgrass turned to look at the children and the drawings on their heads. Then his chuckling turned into polite laughter and then red-face laughter. Unaware they were doing it, the children began to laugh as well, because real laughter, good laughter is contagious but not like a winter cold or the chicken pox.

“Good job Mr. Billsley,” said Dr. Snodgrass. “I like how you’ve involved the children. They may have fun at my expense any time. Good work.”

Mr. Billsley gave a confused look to Caroline. Caroline turned from his gaze and smiled looking around the room as she was not aware of anything mischievous that she had done.

Dr. Snodgrass turned and came over to Caroline. Out of the doctor’s sight the orderly exhaled a sigh of relief. Then he smiled thinking he had done something wonderful for the children.

As Dr. Snodgrass approached Caroline looked up at the doctor with his stethoscope around his neck and his white lab coat.

“I think you’ve drawn me just about right,” said Dr. Snodgrass winking at Caroline.

Then turning to all the children he said, “I know many of you are sad about losing your hair. I wish there was another way to make you all better.”

Then turning to Mr. Billsley Dr. Snodgrass said, “Good work. You’ve made some fun for them. Keep it up.”

Dr. Snodgrass smiled at the children and then looking down at his clipboard busily walked out of the playroom. Mr. Billsley looked pleased with himself.

Chapter 5

“Sweet dreams, dearie,” said Nurse Nancy, her chubby hand moving over the light switch leaving Caroline tucked in bed in the mostly dark room. Mostly dark except for moonlight coming through the window in a path of soft light.

Caroline lay quietly listening to the nurse’s footsteps growing quieter and quieter as the large woman moved away from Caroline’s room. Counting the steps Caroline estimated the distance and knew that Nurse Nancy was now seated behind the nurse’s station. Caroline slid out of bed. She stepped over to the window. The tiles of the hospital floor were cool under her feet. She quietly lifted the window open and peered outside. A breeze entered the room. It swished around her nightgown tickling her legs.

Caroline leaned against the window sill. The heavy branches of the mulberry tree swayed in the wind with the darkness of the night beyond it. She felt alone and an ache for her mother and father, and Maggie and Chester, rose up in her chest. She tried to push the ache away by thinking about something else, but it was no use. Even thinking of the lion cub did no good, the ache remaining.

Feeling alone, looking into the night, she wished the blackbird would return with another dream to take her to the lion’s world. But the bird did not come. As she waited Caroline’s eyes caught hold of the moon beaming brightly beyond the mulberry tree. Admiring the bright orb her eyelids became heavier and heavier. Soon she was fast asleep leaning against the window sill.

“Oh bother,” said the blackbird landing on the sill next to the sleeping Caroline. “I’m too late.”

Caroline had only been asleep for a few minutes. The blackbird watched Caroline sleeping on her folded forearms on the window sill. He waited a few moments and then hopped closer.

“Hmmm,” said the blackbird hoping to wake Caroline.

“Hmmm,” he said again louder.

Caroline did not even stir. The blackbird put his face near Caroline’s eyes. He lifted her eyelid with his beak and looked into the dark circle of her pupil. Caroline did not move a muscle she was sleeping so soundly.

The blackbird hopped back. Thinking as hard as a blackbird could think, he cocked his head back, leaned forward, and gently pecked on Caroline’s forehead to wake her. Caroline stirred but settle back into her deep sleep, her rosy cheek now squished, pursing her lips. He next hopped around to Caroline’s ear and whispered, “I’ve come to tell you about a dream that you will have tonight.”

The blackbird hopped back and looked at Caroline sleeping heavily.

“But you may already be there. Sweet dreams Caroline,” said the blackbird admiringly before flying away into the night, his black glossy body and wings showing dark against the glowing white circle of the full moon.



“I’m back,” said Caroline happily – recognizing the grove of trees, the long golden fields hemmed in by honeysuckle, the wonderful smell of the place, and the babbling of the brook behind her.

Hoping to find the lion cub Caroline looked about the land. Then glancing at the brook she spotted him. The lion cub had jumped into the brook. Caroline watched as his paws bounced on the rocks wet from the thin slice of cool water running over them. Everything was just as it had been when the dream from the previous night had ended – as time had stood still in this place.

Caroline came quickly over to the brook. Quietly she trailed slowly behind the lion cub over the rocks, but not as sure-footedly on the slippery stones. Then coming close from behind him Caroline yelled out, “SURPRISE.”

Startled, the lion cub turned quickly. He slipped on the stones and dropped into the brook. Then recognizing Caroline, he joyfully leapt up at her playfully and Caroline scooped the wet lion cub up in her arms. But although Caroline was a strong girl, lion cubs are very heavy, or at least heavier than house cats like Chester. Caroline could feel her feet begin to wobble on the wet stones in the brook. Not able to keep her balance Caroline slipped falling right into the water with the lion cub on top of her. But it was a happy moment, full of laughter.

“Where did you go?” asked the lion cub. “You just disappeared.”

“I went back to my world.”

“Oh, up to that game again? This is all a dream.”

Caroline realized it was no use in trying to explain what she herself did not understand. From the brook Caroline could see a dirt lane nearby. Her eyes widened in disbelief as she stared at what she saw coming up the lane.

“Something the matter?” asked the lion cub.

Caroline squinted and then blinked at what she saw. A young rhinoceros and fox walked along the road. They were dressed in clothes and walked on their hind legs.

“This is all so strange,” Caroline muttered and then let out a laugh at the sight of animals wearing clothes, although the lion cub wore none.

The rhino and fox neared the brook. Seeing the lion cub and Caroline they stood on the grassy bank and called out.

“Look who it is.” said the rhino pointing to the lion cub.

“It’s little Ra’el,” teased the young fox.

With swagger, the rhino and fox came down from the lane and crossed the brook.

“Roar at us little itty bitsy lion. Or don’t you know how?” teased the fox.

“I’ll roar one day – and it will be the most terrifying roar that has ever been heard,” said the lion cub looking at the point of the little rhino’s horn.

“How can you roar if you don’t have a father to teach you?” taunted the fox.

“I have a father.”

“Then where is he?” asked the fox. “None of us have ever seen him.”

Caroline could see the change that had come over the face of the lion cub. His eyes dropped to the stones in the brook.

“Why don’t you use those little wings of yours and fly away,” snorted the rhino raising his horn in the air.

“I’m not supposed to use my wings.”

“You’re just too afraid,” said the fox.

“Who’s the funny looking thing?” asked the rhino pointing at Caroline.

“My name is Caroline. And I’m not funny looking,” said Caroline standing in the wet grass and clenching her fists and glaring at the rhino.

Caroline could see she was taller than the little rhino and this gave her confidence even if he had a pointy horn. For making the lion cub feel sad, Caroline wanted to grab the rhino’s horn and roll him and the fox into the tall grass.

“Come on. Fly for us Ra’el,” laughed the fox. “Flap your wings like a little birdy.”

Caroline watched as the lion cub continued to look down at the stones in the brook. His head hung low. He held his wings tight against his body.

“Yeah, fly away,” snorted the rhino moving his stubby arms up and down as if they were wings.

As the lion cub looked down into the brook, Caroline climbed up the bank. Never fond of bullies, Caroline put one hand on her hip. With her other hand she wagged a finger of shame at the rhino and fox – like she had seen her mother do in the principal’s office at Caroline when Caroline’s clever mind got ahead of her common sense with a substitute teacher.

“You two little mean bullies. I have a mind to – ”

“Shhhh ...” said the young fox holding a claw on his paw up to his mouth, cutting off Caroline, signaling everyone to be quiet.

The fox pointed up into a tree beyond the brook.

“What is it?” whispered the rhino.

“Up there,” nodded the fox.

The fox pointed to a robin perched on a branch. The robin sang in the breeze minding her own business. The fox reached in his pocket. He pulled out a smooth stone. He placed the stone in the leather patch of a sling. Then he whirled the leather straps overhead.

“Watch out,” yelled Caroline the stone sailing through the air at the robin.

But Caroline’s cry was too late. The stone struck the robin, the bird falling dead to the ground.

The fox and rhino laughed. The lion cub wagged his mane-less head. He turned back to look down into the brook.

“You horrible little fox. That was a mean thing to do,” said Caroline now glaring at the fox wanting to hit him.

“You’re not my mother,” said the fox walking away from the brook laughing with the rhino congratulating him on his shot.

Her hands clenched at her sides, Caroline let out a loud angry sigh and then began to run.

“Come on. We need to find her,” called out Caroline to the lion cub as she splashed through the brook.

The lion cub chased after Caroline. Soon they came under the tree where the bird lay dead. Caroline knelt in the grass and scooped the bird in her hands. She felt like crying looking at the lifeless bird. The lion cub put his nose on Caroline’s shoulder to comfort her, and she could feel warm lion cub breath.

"I guess we should bury this beautiful robin," said Caroline looking at the lion cub.

A curious look came into the lion cub's eyes. Caroline watched as he looked to the lane and then across the field.

"Do you think we are alone?" he whispered.

"Yes," said Caroline looking around herself wondering if the lion cub had a great secret.

"We don't need to bury the robin."

"Why not. We don't want an animal to get her and tear her to pieces," said Caroline kneeling in the grass.

Again, the lion cub looked around to make sure Caroline and he were alone.

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Yes," whispered Caroline enjoying the surprise of the coming secret.

"I'm a special lion."

"Special?"

"Bring the bird to my mouth."

"No, you'll eat it."

"I won't."

Caroline lifted the robin to the lion cub's mouth. He drew a deep breath. Caroline watched as the lion cub blew his hot breath over the bird in Caroline's cupped hands. The bird's pretty feathers rippled under the gentle force.

Amazed, Caroline watched as the robin opened her eyes. Then the robin stood on Caroline's open palms. She bounced a bit and then the robin ruffled her feathers.

"What just happened? I feel wonderful. I feel different. I feel new," said the robin.

"Oh nothing," said the lion cub winking at Caroline. "This kind human girl rubbed you back to life after a fox hit you with a stone."

"Yes, I remember that. I took quite a hit. Thank you kindly," said the bird gratefully looking up into Caroline's face. "I don't much like foxes."

"Me either," said Caroline. "Nor pudgy little rhinos."

Caroline looked into the robin's eyes. Caroline thought how now she rather enjoyed this dream with the friendly lion cub and his bringing the robin back to life.

"I do feel quite wonderful. I feel so... so... so full of life," said the robin from the scoop of Caroline's hands. "I haven't felt this good in years."

"Will you fly for us?" asked the lion cub.

"Why certainly. I'll put on my best show," said the robin.

Caroline lifted her cupped hands to the sky. The robin flapped her wings and then sailed into the blueness of the day. Standing in the grass Caroline and the lion cub watched the robin's acrobatics against the sky. The robin soared then glided, then soared again, dropping quickly. Then as fast as lightening, soaring again, the robin became lost in the brilliant blazing sun where your eyes quickly shut from a brilliance so bright that you can scarcely take it in.

“How did you do that?” asked Caroline shielding her eyes from the sun, searching for the robin.

“My mother tells me I’m a special lion – like my father.”

Just then something so extraordinary happened that Caroline will never forget it as long as she lives. She heard the noise of it first, turning quickly. The lion turned quickly too. From the grassy bank it was if a small tornado or cyclone of light particles had turned on its side. The top of it swirled faster and faster, and the sound grew louder and louder. Caroline felt herself being pulled towards the force. She could hardly stop herself from being pulled inside.

In desperation the lion cub bit the hem of Caroline’s dress and dug his paws in the soft grassy earth. But it was no use. Caroline was pulled inside the swirling force of lights of a thousand colors. She felt herself going round and round. Then all of sudden the swirling and noise stopped. She opened her eyes. She reached out and felt the hard starched hospital sheets. She looked up at the ceiling and then to the window. She looked into the mulberry branches remembering the dream and the pretty robin doing acrobatics in the sky.

Laying in her hospital bed, Caroline did not remember how she got out of the dream, and neither do you or most people when they get pulled out of their dreams. But now you know what happens to you when you leave the world of dreams.

Chapter 6

“What a wonderful dinner. How was your shepherd’s pie?” asked Caroline’s father.

“It was alright. I liked the lemon meringue pie much better,” said Caroline sitting up in her hospital bed.

“They have very good food here ... for a hospital. You’re mother’s sorry she couldn’t come today. Maggie’s been sick and she needs to stay home and take care of her.”

“That’s alright. How’s Chester?”

“He’s fine,” laughed Caroline’s father.

“What’s so funny?”

“He caught a mouse the other day. He left it dead on the porch. Your mother found it,” laughed Caroline’s father louder this time. “Your mother found it alright. She was going outside to the garden and stepped on its tail. She just about jumped a mile high screaming bloody murder.”

Caroline laughed at the thought of her mother jumping up off the porch.

“I miss Chester,” said Caroline finishing her laugh.

“He misses you. Oh Caroline,” sighed Caroline’s father. “We’ll get you home one day.”

“I do miss home,” said Caroline looking to the window.

From the night sky she saw her reflection in the dark panes of glass.

“Would you like me to spend the night? I can sleep in this chair.”

“That would be nice,” said Caroline thinking of home.

Just then Caroline noticed a blackbird landing outside the window. She jerked excitedly in the bed. The blackbird pecked on the glass, Caroline’s father not noticing.

“No, after all I don’t want you to spend the night. I want to be alone,” said Caroline very fast, her tongue tied in her excitement.

“Caroline why do you keep staring at the window?” asked Caroline’s father turning in his chair to look at the large panes of glass.

“I’m staring at the window? Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“I think you need to leave right now – yes, right now. Along with you.”

Caroline said this in a way that made her father think that she was losing her mind. Caroline’s father laughed a little at the unusualness of his daughter’s strange behavior.

“First you want me to stay, and then in half the shake of a lamb’s tail you want me to leave.”

“I changed my mind. You better go home and protect mother from the mice.”

“There you go again. What are you looking at in the window?” asked her father standing and moving to the glass.

“No, yelled Caroline. Sit down. You must sit down now.”

“Whatever is the matter?” asked Caroline’s father obediently sitting down.

Instantly Caroline's eyes grew very big as she stared at the window. Her father stood and turned to look at the window himself.

"Oh my, is that a bird outside the window? Look at that he's pecking at the glass. I think he wants in."

"You need to leave right now. Do not scare that bird away. I'm very tired. I need to sleep," said Caroline shutting her eyes, plopping her head on her pillow, and pretending to be asleep.

Caroline opened her eyes a sliver and peeked out at her father.

"Caroline I know you are not asleep. Have you gone mad?"

Caroline let out a fake snore.

"Caroline what are you doing. I know you're not asleep."

Caroline opened her eyes. She looked at the window and could see the blackbird sitting outside on the window ledge looking inside.

"I'll be honest father. I need to talk to that bird."

"Alright, my crazy little love," said Caroline's father not believing her. "I'll leave. If Maggie's feeling better or your mother can find someone to look after her, she'll come see you tomorrow morning and I'll be back for dinner tomorrow night."

"Thanks father," said Caroline.

"I want to hear all about what that bird has to tell you alright?" smiled Caroline's father grabbing his coat and standing to leave.

"I'll tell you."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

From her hospital bed, Caroline watched her father leave the room and shut the door. She immediately slid out of bed and came over to the window. She lifted the window up high.

"Hello blackbird. I'm so glad you've come."

"I'm glad to have finally arrived. My message is that tonight you will dream," said the blackbird standing proudly erect as he delivered his message.

"I had a feeling that you'd say that. What will I dream?"

The blackbird cocked his head thinking.

"I don't know. I did not think to ask," said the blackbird scratching his head with the tip of his wing.

"Did the lion send you?" asked Caroline leaning against the window sill.

"He did."

"How did you get from his world, your world, to my world?"

"You know, I don't know. I just started flying in this direction as soon as he told me to come. But that's a good question."

"What do I do now?" asked Caroline

"I don't know. I did not think to ask. I suppose you go to sleep and have a dream."

"But I'm not tired."

“After a good fly I’m always tired. But I suppose you don’t fly.”

Caroline laughed at the simpleminded blackbird, feeling happiness mixed with anticipation for something good about to happen much like when you are standing in line for a ride at an amusement park in the morning knowing you have all day to go on rides.

“I’ll get in bed right now and do my best to fall asleep,” said Caroline gleefully as she ran across the tile floor and scurried up into bed. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep. Then she looked over at the blackbird on the window ledge of the open window.

“Still not tired?” asked the blackbird.

Caroline shrugged her shoulders.

“What do you do when you need to sleep but can’t sleep?” asked Caroline.

“You know, I don’t know. I’ve never had that problem of not being able to sleep. We birds work hard flying and flapping – it’s not as easy as it looks.”

“Well, thank you for coming. I’ll tell the lion what a good messenger bird you are when I see him.”

For the excitement she was feeling about another dream, Caroline knew it might be awhile before she would she fall asleep. She climbed out of bed and watched the blackbird fly away in the light of the moon. Soon he had disappeared in the black night. Feeling a little cold Caroline shut the window and climbed back in bed. She closed her eye and willed herself to sleep. But no sleep came. She counted sheep backwards, from one hundred to one. Then she counted lions. That did the trick.

Chapter 7

“Where am I?” asked Caroline. “This can’t be the lion’s world.”

From where she stood, Caroline looked around at a parched desert wilderness. It was daytime and the sun rested high in the sky. Caroline blinked into the brightness of the sunlight. The air was very warm and dry. A desert wind whipped about Caroline and she felt the sand in the wind. Brown beautiful locks crossed her face in the wind. Reaching for her hair, she enjoyed the softness of it and felt joy. In her world, she missed her hair very much.

Caroline looked down at the pretty dress with daffodils she was now wearing, not the grey hospital night gown she had been put to bed in. Then she noticed her bare feet sunk into the warm desert sand. The sand felt wonderful. Looking wider around her new surroundings, Caroline could see down a steep slope to a lower plateau of the desert plain. Then hearing a mighty roar, she became frightened.

Caroline quickly hid behind a pillar of sandstone made smooth from years of wind and little rain. After some time not hearing another roar, and unable to cure her curiosity, she leaned out slightly and peeked again.

“A lion? A lion in a desert?” whispered Caroline studying what appeared as a ferocious beast with open jaws and sharp teeth.

Caroline stood breathlessly still. She could hear voices now. She leaned in to listen as she watched. The lion talked to a snake. Looking closer Caroline could see the snake’s forked tongue and hear the hiss of his words.

“You haven’t eaten for many days,” stated the snake.

The lion gave the snake a curious glance – wondering how the snake had come to that knowledge.

“Surely you must be hungry,” smiled the snake slithering in front of the lion in the warm sand.

“I am,” nodded the lion feeling the hunger pangs tightening in his stomach.

“I will provide,” hissed the snake loudly.

Then as a magician in a cloak performing a magic trick, a cloud of black smoke swallowed the snake and the lion. Caroline watched the blackness swirling. The snake said a magic-sounding word. The black smoke disappeared into the air. The lion looked down upon the snake. The reptile held a helpless rabbit struggling to free himself from the snake’s coils.

“Take. Eat. Satisfy your hunger.”

“I will not eat another animal. My father forbids it.”

“He would be so tasty,” smiled the snake tightening his coils around the rabbit squirming to be free.

Caroline watched as the lion shook his head no, his mane moving majestically. With a serious look, the lion stared into the snake’s beady eyes. The lion did not say a word, but the snake understood. Loosening his grip, the rabbit slipped through the snake’s coils and hopped away.

“My father, the Greatest Lion of All Lions that Ever Were, has taught me not to live by bread alone, but by his words.”

Then something so remarkable happened that Caroline could hardly believe her eyes. She was still standing behind the pillar of sand. But she could now see the lion and snake atop a grand building that glittered like gold and with towers pearl in color. The pearl color reminded Caroline of her mother’s necklace and she thought of her

mother and felt homesick again. But the sadness vanished as she watched the snake slink in a circle around the lion at the top of the tallest tower of pearl with a blue sky behind it.

“If you be the Son of the Great Lion, throw yourself down from this high place. Certainly someone shall catch you in a great miracle.”

Caroline watched as the handsome and strong lion did not move – not even a muscle. With kind eyes of watery blue he said, “You shall not tempt the Greatest Lion of All Lions.”

Then, still hiding behind the pillar of sand, Caroline became even more surprised. The scene changed again. Caroline now stood close by watching the lion and snake on a high mountain. She could even smell the piney mountain air and feel the coolness of it on her face. The lion and snake were looking down upon all the great cities and kingdoms of the world and their riches and glories.

“I will give you all these,” said the snake regally, raising his head high from the ground.

The lion did not respond, but continued looking down upon the cities and kingdoms.

“Power and influence ... it feels so delightful – so pleasurable,” said the snake writhing as if some dark magical power had overcome him.

Still, the lion did not respond. The lion did not even look at the snake.

“In these cities and kingdoms, the animals will fall down at your paws and worship you. They will fear you. They will adore you. They will come at your beckon call,” said the snake shivering with a powerful pleasure that seemed to slither through him from his pointy head through his long tail.

The lion looked out over the cities and kingdoms thinking of the other treasures there, the purpose for which his father had sent him into the world.

“Ohhhhhhhhhh... the power feels so wonderful,” said the snake again as if in a trance. “The animals of those cities are so easy to fall under my power. They will do any for silver and gold, or a tasty morsel, or an appeal to their vanity.”

Then growing tired of the Lion’s silence, coming out of the trance, the snake sniped impatiently, “Fall down and worship me! I am tired of this lion! Fall down now!”

The lion did not answer. The lion did not even look at the snake. The snake studied the lion’s faraway look as the lion thought of the true treasures in the cities and kingdoms – the animals he would bless and save.

“It would be so easy for you to just fall down and worship me. Please fall down and worship me,” pleaded the snake weakly, the anger in his voice gone now.

The lion shook his beautiful mane, opening his mouth to roar. As Caroline watched she thought she saw droplets of light coming off of his mane.

“Stop. Please stop. Whatever you do, please don’t roar and send me away,” said the snake beginning to quiver and shrinking backwards.

The lion shut his powerful jaws and looked sternly at the snake.

“Then you are dismissed.”

“You can’t make me leave,” said the snake.

Caroline watched the lion crouch, his great head moving low to the ground. He faced the snake at ground level.

“Oh, really?” remarked the lion opening his powerful jaws again, but this time wider and inhaling.

“No, please don’t. Please don’t roar. Whatever you do, don’t roar,” shook the snake’s voice.

“Then go,” said the lion closing his jaws and hiding his sharp, pointy teeth.

Caroline could now see the back of the lion, his shoulders broad and his tail curved. Beyond the lion, the tip of the snake’s tail grew smaller and smaller as the snake slunk down the dusty mountain trail. Caroline felt a desire to run to the lion. Then realizing she did not know this lion, she became unsure of herself, and Caroline began to think that she was a little scared of the lion herself.

But it wasn’t that Caroline was afraid of the lion at all. It was a different emotion that she was feeling. She only mistook it as fear. She was too young to recognize it. It was a feeling of awe and light, something alive and moving through her body below the surface of her skin. It was wonder for something great and holy, which the lion definitely was with his beautiful mane and watery blue eyes and strong, powerful body. Caroline could sense that there was something beyond this world in the lion, which only people like Caroline recognize. They recognize it because there is some of the holy light in them.

However, to people without some of the holy light in them the lion that Caroline desired to run, but was afraid to do so now, would only look as an ordinary, yet very handsome, fierce, and powerful lion. But to Caroline who had been touched by the holy light, she was feeling awe, which adults know as a delight in something so true and full of light and goodness that you are taken back for a moment or longer trying to understand it – for it is not of this world.

Her courage building, the holy light inside her stirring, Caroline moved out from behind the sand pillar. Running towards the lion, she stopped dead in her tracks. It was just then she looked to the sky. Through an opening in the blueness and clouds came forth a heavenly host of noble-looking animals including lions, tigers and bears, birds with beautiful plumage, winged horses and seraphim, all followed by a host of smaller animals like foxes and beavers and woodchucks and porcupines of all things.

Caroline ran back to hide behind the sand pillar. She watched as the majestic creatures touched down on the earth, their feet gracing the desert sand in flawless motion. Some animals carried picnic baskets. In their beaks several birds held golden tablecloths. They laid these out over the sand as they landed from the sky. From the picnic baskets the lions, tigers, bears, and hippos spread out food and goblets and silverware as far as the eye could see. The sight of the hippos made Caroline laugh, but she covered her mouth to be respectful.

Dizzy from all the amazing things that she had seen, Caroline stood watching the heavenly animals as the lion came over to the picnic.

“Friends, what is this all about?” smiled the lion.

“Your father, The Greatest Lion of All Lions that Ever Were sent us,” said an eagle looking proud. “Your father said after fasting in the desert so long you deserve a great feast.”

“I will not argue with that,” said the lion sitting down at the head of the tablecloths.

Being careful not to be noticed, Caroline peeked around the sand pillar. She watched the lion and the other animals eating and enjoying themselves in their feast, eating from the plates and drinking from the goblets.

“Look over there,” said a flamingo, pointing in Caroline’s direction with his thin wiry leg. “It’s a girl.”

“A girl,” gasped the other animals.

The animals quietly looked at Caroline who wasn’t that well hidden behind the sand pillar. Knowing that she was found out, Caroline tensed up. She watched the lion waiting for how he would respond watching his back. She continued to watch trying to stay hidden. But the lion did not turn. He continued eating his turkish delight.

“Ra’el, there’s a girl over there,” said a tiger, pointing with his paw.

“I know. She watched me with the snake,” said the lion reaching for another helping of turkish delight.

“We don’t want to appear rude. Should we invite her over?” whispered a mother bear. “The poor skinny thing does look awfully hungry.”

“No. I will do it,” said the lion.

At that the lion stood from the picnic. He fiercely charged at the sand pillar. Caroline scrunched up her face and held her body stiff as the lion raced towards her. She closed her eyes tight anticipating the impact or the chew of giant sharp teeth. But nothing happened. With her eyes closed all she could feel was hot lion breath on her face smelling of turkish delight. After a while she opened one eye, her body held stiff.

“Caroline, would you care to join us?” smiled the lion.

Caroline opened both eyes and stared up into the smiling face of the great lion.

“Would you care to join us Caroline?” asked the lion.

“How do you know my name?” asked Caroline.

“We’ve met before. I was just a young lion then. Do you remember the robin?”

“I do, but that was only a few nights ago. Now you are a grown up lion. How’d you get so big?”

The lion laughed. Caroline was no longer afraid. She reached forward and gave the lion a big hug, his soft mane tickling her face. Caroline could feel the lion laughing as she squeezed him around the neck.

“There is a great deal of truth in dreams my sweet Caroline. My father the Greatest Lion of All Lions can do all things as time and space do not constrain him. He wants you with me. That makes me a very happy lion.”

“Am I dreaming? Or is this real? I didn’t understand the blackbird.”

“There is no difference between existing and dreaming. It is all the same.”

“Then why am I here?”

“My father the Greatest Lion of All Lions has not told me. But he must have something very special in mind for you. Now climb on my back. Come. Feast with us.”

The lion crouched to the ground and Caroline climbed up on his back.

“Hold on to my mane,” said the Lion as he raced as fast as lightening back to the picnic.

Chapter 8

After being tucked in bed, Caroline lay in the dark counting Nurse Nancy's footsteps as the chubby nurse waddled down the hall in her white nurse's uniform away from Caroline's room to the nurse's station.

Not able to sleep, Caroline turned in bed on her side. She stared out at the blue moonlight coming through the branches of the mulberry tree. She missed the lion, or to be specific how she felt when she was with the lion. It was a pleasant sensation like when someone tickled you, but you enjoyed it. She thought how the feeling was more on the inside of her, unlike when someone tickled you on the outside. Caroline thought how strong and handsome the lion cub had grown up. She liked him even more in her last dream.

Laying there looking at the night sky, she remembered coming up behind the lion cub in one of her dreams and scaring him. And it made her laugh as she lied in bed remembering how he slipped in the brook, and then the lion cub jumping in her arms and she slipping too into the cool water.

Maybe that's why he scared me by running up to me in the desert and blowing hot lion breath smelling of Turkish delight, thought Caroline. And what a wonderful picnic sitting next to the lion, and by Daphne the hippopotamus who told the funniest stories and trickiest riddles. And the food was so wonderful and delightfully tasty.

Laying in bed unable to sleep, Caroline thought of all the sweet tasting and colorful and funny-shaped food and began to feel hungry. Food in my world is so bland and boring compared to the food at the picnic, thought Caroline. But there are cookies in the kitchen.

Coming to the door, Caroline opened it slowly and quietly. Through the slit she looked down the hallway to make sure the coast was clear. As her stomach grumbled in hunger she remembered that if the cooking staff did not eat the cookies made that day, the leftovers would still be in the kitchen and given to the children the next day in the playroom.

Why not eat them now, instead of later, thought Caroline.

Leaving her room, Caroline tip-toed to the front of the nurse's station. Coming to the counter she could see Nurse Briggsbottom stirring in sleep and leaning forward in her chair. Nurse Nancy slept too, with her mouth open, a line of drool slowly making its way down her chin.

Undaunted, Caroline slipped past the two sleeping nurses and headed to the double doors that would lead to her escape. She opened the doors quietly and slid out of sight into a darkened hallway.

"Where could the kitchen be?" she whispered in the quiet of the hallway thinking aloud.

Then coming to the end of this new hallway, Caroline spotted a sign for the stairs. She thought it made sense that the kitchen was on the ground floor for deliveries and such.

In her night gown and slippers she came down to the first floor. Stepping into the hall, lit up slightly from the security lights, she found the sign for the kitchen. Caroline slowly opened the kitchen door and stepped into the dark room. Assuming no one was there at this time of night she flipped on the lights and looked around at the stainless steel tables and refrigerators and ovens.

To Caroline's delight on the table was a stack of the cookies from dinner. She pulled back the plastic wrap and bit into a cookie. She took bite after bite until her hunger was gone, enjoying each swallow. Then telling herself that she deserved a treat, Caroline took a fistful of cookies.

Caroline looked around for a bag or something to put the cookies into. But unable to locate anything she could throw away later to hide the evidence, she gathered up her nightgown into a bowl shape and dropped the cookies in. Then she turned to leave the kitchen to go back upstairs.

Coming to the double doors Caroline peaked through the windows up the hall. To the right she could see both nurses still sound asleep. Caroline slowly and carefully opened the double doors and stepped inside the hall. The room closest to her was Margaret's room. The door was opened and Caroline tip-toed inside. She came over to the bed and place a snickerdoodle on Margaret's pillow. Then coming to the doorway she snuck a peak at the sleeping nurses and slipped into Tommy's room and placed a ginger snap on his pillow. And soon Caroline had placed a cookie on all the children's pillows – and she even left a cookie for Nurse Briggsbottom and Nurse Nancy.

To hide all traces of the evidence Caroline brushed the crumbs of her nightgown into a trashcan near the nurse's station. She came to her room, and now feeling tired, climbed into bed and was soon fast asleep.

Chapter 9

The first thing Caroline realized was that she was laying on her back in a field of green grass. The crushed stalks under her gave a sweet odor. She blinked looking up into the brightness of the sun and the blue sky with scoops of clouds that look like whipping cream atop an ice cream sundae.

"I'm here," she whispered excitedly. "I'm really here. Oh how I do love these dreams."

Leaning up on her elbows, Caroline could see shin-high grass all around her. It rippled in a breeze, the field appearing as a green ocean. Sitting up farther she reached out to feel the soft wetness of the grass she lay in.

"Dew, it must be morning," she whispered into the fresh scented air.

Caroline stood and shielded her eyes as she surveyed her new surroundings. Up on her feet, she looked across the field to a grouping of trees. Then Caroline's ears pricked up. Voices came from behind her. She turned to peer through the brambles. Looking through the twisting vines she could see a lane of smooth, worn-over dirt.

Not knowing what dangers may be lurking, Caroline quietly neared the road. Peering past a weeping willow and through the flowery Queen Anne's lace, Caroline smiled recognizing one of the travelers. She waited for the group to near. Then, when the travelers were close by, she jumped quickly into the road. With her hands above her head and fingers clawed Caroline roared the fiercest roar a twelve year old girl could roar. The animals jumped back frightened. But not the lion. He laughed and laughed. He pranced towards Caroline and scooped her up in his paws.

"I do love your sense of humor Caroline," purred the lion. "Climb aboard."

With that the lion crouched. Caroline climbed up on his shoulders. There she rode as the travelers walked the dusty lane.

"Where are we going?" asked Caroline as she wobbled from side to side as the lion walked.

"To do good," answered the lion.

Caroline sat back enjoying the ride in the sunshine on the lion's back. She listened to his conversation with the other animals. Although his body was strong, his fur was soft as well as his feathery wings, which tickled Caroline's bare legs as she rode. Then arriving at a riverbank the lion stopped.

"This is where you get off, my little friend," said the lion lowering Caroline to the lane.

Caroline and the others followed the lion as he came over to the river. The travelers stood under a sycamore tree near the riverbank. They watched as the lion stepped into the coolness of the water. The lion waded out farther into the faster moving currents. Then the lion dove under the surface in a deeper part.

"He must be cooling himself off," said a black panther with dark green eyes and sharp white teeth that showed when he talked.

"Or he's in need of bath," said a gorilla with dark set eyes and leathery face.

"Should we jump in too?" asked an anteater from his long snout waddling down to the water's edge.

Caroline quickly put her hand up to her face to hide her laughing smile, anteaters being unusually awkward and clumsy animals.

"No, I don't think so," said an orangutan solemnly. "I sense something important is about to happen."

In the shade of the sycamore tree, searching for the lion along the surface, Caroline and the animals watched the fast moving river. Then suddenly the lion's mane broke the surface. His great head and body rose up into the brilliant sunlit day. The water dripped magnificently off the lion, the rays of sunlight passing beautifully through each water droplet.

"Look. Look up there," said a crocodile, amazement ringing in his voice.

Caroline and the others looked skyward. An opening in the sky had broken apart. The same heavenly host as Caroline had seen before in the desert came forth. Noble-looking animals including lions, tigers and bears, birds with beautiful plumage appeared along with winged horses and seraphim. The magnificent creatures hovered over the river. And then Caroline and the others heard a voice from the sky.

Although they could not quite make out what it said, the voice was a tender, pleading voice. It fell to the ground as pleasant, warm rain feels soft and wonderful on your skin. The voice seemed to enter into Caroline's heart, and from the looks of the animals' faces it had entered their hearts as well. To Caroline the voice made her happy and sad at the same time, and she felt as if she would cry tears of joy.

Then moments later, Caroline and the animals came to themselves. The lion, wet as a rainstorm, walked up the riverbank to the sycamore tree where his friends stood. With great force he shook the water off his mane and back and tail wetting Caroline and the animals. He smiled at his friends dripping wet standing under the tree and began to laugh. Then he let out a roar of happiness.

"Climb aboard," said the lion coming over to Caroline, crouching to the ground and motioning for Caroline to climb on his shoulders.

"But you're all wet," said Caroline.

The lion laughed heartily.

"A little wet won't hurt you," said the lion grabbing the neck of Caroline's dress with his teeth as he flung her onto his back.

Caroline sunk into the lion's soft, wet mane, which felt good on the now hot day.

"Friends," addressed the lion. "Let's go find some good to do in this world."

The lion and the travelers left the riverbank. They walked quite a distance along lanes passing animals working in their fields and around their houses. Caroline rocked right to left as the lion's shoulders drooped with each step. He was mostly dry now and Caroline was feeling sleepy. She buried her face in the lion's mane and began to doze.

Then feeling the lion stop, Caroline sat up. She looked off into the distance. Along the horizon Caroline could make out the sea. Sitting atop the lion she watched the waves break white and frothy as they rolled up onto the beach.

Traveling farther in the direction of the sea, the lion stopped on the edge of cliffs. He looked down and surveyed the huts of a fishing village and the boats tethered to the shore. Beyond, other boats were anchored farther out. Then coming down a path carved in the cliffs the lion stepped down onto the sand and crossed the beach. At the shore, small waves lapped at his paws. Caroline breathed in the salt-scented sea air on the wind from where she rode on the lion's back. The strong wind flowed through the lion's mane and Caroline's long brown hair.

“Look over there,” said the lion pointing to a wolf, a kingfisher bird, and a beaver in a boat.

Caroline watched as the wolf, kingfisher, and beaver cast nets over the sea.

“See their muscles straining under the weight of their salty nets. They are good workers,” observed the lion.

The lion stepped into the water and walked out a few paces. Still on the lion’s back Caroline’s feet and ankles skimmed the water.

“You in the boat. Yes, you Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver.”

The three fishermen turned to look at the fierce lion calling to them over the rush of the waves.

“Follow me.”

At the oars, the beaver turned the skiff. As the boat neared the shore the wolf looked on curious from the bow. The kingfisher rested on the wolf’s shoulder thinking the same.

“There is something familiar about that voice,” said the wolf as the skiff broke through the water.

“This is a strange thing to say, but it feels and sounds like pleasant light resting down upon me, the kind of light I like to fly through at daybreak, but stronger,” said the kingfisher.

“I like the sound of it too. But perhaps some help rowing would be nice,” said the beaver breathing heavily working the oars.

As the skiff approached the beach, their hearts burning within them, the wolf, kingfisher, and beaver stared at the lion standing in the water with a girl seated on his back.

“Follow me. I have many great things to show you,” roared the lion as the Beaver rowed close to shore.

From the bow of the skiff the wolf and kingfisher looked at each other strangely.

“It’s like he has some power over me. I can’t help but row to him,” said the Beaver.

“I feel it too,” said the kingfisher.

“This is strange indeed. Then follow we will,” said the wolf as the skiff slid up on the sandy beach from Beaver’s strong rowing.

“Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver. Follow me and I will show you the great things of my father, the Greatest Lion of All Lions.”

Without Wolf, Kingfisher, or Beaver addressing him, the lion turned from the shore. He walked up onto the beach heading towards the village. Straightway the wolf, kingfisher, and beaver left their nets in their boat to follow. Then catching up, the three friends walked alongside the lion, with Caroline riding on the lion’s back. Soon passing through the village gates, the lion, Caroline, wolf, kingfisher, and beaver came into the square. Recognizing the lion, a cheetah drew attention.

“Help us, oh Son of the Greatest Lion of All Lions that Ever Were. Help us. Heal us,” the animals cried.

The lion came over and stood by a well under a tree. Caroline still sat on his back. She looked out at the many animals gathered about him.

“By the power of my father I will heal you. Bring me your sick. Bring me your blind. Bring all to me,” roared lion.

Caroline climbed down from the lion and sat on a rough-hewn bench under the trees near the well. The beaver sat next to Caroline on the bench. The wolf sat on his hind quarters next to the bench panting in the shade.

The kingfisher rested on Caroline's shoulder, which pleased Caroline. They watched as a mother camel nudged her baby toward the lion.

"It is alright. Go to him," said the mother. "He can help you."

The small camel looked back at his mother.

"Come forward little one. It is alright," smiled the lion.

The small camel limped forward. He sat looking up at the lion. The lion breathed his lion breath into the camel's face. It was a sweet smelling to the camel.

"Now run and play. Run and play like you've never ran or played before," encouraged the lion with a laugh.

At first the small camel was not sure what to do. He took a step and then another. The crowd silent watched the small camel. Then feeling confident the camel began to trot. Running faster, the camel jumped for joy. He raced around and then pranced up to the lion. He jumped again and the lion laughed. The crowd of animals let out a cheer of wonder and amazement. Caroline could see the mother camel crying – but crying happy tears which are the best kind of tears because joy and light are mixed in with the clear liquid.

"I am sent by the Greatest Lion of All Lions – to do his works. Bring me all that are in need."

The crowd rushed upon the lion. Caroline, the wolf, kingfisher, and the beaver came to the edge of the crowd. Caroline, the tallest, even standing on her tippy toes could not see past the animals. The kingfisher flew above the crowd. The wolf squirmed through giraffe legs and elephant skin so he could see.

"Oh bother," said the beaver trying to squeeze through the crowd but unable to get through.

"I will tell you what I see," said the Kingfisher descending to the beaver and Caroline.

The kingfisher flew above the crowd and witnessed the healings and miracles. He dropped in closer fluttering his wings.

"How do you do such great things?" the Kingfisher overhead an ape and orangutan ask the lion.

"My father ... His light and truth and goodness have been given me to share with you."

The Kingfisher sailed back over the animals crowding the lion. He landed on the beaver's shoulder.

"Besides the small camel, he has healed an orangutan, panther, bear, lizard, crocodile, and a cockatoo."

"He certainly is the son of the Greatest Lion," exclaimed the beaver. "How else could he do such great things?"

"With his words and touch, in an instant he wipes away lifetimes of hard things," said the wolf returning to the beaver and Caroline. "It is beyond miraculous. It is downright heavenly."

"He lifts the broken-hearted animals living in their world of grief," added the kingfisher.

"I've always known he was a special lion," said Caroline.

Caroline noticed the crowd of animals standing back now. The lion had performed all the miracles they needed and more. The animals stood silently staring and admiring the lion as he came over to Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver.

"Will you stay with me?" asked the lion with penetrating eyes fixed on Wolf.

"I honestly feel as if you have some power over me," said the wolf. "Are you magic?"

The lion laughed slightly.

“No I am not magic. But I do have powers from my father, the Greatest Lion of All Lions, inside of me.”

“I will follow you to the ends of the earth. I never want to leave you it feels so wonderful,” said the beaver.

“I feel the same,” buzzed the kingfisher.

“Then never leave,” smiled the lion.

With that the lion crouched to the ground. Caroline climbed up on the lion’s tawny mane. At the lion’s side the wolf and beaver walked together. The kingfisher sailed about in the air above the foursome. The new friends walked out of the village and into the countryside. Coming along a lane they stopped at a brook and Caroline climbed down. Each of the thirsty travelers drank the cool water and plucked figs and bunches of wild grapes to eat.

“Where are we going?” asked Caroline enjoying the sweetness of the grapes but not caring much for figs.

“A wedding feast,” said the lion crouching to the ground again and Caroline climbing up on his shoulders to continue their travels.

As the lion, Caroline, and other travelers journeyed, Caroline leaned down and whispered a question in the lion’s ear.

“How do you do these miracles?”

“Why, don’t you remember?”

“Remember what?”

“One of the dreams.”

Caroline went over all the dreams she could remember in her mind.

“Which dream?”

“Let me show you. Lay back and look up at the sky as we walk.”

Caroline lay back on the lion’s broad back. She stared straight up into the blue sky. Soon she could see moving things as if on a movie screen in the sky. At first she saw herself and the lion cub by the brook near the grove. It was after the cruel rhino and fox had left them. They were watching the robin flying in an acrobatic show. Caroline was speaking to the lion cub. Only she could hear these words.

“Have you ever known your father?” asked Caroline.

“No,” said the lion cub his shoulders drooping.

Seeing the sadness in the lion cub Caroline desired to make him happy again.

“So you’re a special lion? What makes you special?”

“My mother tells me that my father sent me into this world for a special purpose.”

“What purpose is that?”

“To fulfill the prophecy of the coming light.”

Caroline did not know what to say so she continued to watch the Robin in the sky.

“I’m sorry. I’m so embarrassed. I’ve never asked your name?” asked Caroline looking down admiring the lion cub and studying his wings of feathery gold with the sunlight upon them.

“My name is Ra’el.”

“That’s quite the name. What does it mean?”

“Mean?”

“Yes, all names have meaning. My name means strong. In some languages my name means manly, which I don’t agree with.”

“I’m not sure what my name means.”

“Well, maybe I could help you. I do really well in school. Every year I’m the teacher’s pet. The other children tease me about it – like the rhino and fox did you. It’s just that I love to learn new things.”

At that Caroline scrunched up her lips and placed her hand on her chin deep in thought.

“Let me see,” said Caroline doing her best thinking.

The lion cub looked up wide-eyed at Caroline pacing in the grass.

“Ra’ like rays of the sun. Wait a minute,” said Caroline looking very excited. “Ra’ for the sun; just like Mrs. McGillicutty taught us.”

“Who’s that?”

“My history teacher before I went to the hospital,” said Caroline thinking out loud again. “And ‘el, that’s the light from heaven that make everything grow and blossom. It also means God. You are the son of the sun god – are we in Egypt?”

The lion cub looked up at Caroline and tilted his head trying to understand.

“Yes, that’s it,” said Caroline pleased with herself. “You are named after the Egyptian sun god Ra?”

“Who?”

“Mrs. McGillicutty showed us the most wonderful pictures, or drawings rather. Ra has a human body like me, with arms and legs, but his head is a falcon’s head – a very handsome falcon, noble. On top of his head is a crown in the shape of a circle called a sun disc that supposed to be a sun and on the outside of the circle is a sacred cobra.”

“That’s my father? I don’t look anything like that.”

“No silly. I didn’t say that he’s your father. It’s just who the Egyptians called their god. And he was their sun god, their most important god. They believed Ra’ gave them sunlight to make all things grow and that he created the world.”

“You’re smart,” smiled the lion cub.

“Thank you for the compliment,” said Caroline giving the lion cub a curtsey.

“I know I’m a strange lion.”

“You’re not strange at all. You just have powers, or magic that you don’t understand yet. See what you did for the robin,” said Caroline pointing up into the sky.

“My mother says that before this world was here, my father brought me into something called the Ayin with him.”

“The A-y-i-n?”

“My mother calls it the nothingness ... like when there was nothing before the world was created.”

The lion cub opened his mouth to speak and then shut it quickly. Silent, he looked away from Caroline. His shoulders were drooping again as he stared across the field.

“Is something the matter?” asked Caroline.

“I’m saying too much.”

“I won’t tell anyone – and I do love to learn new things,” pleaded Caroline.

The lion cub gave Caroline a curious look.

“Please tell me more. I won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

“Well, I do have another name?”

“What is it?”

“Yesh. My name together is Yesh Ra’el.”

“Do you know what it mean?”

“You promise never to say anything – to anyone?” asked the lion cub looking around to make sure Caroline and he were alone.

“Yes. I promise – cross my heart and hope to die.”

“My mother told me that my father, the Great Lion, put the power of life of this world, the Yesh, in me.”

“And that’s how you could bring the robin back to life.”

“Yes, he put me in the Ayin, the nothingness, and with his powers in me he made the world and all things in it – the mountains and rivers and flowers and animals and the sky, everything.”

“I don’t know what to say,” said Caroline, a very special feeling settling over her that was both sweet and tender, as well as exciting all mixed together.

The lion cub looked up at Caroline and smiled. He was happy his new friend understood him and he felt as if he could trust her with the deepest secrets.

“You are a special lion,” complimented Caroline.

“I am only a small lion now, but my mother says I will grow into a great lion someday – like my father.”

Caroline studied the pride in the lion cub’s eyes as he said the words.

“My mother says that one day I will need to save this world and everything in it.”

“How will you save it?”

“She says the world has lost most of the light given to it by my father. I need to pay a price to the darkness so that I may put light into everything, as much of the light as it will possibly hold. Then everything will live forever in happiness.”

Listening to the lion’s words, Caroline watched the robin flying in the sky. His words now made her feel a deeper sweetness and tenderness and excitement, and this time the feeling brought tears to her eyes.

“Did you put the light back into the robin.”

“Yes,” said the lion cub feeling very fond of Caroline and happy to have a new friend who knew about sun gods and other things.

“Would you like to see where I live?”

“Yes, very much.” said Caroline watching the lion cub suddenly leaping across the field.

Following his tail again through the tall grass, Caroline ran watching the lion cub prance ahead of her. Catching up to him, together they walked along a dust covered lane with trees overhead. As they walked they talked and listened to the warblers and robins in the leafy branches.

“My mother says that I must be very careful who I tell my story to,” said the lion cub.

“Why?”

“Not listening to my mother, I’ve told others and they have made fun of me and even tried to hurt me – like the rhino and the fox.”

“Then why did you let me see you save that bird?”

“Something tells me I can trust you.”

“You can count on me. I can keep a secret till doomsday,” said Caroline rather proud of herself as she walked now in the open sunshine.

Caroline and the lion came up the hard dirt lane. They rounded a bend and could see another brook. The grass along the banks was dark green and long from the cool, sweet water. They went down the bank and knelt at the water’s edge. Caroline cupped water to her mouth. Ra’el lapped the water into his mouth with his tongue. The water was cool and sweet. After satisfying their thirsts, they came back up the bank and continued their journey to the lion cub’s home.

Then coming over a rise in the road, Caroline could see a home of mud bricks and straw. Tree branches and dried grasses covered it for a roof. It was set against a grouping of trees for shade under the summer sun and protection against the winter winds.

“There it is,” said the lion cub running to the house.

Caroline followed after the lion cub.

“Mother, are you here?” asked the lion cub coming into the house.

There was no sound. Caroline looked around the humble home. It had a dirt floor that was very different from her home. Thinking about her home, where she had not been in months for her long stay in the hospital, made Caroline feel homesick again.

“This is where I sleep with my brothers and sisters,” said Ra’el, pointing to straw mattresses on the dirt floor.

“You don’t sleep in beds with box springs and mattresses with frames that keep you off the floor?”

“I don’t know what you mean. That sounds strange.”

Caroline looked around the small dwelling and at the plain food of figs and barley bread and fishes and honey cakes. She glanced over at the clothes of homespun wool.

Chapter 10

“Mind if I ride along?” asked Beaver as he trotted beside the lion. “These short legs of mine can’t cover so much ground compared to you four legged animals.”

The lion crouched. The beaver scurried up behind Caroline. He reached around her as far as his little arms could reach to hold on for the bumpy ride.

“Hey, that tickles,” said Caroline.

“What about this?” laughed the beaver tickling Caroline for a quick second under her arms.

Caroline laughed delightfully as the lion continued his walk along the lane. Coming under a grouping of trees covering the lane the Beaver sprawled out over the lion’s back.

“I don’t need to hold on. I’ll just lean back. Plenty of room here. I think I’ll take a nap,” yawned the Beaver sprawling out over the lion’s back.

Beaver placed his paws and arms under his head and looked up into the sky.

“I’m sleepy too. But I’ll lean forward to give you more room,” yawned Caroline burying her face in the softness of the lion’s mane.

From the heat of the day, and the steady rhythm of the lion’s shoulder, Caroline was soon asleep.

“Yes, that is not a bad idea,” said the kingfisher landing on the lion’s head.

Kingfisher hopped down into the soft mane. He nestled in near Caroline’s head. Soon he was fast asleep as well. Wolf turned to look at the kingfisher, Caroline, and the beaver asleep. He smiled at the lion, the wolf’s smile breaking into a laugh.

“Wolf, what are you laughing at?” smiled the lion knowing full-well the reason for the wolf’s laughter.

“You look like a camel of sorts carrying your wares to market.”

The lion laughed heartily and then turned his gaze to the wolf as they came along the lane near a brooklet.

“Wolf.”

“Yes.”

“My father has a great work for you to do.”

“I will do my best at this great work. I will climb any mountain. I will cross any sea – ”

“That is enough. I admire your enthusiasm,” interrupted the lion. “It will be a difficult journey for us all.”

The lion and wolf talked much as they journeyed – the three sleepy travelers slumbering atop the lion. In the twilight of the passing day they soon came to the gates of a new village.

“Where are we?” asked Caroline rubbing her eyes feeling the lion’s walking motion stop.

“Yes, where are we?” asked the beaver sitting up gazing sleepily about.

The lion crouched to the ground. Caroline and the beaver slid off his silky back. The kingfisher took flight and landed on Caroline’s shoulder. Caroline watched as a beautiful lioness came over to the lion.

“They have no wine,” said a lioness.

“I bet that’s the lion’s mother,” whispered Caroline to the kingfisher.

“That’s a beautiful lioness indeed. I see where the lion gets his noble looks.”

“Please Ra’el. It’s their wedding.”

“Then please fill the waterpots with water.”

Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver watched as servants came forward and filled the waterpots to the brim.

“Draw out now, and give to the governor of the feast,” said the lion.

The governor, a plump pig, came over.

“Pour me a cup of this wine,” ordered the pig.

A servant poured a cup of the new wine. The priggish pig smelled the wine. He threw his head back taking a drink. Placing the cup on the table, the pig smiled at the lioness. The lioness smiled at her son.

“What manner of lion is this that can turn water to wine?” asked the wolf in a whisper to the beaver so as not to interrupt the pig.

“There’s only one explanation. His father, the Greatest Lion of All Lions has given him light and goodness to bless all animals – as he has said,” whispered back the beaver.

Then bidding the wedding party goodbye, the lion, along with Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver walked through the town. They passed through the heavy wooden gates and the open countryside spread out before them. Caroline watched the lion surveying the roads, determining which road to travel next.

Coming along through the green countryside, in the distance Caroline could see a dark figure moving at lightening speed. The dark figure increased in size as it approached. Soon an out-of-breath, a noble-looking panther rushed up to the lion.

“Excuse my hasty request,” said the panther working hard to catch his breath.

“Take a moment friend,” smiled the lion.

“I’ve traveled more than 70 miles to reach you, running the entire distance.”

“You are excused. What is your request?”

The panther did not speak. Caroline could see giant panther tears welling up in his dark panther eyes. But these were not tears of joy and light mixed in with the clear liquid. They were tears of fear, the worst kind of tears – their source a dark spring of a broken heart, pouring from the cracks that come from broken feelings.

“You may speak,” said the lion softly.

“My son is at the point of death,” said the panther now crying big panther tears.

Caroline felt so very sorry for the panther. His crying reminded her of her mother’s eyes, red from crying.

“Will you come and heal him?” asked the panther who had gotten himself together, but his lip still quivering.

“Except you see signs and wonders, you will not believe,” said the lion looking rather sternly at the panther.

The lion’s words surprised Caroline. He had healed other animals at their requests.

“Lion, come down or my child will die,” pled the panther.

Not speaking, the lion studied the look on the sad panther’s face.

“Go your way; your son liveth,” smiled the lion.

“What. You won’t come? How will my son live then?” asked the panther confused.

“I need not be present to show the greatness of my father. Be of good cheer. Your son liveth.”

“He lives? Oh thank you. Oh thank you,” said the panther wanting to jump high into the air but deciding to be respectful to the lion.

“Go home. Run. Run with the speed of a thousand panthers,” said the lion.

The panther gave a thankful glance. He turned from the lion and ran away as fast as his powerful panther legs would carry him. Caroline thought it a beautiful sight to see the panther running so quickly, his muscles rippling under his shiny black coat. In no time flat, the panther had disappeared over the rise in the road. He was on his way towards his home many miles away.

Later that day the lion told Caroline that after running through the night, and into the next day, the panther would see his servant running on the road to greet him. The panther would slow and then stop knowing his servant had news about his son. His heart nearly breaking, the panther would run at top speed to reach his servant. Then coming close the panther would hear the words of his servant.

“Your son lives. Your son lives,” the servant would call out joyfully.

“At what hour did he live again?” would asked the panther out of breath from running the speed of a thousand panthers.

“Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.”

“That is the same hour in which the lion said unto me, Thy son lives,” would the panther say in utter amazement.

Then the panther and his servant would run home and rejoice with his son and entire household, and then hold a feast in the honor of the lion.

As Caroline watched the panther speed away, the sun was beginning to set. It had been a long day of healings and miracles, and evening was coming on. The lion, Caroline, and Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver now passed through a part of the country of rough dwellings made of mudbricks and timbers.

“I am very tired,” said the lion.

“We all are,” said Wolf.

“I’m tired too but when I wake up in the morning this will have been only a dream,” said Caroline with disappointment in her voice.

“Maybe so, but then maybe not,” said the lion smiling at Caroline.

“Where will we sleep tonight? What will we eat?” asked Beaver.

“Those things will be provided,” said the lion not looking at Beaver but ahead to a village bathed in the orange half-light of the setting sun.

Then coming into the village the travelers came to a muskrat sitting at the trunk of sycamore tree. Beaver noticed the muskrat eating a fig that he had gained after begging. Not saying anything, Caroline noticed from the muskrat’s movements that he must be blind.

“Lion, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” asked Beaver.

“Neither, but that the works of my father should be shown. Come with me.”

The lion and his companions approached the muskrat. The lion turned to Wolf, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

"Muskrat, may I do a kind act for you?"

"That would be much appreciated."

In his paws the lions gathered clay of the ground. He spit on it. Caroline cringed a little when the lion placed the clay on the eyes of the muskrat.

"Have your friends here take you. Go, wash in the pool and you will see again," said the lion.

Caroline and the others watched as the muskrat was lead to the pool. There he washed and came forth seeing.

Looking on, wolf said, "Master I am unworthy to be in your presence."

"Please stay," smiled the lion.

Wolf could see something magical and wonderful all rolled together in the lion's eyes. Then looking upon his weary travelers the lion pointed ahead to a small house.

"Look, there at that dwelling. When we pass they will offer to feed us the finest fish stew and pastries you've ever tasted ... and give a place to sleep."

"Oh delightful. Fish stew. I'm absolutely famished," said the beaver excitedly rubbing his paws together.

Chapter 11

In the early morning Caroline woke. She found herself cuddled against the pleasant downy feathers of the lion's wing. Waking up further, still leaning against the lion, she looked up at the wooden rafters and straw thatch of the roof. She remembered falling asleep in the raccoons' house the night before. She had eaten so much fish stew, which although sounded disgusting was quite good, and had tasted so many pastries, that she was not hungry for breakfast. Still leaning against the sleeping lion, Caroline looked at the doorway. Actually there was no door there. An old blanket covered the doorway. From around the edges of the blanket Caroline could see the bright sunshine of a rising day outside.

Although adequate in size for a raccoon family, the house was rather small to Caroline with a lion, wolf, and beaver sleeping next to her. Kingfisher did not take up much room. He slept nestled in the lion's mane as a bird in a nest. Caroline, too, had slept leaning against the lion, his purring the perfect thing to put one to sleep.

Caroline carefully leaned off the lion. She came to the doorway. Pushing back the blanket, to her surprise a multitude of animals waited silently outside – giraffes, tigers, wolves, elephants, monkeys, camels, squirrels, ground hogs, flamingos, bears, rabbits – all animals great and small.

"Is he awake?" whispered a ground hog. "I don't want to wake the great lion, but I need his help."

"I need his help too," whispered a giraffe bending down his long neck to Caroline's ear.

Caroline shook her head. But then felt warm lion breath on her neck.

"Good morning Caroline," said the lion yawning as he brushed past the blanket and stepped out into the morning.

The animals stepped back to clear a path. Then a hush fell over the animals waiting for the lion to speak. The lion studied the crowd.

"Why do you come?" asked the lion.

"To be healed?"

"To be fed?"

"To live?"

"You shall have all of that and more – but not from me, but my father, the greatest lion of all lions for he is the source of my light and goodness. Come, follow me," said the lion.

Seeing the lion leave, Caroline quickly returned inside the raccoon's house. She shook Wolf and Beaver awake. Kingfisher still slept in Ra'el's mane but the multitude of animals must not have noticed his colorful feathers. Caroline did a curtsy to show gratitude and thanked the raccoons for the fish stew and pastries.

Brushing past the blanket covering the doorway, Wolf stepped outside. He could see kid goats prancing around the lion's paws at the lion's encouragement playing a game of tag.

"Little ones be on your way. Leave the lion alone," growled Wolf showing the whites of his teeth and rushing upon the clumsy goat children, the kids scattering.

Instantly Wolf felt the weight of a paw on his shoulder. He turned to look into the lion's soft eyes.

"Suffer the little children."

“Yes, lion,” said Wolf humbly, his eyes showing he was sorry.

“Wolf, brush away your sadness. You have not offended me. And understand, you must become as one of these little ones.”

With that, the lion crouched to the ground. Caroline and Beaver climbed on the lion’s shoulders. Kingfisher flew atop Caroline’s shoulder. The wolf walked beside the lion. The multitude of animals followed, the lion leading them away from the houses and small dwellings of sticks and straw. The lion passed the well of the village. Soon the lion and multitude were out into the countryside. Following the lion, the multitude of animals came along a well-traveled lane cut through high field grass. Looking ahead past the rolling hills Caroline could see to the higher places of a mountain

“Where have all these animals come from?” asked Wolf as he walked at the lion’s side.

“The word is spreading. They come from the towns and villages, and even the great city.”

“It is because of your great powers.”

“My father’s great powers lent to me,” corrected the lion. “In me, they can see and know my father – the greatest lion of all lions.”

The multitude of zebras, gorillas, penguins, moose, reindeer, mongoose, crocodiles, frogs, lizards and many more kinds of animals walked behind the lion. It was quite a colorful sight to see all these two legged and four legged creatures, some short others tall, some fat and other thin, some with spots others with horns or antlers, coming up the mountain trail.

Then after climbing the mountain, the lion came to a large meadow. Heavy trees cupped around the meadow of field grass and wild flowers. He came over and stood on a large stone above the multitude not speaking. From this spot he looked out over the animals and their antlers and spots and horns.

“Shall I feed you with truth or food, or both?”

“Since you bring it up your majesty, we are very hungry – kind sir,” called out an ape down below bowing.

“Wolf, what do we have to feed this multitude of animals and their families?”

Wolf came forward and bowed his head.

“I’m sorry master, we only have a few loaves and fishes. We must send the animals away if you desire to feed them.”

“No, I have compassion on these. I will provide,” said the lion, his kind blue watery eyes saying more than his words.

At that Wolf brought over seven loaves and a few fishes. He set the baskets on the rock upon which the lion stood above the multitude. The lion gave thanks looking heavenward into the clearness of the blue sky. Then the lion turned to Caroline, Wolf, and Beaver.

“Friends, distribute these baskets and all will be fed.”

And then something strange happened, and continued to happen, over and over. Caroline could not believe her eyes. Every time she returned to the large stone, more baskets of bread and fish magically appeared. And after the multitude was fed, there were leftover of seven baskets full. Always amazed at the lion, Caroline looked up to the great stone from which the lion spoke.

“Have ye any who are lame, blind, or in need?”

One by one the animals in need came forward. They stood below the stone looking up. The lion roared loudly from the rock. The sound of the roar passed through the animals below him and went beyond out into the forest. Then the animals below in need began to stand and run and see. All let out joyful animal noises of growls and grunts, and snorts and screeches. And there were many grateful tears as well.

“Pease sit. I have much to teach you of my father,” said the lion feeling pleased at the joy he was able to give the animals.

Then from the great stone the lion taught the animals. Caroline, Wolf, and Beaver continued to make their way through the hungry multitude handing out more and more loaves and fishes. When they were finished, the lion said, “Go home and ponder these great truths of my father that I have taught you,” said the lion turning from the crowd.

Then the lion came down from the great stone and greeted Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver.

“Thank you for your help in feeding this multitude.”

“Master, we are your servants. We are pleased to do anything for you,” said Wolf bowing his head trying to understand the great miracles he had just beheld.

“Then let’s go about doing good work. It thrills my heart ever so much to do good works,” said the lion as he turned to take a narrow path on the mountainside with Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver following.

The five friends came down the mountain path sweating in the sun chatting about the deliciousness of Mrs. Raccoon’s fish stew and pastries. Then sensing a presence behind her Caroline looked over her shoulder. She looked at the lion.

“Ra’el, a few of them are still following us,” said Caroline looking back over her shoulder.

“I know. Should we make a run for it?” laughed the lion.

But it was only a half laugh that came from the lion’s great mouth and jaw.

“If you don’t mind me saying something, you look a little down in the mouth,” asked Beaver of the lion.

“I am,” admitted the lion.

“Do you mind if I ask why – being as great as you are?”

The lion gave a half smile.

“I desire to feed all animals the bread of life and give them the living water, but most of the animals in that multitude only wanted to eat the food of this world.”

Caroline had never seen the lion affected in such a way. A new love for the lion came over her. It was not a new feeling, but a deeper feeling about the lion. It was the realization that the lion could be made happy or sad by the things she and others did.

“I want the bread of life and the living water,” said Caroline playing with her long brown hair.

“I know you do. And it pleases me.”

The late morning sun shining nicely on their backs, and coming farther down the mountain, a leopard who had lost his spots called to the lion. Caroline noticed the leopard’s bandages where his spots had fallen from.

“I beg you your majesty, please heal me of my leprosy. I have lost my spots and spots are ever so dear to a leopard.”

The lion stopped on the road and came over to the leopard.

“Do you know you are disobeying customs coming to us who are clean when the rulers, the badgers and peacocks and foxes and crocodiles, consider you unclean?”

“I know your greatness. But I have no other way. The suffering without spots is unbearable. The badgers, peacocks, and foxes and crocodiles may punish me if they wish,” said the leopard kneeling at the paws of the lion.

The lion smiled at the leopard and a wave of joy came through the leopard and shined in his eyes.

“I can see you are a good and kind leopard.”

“Lord, if you will, I believe that you can make me clean and give me back my spots,” said the leopard trembling – admiring the great lion like a rising sun on the horizon bearing the promise of a new day.

Beaver came over and reached up high and tapped the lion on the shoulder with his paw. The great head of the lion bowed down. Beaver stood on his tippy toes and cupped his hand around his mouth and put it next to the lion’s ear.

“If you touch him you may catch his leprosy,” cautioned the beaver with a polite whisper.

Without hesitation the lion put his paw on the leopard.

“Be thou clean.”

Immediately the leopard’s spots magically returned and all his sores were instantly healed. He looked about himself amazed and stood on his hind legs and jumped high in the air shouting for joy.

“See you tell no animal,” smiled the lion.

Chapter 12

Caroline sat in her bed in her nightgown. Dinner tray on her lap, she stabbed her meatloaf with her fork. She sliced off a piece near the top smothered with ketchup. Maggie moved about Caroline's hospital room knocking into things just as any curious two year old will do. Caroline's mother's sat in the chair between the window and the bed. See also sat with her dinner tray on her lap. She did not eat but moved her food around with her fork. Her eyes were red again from crying and she did not scold Maggie for knocking about the room. Her eyes had the look of a recent cry, and her nose was red too. Caroline could tell something serious was weighing on her mother's mind.

"You know I am twelve," said Caroline impudently, which is a big word meaning direct and a little rude.

"What is that dear?" asked Caroline's mother in way that showed she was not paying attention and lost in faraway thoughts.

"I see something is bothering you and it's about me. I'm a very mature twelve year old. You can tell me what is the matter."

Caroline's mother smiled at her daughter.

"Your father told me that he told you about Chester and the mouse's tail. I just about jumped to the sun." said Caroline's mother with a weak smile.

"Mother, please tell me why I'm not getting better. I've been in this hospital so long. Is that why you cry all the time?"

Caroline's mother stood and came over to the bed. She looked down into Caroline's face and smiled. She lovingly squeezed Caroline's shoulder.

"You are a very mature girl. And a very brave girl. It is just so hard to not have you home with us."

"What did Doctor Snodgrass just tell you? Is that why you were crying?"

Caroline's mother sat back in her chair and looked out the window into the mulberry branches.

"I have a right to know," said Caroline.

"It's just that you're not getting better faster enough. I'm not very patient when it comes to my daughters' wellbeing. That's all," said Caroline's mother.

"Don't be sad mother. The lion will help me."

"What?"

"The lion will help me."

"Who's this lion?" asked Caroline's mother smiled bravely. She nodded her head like adults do when they think of the childish notion of their children.

"Then please ask this make-believe lion to work some magic for us all," said Caroline's mother.

"I will. And he's not make believe."

"Would you like to play a board game before bedtime?" asked Caroline's mother.

"Peck, peck, peck."

A pinging sound on the window.

Caroline's mother turned in her chair towards the window. Seeing a blackbird she lurched back in her chair. Caroline laughed.

"Peck, peck, peck," came the pinging again.

"It's alright mother. He has a message for me from the lion. Will you please lift the window open," asked Caroline knowing her mother would not do such a dangerous sort of thing.

"Peck, peck, peck."

"He really wants in," said Caroline's mother wrongly assuming that this bird was part of Caroline's childish made up fantasy world.

"He's a talking bird. He really talks. He's here with a message from the lion."

"We will not open that window. That bird will fly about the room and then out into the hospital."

"But look at him panting. He's flown quite a distance. He's come from another world?"

"Hmmm ... Another world?" nodded Caroline's mother.

"Yes, the lion's world."

"You have such a curious imagination," said Caroline's mother sitting down again. "Did you want to play a board game?"

"No, I'm really tired," said Caroline faking a yawn and stretching her arms up in the air.

"You do look tired."

"Peck, peck, peck."

"That nasty bird," said Caroline's mother standing and coming over to the window. "I should get the orderly."

"No," objected Caroline.

At the window sill Caroline's mother grabbed a newspaper and rolled it up and swatted at the window. The blackbird flew off into the night. Caroline's head sunk.

"Well, I'm glad that is taken care of," said Caroline's mother. "If you don't want to play a board game I guess we'll be off."

Caroline watched her mother and Maggie leave the room. At the doorway her mother turned. She blew Caroline a kiss. Then with her sweetly mother hand she turned off the lights and shut the door. For a moment Caroline pretended she was in her bed at home and her mother had just turned off the lights after a sweet goodnight kiss.

With the door closed Caroline jumped out of the bed. She raced over to the window. Lifting the frame the cold of the night came into the room.

"Come back blackbird. Please come back," Caroline shouted out into the dark night.

Hoping the blackbird would return, Caroline pulled a blanket over her shoulders. She knelt on the floor resting her forearms on the window sill. She looked out into the night. The night air was cool against her skin. Feeling her eyes growing heavy she lay her head on her arms as a pillow. Then she began to snore.

Chapter 13

Standing alone in a field, her head craned backwards, looking up into the night sky, to Caroline the stars seemed to go on forever and ever. The stars spread out in wide clusters of natural light. With no street lights, or store front lights, or any manmade light for that matter, the stars shined more luminous (a big word meaning brightly) than Caroline had ever seen before. For in the lion's world there was no electricity or hydro-electric dams or wind turbines, nor indoor plumbing – which is a matter that will not be discussed further.

Looking around her new surroundings, Caroline noticed that she was in a village with homes made out of mudbricks with smooth branches and piles and piles of straw for roofs. In the moonlight she made out the shadows of the town fountain and well which a wooden bucket was dropped down into to fetch water. She could see the trees and shrubs growing around the well.

Hearing a familiar voice, Caroline recognized it at once. She looked across the village square. In the moonlight the lion talked to a badger. From all the bad talk she had heard about badgers, peacocks, crocodiles, and foxes this surprised Caroline.

“Lion, we know that you are a great teacher sent from the Greatest Lion of All. For no one can do these miracles, except the Greatest Lion of All be with him,” complimented the badger.

“Except a badger, or any animal, be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of the Greatest Lion of All.”

“Born again?” asked the badger.

“Marvel not that I said this. You must be born again.”

“How can an animal be born when he is old?”

The badger looked at the lion with a confused look on his pointy face.

“I am to bring new life.”

“Oh bother,” said the badger still not understanding and waddling away into the darkness of the night.

Caroline watched the badger disappear. She came over to the lion as he lifted a bucket from inside a well by a rope to quench his thirst.

“Hello lion,” said Caroline.

The giant lion startled, dropping the rope. The bucket made a splashing sound at the bottom of the well.

“Oh, hello Caroline. You scared me.”

Caroline laughed at the thought that she could scare a lion.

“Why did the badger not understand?”

“His heart is cold. But to you Caroline it is given to understand. Your heart is warm. Your heart will gladly take in the light.”

Caroline let out a long yawn, her mouth wide open, arms stretched out to the night sky. Caroline caught the lion laughing.

“What are you laughing at?” asked Caroline finishing the yawn.

“I thought you were going to roar like a lion with your mouth so wide open, but no sound came out.”

Caroline laughed at the thought of roaring like a lion. Then let out another yawn, but not so big of a yawn this time.

“Would you like to spend tomorrow with me?” asked the lion.

“Why yes, if the dream doesn’t end.”

“I’ll make sure the dream holds,” said the lion. “Can you stay awake a little longer?”

“I’ll try my best.”

“I have one more important thing to do today and it involves Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver. They will be coming soon.”

“What is that?”

“To teach what the badger would not learn.”

With that the lion walked across the square and to a sycamore tree. He put his back against the tree trunk and scratched his great coat. Then he lay at the base of the tree.

“You are tired,” said the lion to Caroline. “Here, lay against me and sleep. And I will take a cat nap while we wait for our friends.”

Caroline nestled against the lion. With one glance at the moon she was asleep. The lion lay holding sleep at bay as he waited. Then in the night he could see Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver approaching. They spotted the lion and came over to the sycamore tree.

“So good to see you,” said the lion. “Excuse me if I do not rise for the sleeping Caroline.”

“Not a problem at all,” said Wolf.

“We are excited to be called to hear more of your teachings,” said Kingfisher landing at the paws of the lion.

“Yes, indeed,” said Beaver taking a seat.

“Except a Wolf, Kingfisher, or Beaver, or any animal, be born again he or she cannot see the kingdom of the Greatest Lion of All.”

“Born again?” asked Wolf.

“Yes, born again.”

“How is that possible?” asked Beaver scratching his head with his pointy claws.

“I bring new life to those who believe in me. Those who believe I will make to become shiny new.”

Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver could see the lion almost perfectly in the light of the full moon. He looked different in the silvery light.

“My father has chosen you to spread my word through the world.”

“We will do our best,” said Wolf.

“As you go out into the world, after I am gone, the learned will object. They will not like your words.”

“To what can they possibly object in you?” asked Kingfisher.

The lion gave a polite and understanding laugh and smile.

“They will point to the hard things of this world – the suffering, the sadness, and say that my father, the Greatest of All Lions does not exist. For he being all good could not have created such a world with hard things.”

“But he did ... he did. It is the truth,” said Beaver.

“The learned say that this creation upon which we stand is a hall of doom – with sufferings, hunger, sickness, and death,” said Wolf.

“Yes, and they are right. But those things are necessary – and for a wise purpose in my father. But mixed in with the hard things, there is also much joy and happiness and good things built into this world.”

“Lion, why must death and suffering and sadness come? I’ve wondered about that myself many times,” said Kingfisher. “And yes, there is much good in the world as well – most of it good.”

“There are two reasons. First, you are eternal creatures – with much potential to be filled with light and truth and joy. You need to learn these things for yourself, to receive these things. You must learn to rely on your own powers to become these things.”

“What is the second reason?” asked Wolf.

“Only in this world may an animal’s true potential be unfolded and rise to the surface. It is a difficult journey at times, but there is delight and joy in it as well. This unfolding may only take place in the grand drama of life on this world where things are not always easy.”

“Why only in this world?” asked Kingfisher.

“By living in this world of hard things, the true in heart are broken into by suffering and sadness. That allows my father’s light inside. Then I bring the light and healing and real happiness.”

“Oh sweet happiness. That all animals would be happy – what a world this would be,” exclaimed the Beaver excitedly.

“After my great sacrifice, I will shine even more divine light upon death and suffering and sadness – all the shadows and darkness of this world fleeing. I will consume it. I will devour it. Then I fill it with the new green of budding life and wash it over with living and cascading waters.”

“That is beautiful indeed,” said Kingfisher.

“Yes Kingfisher. And my father grows even more glorious with each creation in which I do this, for it is his light that I fill.”

Their hearts swelling, light stirring within them, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver sat stunned in the moonlight by the new ideas and light coming from the lion.

“After I am gone, you are to teach that each animal is a miracle – like the rest of this glorious creation. Teach that right near his pounding heart, if he or she will listen, each animal is godlike in themselves like the Great Lion that my father is, and if they knew this, they would be fascinated by and even fearful of themselves.”

“I’m a miracle?” asked Beaver his voice trailing off into amazement.

“Yes you are, and you need to be born again through me, to throw off the pride and vanity of this world, to see it.”

“We may become born again through you?” asked Kingfisher.

“Yes. You need to free yourself to be yourself. How do your hearts feel as I reveal these things to you?” smiled the lion.

“Humbled, at our greatness,” said Wolf feeling as if he stood in a pillar of light filled with awe and reverence from the feelings in his heart at the words of the lion.

“Excited and alive in the possibilities,” said Kingfisher solemnly.

“I’m humbled too, like Wolf, and a little afraid at what you will make out of me – I’m only a little awkward beaver,” said Beaver feeling new life surging through him.

“All of you, and all animals, need to be born again. You need to open yourselves to the possibilities of this life, open yourselves to your destinies, open yourselves to the marvels of your creation.”

“How? How do we open ourselves up to these new possibilities?” asked Wolf.

“Truth. Come to love truth. Discover the true nature of things and yourselves.”

“How?” asked Wolf urgently.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

“I see it now. I’ve known this all along. You are the truth,” said Kingfisher, this realization dawning through him.

“Animals must come unto me, and then listen to the quiet inner voice inside them where my father speaks the loudest and delivers the most profound truths.”

“But how are we to do this?” asked Wolf growing impatient with himself that he was not understanding these great truths more fully.

“Allow the things that do not bring happiness to die inside you, and be born again – receive a newness of life in me.”

“How am I to die?” asked Kingfisher. “I’m particularly fond of living.”

The lion laughed.

“Let your doubts, your selfishness, your pride, your envy, your jealousies to wither like untended grapes on the vine. Let them die away and come unto me for a new, better life.”

“We will. We will,” said Beaver.

“Let your true self, which you have buried inside you, to rise to the surface – like a seedling struggling through the earth to reach the sunlight. Let the truth of my living water penetrate through the hard soil of your souls to reach you down inside. Then rise, rise, rise above the fallen earth into the sky.”

Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver sat in the moonlight nodding at the great things the lion taught, an excitement building inside of them.

“When you are born again, you will be able to take my light and add it to your inner flame – your eternal spark. You will plunge into life. You will become a restless spirit – full of vigorous life in me. That is where true happiness is to be found.”

“My heart burns within me to here you talk of such things,” said Wolf his eyes filling with tears. “I have lived such an ordinary life until you found me by the seashore.”

“My father has given you, and all the animals to me, minds capable of great thoughts, glorious imaginations, desires for truth, beauty, and goodness – and to dream. These all need to be unfolded, and they are to

be unfolded in this world. You may live on this tiny territory now, but you are destined to live in galaxies and universes and dimensions beyond visible universes – forever and ever.”

“Live on worlds other than this world?” marveled Beaver.

“Yes Beaver, you are eternal. But first you must break your spirits out of the prisons you have created for yourself and be born again into newness of life.”

“Give me a hammer and chisel and I’ll break out of any prison for the things you speak of,” said the Beaver defiantly.

“The meanness of the badgers, peacocks, crocodiles, and foxes come because they hide their true selves beneath their love of money and high positions and thrones. They cheat the poor. They steal from the widow and orphans – all for the love of money and the praise of each other.”

“They are mean,” said Wolf.

“I shudder to think of their evil works,” said Kingfisher.

“They frighten me,” said Beaver.

“They lock themselves in golden cages and put the bluest skies of possibilities out of their reach. They seek to build themselves up instead of trusting in my father and his purpose of building animals to live beyond themselves in the grand drama of life and becoming their true selves. If the badgers, peacocks, crocodiles, and foxes could see what they could become through my father they would shudder – as I’ve said they would even be fearful of themselves.”

The thought of who he could become through the lion was swimming around and around inside Wolf’s mind. He could hardly contain his excitement and the love he was feeling for the lion, knowing this was only possible through the lion and his father, the Greatest Lion of all Lions that Ever Were.

“The animal that gives over the meaning of his life, and his whole soul and living energy, to my father will truly live. Then may an animal be open to life, generous, courageous and truly touch the lives of others.”

“We do indeed want to truly live in this way,” said Beaver.

“It is my father’s desire that each animal be born again and reach beyond the limits of the small worlds they make for themselves. But they must turn to the highest powers within themselves and grasp the new realities that my father opens to them. This is where you really live and your spirit is nourished. This is true happiness.”

“Lion, these are such great things. I cannot remember them all. Will you teach us about them again and again so we can teach others?”

“Yes, my sons. Over and over again until they become part of you – until you have mastered them. For your calling is to bring these teachings to all the world.”

“All the world? Us?” exclaimed Beaver.

The lion laughed.

“Here is what I want you to remember tonight. The parts of you that do not bring happiness must die away. Through me, and my truth, you must let your doubts evaporate like the morning dew before a summer sun. Let the powers in me open up in you. Then you are born again – a new creature. With this new hope, you may stand bravely

looking life square in the eye and see things as they really are. Through me, you may look to the horizon of unlimited possibilities of life that stretch out before you that come from the life-giving forces of my father.”

“Oh my, you expect us to teach these things to the whole wide world?” asked Beaver, the task seeming so big to him that he was about to faint.

“Yes, you are to teach these things to all – that all may have new life and become new creatures in me.”

“It seems beyond our abilities,” said Wolf.

The lion smiled kindly at Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver.

“My father was chosen you. Remember, he sees deep below the layers where you have hidden your true selves.”

“We will do our bests,” said Kingfisher.

“No,” said Wolf. “We will do this for you lion, for we love you. We will give our lives teaching these things.”

The lion smiled and Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver could see tears in the lion’s eyes. Seeing the tears caused something sweet and tender and living to jump within each one of them.

“I will send others to help, now and in the future. And after your days have passed, and you join me in the invisible world of spiritual wonder, others will follow. And in the last days of time, I will send the great prophet Kierkegaard to teach all men and women in Caroline’s day to throw aside the darkness of their world and come into the fulness of life, which is centered in me.”

“Lion, we will follow you forever,” said Wolf.

“I know you will. I have said much and you must rise early to cast your nets on the morrow. For now keep these things locked away in your hearts. Listen to the inner voice and my father will explain more and make these things part of you.”

“Oh thank you lion. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts for what you have taught us this night,” said Kingfisher.

“Go on now,” said the lion. “For I am tired, and I have much work to do tomorrow.”

With that Wolf and Beaver stood. Kingfisher flapped his wings and landed on Wolf’s back. The lion smiled and soon his eyes were shut tight and he was snoring.

Chapter 14

Waking, Caroline lifted her head from the lion's mane and looked about the village. She stretched her arms above her head reaching for the morning sky letting out a yawn. She blinked in the sunlight of the new day. With her back against the lion she could feel his deep breaths as he slept. She quietly tried to roll off the great lion thinking she rather liked sleeping out under the stars with a lion to protect her and keep her warm.

"Where do you think you're going my little one," laughed the lion playfully reaching for Caroline with his teeth on the neck of her dress.

"I'm sorry. I did not mean to wake you."

"That is alright."

"Did Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver come? I tried to stay awake but couldn't keep my eyes open."

"Yes, they came. Are you hungry?"

"Absolutely famished."

"Then let's get some breakfast," said the lion. "Let us walk by that house. They will invite us inside for breakfast."

As Caroline and the lion approached the house a mother monkey swept outside. The house was a hollowed out tree with branches that reached high into the sky and was perfect for climbing. From the doorway she called out, "would you two care to join us for breakfast?"

"What are you having?" asked the lion.

"That's not very polite," whispered Caroline to the lion.

"Flat bread and honey with figs and dates and nuts."

"I love flat bread and honey with figs and date and nuts," said the lion.

"Me too," said Caroline feeling her stomach turn in hunger at the mention of honey.

"Thank you monkey. I bless your house for this kind act."

"You'll have to fend for yourself. My little monkeys don't always mind their manners. But come in."

The lion and Caroline pushed back the blanket over the entrance. Caroline jolted backwards, her eyes wide as silver dollars, at the sight of so many little monkeys hanging and dangling, jumping and leaping, tussling and wrestling from the rafters and all over the furniture of the house. As the monkey's played, in their excitement they made high-pitch screaming noises like horns on automobiles with impatient drivers stuck in traffic. Caroline covered her ears. It was much louder inside the house than in the open cages at the zoo.

"What have we gotten ourselves into?" asked Caroline quietly so none of the monkeys could hear.

"Attention," called out the mother monkey loudly like a soldier.

The monkeys stopped in an instant and looked at their mother.

"We have a distinguished guest with us this morning. And his friend ... what is your name dear?"

"Caroline."

"And Caroline. I expect you to be on your best behavior. Now take your seats for breakfast."

At first each monkey brother and sister sat at the table quietly. But that lasted less than one minute before one monkey took the grapes from the monkey across the table. Then another monkey took the flat bread while his sister monkey was not looking. In the fracas the honey was tipped. End over end it flew through the air. The jar landed upside down on the lion's head. The mother monkey gasped. The monkey brothers and sisters became quiet. Caroline tried not to laugh as she watched the honey dripping down the lion's mane – but she could not help herself.

In the now quiet house, all eyes were on the lion and the honey dripping down his face from the pot on his head. Then his giant tongue leapt out of his mouth. He licked a long drip off golden honey off his face. The monkey's sat quietly staring at the lion. The mother monkey held her face in her hands. Then the lion smiled, and his smile was so wide, the monkeys and Caroline began to laugh. And the lion laughed too. The mother monkey felt much better.

Then seeing that everything was alright with the lion, a girl monkey jumped on top of the lion's head. She removed the honey pot. Another monkey jumped on top of the lion. They began licking the honey off his mane. Soon all the monkey children had joined in, licking the lion clean. The licking tickled the lion and he laughed heartily. Caroline laughed as well seeing the lion enjoying his bath of sorts.

"I'm so sorry," said the monkey mother looking very frightened. "Please forgive me."

"Nothing to be sorry about. The breakfast was delicious and I'm clean as a whistle. For your kind acts I leave my blessing on this house that you may always have plenty to feed yourself and your active little monkeys."

The monkey children still clinging to his mane, the lion leapt outdoors. Standing in the morning sunlight the lion placed each monkey on the ground before him in a straight line. For a moment he looked at them sternly not speaking. Knowing of their bad behavior the monkey children looked down at the ground.

"You have a kind mother. I command you to always obey here," said the lion.

The monkey children looked up at lion seriously and reverently.

"Now, who here likes to play hide and go seek?" asked the lion.

The monkey children jumped joyfully, making high pitched monkey noise you hear at the zoo when the monkeys become excited. The lion put his giant paws over his eyes and began to count. "1, 2, 3 ..."

To hide, Caroline and the monkeys spread out in all directions, up in trees, behind houses, and down inside the well.

"... 100. Ready or not, here I come."

After finding all the monkeys and returning them to their mother, who was still embarrassed from their earlier antics, the lion and Caroline waved goodbye and walked out of the village. Alone now, walking through green countryside Caroline wanted to ask the lion a question.

"What's on your mind little one?"

"Of all the houses he could have sent you to, why did your father send you to that house?"

"He has a sense of humor," laughed the lion.

"I'll never forget the sight of you with all those monkey's climbing over you licking you clean," Caroline laughed.

"I enjoyed it. It makes me happy to make animals laugh."

“I’ve never thought of him as having a sense of humor?”

“He is full of laughter. I should say good laughter. He only wants happiness for all.”

“I’ve been taught all my life that God was rather serious ... that he was not always pleased with me. Because I do have trouble being good sometimes.”

The lion stopped. He turned to look at Caroline. There was a softness in his eyes. His head tilted a little. Caroline had learned that when she saw that softness and tilt that the lion had something important to say to her – and she also knew that he loved her.

“Not everybody understands my father for who he is. I want you to know – and never forget – Caroline that he is full of love. He desires for you and everybody to be happy – to embrace the joy that he holds out for all. He has given me to this world so there can be happiness. And regarding your behavior, remember to always do your best and that because of me there are second chances... actually, third, fourth, fifth, sixth chances – even all the way to infinity.”

At the lion’s words, a new feeling had entered Caroline’s heart. It was a feeling that in her young heart she had never had before, that the Greatest Lion of All Lions desired her happiness, her joy – not to scold or punish her. He did not want to punish her at all. He wasn’t always trying to catch her doing wrong. He wanted to bless her, to fill her full of light and truth and goodness. Now Caroline understood the Lion of All Lions wanted to do special things for her. Of course, she should be a good girl – and do her best. But she did not need to be a perfect girl, nor did she need to be down on herself when she wasn’t perfect. That was the work of the lion.

This new feeling, this new knowledge, was very precious to Caroline and a new, stronger happiness beamed inside her.

The lion smiled at Caroline and turned to head along the lane. Caroline came up beside him and rested her hand on his back. As they walked through the countryside of green fields and wildflowers, Caroline remembered that for a while she had wanted to ask the lion for a special gift, but had never felt it proper. But now that she felt these deeper feelings, and she could see how much the lion wanted to help and bless others, she could hardly stop herself from asking.

“You want something from me?” said the lion reading Caroline’s thoughts.

“I do?”

“Yes, you do. It is okay to ask me.”

Caroline twirled her long brown hair in her fingers.

“We’ll ...”

“Why are you hesitating? Your wish is my command.”

“I don’t like to ask for things.”

“Ask,” commanded the lion with a short roar. “I know what it is.”

“I miss my hair,” blurted out Caroline.

“It’s very beautiful hair and it’s attached to you. It’s right on top of your head,” smiled the lion.

Caroline let out a laugh and she didn’t feel so bad for asking.

“In my world I have no hair. The medicine they give me to keep me alive makes my hair fall out.”

“I see. We’ll if my mane fell off I’d be very sad too.”

“Can you give me hair in my world, the real world I live in?”

“I will have to ask my father.”

“Do you have to ask your father for every miracle you perform?”

“No, not in this world. But your world is another matter.”

“I don’t want you to have to trouble the Greatest Lion of all Lions that Ever Were,” said Caroline feeling a little scared.

“It is no trouble at all. He lives to bless and lift. I will ask.”

Chapter 15

Caroline stirred in the morning light. Then waking more fully, she slid out of bed. She stood on the cool tiles. Coming to the window she looked to the sun-filled sky. She glanced at her faint reflection in the window from the sunlight. Then she frantically reached for the top of her head.

“Oh my,” she exclaimed touching her thick brown hair.

Caroline ran her fingers through her hair jumping with excitement. She came into the bathroom and looked in the mirror at her long beautiful hair.

“He did it. He really did,” shouted Caroline gleefully.

At the shout, the door to her hospital room flung open. Caroline listened to it knock with a bang against the wall.

“Is everything alright in here? What’s all the fuss?” asked Nurse Nancy looking frantically about the room.

Caroline came out of the bathroom in her night gown and long, flowing hair. She stopped in front of the nurse and looked up at her.

“Oh my,” shrieked Nurse Nancy stepping back a few paces. “You have hair.”

“I do,” smiled Caroline dancing on the cool tiles.

“It must be a wig. Wherever did your parents get a wig that looks so real?” asked Nurse Nancy.

“It’s not a wig. The lion gave me my hair back.”

“That’s impossible. You’re hair cannot grow back overnight.”

“Well, it did. Here. Pull for yourself,” said Caroline tugging on her hair.

Nurse Nancy came over and pulled on Caroline’s hair. She pulled on the sides and the top and the sides again.

“Ouch,” said Caroline.

“Oh my, that is your real hair. What in the dickens?”

“I’m going to go show the others.”

“No, you can’t,” said Nurse Nancy gripping Caroline by the shoulders.

Caroline squirmed to get away but Nurse Nancy held her grip.

“It will discourage the other children. And something is not right here. I need to get Dr. Snodgrass.”

“Please, please let me go show the others,” said Caroline squirming to free herself from Nurse Nancy’s strong fingers.

“Absolutely not,” said the nurse gripping harder.

“Please,” begged Caroline squirming less.

“In the closet you go,” said the nurse struggling to shove Caroline into the closet.

The chubby nurse gave a final push and Caroline found herself in the dark closet. Caroline pushed against the door, but Nurse Nancy leaned against it.

“You can’t keep me in here,” came Caroline’s muffled voice through the door.

“If you won’t behave and mind me, yes I can,” said the nurse shoving a chair under the door handle.

“Just wait until I tell my mother. You’ll be in big trouble,” called out Caroline. “You’ll lose your job and have to eat out of trashcans.”

“It will be just a minute. I’m bringing Dr. Snodgrass. You stay put.”

Caroline listened to Nurse Nancy leave the room and shut the door. Caroline sat on the floor. Then, in the darkness of the closet, Caroline heard a strange noise.

“Peck, Peck, Peck.”

“Ouch, what’s that touching my leg?”

“It’s me.”

“Who?” cried out Caroline now afraid.

“It’s me the messenger bird.”

“I can’t see you in this dark closet,” said Caroline recognizing the blackbird’s voice.

“It’s me alright. The lion sent me.”

“How ever did you get in this closet?”

“You know, that’s a good question. The lion sent me so right away I started to fly in the direction that I always do and the next thing I know I’m in this dark closet next to you pecking on your shin to get your attention.”

“I need to get out of here and show the other children my hair.”

“I can’t fly too well in here. So I guess we’re trapped.”

“There must be a way out?”

“I don’t know,” said the blackbird shrugging his shoulders, which Caroline could not see.

“What’s got the door shut? Get down low to the floor and look under the door for me.”

The blackbird got down close to the floor and looked through the small slit of light and into the room.

“I see the legs of a chair. Yes, a chair must be leaning under the door handle.”

“Is there a stick or something in here? Feel about,” said Caroline. “We could slide it under the door and knock the chair loose.”

“Here’s a broom.”

“It’s too long. It won’t slide along the floor.”

“Is it wood?”

“Let me feel it again. Yes, it is wood.”

“Put it in the corner.”

“Like this?”

“Yes. I’ll hop up and chip away at it.”

“Okay, but hurry the nurse is bringing the doctor.”

Caroline held the broom and with his beak the blackbird chipped away at the wood of the handle.

“I think you can break it now. Give it a try.”

Caroline snapped the broom handle in half. She slid it under the door knocking the chair loose. Caroline opened the door and sprang outside. The blackbird flew out and landed atop her hospital bed.

“What do we do now? We must hurry,” panicked Caroline.

“How did you get into my world before?” asked the blackbird

“I would dream.”

“I supposed you can’t fall asleep now with all this excitement and it being morning and you having slept all night.”

“No. There must be some other way.”

“I wish I could be more help but I’m kind of a bird brain.”

“I know,” said Caroline leaping over to the window and lifting it up.

“Oh, we can fly out of here. Why didn’t I think of that,” said the blackbird. “But wait you haven’t got wings.”

“I’m going to climb out onto that tree branch. I’ve always wanted to climb in that tree.”

“It’s pretty far. Do you think you’ll make it?”

“I’ve got to try,” said Caroline leaping off the window ledge.

The blackbird flew out the window. In midair he turned to see Caroline jump out and then her fingers missing the branch. He swooped down, but there was nothing he could do. Caroline fell fast towards the ground.

Then “poof” Caroline disappeared in midair just inches from the grassy patch under the mulberry tree.

Chapter 16

With a soft thud, Caroline landed in a field of tall grass. All around her, the green stalks moved in a warm wind. Although the grass was soft underneath, her derriere ached. (You can ask your parents about a derriere.) Rubbing the back of her head she looked up from where she had flattened the grass. Looking closer, she saw something peculiar. With the sun behind it, a large and shaggy shadow moving in the wind appeared in front of her. The shadow was the shape of a large lion, his mane flowing all around him in the gusts.

“Are you alright?” asked the voice of the shadow.

“Ra’el,” said Caroline recognizing the voice.

Caroline stood and hugged the lion.

“You took quite the fall.”

“Yes, thank you for saving me when I fell from the tree ... and thank you for my hair back,” said Caroline hugging the lion tighter now.

“My pleasure. A girl’s hair is important to her. Would you like to spend the day with me?”

“That would be wonderful.”

“I admire your bravery for jumping out the window. You know, I could send you back, but you’d probably hit the ground pretty hard from that second story window,” laughed the lion.

“I’ll stay with you, thank you,” smiled Caroline.

“Then take a walk with me and we’ll see what good we can find today.”

The lion and Caroline walked along a dusty lane. Every so often they passed under trees that arched over the road. The shade was welcome. In places along the road wildflowers bobbed in the breeze. Not before too long a cheetah came running towards the lion.

“Lion, my servant lies at home sick, very sick.”

“We will help,” said the lion looking concerned.

“Thank you kind lion. I have heard of your mighty works and miracles.”

“You are a soldier,” said the lion.

“You guessed right.”

By now Caroline knew the lion never guessed at anything.

“And you have many animals under your command.”

“That is true.”

Caroline noticed the cheetah looking away from the lion. There was shame on his face around his whiskers.

“Cheetah, is something wrong?”

The Cheetah looked at the lion and then away.

“Speak to me. All will be made right.”

“I have done and seen many things in battle of which I am not proud. And you are ...”

The cheetah paused.

“I am?”

“The son of the Greatest Lion of all Lions that Ever Were. I am not worthy that you should come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed.”

The lion looked long and hard into the cheetah’s face – as if sensing the cheetah’s past cruel and brutal deeds as a soldier. The longer and harder the lion looked at the Cheetah, the more and more unworthy he felt to be in the lion’s presence. And although the cheetah could not put his feelings in words, something within him sensed the greatness of the lion, and how the lion was the life and light of the world, and the source of all the things he had destroyed in battle.

“Here, here cheetah. All animals, both good and bad, need not feel uncomfortable in my presence. For I am not only life and light, but I am love.”

“Thank you kind lion,” said Cheetah staring at the ground.

“Perhaps you did not understand me. Look at me – I am love.”

The Cheetah raised his head. He looked up at the great lion. The lion did not smile but looked noble and dignified. Yet, there was also moistness in his eyes. Then a reassuring smile.

“Cheetah, go thy way; and as you have believed, so be it done unto you and your servant.”

“Thank you kind lion. I will never forget this.”

Caroline watched as the cheetah sped away, down the lane in great leaps and bounds. At the rise in the road between two clumps of grass and tall leafy trees, he stopped. He let out a growl of thanks raising his paw in the air – as a soldier would do. Then the cheetah turned swiftly and was on his way. Caroline knew that he would run many hours, desiring greatly to see his servant well as the lion had promised.

Once the cheetah was out of sight, Caroline and the lion continued their journey. Coming down the slope of a mountain, they passed through green pastures. The field grass whisked against Caroline’s legs. She put out her palms touching the bobbing stalks. Ahead in the distance she could see a city gate. Then coming into the city, Caroline and the lion watched as a young billy goat who had died was being carried out of the city to be buried. Caroline and the lion stopped to look at the sad animals weeping and crying.

“He is the only son of his mother,” said the lion leaning over to Caroline.

Caroline thought to ask the lion how he seemed to know something like that when he had just set foot in the city, but then remembered she knew the answer.

One by one, the animals of the city came forward and comforted the mother. Caroline could see the mother billy goat crying. Seeing the mother’s tears made Caroline, who was already really sad, even sadder. Caroline felt as if she would cry, her heart breaking for the mother billy goat. Caroline looked over at the lion hanging his head too. His eyes were moist again. Caroline remarked to herself what great love the lion had in his heart for all animals and all things.

From where they stood, Caroline watched the lion come forward. He bowed his head and then smiled at the mother billy goat. It was a smile with both sadness and goodness in it.

“May I?” asked the lion looking at the mother raising his paw to touch her son.

“Yes,” said the mother noticing the lion’s weepy eyes.

The lion gently touched her billy goat son.

“Young billy goat, I say unto thee, arise,” said the lion.

Then coming to life, the billy goat sprang to his feet and let out a loud “hurrah.”

Not believing their eyes, Caroline and the villagers rejoiced. The mother billy goat cried the most beautiful tears of joy. Her tears looked like lovely starlight to Caroline.

“A great prophet is risen up among us,” crowed a rooster.

“The Greatest Lion of All Lions has blessed us with his kindness,” cooed a flock of geese.

“The divine light has entered our village,” said a horse.

“He can stop death in its tracks,” barked a white dog named Bear and a black dog named Bingo.

After saying their goodbyes, and the animals cheering, Caroline and the lion left the city. They traveled in the early afternoon through the countryside to another city. In this city a deer came to them and fell at the lion’s feet.

“Be careful with this one,” said a hyena nearby. “She is filled with evil spirits.”

“Evil spirits?” asked Caroline a little frightened.

“She is very sick in her mind,” said the hyena.

The lion studied the deer laying at his feet. Then with the light within him, the lion inhaled a great breath. He slowly blew his breath of life into the face of the deer. Although invisible to Caroline, she could sense something dark and menacing now in the air. She watched the deer limp at the lion’s feet. For a moment, the evil spirit hung in the air making Caroline feel gloomy. Caroline looked to the lion. The lion looked at Caroline. But his look was more than a glance. Caroline could see that he was looking deep into her eyes. Then in an instant, the gloomy sadness left Caroline and she felt happy again. Caroline thought how the evil spirit, although invisible, had disappeared into thin air because of the lion.

The deer no longer limp stood excitedly on her feet.

“Thank you kind lion. You truly are the son of the Greatest Lion of all Lions.”

“You are welcome.”

Caroline watched as the deer in high leaps joyfully leapt away across the village square. Caroline came over to the lion.

“A light came into the deer’s face making her beautiful,” observed Caroline to the lion.

“Yes, I put light into her. She had been in darkness in her heart for a long time.”

“She was beautiful before, but with this new light she is even more beautiful.”

“Yes, she is radiant.”

Caroline stepped back and looked up at the lion and felt so much love for him that she thought her heart would burst.

“I desire to fill all animals with light – brightness even sunnier than the brightest sunrise.”

Caroline wanted to ask the lion a question. But she was afraid to learn the answer. The lion nudged Caroline on her arm with his wet nose. Realizing the lion knew her heart’s desire she built up her courage.

“Have you put your light into me?”

“I have. Well, at least as much light as you have allowed me.”

“So I can have more light?”

“Yes, eternities of light await you if you will allow me to fill you with this light.”

“I do. I do.”

“Would you like to know a mystery?”

“Yes.”

“My father showed me something about this deer.”

“What did he show you?”

“That soon she will follow me to the end.”

Caroline did not like the word “end” nor the sad look on the lion’s face when he said it.

“What do you mean by the end?”

The lion hung his head and looked at the ground. Sensing Caroline’s worry, he turned and looked up at her. But he did not speak. His pause made Caroline feel sad and more worried. She could see something of pain and fear in the lion’s face, which she had never seen before.

“It is the will of my father that I go into a garden and take upon me all the pain and darkness and emptiness of this world.”

“Why?”

The lion turned his head and looked off into the distance at the horizon where the greenness of the land gave way to a blue sky that stretched out as if it would never end.

“Please tell me why,” asked Caroline softly coming over and resting her hand on the lion’s shoulder to comfort him.

“So all things in this world, all animals, and the trees and the flowers, the mountains and the sea can be changed and filled with light and truth and goodness – so they may receive joy.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

Caroline’s words felt hollow to her. She knew the lion was talking about great things – things so great that not even the smartest person in the world times infinity could understand them. But the lion understood them all.

“It will be wonderful,” said the lion smiling at Caroline, his usual joy and liveliness and playfulness coming back into his voice.

The lion turned to face Caroline. Although he seemed happy, Caroline could see moistness again in his eyes. Then a single solitary tear ran down his tawny face.

“I’m sorry lion. I see this upsets you.”

“No, on the contrary. It will be difficult, but for this purpose did I come into the world.”

“You are the greatest lion ever,” said Caroline reaching around the lion’s neck and hugging him.

“My father is the greatest. I am but his servant.”

“I’d like to meet your father one day.”

“You shall. You shall,” said the lion softly. “And there is something else that you should know.”

“What is that?”

“After I go into the garden and take upon me all the darkness and pain and sorrow of this world, so that I may fill it with light, I shall allow myself to be taken into the hands of the badgers, peacocks, crocodiles, and foxes

to be killed. You and the deer, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver, and all others who will remain with me shall see this great sacrifice.”

This should have made Caroline cry right then – and it would have been a long cry too. But instead, the lion’s words caused Caroline to feel an awful hollowness in her chest. She could not breathe for a while.

“NO, say it isn’t so,” cried Caroline grasping and hugging about the lion’s mane.

“It be must so,” comforted the lion nuzzling Caroline which sent a tickle along her neck.

The lion could feel Caroline crying through his great mane.

“But be of good cheer.”

“How could I be of good cheer?” asked Caroline stepping back from the lion and wiping tears from her eyes.

“Because I shall rise again,” said the lion comforting Caroline with his paw gently placed on her shoulder.

“I don’t want you to die,” cried Caroline with tears now streaming down her cheeks.

“We all die. It is all part of the great work of my father – to expand souls to fill them with light which leads to eternal joy.”

“But it hurts so much when I think about you dying. It hurts so much I feel as my heart will burst open right now.”

“It is required,” said the lion firmly then looking away.

“I don’t like ... I don’t like it. In fact, I hate it. I don’t want you to leave me,” cried Caroline. “And in my world I don’t want to die. I hate it. I hate being sick. I hate living in the hospital. I hate all of it. I hate the thought of being buried in some old cemetery under shovelfuls and shovelfuls of dirt.”

At this, the lion gathered Caroline into him with his mighty paws.

“There is no other way, but trust in me,” whispered the lion.

The lion’s embrace felt wonderful to Caroline. She felt his warm lion’s breath blowing on the top of her head.

“Just remember that all is necessary for you to be filled with light – so you can live with me forever. And oh what a time we will have.”

“You mean heaven, right?” asked Caroline wiping her cheeks clear of her tears and looking up in the lion.

“Yes, where there is only light and joy ... no death, no pain, no suffering, no misery as you find in this world. Come, let’s cheer up that broken heart of yours by finding some good works to perform – let’s lift another’s heart to lift our hearts.”

“I would like that,” said Caroline thinking of how red her eyes must be from all her crying and she wondered if her eyes were as red as her mother’s eyes from all her crying over Caroline.

“Remember this. Never, ever forget it.”

“Yes, I will,” said Caroline seeing something fierce and powerful in the lion’s eyes.

“In time I will make all things right – all things!”

Then the lion turned and began to walk up the lane. Caroline watched his tail moving as he walked. Feeling happy now from the lion’s words, she ran up the lane to catch up to the lion.

After walking a great distance, coming through the gate into another city, the dusty travelers looked about the hustle and bustle of daily life there. A wave of compassion passed through both Caroline and the lion as they looked about the animals. Their emotions rising, the light of the lion's divine nature stirring, Caroline watched as the lion's eyes moistened as he watched a misshapen squirrel bowed together. The squirrel could not lift herself apart. Coming over, the lion called, "Squirrel, thou art loosed from thine infirmity."

Caroline watched as the lion raised his giant paw and gently placed it on the tiny squirrel. The squirrel immediately was made straight. She jumped for joy. She was so happy she forgot her manners and as fast as lightening scurried up the lion's leg, then up his chest, around his neck, over his head and kissed him on his nose. Her kiss tickled his nose and he almost sneezed. Caroline quickly put her hand over her mouth so as not to laugh out loud.

"Glory be to you. You are indeed the son of the Greatest Lion of All Lions that Ever Were," said the squirrel.

Caroline could see a badger now. He stood in front of the lion. But the lion did not notice him. The badger knocked on the knee of the giant lion.

"Oh, hello down there," said the lion looking down.

"I am the ruler of this city. There are six days in which animals ought to work, and you have worked by healing on this day?"

The newly straightened squirrel hid her face from the badger. The lion looked angrily at the badger.

"Ought not this squirrel, who the snake of all snakes has made to suffer, be healed by my father?"

"Undo your magic. It is the day in which we worship the Greatest Lion of all Lions."

"You do not know the Greatest Lion of All Lions."

"Undo your magic," said the badger, pointing the lion on his knee.

"I will not undo the healing, for I do the works of The Greatest Lion of All Lions."

At that the lion turned and walked away.

Restless, Caroline stirred in bed. Half asleep she could see the mean face of the badger, it frightening her awake. Reaching out, Caroline felt the sheets on the bed. This calmed her. She looked up at the ceiling and then about her hospital room. She could see everything in the room clear in the morning sunlight. She missed the lion and dreaded another long, boring day at the hospital where nothing fun ever happened. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked out the window at the mulberry tree, and the blue sky and sunshine behind it. Day by day, more leaves were falling from the tree in the autumn season, winter in the distance.

Feeling rather sorry for herself, Caroline's eyes caught her reflection in the window panes. Looking closer she could see strands of long, beautiful, soft, brown hair. She jumped out of bed and looked at herself in the bathroom mirror.

"It's all there. It's all there. It's all there," she called out jumping for joy.

Remembering her last encounter with Nurse Nancy, Caroline kept her voice down.

"I mustn't let the nurses see me," she whispered scheming. "I don't want to be shoved into a closet again."

Caroline came over to her bed and sat down. She pulled the covers up over her legs for the chill in the room. The hospital was always so cold. When Caroline complained, the nurses would say they did not turn up the heat too much so the germs would not multiply. But excited, Caroline tossed the blankets off and slid out of bed. She came over to door and opened it a crack. She peered out at the nurse's station and watched the nurses busying themselves behind the counter. She looked to her left and could see the playroom.

"I must show myself to the other children. They will believe."

Caroline took a deep breath and opened the door wider. She lunged forward and ran down the hall, her long brown hair flowing behind her. She made it past the nurse's station without notice. She could see she was a short distance from the playroom. Looking through the hallway windows she could see the children inside. Then the nurse's voice echoed down the hall.

"No running Caroline," called out a nurse and then noticing Caroline's long flowing hair.

Caroline did not stop. She was closing in on the playroom door. The nurse angrily pointed to the orderly to catch the mischief maker. Caroline did not turn but she heard the plodding feet of Mr. Billsley. She ran faster for the playroom door. She could hear the fat man breathing heavily and closing in on her. Then Caroline grabbed the door handle and swung open the door to the playroom and leapt inside. She turned shutting the door and locking it just as Mr. Billsley frantically turned the door handle and called for the nurses to get the key.

"Look everyone, my hair is back ... my hair is back. They don't want you to know about it."

The children looked up. Through the glass Mr. Billsley twisted the door handle.

"Amazing, how did your hair grow back?" asked a girl with her jaw dropped open.

"The lion from my dreams made it happen."

"It's a wig," mocked Frank from a table playing chess.

"Would the lion get me my hair back?" asked another girl coming forward and touching Caroline's hair.

"I'm sure if it was up to him he would."

“Will you ask him for me?” asked the girl joining the crowd around Caroline.

“Will you ask him for me?” asked another girl stepping forward to admire Caroline’s hair.

“Oh yes, I’ll ask him for all of you,” said Caroline looking over her shoulder.

Caroline could see a nurse unlocking the door, and Mr. Billsley and Dr. Snodgrass standing by. The adults burst into the room. Then feeling the adults come up behind her Caroline squirmed. Dr. Snodgrass came in front of Caroline and dropped to his knee. His head tilted to the side and with big eyes of disbelief he looked at Caroline’s hair not speaking.

“It’s the most lifelike thing I’ve ever seen. Where did your parents get such a realistic wig?”

“It’s real. Here tug. Tug all you like.”

The doctor tugged gently on the ends of Caroline’s hair. Then he ran his fingers through it. At her scalp the doctor examined the roots of her hair. Then he tugged a little harder.

“It’s not a wig. It’s real. The lion made my hair grow back.”

“A lion, hey? Is that what your parents told you?”

“You wouldn’t understand. He’s a lion from another world,” shouted Caroline.

“There has to be an explanation for this,” said Doctor Snodgrass smiling and nodding to the nurses as if he had a hunch and that nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

On bended knee Dr. Snodgrass turned back to Caroline. He grabbed her shoulders and looked into her face.

“When I last saw you, you had no hair. Today you have all your hair ... amazing, utterly amazing.”

“The loin is amazing.”

“I’m sure he is... I’m sure he is.”

Chapter 18

After lunch Caroline retired to her room. She felt happy, yet sleepy at the same time. The happiness was not the excitement you get by thinking ahead to Christmas or birthdays or Halloween night. It was a deeper happiness about the lion. She sat in her hospital bed combing her hair. It meant a great deal to her that the lion had given her hair back, and she loved the lion even more now.

Looking out the window from bed, she could see that it was a cold day outside. The autumn wind had plucked more leaves off the mulberry tree. But it was still quite full of yellow and green. Watching the leaves taken away by the wind made Caroline wonder where all the leaves went. It also made her a little sad that the leaves that were once part of the big leafy tree were now alone somewhere blown up against fences or schoolyards or streams or down in ravines.

Watching the leaves riding in the invisible currents of wind made Caroline feel a little cold herself. She pulled the blankets up around her shoulders. She thought of the approaching winter and how the snow covered world would appear outside her window. She thought how wonderful it would be if she were able to be home by Christmas.

In the warmth under the covers, and feeling full from lunch, Caroline's eyes felt heavier and heavier. Soon she was asleep. In her sleepy state images blew through her mind like the leaves being tossed around outside -- then a lion, wolf, kingfisher, and beaver. Then a jumble of images came rushing forward ... her mother and father, Dr. Snodgrass, Nurse Nancy was doing jumping jacks for some reason and Mr. Billsley rode a child's tricycle. The dream had become rather silly and a smile crossed Caroline's sleepy face.

Then the dream became more real. Caroline could see herself standing in front of a wall of pale blue. It reminded her of the color of the sky on a fall day -- when the blueness of it is darker from less sunlight as the earth slowly tilts on its axis as the summer turns to fall. The wall of blue Caroline stood before seemed to go on forever -- down and up, right and left. There was no starting point or stopping point to it. It was just there like a heavy fog.

Caroline looked up and then side to side along the pale blueness. Looking down Caroline could see there was nothing under her feet. But she did not panic. She felt as calm as if she had been standing on the floor. Below she could see the earth and the buildings and the lakes and rivers looking small, like her miniature toy sets. But then thinking that she may all of sudden fall, she became afraid of plummeting down on those buildings, lakes, river and other small things down there -- like people do when they become afraid of falling in a dream.

To stop herself from falling, Caroline frantically reached into the blueness for something to hold on to. But her fingers went inside the blueness, and there was nothing there to grab. Reaching into the blueness felt like putting your fingers in gelatin at a family dinner when no one is looking, just not as wet and sticky.

Relieved she was not falling, Caroline felt around inside the blueness. She noticed that with her hands she was making a small opening that she could see through. Looking through the opening she could see a smooth dirt lane and trees and grass just ahead of her. She made the opening in the sky larger and larger. Then she stepped

inside and stood on the lane. It was solid under her feet. She looked behind herself. The blueness had vanished and all she could see was the lane leading to where it had begun.

Caroline walked along the road hoping it would take her somewhere meaningful. She assumed that she was in the lion's world, but did not know for sure. She walked a distance enjoying the countryside. Then coming around a bend in the road she could see a city. Close to the city was a grove of trees near and a cave. The idea of exploring a cave gave Caroline an excited feeling as when you are about to embark on a new and mysterious adventure.

Coming down a hill Caroline walked over to the entrance of the cave. She stood in the doorway and peered inside. She reached over and felt the rough texture of the sandstone archway. She looked up and read the lettering on the archway. "Temple of Pan."

Caroline remembered Pan from her studies on Greek mythology in Mrs. McGillicutty's class. She thought back to the drawings that she saw of Pan, a grotesque half-man, half-goat. Pan was the god of shepherds, mountains, forests, and wild animals. Caroline remembered that he was known for chasing nymphs while he played his flute to please them.

Afraid to venture inside, Caroline leaned forward just a little and looked into the cave. From the sunlight Caroline could see carved objects on the wall and deeper inside she thought she could see a shrine. Then a faint voice from nearby came to her hearing.

"Whom do the animals say that I am?"

Recognizing the voice, Caroline excitedly turned away from the temple. She looked through the trees and bushes. In a clearing she saw the lion standing before Wolf, Kingfisher, Beaver and others.

"The animals are not quite sure who you are. They don't quite know what to make of you," said Wolf.

"Wolf, who do you say that I am?" asked the lion, his water blue eyes gazing at Wolf.

"The son of the Greatest Lion of All Lions that Ever Were."

Coming close Caroline watched as the lion turned to all the animals with him.

"For who will save his life shall lose it: and who will lose his life for me shall find it. For what is an animal profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

As the lion finished Caroline came near. The lion's eyes brightened.

"My sweet Caroline. I'm so glad you've come," smiled the lion.

"Me too, I was having such an awful dreadful boring day in the hospital."

"Then what a day we shall share together. Come, climb up and travel with us."

The lion crouched and Caroline climbed up on the lion's back. Beaver followed Caroline in climbing aboard. Kingfisher buzzed around Caroline's shoulder. With Wolf by his side, the lion moved along the road. The ride was bumpy and Caroline could feel Beaver's paws grab onto her so he wouldn't fall off.

"Lion?" asked Caroline.

"Yes?"

"May I ask you a question?"

"Yes, of course child."

"In my world is God the name of your father ... the Greatest Lion of All Lions."

“Yes.”

That was all that the lion said about the matter. Caroline did not speak either as she rode on the lion’s back.

“Caroline? Something is bothering you,” said the lion.

“Yes.”

“May I help?”

“If you can,” said Caroline rather glumly.

“What is it then?”

“My father.”

“What about him?”

“He says that your father is not real. That he’s all made up,” said Caroline letting out a sigh.

For a long time Caroline had wished that her father did believe and knew of the wonderful things that she had come to know in her time with the lion.

“How do you know this about your father?” asked the lion.

“On Sunday mornings, from the other room in my house, I hear my father and mother argue about going to church and God.”

“What do they say?”

“I don’t know, they’d don’t really let me hear. But my father carries around a big book by ... oh, what is his name?”

The lion cocked his head to the side and looked back at Caroline.

“My father has a photograph of him in his study. He’s a thin man who smokes a pipe. He parts his silver hair almost down the middle.”

“Bertrand Russell,” said the lion. “He’s a very smart man indeed.”

“You know him?”

“I know all men and all animals.”

“Well, reading from Mr. Russell’s book, my father argues with my mother.”

“What does your mother say?”

“She listens patiently as my father reads something. Then she says none of it makes sense. Then she waves her hand at my father and says that she just believes and that is the end of the matter and then she comes into the kitchen sometimes mad, sometimes unhappy. And then my father does not go to church with us and he stays in his study by himself most of the day and reads his big books.”

“Why does this make you sad?” asked the lion.

“I wish my father knew you like I do.”

“I do as well,” said the lion continuing to walk along the rode with Wolf at his side.

“Then why doesn’t God come down and shake my father – you know, wake him up?”

The lion let out a laugh. He crouched down low to the earth of the road.

“Climb down Caroline and come around so I can face you.”

Caroline climbed down from the lion and came around and stood facing him. Beaver followed Caroline and stood a little behind her.

“My father does not shake people. It’s not the way he does things.”

“Well, why?” huffed Caroline.

“My father is as patient as eternity. He would much rather have your father find him in his searchings, his longings. Your father doesn’t know it, but that is why he reads those big books.”

“Really?” asked Caroline surprised and a little confused.

“My father has planted many miraculous things along the path of your father’s life – for him to find that will point him to God – the source of all truth. All men and women in time will come to know my father – and me.”

“But that will take too long. I want my father to believe now.”

“Patience, my child. Patience,” said the lion turning his head to look at Caroline.

Caroline could see a softness in the lion’s eyes that calmed her.

“I love the man or animal more that roams the entire world seeking for truth than those not interested in even the smallest morsel of truth and follow me blindly. I am the truth of which all seek whether they know it or not.”

“Which one is my father?” asked Caroline pouting a little.

“The first.”

The lion sat back and studied Caroline’s expression.

“May I ask what is wrong with not believing in my father? My father does not force anyone to believe.”

“Well, if my father doesn’t believe in your father he won’t go to heaven. He won’t be with me and my mother and Maggie and Chester ... Cats do go to heaven, right?”

“Most certainly,” reassured the lion.

“When I think about it at night in the hospital it makes me cry,” said Caroline feeling herself beginning to weep like she did when she worried about her father.

Beaver stretched out his paw and gently placed it on Caroline’s shoulder to comfort her.

“Now, now. Don’t cry,” said the Lion. “As I’ve told you before, in time, I will make all things right – and that includes your father.”

Caroline looked up into the lion’s soft furry face and beautiful eyes and she suddenly felt her tears dry up.

“I know your father. He is a good man. He will be in heaven with you one day. My father is very generous.”

“Oh lion, that is wonderful,” said Caroline throwing her arms quickly around the lion and squeezing him so tightly that even the mighty lion was impressed with her strength.

Caroline loosened her grip and stepped back from the lion.

“How do you know my father?”

The lion let out a laugh and a small roar.

“I know all men and women, girls and boys.”

“And all animals, too?” said Wolf.

“Yes, and all animals, too ... each and every one by name and by heart.”

“You are the most wonderful and amazing lion.”

“I don’t want you to be sad anymore,” smiled the lion at Caroline.

The sound of rushing water could be heard nearby. The lion looked across the field and to the trees near a brook.

“Come, let’s sit in the shade of the trees by the brook where it is cool. Caroline, you are ready to be taught a few of the mysteries that the world will not accept. But they will of great value and comfort to you. Come, let’s go.”

With that the lion leapt off the road. He and came over to a brook and grassy bank. Wolf leapt as well and followed closely behind the lion. Caroline and Beaver walked through the tall grass and Kingfisher darted through the air close to them. As she walked Caroline felt the heat of the day give way to coolness on the air near the brook. The lion and Wolf stepped in the brook to cool their paws. Then they found a comfortable spot in the grass near the bank and laid there. Caroline removed her shoes and sunk her feet into the cool water. Beaver did the same. Then finding a large stone near the lion and Wolf, Caroline and Beaver sat. Kingfisher perched in a tree overhead.

“Caroline,” said the lion looking serious.

“Yes?” asked Caroline folding her legs and sitting crossed legged on the stone in the shade of a tree.

“These things I’m about to tell you are too great for you to fully understand at your young age.”

“I will do my best to understand,” said Caroline wide-eyed and excited to hear the lion’s mysteries.

“I know you will,” complimented the lion. “You are a very bright girl. I want you to lock these things away. For one day, when older, I will send more of the meanings.”

Caroline nodded and rested her elbows on her knees and looked up to the lion with big eyes. The lion still had the look of seriousness and Caroline sensed the specialness of the moment. A reverence fell over Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver as well.

“Your father is a thirsty soul. A hungry soul – the best kind of soul to be.”

“You’re not talking about water or food are you?”

“No, my precious Caroline.”

“What is he thirsty and hungry for?”

“Something you have tasted – my light, my truth, my goodness.”

“I have?” asked Caroline, her head tilted and looking confused.

“Yes, it is part of you now. It began when you turned your heart to me.”

Caroline nodded beginning to understand. She realized that all this was from the love she felt for the lion.

“Your father desires the same light and truth and goodness, but he does not know where to find it.”

“May I bring him here into your world, to meet you?” asked Caroline.

“That is not possible,” said the lion shaking his mane.

Caroline felt disappointed at the lion’s words.

“Caroline, one day your soul will thirst and hunger for more light and truth and goodness like your father.”

“When?”

The lion laughed at Caroline’s good questions.

“When the magic and light of childhood has rubbed off of you.”

“Rubbed off?”

The lion smiled at Caroline’s innocence and laughed a sweet, touching laugh again.

“When you begin to become an adult, like your mother and father,” answered the lion.

Caroline gave the lion a blank stare.

“This is one of those things that you will understand when you are older – after the experience has come.”

“When will it come?”

“In only a few years – the magic and light of childhood will rub off of you. And you will forget me for a time.”

“Forget you?” said Caroline with a hollow sound in her voice.

“Yes.

“No, I could never forget you,” said Caroline horrified at the thought. “I won’t let that happen.”

The lion smiled again admiring Caroline’s strong will. Then Caroline noticed the lion’s eyes filling with sadness.

“Why are you sad,” asked Caroline wanting to reach out and touch the lion’s mane to soothe him, but not knowing if she should approach him as he spoke of these mysteries.

“That is when people begin to wander from me – when they are no longer children.”

“But they come back, right?”

“Yes. When they become childlike they return to me.”

“Why would anyone ever wander from you?”

“They lose the magic – the light given to them by my father that every child brings into this world.”

A look of deep thinking came into Caroline’s face. She leaned back on the stone and rested her palms on the cool surface. Beaver was thinking hard too. Caroline’s forehead even wrinkled up a bit from her deep thinking.

“I will never wander from you,” said Caroline boldly sitting up straight.

“Thank you,” gently smiled the lion. “But if you do wander, never wander far. And remember that I am always near.”

As she looked at the lion, Caroline wanted the sadness in his eyes to go away.

“It has been many years since your father lost his magic, his light – I miss him a great deal.”

“Was he once like me?” asked Caroline leaning forward and resting her elbows on her crossed legs.

The lion let out another tender, good-natured laugh.

“He was very much like you, a wonderful boy. But he became a man. Now the center of him has a curious, wild pain.”

“Pain?” asked Caroline concerned.

“Not a pain like when you scrape your knee or your tummy hurts.”

“Then what kind of pain?”

“The worse kind of pain. A pain of heart.”

“Does this hurt?”

“Not like you’re thinking. It’s more that he is empty. But it does hurt at times.”

“Empty?” mumbled Caroline thinking.

Then as if a very bright light bulb inside Caroline’s head had been turned on, her eyes shone with a new brightness.

“He just needs your light and truth and goodness to fill him so he’s not empty anymore.”

“You are right,” roared the lion congratulating Caroline.

Caroline felt proud of herself and smiled at Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver who smiled back. Then she looked at the lion as he began to speak.

“Your father has been searching for a long time. This pleases me.”

“What is he searching for?”

“What all desire – a beautiful vision of my father, light and truth.”

“You can actually see him, your father?”

“Of course, and when you see him he gives you a vision of something very special.”

“What is it?”

“Yourself – a vision of your true self.”

“Your true self?”

“Nothing is more sacred and beautiful and special as the vision of your true self, the person my father can make out of someone. It will bring tears to your eyes. Not sad tears, but tears of great joy.”

“Will you give my father this vision? I want so badly to make his wild pain go away.”

“In time. The vision will come. But you must be patient. Your father must first experience the things of this life which are necessary to become aware of his true self.”

“What are those?”

“You being a sick girl in your world is one.”

“It is?”

“Your father is learning much about love as he worries over you. His red eyes, red from crying, and messy clothes from sleeping at his desk, and his unshaven face.”

“Why? Why do I have to be sick?”

“It’s a necessary pain. It is a necessary emptiness.”

“But why?” pouted Caroline

The lion stood from where he sat in his grassy spot near the brook and came closer to Caroline.

“Caroline, there will come a point when I will feel everyone’s pain – all pain. And everyone’s emptiness – all emptiness – so that I may take it and devour it,” roared the lion quite loudly.

“How?” asked Caroline, after the loud roar had quieted.

“That is not for you to know. But listen to me carefully.”

Caroline leaned forward. Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver also leaned in.

“Inside every man and woman, girl and boy – in your world ... and in all animals in this world, there is an imaginary throne.”

“A throne?”

“It is my throne.”

“Your throne?”

“But I cannot take my place until the person or animal permits me to enter his soul, to enter my rightful chamber and place.”

“How can a person or an animal invite you inside themselves?”

“By opening their heart like you have.”

“Like I have?”

“Yes, and when I sit in the throne the wild pain, the emptiness disappears. I destroy it with my sharp, powerful teeth.”

“Emptiness?”

“Yes, I – and only I – fill the emptiness with my light, my truth, my goodness to where it pours over the brim.”

Caroline wondered if the lion’s light and truth and goodness were flowing inside her right then. She sat back thinking of all the lion was telling her. She was beginning to understand, at least the parts that a bright twelve year old girl could understand. In her young heart, she recognized that somehow the lion was the answer to the riddle of every pain, hurt, agony, ache, throbbing, sting, soreness, unhappiness, heartache, anguish, misery, grief, woe, and more – suffered by every single person who has ever lived or would ever live on this earth. Not only would he take all those things away, he would replace them with light and truth and goodness, and send all people from her world, and all animals from his world, on a pathway to the most unimaginable happiness and joy where they would become their true selves crying tears of joy and happiness.

Then an idea, so powerful and imaginative, opened up inside Caroline’s mind. It was the mathematical equation of all the happiness and joy that people and animals would feel when they had become their true selves. It came to Caroline when she thought of the happiest day of the year, Christmas morning. When you round the stairs and spring into the living room to find piles and piles of presents. If you could measure this happiness, for just one person, and then multiply it by the exact number of people and animals who would live or had lived on this world, and then multiply that by the biggest number you could think of – that is how much happiness the lion would create for everyone. It was such a big idea, and a wonderful idea, that Caroline thought she would cry – cry for a now deeper love for the lion knowing what he would do for the whole wide world.

Admiring the lion, Caroline promised herself that if the lion did ever leave her, that she would turn any key to any lock inside her heart and let the lovely lion back inside to sit in his rightful throne. Then thinking of this a worried look crossed Caroline’s face. The lion noticed it.

“What’s wrong Caroline?”

“I’m afraid,” said Caroline about to cry.

“What are you afraid of?”

“Growing up. It sounds awful,” wailed Caroline.

The lion came over and with his paw wiped away her tears. Caroline enjoyed the softness of his fur on her face.

“There is nothing to be afraid of. When you are ready to find me again I will race into your heart faster than one thousand lions, just as when you have ridden on my back laughing with glee as we moved like the wind over the fields and hills and mountains that we have crossed like lightening.”

“I will?”

“Yes. I know your heart. You won’t be able to keep yourself from letting me in.”

“Really?” asked Caroline a warm happiness spreading through her, the hairs on her arms and legs standing up from the pleasant sensation.

Chapter 20

At the lion's promise, Caroline was feeling happy again. She leaned back on the stone next to Beaver. She looked up into the sky momentarily. From the stone she looked down on the lion who was now relaxing in the grass next to Wolf.

"I want you to learn a big word," said the lion looking up at Caroline.

"A big word?"

"Yes, you are smart girl."

"What's the word? Maybe I know it already."

The lion smiled at Caroline's confidence.

"Numinous."

"Numi-what?"

The lion laughed as he watched Caroline try to push the big-sounding word out through her child mouth.

"Num-i-nous," said the lion sounding out the word for Caroline.

"Numinous," said Caroline making the sound of the word perfectly.

"Very good."

"What does it mean?"

"It is difficult to explain."

"Why?"

"Because it is something that you feel and not see – like a Wolf, Kingfisher, or Beaver. They are before your eyes so you see them."

"So the numinous is something that you can only feel."

"Yes, a good feeling, a special feeling. But more than that – deeper than that. It is a sweet mystery that human words or animal words cannot explain."

"Sweet?"

"Yes, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*."

"That sounds like a magic spell."

The lion laughed at Caroline's sweet innocence and charm.

"I can't even say those words, but they are pretty. What do they mean?"

"The numinous is a tremendous mystery – a mystery of majesty and wonder. It is a feeling so deep and special and fascinating that the words to describe it have not been created by humans or animals. One day I will help them create those words."

"I will look for that feeling every day."

"It will be a day I will treasure."

Caroline thought as hard as she could as she listened to more of the lion's wonderful words.

"Caroline, it is important to me that you know this numinous, so my light will touch the good things that my father has buried inside you. When it comes you must allow it to enter."

“I will. I think I know that feeling already – or at least part of it.”

“You do?” questioned the lion looking surprised.

“Yes, when I’m with you. When I listen to you teach the animals. When I see you heal the sick and give sight to the blind – your good works.”

With happiness in his step, the lion pranced up besides Caroline and rubbed his soft mane all over her.

“You are right. You know the feeling that you are to be looking for. But what you have felt is only the beginning of the feelings I will put into your heart.”

Then wolf came up next to Caroline.

“In our travels I have seen animals fall down at your paws, although they’ve never seen you before. Is that part of the numinous,” asked Wolf.

“Yes, that is right. That is the numinous. It is light from the invisible world of divine wonder.”

“The badgers and peacocks and crocodiles and foxes don’t feel it, do they?” asked Wolf.

The lion did not answer. He looked away from Wolf.

“What is the invisible world of divine wonder?” asked Caroline

“It is where the numinous lives in this world – and your world. It is the light I brought with me here from beyond all worlds.”

“How did you get the light here?”

“My father and I carried it. And we put it into the invisible world of divine wonder.”

“Where is the invisible world of ...?” asked Caroline hesitating as she tried to remember its full name.

“Invisible world of divine wonder.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s all around you.”

“But if it’s invisible I can’t see it.”

“Yes, that is true.”

“Then what is it good for?” asked Beaver.

“It’s not something you see. Remember, it’s something you feel and understand. You reach inside the invisible world of divine wonder. It’s where all knowledge and truth exist. It’s where all discoveries are made. It’s where poets and prophets and philosophers reach into. It’s when you study algebra or chemistry or things in school and they start to make sense. All truth is in the invisible world just waiting for a school girl like Caroline to learn of it.”

As the lion talked of the invisible world of spiritual wonder Caroline began to feel even greater things swelling inside her.

“The light from the invisible world is all around you. But you can’t see it. It rubs on to you when you brush up against the veils and curtains of light and gossamer that conceal the light and truth inside the invisible world of divine wonder.”

Not only was Caroline amazed by what the lion was teaching her, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver were also filled with awe and wonder and love for the lion.

“The things in the invisible world of spiritual wonder are so lovely and special and interesting that you cannot find words, even in the biggest dictionary in the biggest library in all the world to describe them. But when I come again I will explain all of them to you with special words, and you won’t just feel the greatness of all things in the invisible world of divine wonder, but you will understand them, see them, and they will become part of you.”

Caroline reached up and hugged the lion, rubbing her face on his soft mane and smelling the sweetness of something like lilacs.

“The things that my father, the Greatest Lion of all Lions, have built into the invisible world of divine wonder go on forever. They are infinite. Yet he knows them all. And one day Caroline, you and your father, will know then too.”

Chapter 21

Night had fallen. Unable to sleep, Caroline lay in her bed staring at the hospital ceiling. She looked up at the shadows there from the moonlight weaving in and out of the mulberry branches. They formed the most unusual shapes. As Caroline lay awake, she deciphered the shadowy shapes. Then in her imagination she would tell herself stories about the animals and monsters she saw there on her ceiling.

Getting out of bed, Caroline came over to the door. From the opening, the hospital floor seemed quiet. The other children must be sleeping, she thought. The nurses that chatted every night behind the nurse's station were not talking either, but with nothing to do sleeping in their chairs.

Bored Caroline turned on her side and looked into the mulberry tree. In her sleeplessness she thought of the blackbird appearing on the window sill and of her time with the lion. She tossed away from the window and let out an exasperated sigh. Her father had left a few hours ago after dinner. She remembered him talking of the rareness of the lunar eclipse that was to occur that night. Caroline had never thought before that the earth had a shadow. But it stood to reason, because if the light is just right, everything has a shadow. Nor had she thought of the perfect geometry of planets aligning. Tonight the moon was to move into the earth's shadow, and this only happened when the sun, earth, and moon exactly aligned in their fast moving orbits. Caroline was impressed when her father told her that the moon's speed through the shadow would be 2,300 miles per hour.

Caroline also remembered laughing when her father told her that the early Egyptians thought that the eclipse was a cow swallowing the moon. Or that the Mayans believed a jaguar swallowed the moon and then let it out when the moon reappeared. Or that the ancient Chinese thought a three legged toad had swallowed the moon. Caroline's father also told her that some early peoples thought a demon had swallowed the moon. These people would try to chase away the demon by throwing stones at the moon or their magic men would curse the demon. This all must have worked. The moon eventually reappeared.

Still unable to sleep, Caroline slipped out of bed. She came over to the window sill. She looked up into the night sky and at the moon. She could not see it very well for the mulberry tree's branches. Then Caroline climbed back into bed and lay again looking up at the ceiling. In the twisting and turning shadows from the moonlight passing through the mulberry tree, she tried to spot demons who might just swallow a moon.

A grumbling sounded in her stomach. Caroline thought of the cookies that had come with dinner. She remembered that if the cooking staff did not eat the cookies, the leftovers would still be in the kitchen and given to the children the next day in the playroom. Propped up on her pillow, Caroline planned her adventure.

Caroline slipped out of bed and put on her slippers. She came to the doorway and peered at the nurse's station. As luck would have it, both nurses were leaned back in their chairs sleeping, letting out little snores as they breathed. Quickly, Caroline tip-toed to the front of the nurse's station. Coming to the counter she could see Nurse

Briggsbottom stirring and leaning forward in her chair, her eyes opening slightly. Immediately Caroline dropped to the floor on all fours. Caroline lay quietly not moving, hoping the nurse would fall back asleep. She looked up the hall. Ahead she could see the double doors that would lead to her escape. Then like a soldier in battle, on elbows and knees, she crawled along the floor by the counter of the nurses station and then along the wall. Knowing she was out of sight of the nurse's station she quietly walked to the doors.

Caroline patiently pushed through the double doors. She turned, and then quietly shut the doors behind her so as not to alert the nurses. Ahead of her the hallway was dark. But the shadows from the full moon cast enough light that she could see the signs above the doorways. Coming to the end of this new hallway, Caroline spotted a sign for the stairs. She came down to the first floor. Stepping into the hall, lit up slightly from the security lights, she found the sign for the kitchen. Caroline slowly opened the door and stepped into the dark room. Assuming no one was there at half past midnight she flipped on the lights and looked around at the stainless steel tables and refrigerators and ovens.

To Caroline's delight on the table was a stack of the cookies from dinner. She pulled back the plastic wrap and bit into a cookie. She took bite after bite until her hunger was gone, enjoying each swallow. Then telling herself that she deserved a treat, Caroline took a fistful of cookies for later.

Coming into the hall Caroline had every intention of going back to her room and eating the cookies in bed, wiping the crumbs from the sheets into the trash can so no one would be none the wiser. But standing in the hall the full view of the moon caught her attention. She came over to the glass doors leading out of the hospital and gazed up at the brilliant orb hanging low in the sky.

"It has been so long since I've been outside, and it is such a wonderful night," whispered Caroline into the stillness of the hall.

For a while, Caroline stood in front of the glass doors staring up at the moon debating with herself.

"It's a rare occasion to see a lunar eclipse and I can't see it from my room for the mulberry tree."

Caroline turned the lock and stepped out into the cool night. The breeze tossed the edges of her nightgown and lifted her hair off her shoulders. She looked up into the night sky and could see the moon full and glowing. She stood on her tippy toes and breathed in the fresh air that she had missed so much, the air that she once ran and played in before coming to the hospital. Ahead Caroline spotted a tree in the grass and came over to it. She sat in the cool wet grass and leaned back against the trunk. She ate a cookie and looked up at the moon in her perfect spot to see the eclipse.

And then it happened. The moon began to pass through the earth's shadow. Amazed Caroline gazed as the moon turned reddish. She remembered her father's words about geometry and astronomy and the design of the universe and other scientific things, and then her eyes began to be very heavy and soon she was asleep in her night gown outside leaning against the mulberry tree.

Looking down from the window sill, the blackbird who had flown the great distance from the lion's world to Caroline's world spotted her under the tree in the grass.

"Oh my. The girl is asleep outside in her nightgown. She must be so cold," said the blackbird.

The blackbird swooped down next to Caroline. He jumped up on her lap.

“Caroline, you must get up. You can’t sleep here all night.”

The blackbird jumped again, harder. It was no use. Caroline did not wake.

“Silly, sleepy girl. I wish you’d wake up.”

Next the blackbird flew atop Caroline’s head. He turned himself almost upside down and peered down over her forehead. He lightly pecked at her nose hoping that would wake her. Then he cawed to wake her.

“This is not good. I very well can’t leave her here all night. I must get her inside,” the blackbird fretted.

Just then the blackbird spotted a group of squirrels in the tree. He flew up into the tree.

“Beg your pardon, but I have somewhat of a predicament.”

Hearing the blackbird’s distress the squirrels gathered round.

“What seems to be the problem?” asked a squirrel.

“That girl down there is a friend of mine. I can’t seem to wake her. She can’t sleep out here all night. I need to get her inside. Will you help me?”

“What’s in it for us?” asked the lead squirrel.

The blackbird thought for a minute and then his eyes widened.

“I am from a faraway land, an exotic land. I will bring you bunches of nuts on my next visit – the tastiest nuts you have ever tasted.”

“I don’t know,” said the squirrel.

“Just think of it. I will bring you bunches of nuts. No gathering, sorting, or anything you have to do. I’ll bring them right to your tree and you can store them away,” said the blackbird rather proud of himself for coming up with such a good argument.

“What do you want us to do?”

“Round up all of the squirrels. If you each get under a part of her we can carry her upstairs.”

From their tree, the squirrels looked down at Caroline fast asleep leaning against the tree trunk.

“She is a rather skinny thing. Sure we’ll help you.”

The blackbird flew down to Caroline and the squirrels scurried down the tree trunk.

“Here, let me try and wake her again,” said the blackbird hopping and pecking at Caroline.

Caroline stirred but fell back into her deep sleep – like children will do.

“Alright, let’s do this,” said the squirrel. “You get under her right heel and you get under the left heel.”

Soon a group of squirrels were under shoulder blades and backs and thighs and other places I probably shouldn’t mention.

“Lift,” shouted the squirrels.

Caroline’s body raised in the air, a few inches off the ground. Together the squirrels carried her from the tree across the lawn, to the glass doors. A few squirrels had run ahead chasing the blackbird and held open the doors. The squirrels came inside the hospital and headed to the elevators. The blackbird had pecked on the button for the second floor and the doors opened just in time for the squirrels to carry Caroline inside.

“Okay, let’s set her down here,” said the squirrel.

The squirrels groaned in relief as they placed Caroline on the floor of the elevator. The blackbird pecked on her face again, but all Caroline did was smile as if being tickled in her sleep. Then the elevator doors opened.

“In positions everyone,” said the lead squirrel.

The squirrels followed their orders and lifted Caroline up off the floor.

“We must be careful. Wait for my signal that no one will see this,” said the blackbird flying down the hall.

Coming to the nurse’s station the relieved blackbird flew back quickly to the squirrels.

“Good news, the nurses are asleep. Quietly follow me,” said the blackbird.

The squirrels followed the blackbird inside Caroline’s hospital room and laid her on the floor.

“I don’t think we can get her up in the bed,” said the lead squirrel.

“Then let’s leave her on the floor and put a pillow under her head and a few blankets on top of her,” said another squirrel.

“I agree. That is the best course of action,” said the blackbird. “Thank you so much. Nuts for all of you soon, very soon.”

Chapter 22

By now Caroline was in a wonderful dream. It had started while she slept against the tree. It was such a wonderful dream that even though the squirrels moved her with great efficiency, she was so happy in the dream that she did not wake up even with their hustling and bustling.

In the dream Caroline now rode on the lion's back. It was a beautiful day under the sun with a cool breeze from the sea floating around her.

"Look. It's Beaver," asked Caroline pointing ahead.

"I believe it is," said the lion stopping in the road sounding surprised.

The lion squinted into the distance across the field. Caroline did the same.

"What are those things with their heads in the sand?" asked Caroline

"I believe they are ostriches," said the lion sounding a little perplexed.

"Yes, they are. Why aren't they looking at Beaver as he speaks?" asked Caroline.

"They must not like what Beaver is telling them," chuckled the lion.

"We should go to him," said Caroline.

"Certainly."

The lion crouched and Caroline climbed up on his back. Caroline felt the lion move underneath her. Soon he was leaping across the field in great strides. Caroline jostled from side to side with each leap. She held tight to his mane so as not to fall off and take a roll in the field. As they came close, watching Beaver, Caroline laughed. She could see the black and white ostrich tail feathers wagging in the air and the birds' long necks stretched to the ground and their heads buried in the sand.

"Hello Beaver," said Caroline coming up from behind.

Beaver turned to watch Caroline slide down from the lion's silky back.

"What do we have here?" asked the lion.

"These ostriches will not listen to me," said Beaver somewhat impatiently.

The lion looked at the ostriches with their heads buried in the sand and smiled at Beaver.

"What are you telling them?"

"I have been teaching them about you."

"And they obviously don't like what you are saying," said Caroline.

Beaver gave an unpleasant shifty eyed glance to Caroline.

To get the attention of the ostriches, the lion let out a roar. With a popping sound the ostriches removed their heads from their holes. They looked in the direction of the roar, quivering a bit seeing the lion.

"Are you here to devour us?" asked a finely dressed ostrich, the other ostriches lining up behind him.

"That depends, is there even anything within you worth devouring?"

"I don't understand."

"Is there anything good in you – anything of value?"

"Yes, I'm a very educated ostrich. Top of my class."

“I know ostriches can run at top speeds, but regardless, you have no choice in the matter. I am a quick and strong lion, capable of cutting both limb and joint with my sharp and powerful teeth.”

“That is true,” said the Ostrich nodding his head sizing up the lion. “So you do desire to devour us?”

“I desire to bring you to my father, the Greatest Lion of All Lions.”

“Will he devour us?”

“He will not devour. He will add to the things in you that are worth desiring.”

The ostrich could not quite decipher the strange language of the lion. But, looking into the lion’s soft eyes, a reassuring calm fell over the ostrich and he felt a trust of the lion.

“Pop ... pop ... pop ... pop ... pop ... pop ... pop ... pop ... pop ... pop ... pop ... pop ...”

Caroline listened to what seemed one thousand popping noises sounding across the field. Emerging into the daylight for their holes, a hundred or so moles shot up from their tunnels. In the bright sunlight they squinted at the lion, who appeared as a shadowy figure with the sun behind him, their eyes having trouble adjusting to daylight from all their tunnel digging.

Standing in the field, the lion introduced himself to the ostriches and moles spread across the field.

“I am Ra’el,” roared the lion. “The son of the Greatest Lion of all Lions that Ever Were.”

The ostriches and moles did not speak. They stood silent watching the lion sensing a greatness in him and thinking to themselves, this is no ordinary lion.

“I have come from my father to offer you light and truth, joy and happiness.”

“How can we know that you are the son of the Greatest Lion of All Lions?” asked the lead ostrich. “That old myth has been laid to rest.”

“There is no myth.”

“I do not believe. You look just like any other lion, except for the strange wings, although you are very noble looking and handsome.”

“Do you not believe the words of the beaver about me and my father?”

“No.”

“You would do well to listen to this beaver.”

Caroline watched Beaver’s chest pop out and his brown fur rising as he stood on his tippy toes. He blushed at the lion’s praise.

“Ostrich, you see a very smart bird. May I share a few things with you – that may pique your intellectual curiosity?”

“Certainly,” said the ostrich nodding proudly at the other ostriches.

“May I show you thing that may have never crossed your brilliant mind?”

“There is not much I have not learned, but yes, go ahead.”

With that, the lion roared, his deliciously warm breath sailing over the moles and ostriches.

“Then I will tell you about my father, The Greatest Lion of All Lions,” said Ra’el. “Once you know him you will desire to live the life the beaver has been telling you of.”

“Please tell us,” called out the moles. “We did not hear the beaver’s words. We were underground digging our tunnels.”

The eyes of the moles had adjusted to the sunlight and they could now see the noble looking lion as more than a shadow.

“To know my father, you must know yourselves.”

“Who are we if not ostriches and moles?” asked the ostrich ruffling his feathers.

“Children of the divine, and eternal spark as they say in the east – a light from heaven.”

“Divine? Eternal spark? Heavenly light?” asked a mole close to the lion’s paws.

“Divine creatures made by a perfect lion – my father. And he has made you for joy. He desires your happiness. He has given you a soul that can grow as tall as the tallest trees – a mind that can reach the deepest depth. But all of this is from him, and me.”

The moles and ostriches felt something stir within them at the lion’s words. Even the leader of the ostrich clan stepped back from the swelling in his heart.

“As mighty oaks spring from tiny acorns, you are seedlings now – but seedlings dropped from a tree of light in the rich soil off this world.”

The leader of the ostrich clan admired the beauty of the lion’s words, but listened carefully for any flaws in his argument.

“A spark of divine light is in you. I am here to ignite the spark.”

The moles who lived mostly underground out of the light were interested in learning about this light.

“Soon, in a garden, I will descend and devour all the bad in this world so that it no longer exists to harm you. Then at a future day I will fill this creation – and each of you – with light and truth and goodness that you cannot now understand.”

A mole emerged from his hole, wiped the dirt away from his fur, and came over to the lion.

“Forgive me. We are simple diggers. But a strange feeling has overcome me,” said the mole. “I feel your words are great, but my mind doesn’t understand.”

The lion smiled down upon the mole.

“In that day, like a blast of morning sunlight after a dark night, my light will shine upon you and make of you new and better creatures.”

“So we will live again after we die?” asked the ostrich.

“Not only will you live again, but you will live with light and goodness surging through you in joyful strains. No more hunger or loneliness, or hard things to bear – and no more tunnels to dig for the earth under my reign will be a much different place.”

At the lion’s words the moles came out from their holes, brushed off the dirt, and reverently bowed shouting, “Praise to the lion. Praise to the lion. Praise to the lion.”

But the mole’s excitement was not at the lion’s words that there would be no more digging. They desired to be filled – filled beyond measure.

“Fill us with this light. Fill us with this light. Fill us with this light,” cheered the moles.

“The amount of light I fill you with is up to you – and the greater the light, the more your joy.”

“Then we will do your will lion,” shouted a mole.

The lion smiled at the mole and then looked over the field at the ostriches standing on their two legs and the hundreds of moles seated comfortably half in and half out of their holes of overturned soil.

“But a warning I must give. In this life, you have an enemy – a snake.”

“Who is this snake?” asked the ostrich folding his wings behind him and beginning to pace like lawyers do in a courtroom.

“He was once a lion, and a bearer of light, like me. But he desired to take my father’s power and lead a war. His became so angry his shaped changed to that of a dragon. He lost the war and he and his soldiers were cast down to your world as snakes that hiss discouraging words, and wisps that whisper temptations into your ears.”

“So he went from a lion to a dragon to a snake?” mocked the ostrich. “Where is this make-believe snake now?”

“Hidden behind a veil of light.”

“Why hidden?”

“The sight of him is too terrible for you to behold.”

“I doubt that,” again mocked the ostrich.

“His greatest desire is to dim the light within you, and then grasp you in his awful chains.”

The ostrich looked over his shoulder at the other ostriches and nodded as if he had exposed the lion.

“Invisible chains can’t hold me very long,” laughed the ostrich.

“The snake desires to dim your light. I desire to ignite it into a raging fire of goodness and more light.”

“Why would your father being all-good send such a horrible wretch of a creature to live among us?” asked the ostrich.

“So you may learn to choose the good over the evil for yourselves – for the good you see in it. To prize the sweet over the bitter – to act for yourselves – so I may add to your light and truth. For I can only do this with your permission.”

The ostrich came close to the lion. He smiled thinking he had caught the lion in a snare.

“I just can’t believe these wild ideas – a lion that became a dragon who became a snake who lives in an invisible world, and a great lion who is supposedly all-good in the sky that would unleash this monster upon us.”

“What is your question ostrich?” asked the lion looking a little annoyed.

“I simply cannot believe in something I cannot see.”

“Then let me persuade you.”

“Please do,” said the ostrich looking confidently over his shoulder at the other ostriches.

“I have a question for you ostrich.”

“Go ahead. But you should know I was educated in the great city.”

“Are most animals good? Is there a kindness, a goodness to them?”

“Most are good. But some do wrongs. They hurt others, steal, lie, and more.”

“The badgers and peacocks hurt, steal, lie, and many other things,” said a mole.

“The badgers and peacocks have dimmed the light within. Darkness now lives where there once was light.”

“The badgers and peacocks make slaves of us to dig their wells,” called out a mole. “They whip us.”

“Something needs to be done about it,” called out another mole who had been made a slave but escaped.

“In time... in time my justice will find them,” said the Lion with authority.

The lion sat on the ground and looked around at the moles and ostriches watching him.

“The goodness inside you and others comes from my father – for he put it there. I can sense even goodness in this very smart ostrich,” smiled the lion.

The moles laughed lightly and so did some of the ostriches, although the lead ostrich did not appreciate being made fun.

“Ostrich, if one of these moles fell into that river, would your impulse be to jump in and save him even at the peril of your own death, or to let him drown?”

The ostrich did not answer, knowing that he would feel an impulse to save the mole.

“He would jump in to save the mole. It’s the right thing to do. We all would jump in to save an ostrich or a mole,” shouted out a mole. “It’s just the right thing to do. No doubt about it.”

“The lion is right, most animals are good and the goodness comes from his father,” said another mole.

“Ostrich, my father put the goodness in you and all animals. It is the light of heaven.”

“How did he put this goodness, this light in us?” asked a mole.

“He wrote his goodness on your hearts before he sent your spark into the world.”

“This doesn’t prove a thing. I need to see your father to know he is real,” demanded the ostrich.

The lion smiled patiently at the ostrich who feathers were beginning to ruffle knowing the lion was someone with much intelligence.

“Ostrich, do you have a conscience?”

“What is a conscience lion?” asked a mole nearby from his hole.

“That little voice inside you telling you right from wrong.”

“Yes, we hear that voice quite often. Everyone does,” chimed in a group of moles.

The moles were beginning to get on the lead ostriches’ nerves.

“That voice is the goodness of my father, the great lawgiver. It is to help you be happy creatures.”

“Yes, we are happy when we do right. Very happy indeed,” said a mole.

The ostrich moved closer to the lion.

“We can see you lion,” piped up the ostrich. “But how do we know that your father is real if we cannot see him?”

“These moles believe so easily in what is true, why can’t you?” asked the lion.

“I am more sophisticated than these hole diggers.”

The moles started to grumble at that comment, their grumbings filling the field.

“Lion, look at the universe we live in.”

“I know much about it, for I created it with my father.”

The ostrich smiled slyly at the lion.

“Beyond the skies in the heavens so broad is only empty space – cold and dark planets with no life.”

“Go on,” said the lion.

“On this planet we live only a short while, causing sorrow as we leave our loved ones behind in death as we drift into the great nothingness – where all stories come to nothing. Our loved ones bury us in the cold earth; and we disintegrate into the dirt in which these moles so enjoy.”

“Please, go on.”

“This earth upon which we live and die has been here for millions of years before we sprang into existence. It was a desolate, hard place. But even now, all life will die away. The earth will again become a desolate place when the sun burns out,” said the Ostrich looking as if he had more to say.

“Please continue,” said the lion. “Speak your mind. For your mind is a wonderful thing.”

“In the beginning, the animals were less tame as we are now. They preyed upon one another for survival – the lower animals being chewed up by the higher animals.”

“Oh my,” cried one of the moles. “The animals actually ate one another?”

“Yes,” said the ostrich. “There was much pain, much suffering.”

“I’d much rather live now than back then,” said another mole.

The lion stood and approached the ostrich. There was a serious look in the lion’s eyes.

“Ostrich, where did you learn these things?”

“The orangutans who came from Greece.”

“Yes, they are intelligent fellows.”

“What do you have to say to their ideas?” smiled the ostrich thinking he had trapped the lion.

“I say to you Ostrich, how do you know what they are telling you is true?”

“Their ideas seem reasonable. They are based in observable facts.”

“All things they say?”

The ostrich hesitated studying the lion’s expression before answering.

“Well not all things.”

The lion smiled at the ostrich, which made the ostrich think the lion was up to something.

“When you see the world as it is now, with the pain and sadness, yes one could come to your conclusion. Although you must admit there is much joy and happiness and goodness in this world. In fact, much more good than bad.”

“So you see my point and you are ready to say I am right,” said the ostrich looking over his shoulder at the moles and smiling.

“No,” laughed the lion. “You are missing many pieces of the puzzle.”

“What am I missing?” asked the ostrich turning his head quickly back to the lion.

“You assume things will go back to the way they were millions and millions of years ago. But that is not true. The world will not always be as it is now. This world, and all of the universes, are in an upward movement to better and better, and higher and higher, states of existence where they will be filled with joyous life.”

“You don’t know that,” snapped the ostrich with the close of his beak.

“Oh yes I do,” smiled the lion slyly.

“Do tell.”

“My father, through me, will one day fill this creation upon which you stand, this very field of dirt, with the most wonderful light – a million times more powerful than even sunlight which causes everything to grow and live on this planet, and bloom and burst into the beauty of the shining seas and the majestic mountaintops and all that lives in between.”

“I want proof,” snapped the ostrich.

“I want faith,” smiled the lion. “And you will give it to me voluntarily when you see these things come to pass.”

“Why faith?”

“Because you need to do things on your own powers.”

The ostrich bowed his head in frustration.

“Please enlighten me lion,” said the ostrich weakly.

“This world will never go backward to those dark days, it was only necessary in its creation – in order to bring life upon it. As I have said, this world, and all other worlds in all other universes will only see days of ever-increasing light where life advances and advances to higher states of happiness and perfection – as my father is perfect.”

“I don’t know what to say,” said the ostrich. “You say it is one way, and the orangutans said it is another way. I don’t know who to believe?”

The lion looked into the face of the ostrich and gave a wry smile.

“Ostrich, let me teach you about my father.”

“Why your father?”

“Because my father is the first great cause. You need to start right to end right. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, that is good logic.”

“My father set all things in motion in this cold, dark empty space of which you speak. My father spoke into the darkness and sent forth the light – me.”

“From only his words he did this?” asked the ostrich seeming sincere.

“Yes, he set in motion this world and the stars and the planets and all thing in them. And this earth will always be filled with light in me. I will perform my great act. Then at a future day I will fill every particle of matter with light and truth and goodness and it will become more beautiful every day of its existence from that time forth.”

“How will you do that?” asked the ostrich, his eyes widening in an excitement that the world could become as the lion spoke.

“It is one of the greatest mysteries. As learned as you are, you wouldn’t even begin to understand it,” smiled the lion. “But do not despair. I will teach you all about it one day.”

“Teach me now,” pleaded the ostrich fighting the urge to say that the lion could be the son of the Greatest Lion of all Lions.

“Then I will. My father brought me into the Ayin, the emptiness to give it order and purpose.”

“The A-y-i-n?”

“The nothingness ... when there was nothing before the world.”

“But you are a lion. How could you be brought into the nothingness?”

“My father created me as the Yesh ... the power of creation, the light of creation, the force of creation. My father put the power of creation, the Yesh, in me. Then he put me in the Ayin, the nothingness, and with his powers in me he and I made the world and all things in it – the mountains and rivers and flowers and animals and the sky, everything.”

“If that is how things began, it doesn’t prove how they will end.”

“There is no end.”

“Logically there has to be an end.”

“There is no end.”

The ostrich tossed his head from side to side.

“All you need to understand now is that through my father I will one day save this world and everything in it.”

“How will you save it?”

“I will put light into everything – and because of the light nothing will go backwards. And on those other cold, dead, empty planets of which you speak, there too will I bring the Yesh, the power of creation, the light of creation, the force of creation, and do this work on those worlds. Through the light of my father everything will live forever in happiness.”

The mole and ostriches could feel something in the lion’s words that excited them very much – although they could not put this feeling into words. The feeling gave them an inkling of great things within themselves and a future on a world full of blossoming light – light in the trees and flowers and houses and everything, a magnificent light in all the animals too, and all things reaching higher and higher, worlds without number.

“Ostrich, to know my father look around. Look at the beauty and wonder you see in the mountains and rivers and the starlit sky. From that cold planet of which you speak, he has organized and brought all this into being. Look at the beauty in you. Look at the complexity of life, and how life is sustained from a blazing sun shining down upon us to the raging seas filled with life you cannot even dream of. Then imagine this world filled with ever increasing qualities and quantities of light – light filled with truth and intelligence.”

As the lion spoke a young mole girl was having a conversation with herself. “I must come to him,” she whispered. “These feelings are overcoming me. I feel as if I must run to him.”

Just then the young mole girl emerged from her hole, brushed the dirt off, and ran over to the lion. The ostrich did not notice the little mole running by his feet. Then standing in front of the lion, tall and noble, the little mole girl looked up into the lion’s face. The lion smiled and picked up the little mole girl and put her in the palm of his paw.

“May I help you?” smiled the lion holding the mole near the end of his nose.

“I just want to be near you.”

“Ostrich, this is faith. You can feel as wonderful as this tiny mole feels.”

The lion smiled politely at the little mole girl still in his paw, and then looked out at the moles and ostriches stretched across the field.

“Look at this beautiful little mole who can think and feel, and yes love. All the world, and even this little mole girl, speaks of my father as the great creator.”

The ostrich gave the lion a kind, but frustrated look.

“But how can we know, really know, that your father – that we cannot see – created these things and that they just didn’t happen? And that all things one day will be filled with light and wonder as you say?”

The lion smiled at the ostrich and looked deep into his soul. The lion did not speak for a long time.

“There is a way – in fact, the only sure way to know my father.”

“What is it? What is it?” asked the moles from their holes and ostriches with their heads out of the sand.

“You find my father in your world – the secret world of your thoughts and feelings.”

“How do we do that?” asked the ostrich.

“The impulses of your heart – these will teach you truth that words cannot explain.”

“These are just feelings, emotions. There is no truth there.”

“Not necessarily.”

The ostrich rolled his eyes.

“Ostrich, is there not any happiness in your life? These moles seem very happy creatures.”

The ostrich, thinking of his wife and children, did not want to answer with the truth of his feelings.

“And speaking of death,” said the lion addressing all present. “Death is sad, but a very important part of life. But know that I am the resurrection and the life. And please know that everyone, mother and father, daughter and son, will have life restored. And not only will I fill you with the breath of life, I will fill you with light and truth and goodness, never to die again – joy unending.”

At that the lion roared. Caroline watched the moles and ostriches standing still and solemn as a hush had fallen over them.

“Follow the true impulses of your hearts. Listen to your inner voice. To know the Greatest Lion of all Lions think of your feelings when you see the setting sun over the blue ocean, or when you hold your newborn babies in your arms or wings. Think of your feelings when you fill with love as you watch your child’s play under a sycamore tree in blossom on a sunlight spring day. Then ask who provided you with these things.”

The lion stopped speaking and smiled upon the animals, sensing the moles and ostriches wanted more of his words he spoke.

“When you think of your lives and the wonder of these things my father will reach out and touch your hearts.”

From behind the lion, Caroline watched Beaver fidgeting. His tail began to tap on the ground faster and faster in a wild excitement that he could hardly contain. Then stepping rather boldly in front of the lion, Beaver began to address the moles and ostriches.

“I know these things that the lion is speaking of to be true. I know them with all my heart. You must find the Great Lion. It will change your heart.”

“Thank you Beaver,” complimented the lion turning to Beaver and smiling.

The lion turned to the crowd.

“This beaver is a witness. You may also know of my father from the many witnesses of him.”

Again, still not able to contain himself from the feelings swelling in his heart, Beaver stepped forward again.

“I have seen the lion heal. I have witnessed sight to the blind and the lame to walk. I have seen him feed thousands with only a few fishes and loaves. Miracle after miracle after miracle. At first, I hardly believed my eyes, but it is true. By the name of the Greatest Lion of All Lions, this lion’s father, I swear it. I, indeed, swear it is so. I swear it by my life.”

Caroline felt her heart melting as she watched Beaver stand proudly next to the lion and speak his words. And Beaver was happy too because the ostriches listened to his every word and did not pop their heads back into the sand.

“I sense some of you ostriches still do not believe in my father.”

Then the lion turned to the lead ostrich.

“I want you to know that my father, your creator, is full of compassion and love. He has put these same things inside of you. You must allow them to rise to the surface and come out of you.”

Beaver stepped forward again filled with wild excitement and joy.

“The things the lion has said are all true. I swear it by heaven and earth, and even my own life.”

“Moles and ostriches. As we leave you please understand you were made for joy. Happiness is the object of your lives, and you will be truly happy once you come to know my father.”

“It is the sweetest happiness you can imagine,” said Beaver feeling something rich and powerful flowing inside him.

“Remember, my father desires for you to find him. But it is you who must turn the key to unlock the door which he is standing behind where he waits with light and truth and goodness to bless you, to fill you, to give you peace, and a vision of the endless future with him, for true happiness cannot be found apart from himself.”

Chapter 23

After her father had left her hospital room for the night, Caroline slipped out of her bed. She came over to the window and lifted it up. The night air entered the room. It had the sweet fragrance from the bushes below. Caroline looked past the mulberry tree and into the darkness of the night and stars. She watched the giant branches sway. Leaning on the window sill, staring out into the night, Caroline hoped the blackbird would return.

After some time stargazing, the blackbird still had not come. Feeling quite cold in only her night gown, Caroline left the window open and climbed back into bed. She pulled the downy comforter up to her chin. Caroline remembered Dr. Snodgrass' expression upon seeing her full and long hair. Dr. Snodgrass' eyes just about popped out his head, she thought. His mouth hung so wide open in disbelief that the blackbird could have flown inside.

Caroline lay in the darkness thinking how the lion had made her hair grow back, and how he was such a kind lion. Then she thought of Dr. Snodgrass again and started laughing, and Caroline laughed herself to sleep.

The next thing Caroline realized was that she stood at the edge of a crowd. She could hear the lion's voice through the courtyard of chiseled pillars. Jostling her way to the front, careful of the porcupines, Caroline could see the lion as he taught the animals.

A noise came from behind the crowd. Badgers pushed a gazelle forward. Coming near the lion one badger pushed the gazelle down on the courtyard stones at the lion's feet. Caroline could see the gazelle had been crying and embarrassment hung on her face.

"Master, this gazelle has done a very bad thing. May we stone her according to the law?"

The lion let out a fierce roar. The force of the roar blasted through the badgers' fur. Then silence. It was a solemn and heavy silence made thick from all the stares of those present. You could only hear the wind coming across the courtyard. To Caroline it was the strangest thing. No animal said a word. No animal made a sound. All the animals watched the gazelle staring up into the lion's face.

Still and quiet, the crowd leaned in waiting for the lion to say something, anything. But no words came. Instead the lion took a claw of his great paw and wrote something in the sand.

"Master may we stone her for what she has done?" asked one of the badgers angrily.

Waiting for the lion to roar again, Caroline looked at the pushy badgers badgering the lion. But the lion did not roar, nor did he say a single word. The lion looked down and continued to write in the sand. Everything was still so quiet. The animals gathered watched in silence waiting for the lion to answer the badgers. Caroline looked around at the other animals. They held motionless and looked like statues.

Then after many uncomfortable moments, the lion broke his silence.

"He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at the gazelle."

The crowd turned their gaze now to the badgers. The lion remained silent, stooping to the ground writing again in the sand with his paw. Then Caroline noticed a strange thing happening. One by one the badgers left the courtyard – not even saying a word. And then even stranger still the animals who had come to hear the lion teach left one by one – they too not even saying a word. In this solemn scene, even Caroline backed away and stood behind a pillar of the courtyard. Only the lion and the gazelle remained, with Caroline out of sight watching.

“Where are the badgers who accused you?

“Loin, they have left.”

“Then neither do I condemn thee: go, and do wrong no more.”

Caroline watched the gazelle smile brightly, and then happily leap away from the courtyard. Then coming out from behind the pillar Caroline rushed to the lion. He smiled and put his giant paw on Caroline’s shoulder.

“I’m so glad that you’ve come. Are you here to spend the day with me?”

“If you’ll have my company.”

“I would be delighted with your company.”

Caroline and the lion left the courtyards and journeyed outside the city into the countryside with Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver. They walked quite a distance and then came to a meadow.

“We need rest. We have been serving others so long. We need play,” said the lion turning to Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, Beaver, and the other animals that followed him.

“Caroline, what game should we play?”

“With the trees over there and the rocks beyond the stream there are many places to hide,” said Wolf.

“Then let’s play hide and go seek,” said the lion. “Wolf, you count.”

“But I asked Caroline what game she wanted to play.”

“I like hide and go seek. It’s one of my favorite games.”

“Alright, Wolf you be the counter.”

“Yes Ra’el,” said wolf putting his paws over his eyes.

Caroline, the lion, and the other animals scurried about the meadow to the trees and stream.

“1, 2, 3 ... 100. Ready or not here I come,” called out Wolf looking about him.

At top speed Wolf struck out across the meadow. Rising above the tall grass wolf could see the two ears of a rabbit. Wolf raced over and tagged the rabbit. Then he came to the trees and chased out a wolverine, panther, and giraffe – the giraffe was not well hidden for obvious reasons. Then looking to the stream he thought he could see Caroline and the lion.

“To tag the lion would be the sweetest prize,” said Wolf running back across the meadow and splashing through the cool stream.

The lion spotted Wolf closing in.

“Come on Caroline. Hurry, get on my back,” said the lion crouching so Caroline could climb up quickly.

Upstream Wolf caught a glimpse of Caroline riding on the lion’s back heading for the stone base to tag it and be free. Wolf ran up the bank. As fast as he could, Wolf ran across the meadow. From the lion’s back Caroline could see Wolf only a few paces away.

“Hurry, hurry,” giggled Caroline looking at Wolf’s tired, but determined face.

Caroline felt the force of the lion’s muscles ripple as he ran to get ahead of Wolf.

“Faster. Faster,” yelled out Caroline.

Caroline watched the lion’s paw hit the stone base, just as Wolf’s paw fell against the lion.

“I almost caught you,” panted Wolf in heavy breaths.

Then out of the corner of his eye, Wolf spotted Beaver.

“You can definitely catch him,” laughed the lion.

Wolf spotted Beaver running to the base, his short legs carrying his stubby body as fast as they could. Wolf sprinted towards him and quickly ran up behind Beaver.

“Here I come,” breathed Wolf near the Beaver’s hind quarters.

“Not fair. You have four strong legs and I only have these two short stubby things,” said Beaver gasping for breath as he ran.

“Then run,” said Wolf slowing his pace so Beaver could have a fighting chance.

Beaver ran as fast as his little legs could carry him. Wolf let Beaver make it to the stone base where the lion, Caroline, and the other animals stood.

“That was fun,” panted the lion. “I needed that.”

Chapter 24

With her chin just above the bubbles, Caroline lay in the bathtub before bed time. The bathwater was warm and it made her sleepy. She reached up and cupped a mound of bubbles in her hand. She lightly blew into the bubbles to make interesting shapes. She laughed remembering the morning, and Nurse Nancy stomping down the hall leading Dr. Snodgrass towards the playroom.

“What you are saying about the children is impossible,” said Dr. Snodgrass looking intently at his clipboard as he followed Nurse Nancy.

“Wait till you see doctor. You won’t believe your eyes,” said Nurse Nancy flinging open the door to the playroom.

All the children turned to the loud crash of the door as it swung open.

“Is this some kind of joke?” asked Dr. Snodgrass with his eyes big, jaw dropping, and his clipboard crashing to the floor.

“You tell me, you’re the doctor.”

Dr. Snodgrass looked around the room. All the children had full, beautiful, shiny hair. And the children were very happy.

“Impossible,” muttered the doctor in utter disbelief. “Utterly, completely, and totally impossible. But there must be a logical, scientific explanation.”

“Something mighty strange is going on around here,” said Nurse Nancy.

Caroline blew again into her handful of bubbles. Then she sunk under the water and looked up at the bubbles floating on the surface of the bathwater. She decided to see how long she could hold her breath. Under the water she remembered the look of Dr. Snodgrass and Nurse Nancy and she blurted out a laugh. She quickly put her head above the surface to breathe.

“It was the lion’s doing,” she thought. “But how did he know?”

Caroline took a deep breath and slid under the water again. She counted to measure how long she could hold her breath. Then gasping, she rose above the surface, the water dripping off her long hair. She wiped the water from her eyes and looked over the bathwater.

“Aaaahhhhhh,” screamed Caroline at what she saw after coming up out of the water.

“What’s the matter? Why are you screaming?” asked the blackbird perched on the edge of the tub.

“What are you doing here? I’m naked,” said Caroline making sure only her head was above the water and bubbles.

“Well, so am I naked,” said the blackbird examining himself. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“You have feathers covering you,” said Caroline.

After her scare Caroline was happy to see the blackbird and less ashamed of her nakedness hid under the soap bubbles.

“Will I dream tonight?”

“Uh... the lion didn’t exactly say.”

“Well, I’m not going to jump out to the tree and take another fall.”

“Like you said. Maybe you’ll have another dream tonight.”

“Do birds hold their breaths?”

“Not sure what you mean?”

“Like under water.”

“We birds swim alright, and some of us dive for fish, so yes, we must hold our breaths.”

“Do you want to see how long I can hold my breath?”

“I would,” said the blackbird perched on the edge of the tub and peering down into the bubbles.

Caroline took a deep breath and slid under the water. She looked up at the bubbles and through the reflection could see the blackbird. Just then Caroline noticed the color of the water changing to dark. She could no longer see the blackbird. The temperature of the water changed from bathwater warm to seawater cold. Afraid, Caroline put her head above the surface. To her amazement she found herself in a giant sea being tossed by waves – and the crash of the waves was very loud. A good swimmer, Caroline kept her head above the water and did not panic, although she was very, very frightened. She treaded water and looked about.

“Man overboard,” she heard a voice call out in the moonlight.

Caroline turned to see a boat close by. She swam to the boat as it came to her. Looking closer and she could see Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver on the boat. Caroline did her best to wave to the boat so they could throw her a rope. She felt relieved as she watched Beaver rowed the boat over to her.

Coming close, with his teeth Wolf pulled Caroline on board. She sat in the stern dripping wet and Beaver put a blanket over her shoulders.

“How did you get out there Caroline?” asked Kingfisher.

“I’m not sure. I was taking a bath and a blackbird showed up and the next thing I know I’m here. It must be the lion’s doing.”

“Well, the lion is sleeping. Better get down there yourself. I don’t like the look of those skies,” said Wolf.

“Could be a tempest brewing,” replied Kingfisher.

Caroline went down into the hull of the boat. The lion was sleeping. She lay against his furry mane. She could feel him sleeping and taking deep relaxing breaths. Pulling the blanket Beaver had given her up around her shoulders, soon Caroline was fast asleep herself, and dreaming of being home with her mother and father and Maggie, and Chester her cat.

Wolf and Kingfisher were right. A storm rolled through the skies. The waves and wind pitched the boat on the water. The movement woke Caroline. She climbed up the ladder to see what was the matter. As soon as her head poked up through the passageway she could see the great tempest tossing the boat. Waves crash onto the small vessel.

“We need the lion. We’ll never make it through this storm,” cautioned Beaver.

“I’ll go wake him,” said Kingfisher flying through the passageway down to the hull.

Kingfisher landed on the lion’s nose and perched there a bit. To wake the lion Kingfisher tickled Ra’el’s nose with his wing. Kingfisher watched as the two giant lion eyes opened wide and blinked.

“Lord, save us: we perish.”

The lion felt the rocking of the boat and then nodded. He climbed up onto the deck. Rising at the helm, the cold rain and wind-tossed sea-water splashed against his lion’s face. Then raising his paw the lion rebuked the winds and the sea. A great calm came over the water. The winds ceased. The waves stopped. A beautiful moonlight reflected off the calm surface.

“What manner of lion is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” whispered a toucan bird with his orange and black bill to a colorful parrot.

“He is just as the Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver say he is – The Son of the Greatest Lion of All Lions,” said a warthog who was also part of the boat’s crew.

The lion was still very tired. He had spent the day before healing and blessing many animals.

“I am very sleepy,” said the lion yawning and going down to the hull.

Caroline came down behind the lion. The lion curled up where he had been sleeping. Caroline lay against the lion, yawning. The lion closed his eyes. Soon both were fast asleep.

In the morning Caroline climbed up on deck. She looked over the side admiring the serene water. The sun’s reflection made the sea looked like black glass. With the rising sun the dark water had an orange hue cast over it. Caroline came to Beaver as he rowed the boat over the smooth water. Everything was quiet except for the splash of the oars. Caroline enjoyed the bow of the boat bouncing up and then down as it encountered the slight waves coming to the shore.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?” said the lion coming up behind her.

“Yes,” said Caroline.

“Good morning,” said Wolf.

“Quite a storm,” said the lion.

“Yes, thank you master,” said Wolf.

“Wolf is an animal of great faith,” said the lion. “He even walked on the water momentarily.”

“I’m afraid only momentarily.”

“Yes, but I was proud of you, and your faith.”

“You really walked on water Wolf?”

“Only thanks to the lion. It was his power.”

“Yes, but it was your faith.”

“Tell me about it Wolf,” asked Caroline.

“We were in the boat at night. We thought we saw a ghost walking towards us on the water. Then the lion’s voice came to us to take courage and not be afraid.”

“A ghost,” asked Caroline feeling a little scared.

Wolf and the lion laughed.

“It was not a ghost. It was Ra’el. We’d never seen anyone walking on water before. There was a light around him,” said Wolf.

“Walking on top of the sea at night?” asked Caroline surprised.

“When I saw it was the lion I asked, Lord, bid me to come. I wanted to come to him, to be like him and walk on the water.”

“What did you say to Wolf?” asked Caroline turning to the lion.

“I said ‘come,’” smiled the lion.

“I got down out of the boat and walked on the water. It was the most thrilling moment of my life.”

“But then what happened Wolf?” asked the lion.

“When I felt and saw the wind I was afraid and began to sink.”

“Oh no, what did you do?”

“I cried out, ‘lion, save me,’” said Wolf.

“Did you save him?” asked Caroline very much enjoying the story.

“I immediately reached out my paw and caught Wolf.”

“Then Ra’el led me to the boat and put me in and the winds stopped. Everyone on the boat fell down and worshipped the lion saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of the Greatest Lions of all Lions.’”

Beaver listened to Wolf’s story as he rowed. Soon the boat was safely at shore. Wolf jumped out and walked through the small waves lapping up on the shore. He pulled the boat by a rope in his mouth. He tied the rope to a rock and the others stepped out. They carefully carried their night catch of fish up the beach and into town to the market. As the lion passed through the town, the animals there did not talk. They looked very respectful of the lion.

Then coming to the center of the town a group of orangutans approached the lion. They pulled a friend upon his bed made of sticks and cloth up to the lion. For a moment the lion studied the orangutans not speaking. The orangutan looked at the lion and then looked humbly to the ground.

“I can see your great faith in me and my father. And I can see your desire that your friend be healed.”

“Yes, Lion. We know of your power,” said one of the orangutans.

“And I see the great love and sacrifice you good friends have shown through carrying this orangutan a great distance.”

“That we have lion,” said the orangutans.

“I can see your faith by the rays of light within you.”

The lion turned to the palsied orangutan.

“Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.”

From dark shadows a group of well-dressed badgers stepped into the light.

“This lion speaks ill,” said one of the badgers to the others.

Not hearing their whispers, but reading their hearts, the lion turned to the badgers.

“Why do you think evil in your hearts?” asked the lion.

“We are not evil,” said the badger. “We rule the people.”

“Is it easier to say your sins be forgiven, or to say arise and walk?”

“It would be easier to say yours sins be forgiven.”

“Then I say to this orangutan arise, take up your bed and go to your house.”

The orangutans, as well as the badgers and the animals of the town, looked anxiously at the palsied orangutan as he lay on his bed of cloth and sticks. He looked up at the lion from where he lay. He turned over and knelt on the ground. He looked to the lion again. The lion nodded, but did not speak.

Then the orangutan stood on his feet. He wobbled a bit, but then stood confident. The other orangutans began jumping with excitement as orangutans do. Then the palsied orangutan began jumping himself, smiling at the lion.

At a nearby tree, the palsied orangutan sprang to a branch – something he had not been able to do since he was an orangutan child making fun and mischief in the trees. With their heads tilted back, everyone watched as the palsied orangutan shimmied up the tree and climbed so fast to the top branch. He swung back and forth on the branch and then jumped through the air and landed on the roof of a house. He jumped back up into the tree and climbed again to the highest branches. The other orangutans let out “Ooooooo’s” and quickly jumped up into the tree and followed their friend.

The lion, Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver all laughed a happy laugh – it was the kind of laughter with joy mingled in, the kind of laughter when the light inside you, put inside you by the Greatest Lion of All Lions, comes to life and makes you smile a lasting smile.

“Thank you Lion. Thank you Lion. Thank you Lion,” yelled out the orangutans as they swung from the tree branches.

“You are welcome,” shouted the lion. “May we join you in your fun?”

“Yes, of course,” said the orangutans swinging.

The lion crouched to the ground and Caroline knew what that meant. She climbed on the lion’s back and held tight to his mane.

“Come Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver. Up into the trees,” said the lion with great strength running up the trunk of the tree and standing on a branch. Caroline held on very tightly to his mane so she would not fall off. Wolf came up the other side of the tree and Kingfisher landed on a branch above Wolf.”

“Come up Beaver,” called down Caroline.

“About all I could do is to cut down this tree with my beaver teeth. But I suppose with all you up in the tree that you wouldn’t want me to do that,” said the Beaver standing on the ground looking up at all the fun in the tree.

Caroline, the lion, Wolf, and Kingfisher all laughed as they climbed higher and higher into the trees. But they were no match for the swinging orangutans with their long stretchy arms who were having the time of their life with their friend now swinging alongside them.

Chapter 25

In the middle of all the play, Caroline looked down. Under the tree a rabbit held his hat. Every once in a while he would look up into the tree. Then he would look down to the ground and nervously tap his long rabbit's foot. Caroline pulled on the lion's tail and pointed down to the rabbit. The lion watched the rabbit nervously feeling the rim of his hat.

Caroline watched as the lion jumped from branch to branch and then pounced on the ground in front of the rabbit.

"You'll have to excuse me Rabbit. I was making fun," panted the lion.

"That is quite alright."

"Do you have something to ask of me?"

"Yes," said Rabbit through trembling lips.

"What is it?"

"My daughter," said the rabbit choking with sadness. "She is even now dead: but come and lay your paw on her, and she shall live."

The rabbit began to sob and Caroline watched as lion put a soft, comforting paw around him. Always fond of rabbits, and seeing the trembling lip of the rabbit, Caroline felt as if her heart would break open so big that the entire sea she found herself swimming in the night before could be poured inside her.

"We will go now Rabbit. Climb up on my back and hold onto my mane. Caroline and Beaver climb aboard as well."

"Yes, Lion," said the rabbit, Caroline, and the Beaver.

"Where are we going," asked Wolf jumping down from the tree and the Kingfisher flying in front of the lion.

"To this rabbit's hole."

To get to the rabbit's hole, the travelers passed through the streets of a city. Coming along animals reached out to touch the lion. They simply wanted to touch him for the greatness they felt and saw in the lion. Caroline noticed a pretty black dog reaching for the lion. Her paw just missed touching his mane. Caroline watched the dog hang her head. Then, her determination building, the dog ran ahead in the street. She reached again as hard as she could, but was pulled back into the crowd.

"If I may but touch his mane, I shall be whole," Caroline heard her say.

Caroline watched as the dog ran ahead again pushing through the crowd. She reached, this time her paw touching the lion's mane.

The lion stopped. The animals in the street stopped as well. The crowd noticing the lion had stopped grew quiet. The lion turned and looked behind him into the crowd. Understanding somehow who touched him, the lion looked at the dog and smiled.

"Dog, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole."

The lion continued walking through the streets and the animals again pressed upon him to touch his glorious mane. But Caroline stopped. She turned to watch the dog so happy to be healed of a sickness she had so many years. Caroline looked closer and could see the dog crying. But Caroline now knew the difference between sad tears and happy tears, the tears with joy and light mingled in.

Caroline looked up the street at the lion, with Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver ahead of her. Deciding she needed to catch up, she pushed her way through the animals sliding past deer, coyotes, dogs, cats, monkeys, and more. She glanced at the rabbit who smiled a smile of hope and hopped up and down in excitement for his daughter. Caroline wondered if seeing the dog healed gave the rabbit a new hope.

The lion and Caroline, along with Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver followed the rabbit out of the city and into the green countryside. They came down the road and then crossed a grassy field with bluebells. As they quickly crossed, their feet crushed the stalks of grass, everything smelled alive and wonderful.

“It’s over there,” said Rabbit pointing. “Our hole is right there. I’ll go fetch the others.”

Caroline watched the rabbit cross the field, hopping through the tall grass. His long ears rose above the heads of the grass and dandelions and clover. As the lion and Caroline, and the others arrived at the rabbit’s hole, the rabbit’s family and neighbors from other rabbit holes had gathered around the dead rabbit.

“Give place: for the maid is not dead, but sleeps,” said the lion.

The rabbits from the other holes began to laugh. Caroline did not take well to this offense of the lion and looked angrily at the other rabbits.

The lion came to the small rabbit where her mother had laid her on the grass. He reached down and took the rabbit by the paw, which was quite a sight for the lion’s paw was so big and the bunny’s paw so tiny. At first the bunny blinked her eyes. The rabbit mother let out a gasp. Then the bunny sat up. She looked around at her mother and father who were biting their lower lips but looking hopeful. Then the bunny jumped on all fours, and began to hop and hop like she had never hopped before.

Caroline watched the father rabbit and his wife crying, but again the good kind of crying, where joy pours from your eye sockets and you think your heart is going to burst with happiness because of the lion. The other rabbits who had been laughing at the lion earlier stood with their mouths open in disbelief, their ears flopped down. Some of the rabbits rubbed their eyes not believing what they had just seen. These rabbits now eating their humble pie, did give Caroline some satisfaction.

“Thank you lion. Thank you so much. How will we ever repay you?”

“Nothing is owed.”

The bunny’s mother stepped forward and hugged the lion’s right leg. She was so happy she hugged the lion’s leg with all her might.

“Thank you lion,” said the rabbit fingering his hat and looking at the ground again as he did when Caroline first saw him under the tree. He was a very humble rabbit.

“Thank my father, the Greatest Lion of All Lions that Ever Were.”

“We will. We will always honor to you and your father,” said Rabbit with his paw around his wife’s shoulder.

About to leave, the lion paused. He looked down to the ground. The Rabbit's daughter, so small she could have fit in Caroline's pocket, bent down and kissed one of the claws on the lion's paw. The lion turned his paw over and motioned for the bunny to climb up. To get a good look at her, the lion lifted the bunny up to his nose. Caroline watched as the bunny looked into the lion's face and with moist eyes said, "Thank you great lion."

"You're very welcome. Never forget that you are a very special bunny."

Then in the distance the frantic voice could be heard, but not seen. The voice grew louder and then the tip of a tail could be seen coming very quickly through the field grass. A mountain lion pounced at the lion's feet. The lion gently placed the bunny in the grass.

"Lion, he who you love is sick. You must come now," begged the mountain lion panting short of breath.

The lion did not speak. He just tilted his head and looked at the mountain lion. After a while he spoke.

"It is not my father's will that I come."

"I said, he who you love will be dead."

"I must obey my father," said the lion hanging his great mane.

"No, you must come. You must come now. He who you love will be dead," pleaded the mountain lion.

Caroline recognized the sadness in the lion's eyes. It was deeper now than she had ever seen.

"I said, he who you love will be dead," said the mountain lion with tears of his own.

The lion just turned his head away and looked to the north.

Two days had passed. The lion, Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver journeyed through the green of the countryside under a pale blue sky to the place of the lion's friend – whom the lion loved. As usual, Caroline and Beaver rode on the lion's back. Kingfisher rested on Caroline's shoulder. Wolf walked alongside the lion. But the lion did not say much. He looked to the ground often. Caroline, as she sat on his back, thought his muscles felt tense. At one point the lion stopped to say they were near.

Coming over the rise in the road a gazelle came out to meet them. She leaped quickly, all four hooves suspended in air momentarily, as gazelles do.

"Lion, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know whatsoever you will ask your father will give to you," said the gazelle looking at the lion and then gazing at the ground.

From atop the lion, Caroline watched the gazelle's sad eyes. The lion did not speak. Everything was quiet except for the buzzing of insects in the clumps of grass at the roadside and the wind moving through grass and trees. The moment held still. All eyes were on the lion not speaking. Caroline wondered if she should get off the lion's back, but then decided to sit still with Beaver behind her and Kingfisher on her shoulder. Then the lion spoke.

"Thy brother shall rise again."

The gazelle's head lifted and her eyes shot up from the ground to the lion. She studied the lion's sincere expression.

"I know that he shall rise again at the last day when you bring everything to new life."

"I am life. I am light. I am truth. Please, go get your sister."

The gazelle looked for a brief moment reading something in the lion's eyes. Then she turned and ran down the road. As Caroline watched the gazelle run, she could see a house in the far distance. In no time the gazelle had made it along the length of the road, passing under trees and crossing a bridge, to the house. But the lion remained still on the spot of the road where he had met the gazelle. Caroline, nor the Wolf, Kingfisher, or Beaver, felt as if they should talk and interrupt the lion's silence. There was a solemnness in the moment. Caroline wondered why the lion did not go with the gazelle to the house.

Upon arriving at the house the gazelle entered speedily. Her sister sat at a spinning wheel but stood immediately dropping her basket of yarn.

"The lion has come," said the gazelle to her sister.

"He has?" asked the sister gazelle, her voice trembling.

"He calls for you to go out and meet him."

"Where is he?"

"North on the road with others."

The sister gazelle burst through the door. It banged on a table she moved so quickly. Outside she leaped past the well and fences. As her sister did, she leaped so high in her haste to get to the lion, she momentarily suspended all four hooves in air, with each leap. She was gladdened. Feeling only deep despair, she now felt a new

and exciting hope rushed through her heart. In fact, she felt as if her heart would burst open in joy for the promise of the lion.

Caroline watched as the sister gazelle came quickly up the road. She fell down at the lion's feet.

"Lion."

"Yes?"

The gazelle looked to the ground at the dirt and grass. There were tears in her eyes. Then not looking at the lion she said, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died."

The lion came close to the gazelle. He put his paw under the gazelle's chin and raised her face to look at him. He looked down into her watery eyes.

"Where have ye laid him?" asked the lion, smiling gently at the gazelle.

At that, and without asking, Caroline and Beaver slid off the lion's back. Coming around the front of him Caroline noticed the lion crying himself.

"I will take you," said the gazelle looking kindly at the crying lion.

The gazelle lead the lion Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver along a route to a cave where they had buried her brother. Her sister, the other gazelle, had come out of their house and joined them on the road. Then passing through a grove of trees they came to the cave. There was an elephant there with two rhinoceros.

"Take away the stone," commanded the lion in a confident voice.

The elephant and rhinoceros got behind the large round stone and pushed with their big bodies.

"But lion, he has been dead four days," called out a bear close by.

Not speaking, and his eyes strong, the lion watched as the elephants moved the stone the rest of the way with his long trunk. The cave was now open. From where she stood Caroline look at the entrance and noticed how dark it was inside. The lion looked heavenward.

"Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me."

Then moving to the cave, and putting his head and mane inside, the lion said, "Come forth."

All the animals gathered stood in silence. The lion backed away from the entrance to the cave. He turned and looked at those gathered. Then, with all eyes upon him, the lion's friend, whom he had loved, came forward. The mountain lion came out of the tomb and up to the lion. The mountain lion joyfully put his paws on lion's shoulders and kissed his mane.

Their stomachs tied in knots, Caroline's mother and father sat in Dr. Snodgrass' office. It was late in the afternoon. Immediately after receiving the call Caroline's mother left Maggie in the care of a neighbor, Mrs. Abbott, and had taken the train to the city. Caroline's father's left work early and drove to the hospital. Now seated in Dr. Snodgrass' office they sat holding hands feeling butterflies. As they waited for the doctor they glanced over the contents of Dr. Snodgrass' very tidy desk.

"I'm sorry for the delay," said Dr. Snodgrass hurriedly entering his office. "I apologize."

"That's alright. You have lives to save," said Caroline's father beginning to stand to greet the doctor.

"Please sit, please sit," motioned the doctor.

Caroline's parents sat. Dr. Snodgrass came around and sat at his desk. He leaned forward on the desk and folded his hands. He opened his mouth to speak, hesitated, and looked down at his folded hands.

"These are such difficult matters. How are both of you doing?"

"Not well under the circumstances of being called to meet with our daughter's doctor under the assumption that something is terribly, terribly wrong," said Caroline's mother shaking a bit.

Dr. Snodgrass tilted his head a little and scrunched up his face.

"Caroline is not well. I'm afraid we must prepare for the worse."

"Oh no," shrieked Caroline's mother.

Caroline's father slumped in his chair and began to cry. It was a real sad cry where your whole body shakes. Looking over at her husband, Caroline's mother began to cry as well. Her cry was a deep soulful cry that only mothers can cry.

"I wish I had better news. But her test results continue to get worse and worse."

"How long does she have?" wailed Caroline's mother.

"It's always difficult to tell. It could be a few weeks if we are lucky... or a few days."

The doctor leaned back and watched Caroline's parents crying and holding each other.

"Will you leave us alone doctor ... to compose ourselves?" asked Caroline's father.

"Yes, of course," said Dr. Snodgrass quietly leaving the office.

Caroline's father put his arm around Caroline's mother. This made her cry even harder. Then they both cried together in the afternoon light coming in through the windows behind Dr. Snodgrass' desk. Caroline's father thought how Shakespeare was right, all the world was a stage.

In the playroom Caroline colored at the big table next to the windows looking outside. Margaret, the little girl who had become Caroline's shadow, colored next to her. Dr. Snodgrass stood for a long while in the doorway watching Caroline and Margaret. He glanced over at his closed office door and thought of his own children at home and he wondered where each one was at the moment.

Looking behind him Dr. Snodgrass could see his office door open. Caroline's parents step into the hall. As they came towards him, Dr. Snodgrass could see they had wiped the tears from their faces. But their eyes were red and their noses running.

“How are you doing?” asked Dr. Snodgrass quietly and slowly.

“As best as can be expected, I guess,” said Caroline’s father wiping his nose with his handkerchief.

“Can we see her?”

“Of course, of course. Go right on inside.”

After admiring Caroline’s drawings of lions and wolfs and kingfishers and beavers, and of course a lengthy conversation with Margaret about how much she liked Caroline, Caroline and her parents retired to her room for a private dinner. They ate pork chops with apple sauce and mashed potatoes and carrots and peas. Caroline had developed a rather impressive technique of eating her peas by balancing them on her knife and then ever so slightly tipping the knife at the right angle so the peas would slowly fall into her mouth one by one. As they ate their dinners, Caroline’s father was very chatting although Caroline sensed a crack in his voice at times. She also noticed that he would look away from her frequently. Caroline’s mother was very quiet and she pursed her lips together and twisted her face often. To Caroline she looked very brave and much like a statue. But Caroline could see the redness in her eyes from lots of crying – and statues do not do that.

“Is something the matter?” asked Caroline.

“Why would you say that?” asked Caroline’s father, his voice cracking again.

“The crack in your voice and you looking away, and the redness in mommy’s eyes and how quiet she is. Is something the matter?”

An awkward silence spread through the room like a gloomy old ghost passing through your neighborhood on a cold Halloween night after the trick or treating and games are over for the year.

“I have a right to know,” demanded Caroline, although inside she was very scared.

“Caroline, it’s just that we miss you so much at home and Dr. Snodgrass says it may be a while longer before we have you close to us again,” said Caroline’s mother, breaking her silence.

After putting their dinner trays aside, Caroline walked with her parents to the doorway of her hospital room. Caroline’s father was the first to kneel. He hugged Caroline very tight and long, and she could feel his deep breaths. Caroline turned and looked up into her mother’s face as she knelt and squeezed her lovely little girl who stood in her nightgown and barefoot on the cool floor tiles. Caroline felt her mother’s arms come around her and then her mother’s face on her shoulder. Caroline felt the throbbing of her mother’s body and could feel her tears splashing down on her bare shoulder where her night gown did not cover. Caroline caressed her mother’s back with her hands.

After a long time Caroline’s mother stood and smiled down on her little girl. The tears in her mother’s eyes looked like stars to Caroline and her mother had never looked so beautiful. As her parent’s left, Caroline stood in the doorway and watched them at first walk hand and hand down the hall. But not before too long Caroline’s father put his arm around her mother. Her mother tilted her head and rested it on Caroline’s father’s shoulder.

Caroline shut the door and climbed into bed. She was so sad inside that her chest hurt. Not before too long she was crying herself. She turned on her side and sobbed some more. Looking out the window, past the mulberry trees, she could see the moon bright and wonderful, and around it an array of stars. The stars reminded her of the tears in her mother’s beautiful face.

Chapter 28

Caroline lay in bed unable to sleep feeling sorry for herself. She thought of the lion and wished the blackbird would come and somehow take her to his world where she almost always felt happy. But the blackbird did not arrive. Caroline turned on her back and stared up on the ceiling in the moonlight. Her eyes were still filled with tears and if she squinted just right she could see things in different shapes in the moonlight. The shapes reminded her of stars. Then something strange happened. She seemed to enter one of the stars made from her tears. She stepped farther and farther into the brightness of the star. Then things began to feel wetter and wetter and wetter and wetter.

“That is cold. That is very, very cold,” shrieked Caroline feeling all wet from head to toe.

She opened her eyes to see an elephant spraying water on her from his trunk. Then she heard a familiar voice.

“That feels wonderful on such a hot day,” roared the lion.

Dripping wet in her pretty dress Caroline stood next to the lion enjoying the water on the hot day. Beaver stood at the end of the spout of water with his mouth open drinking in the water flowing from the elephant’s trunk. Caroline thought that it looked disgusting to drink from an elephant trunk. But Beaver didn’t seem to mind. Kingfisher darted through the spray and Wolf lay in the puddle made from the water to cool underneath himself.

“Caroline, you’ve come. Wonderful.” Said the lion.

Still feeling sad from her parent’s visit, Caroline threw her arms around the lion’s mane and hugged him very tightly, not letting go.

“Is everything alright?” asked the lion patting Caroline reassuringly on her back.

“Now that I am here with you it is,” said Caroline breaking away and looking up into the lion’s wet face.

The lion laughed. But Caroline noticed it was not his usual hearty laugh. She also noticed a look of bravery and sadness in his eyes as he turned his mane away from her so Caroline could not see the hurt in his eyes.

“Is everything alright with you?” asked Caroline.

“Yes, my little one. Will you scratch my back like you have in the past?”

“Yes, of course,” said Caroline raking her fingernails over the lion’s fur.

Caroline’s scratching sent a pleasant sensation over the lion’s back making him shiver.

“You must be a very special girl to be here today and see the things that must come to pass.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When you first saw me just now, you sensed it in my eyes,” said the lion smiling at Caroline. “Today we go to the great city.”

“Why do we go there?”

“You will see,” said the lion hanging his heavy mane. “It is the will of my father that I fall into the hands of the badgers and peacocks, and crocodile and foxes. But I shall rise again with healing in my wings for all animals and all things in creation.”

The joy that Caroline had felt upon seeing the lion only a few moments ago had vanished. The sadness that Caroline felt alone in her hospital room returned. Led by the lion, Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver walked along the dusty road towards the great city. All could tell that the lion had a heavy heart. Then after much walking they could see the city gates. The lion stopped to examine the outline of the city and then continued forward.

Upon reaching the gates the lion came into the great city. Seeing the great lion whose fame had spread through all the land, the animals rejoiced. They spread their clothes and tree branches on the dirt road as a sign of respect just like subjects of a kingdom do to honor their king.

“Hosanna to the lion,” shouted a camel from above the crowd.

“Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Great Lion,” called out a zebra.

“Hosanna in the highest,” squawked an eagle.

Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver followed the lion to a grand looking building high up in the city. Climbing to the top of the steps the lion roared so loudly that the tents of people selling things nearly fell over. The animals stopped their selling and all eyes were upon the lion. He stood tall and proud.

“It is written, my house shall be a house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves,” roared the lion angrily, the bad animals fleeing from before the lion.

Then in the emptiness of the square a blind lama was lead to the lion.

“Will you heal my friend?” asked the lama who had lead his friend to the lion.

“Bring him forth.”

Caroline watched as the lion blew his breath of life upon the lama. By now a crowd had gathered and they watched the lama step back from the lion. The lama blinked a few times then opened his eyes wide. He stumbled back.

“You’re a ... You’re a... You’re a lion,” said the frightened lama who could now see.

“Were you expecting a mouse,” laughed the lion and the crowd laughed with him goodnaturedly.

“I don’t care what sort of animal you are. I can see, I can see, I can see,” said the lama prancing about the courtyard.

The lion raised his head and called out to the crowd, “Bring me all that need to be made whole – mind, body, and soul.”

Soon a circle of animals formed around the lion. One by one he healed every animal in need. Then a group of badgers pushed their way through the circle around the lion, and forced their way to the front of the crowd.

“By what authority do you do these things?” yelled a badger in a long flowing robe of colors, and gold and silver dangling from his neck.

“My father, the Greatest Lion of All,” said the lion interrupting the healing of a duck billed platypus.

The badgers turned away in disgust. Caroline watched as the badger went down the steps and left the courtyard to call a meeting of the other badgers.

As the badgers left, the lion healed the duck billed platypus of his squeaky tail.

“Thank you for healing me,” said the duck billed platypus.

“You are very welcome,” said the lion.

“And one more thing,” said the duck billed platypus cupping his hands and speaking into lion’s ear. “And tell your father, the Greatest Lion of All Lions, thank you for making me one of the most beautiful animals of all the animals.”

“I’m glad you think so,” said the lion.

Caroline watched the duck billed platypus waddle away down the courtyard steps.

Chapter 29

In a lower room the badgers met secretly with the peacocks. In the firelight from torches on the walls the head badger rubbed his small, pointy paws together as he spoke.

“How shall we capture the lion?” asked the head badger.

“We must bind him and kill him. He teaches the animals that we, their leaders, are not of the Great Lion,” said a badger.

“The animals love him more than they love us. We must capture him at night,” said a peacock.

“We need plan. You are right, the animals love him more than us. We must be tricky,” said the head badger.

“We must get one of his followers to betray him to us,” said a peacock.

“Every animal has their price,” said another peacock.

The chief peacock, who had sat back silently, popped open his beautiful purple and blue feathers. The badgers and other peacocks fell silent.

“Here is what we will do. On the feast day, we will pay one of his followers thirty pieces of silver to lead us with our army to take him.”

“Then that is our plan,” cheered the badgers and peacocks congratulating each other.

Chapter 30

After leaving the grand building Caroline, the lion, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver walked alone. Up the road the half circle of a setting sun dipped below the horizon bringing on dusk. The lion did not speak much. His fellow travelers had heavy hearts as well. Caroline noticed that the lion hung his head especially low and she wondered if he was concerned by the threat of the badgers.

"I don't mean to be a bother," said Beaver. "But with that setting sun it reminds me of dinner time and we haven't had anything to eat since earlier this afternoon."

"We will eat and we will eat well tonight," said the lion. "We will eat in that house over there."

Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver followed the lion into a house of mud bricks and straw. As they approached the house a leopard greeted the lion and asked him to please come in and eat. Inside, the humble leopard seated the lion at the head of the table. Then the leopard and the others joined him. As he sat, a tiger brought over an alabaster box of precious ointment. As the lion ate honey comb and bread, the tiger poured the precious ointment on the lion's mane and head.

"This is a waste?" said a cat that had been a follower of the lion for quite some time.

"A waste?" asked the lion.

"This ointment might have been sold and that money given to the poor," said the cat.

"Why trouble this tiger? She has done a good work on me. She has done it for my burial."

Caroline did not like the sound of that. She tried to push away the thought of the lion dying by thinking about how hungry she was. Then just at that moment the leopard and his servants entered the room. They carried large platters of dates and figs and fruit and fish.

"It's about time," muttered Beaver leaning over to Caroline.

Caroline turned from Beaver. She noticed something in the lion's eyes. She looked in the direction of his stare and could see the lion watching the cat sneak out the door, his tail slipping through the crack before closing. For a moment Caroline thought she saw a tear rolling down the lion's cheek.

Then, like cats will do, this cat slyly walked through the streets, jumping over fences and rattling trashcans. Soon he was at the grand building. Coming down the stairs, the cat slipped into the room full of badgers and peacocks still arguing by torchlight about how best to capture the lion. Standing in the doorway, the cat listened for a while. Then to get the attention of the badgers and peacocks he let out a shrill cry followed by a hiss.

The badgers and peacocks quickly turned their heads to look at the doorway.

"I will deliver him unto you."

The badgers and peacocks smiled. From behind their beady little eyes, the badgers rubbed their sharp and pointy paws together with delight. In their excitement, the peacocks opened their beautiful purple and blue feathers in a show of their pride.

The chief peacock came over. Looking at the ordinary street cat, dressed in his poor street clothes, the chief peacock asked, "What is your price?"

"Thirty pieces of silver."

“Deal.”

Chapter 31

The leopard was kind enough to let Caroline, the lion, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver spend the night at his house. As usual, Caroline snuggled up against the lion and slept on his soft fur. Kingfisher made a nest of his mane and Wolf and Beaver slept at his paws. Beaver would sometimes lay awake at night and admire the sharpness of the claws.

Also as usual, in the morning Caroline was the first to wake. She went outside into the sunshine and came to a well. She dropped the bucket down inside. With the rope she fetched some water to drink. She put the ladle to her mouth and drank down the cool, sweet, delicious water. She looked up and over at the leopard's house and could see the lion standing in the doorway watching her. She ran over to him and hugged his great mane.

"You gladden my heart, Caroline."

"Why are you sad?"

"Tonight is a great night. I must suffer much."

"But why do you have to suffer?"

"Because I am the son of the Greatest Lion of all Lions that Ever Were."

"Just because you are somebody's son?"

"I will sacrifice myself, the light and goodness and truth that my father has put inside me to save all things."

"Oh, I do wish I could understand more."

"In time my child. Now, I can see something in your eyes. Why are you so sad?"

"In my world I am dying," cried Caroline the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"And what's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong with that?" asked Caroline looking at the lion in great surprise not understanding why he would ask such a foolish question.

"Yes, as I asked. What's wrong with that?"

"I will be taken from my family," said Caroline starting to cry especially hard, feeling the same sadness she had felt in the hospital watching her mother and father, sad themselves and crying, walking away from her down the long corridor.

As the tears fell from her eyes the tears were immediately swallowed up in the lion's great mane who had come up to her and was now nuzzling her cheeks.

"Caroline, I understand why you are sad. I'm only teaching you."

"I wish I had never been born. I wished I had never lived," cried Caroline, her tears not hitting the ground but being absorbed, one by one, in the lion's mane.

Then Caroline felt herself being pulled away from the lion's mane by his giant paw. She looked up into the sweetness of the lion's face and the infinity in his eyes.

"You must never say that."

"Say what?"

“Will I be with my family again?”

“Not only will you be with your family again, but you will live in a world filled with light and truth and joy springing from your fingertips you are so happy?”

“I want that so much,” said Caroline the new hope returning and building at an ever increasing speed inside her as when a plane reaches top speed flying through the sky.

“In me, through my father, it will be so. That is why you are to be of good cheer. I will soon overcome this world.”

Looking up into the handsome face of the lion Caroline felt like crying again. But it was a different sort of crying. It was the cry of joy and hope and loveliness. She leaned forward and threw her arms around the mane of the great lion. Then Caroline broke away from lion and admired his greatness again.

“Today we must enjoy ourselves with fun and games and good works. For the ordeal that will bring you eternal joy begins tonight.”

Chapter 32

Along with Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver, this night Caroline sat around a table of an upper room. She ate from a bunch of grapes as she watched the lion seated with his followers.

“One of you shall betray me.”

“Lord, is it I?” asked the dog.

“Lord, is it I?” asked the mouse.

“Lord, is it I?” asked the stallion.

“Master, is it I?” asked the cat.

“Thou hast said,” replied the lion to the cat. “Do you what you will soon.”

After finishing their meal the lion stood. The Cat had already left the room and was running through the streets to the badgers and peacocks.

“Come, follow me. Let’s walk up the mountain,” said the lion to those remaining.

The animals all stood and followed the lion out of the room and into the night. Leading the way, the lion walked through the city streets and passed through the outside gate. The lion and his followers came along a path and then began to climb the mountain. Not too far of a distance the Lion stopped on the path. He turned and looked upon those that followed him and beyond them to the lights of the city below.

“All you shall be offended because of me this night. But after I am risen again, I will go before you,” said the lion looking over his shoulder before turning and walking up the mountain.

Wolf ran forward and caught up with the lion.

“Though all animals shall be offended because of thee, I will never be offended,” said Wolf.

The lion stopped momentarily. He gave a grateful glance to Wolf.

“This night, before the cock crows, you shalt deny me three times.”

“Though I should die with thee, I will not deny you,” said Wolf

“We shall see Wolf, we shall see.”

Walking through the night, on the side of the mountain, the great lion slowed at a garden. In the moonlight he stop a short distance from the garden gate. Before passing through, the lion listened to the crickets buried in the grass chirping and the night wind rustling through the olive trees swaying the heavy branches.

Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver watched the lion in a deep mood. Caroline noticed the lion staring into the stars, his eyes connecting with something, and then sighing. Then the lion’s shoulders rounded, and his head dropped.

“Please, sit here,” said the lion passing through the gate, treading into the darkness.

Not looking at his friends the lion next said, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me.”

Although being very tired in the lateness of the night, Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver reverently sat outside the gate watching the lion. With heavy eyelids they did their best to stay awake.

Wolf sat against a boulder and stared up into the sky. It came back to Wolf the sea at night, the water rippling up the shore where he stood with the lion. The lion asked Wolf to launch out into the deep and let down his nets. Wolf protested. "Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing." Obedient, Wolf let down his nets. Within moments, great multitude of fishes filled the nets. As they hauled in the fish the net began to break. Calling to Kingfisher and Beaver, and the fishers in another boat, Wolf filled both ships until they began to sink.

Now, as Wolf watched the lion through the garden gate, sensing something of great importance about to happen, he remembered falling to his knees on the rough wood of the bottom of the boat and saying, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful wolf, O Lion." But the lion never departed.

The lion stood in the darkness of the garden alone. He remembered what The Greatest Lion of All Lions that Ever Were had taught him about this night. His father had cared for the lion with much love, putting light and truth inside him since he was his beloved lion cub a long time ago to prepare him for this night of all nights.

Everything the lion had been prepared for led to this moment as he stood now in the garden of the deepest love. All the pain and heartache ever felt in the whole wide world – by every animal and living thing – would pass through him from his mane to his claws. All the pain and heartache would be swallowed up in him. That way every animal and living thing could let go of those things inside of them – simply let go like when you are flying a kite on a windy day and the string slips from your hand and you watch the kite sail away from you in the blue sky never to return.

All the light and truth inside of lion would be put on the awful altar in this garden of the deepest love. As the light and truth and everything good and great about the lion left him it would cause this loveliest of all lions to bleed at every pore.

Looking into the garden, Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver watched the lion fall on his face and pray, "O my father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou will."

Feeling sleepy, and dozing a bit, Caroline woke herself. She looked into the garden. In the moonlight she could see a snake moving through the grass. She sat up afraid. She wanted to call out to warn the lion. Then she watched as the snake raised his head as if it to strike the lion. But no strike came. Caroline could see that the lion recognized the snake.

Caroline remembered what the lion had told her about the snake and this night. This snake, with his beautifully colored diamond back and head, was the author of all the pain and suffering and death and sadness the world had ever known. Any time an animal did something really wrong they would slowly fall under the power of the snake and his unseen chains. And after many times of doing the wrong, the snake's power over the animal would become stronger and stronger.

But on this night of all nights, it was the lion's chance to undo the snake's power and break those chains. This was the snake's last stand. On this night of all nights everything was at stake – for both the snake and the lion. If the lion could suffer for all wrong acts, the animals and the earth would be saved and be free to one day live in a world of brilliant lights in themselves and all things – and not lost and subject to the snake's cruel intentions, forever in his perilous power.

Slithering onto the scene to battle, the snake as the author of all pain and suffering and sadness was ready to receive his due for all wrongs through all time. Caroline waited for the snake to strike. But he did not move. Rather he talked to the lion, hissing much. Caroline wished she could hear the conversation. But all she could see was the lion turning his head away from the snake and looking very sad.

Then in the lion's mind, time stopped. His father made this happen so the lion could see every animal that had ever lived or whoever would live. The first animal wandered into the scene of the vision. The lion could see the panther's face. Instantly, the lion knew and felt the panther's pains and sorrows and sadness. Then the lion could see all of the panther's sadness, doubts, disappointments, fears, loneliness, and all his wrong acts. Then all those things left the panther and entered into the lion. The panther leapt for joy. But the lion felt them deep, down inside his soul. Taking upon himself the whole soul of the panther, tears streamed down the great lion's cheeks. The lion looked down and noticed that he was sweating red. Then he realized that he was bleeding. It was caused by the vast light and goodness leaving his body for the panther.

"If it is my father's will that I do this for all animals, and all of this creation, I will gladly obey," said the lion groaning within himself. "For unto this end was I born."

Then for each animal ever born, the great lion wrestled the powers of the snake. The lion cried out in agony. Face down on the ground, his paws clawed at the earth. The lion looked down at his legs and paws and could see the redness covering and dripping into the grass on the garden floor. With his tongue he tasted the blood and sweat on his face.

Then, far, far way, an angel dear to the lion stood near his father's throne. Receiving the nod, the angel descended to the garden like heavenly lightening. To comfort the lion, in a twinkling of an eye the angel entered the darkness of the garden. As the angel's paw touched the grassy garden floor the snake flinched in the holy light and glory that burst upon the scene. The angel shined beaming light upon the lion, strengthening the great lion in his hour of greatest need.

Then, in the lion's heart, a new hope dawned – like a morning sun blasting its light across a cold countryside. In one last swallowing up of all the pain and suffering and death the world had known or would know, the lion finished his great act. In a final burst of love, it was finished. The snake had been defeated. Light shed forth.

Although darkness hung over the sky, the morning of a new day was beginning to edge over the horizon. His great chest heaving, the lion caught his breath. He rolled onto his back and felt the grass of the garden under him. He turned over and moved his paws over the cool wet grass drenched in dew. He glanced up into the night sky at the stars. He smiled victoriously and let out a laugh. He had come off the conqueror of all things.

He could now lift and redeem and build light and truth and joy and happiness into every single animal and all of creation – and put smiles on all faces through all generations of time.

It was finished!

Chapter 33

In the trees overhead the night wind rustled through the leaves swaying the heavy branches. The lion stood proudly under the olive trees in the garden looking out into the night. With great joy and happiness surging through him he thought of the great act, the greatest act of all acts, that he had just performed.

The crickets chirping in the grass brought him back to the moment. He thought of his friends. He came over and stopped short from the garden gate. Before passing through he watched Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver sleeping.

“Sleep on now, and take your rest,” said the lion.

Waking, Caroline rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands. Beaver stretched his short arms up over his head. Wolf let out a yawn and Kingfisher flew atop Caroline’s shoulder.

Wolf was the first to look down the mountainside. In the darkness he could see torches carried by wolverine soldiers.

“Shall we flee?” buzzed Kingfisher in the lion’s ear.

“No. This must be.”

The wolverine soldiers, and many badgers and a few peacocks, crocodiles, and foxes surrounded the lion. The cat who had slinked away in the night now approached the lion.

“Hail Master,” said the cat stretching on his hind legs and kissing the lion on his cheek.

“Friend,” the lion said to the cat, “Why did you come?”

With swords and spears, the wolverine soldiers moved forward to seize the lion. Ropes sailed through the night falling over the lion’s head and back. Wolf sprang forward. With the bite of his razor sharp teeth he cut off the ear of a wolverine. The wolverine soldier screamed in pain.

Standing in front of the calm lion draped in ropes, Wolf prepared to lurch at other soldiers. Showing his teeth, Wolf growled threatening to bite off more ears. Afraid, the wolverine soldiers held back. From their position, ready to attack again, they watched the peaceful lion motion for Wolf to fall back.

“Think not that I have more than twelve legions of angels?” said the lion coming alongside Wolf.

The lion came over to the wounded wolverine. He lifted the ear from the ground. The lion smiled at the wolverine who was crying a little and trying to look brave among his fellow soldiers. The lion nodded for the wolverine to move his paw from the open wound. The lion gently placed the ear against the wolverine’s head. He removed his paw and the wolverine reached up to touch his painless ear. The wolverine bowed in reverence and backed away in awe, disappearing into the night.

Caroline came over and stood at the lion’s side. Seeing him tangled in the soldiers’ ropes, surrounded by sharp and pointy swords and spears, and mean pointy nosed badgers, she felt the greatest sadness that she had ever felt. It was worse than if you had come downstairs one thousand Christmas mornings to find that Santa Claus had not visited her house even once.

With his nose, the lion pushed against Caroline motioning her to go away.

Through tear-lit eyes she nodded no. But soon those tear-lit eyes had filled and the pure crystal tears, made pure from loving the lion, and the tears now spilled down her rosy cheeks.

“NO! I will not leave you,” cried Caroline.

With tender eyes the lion looked on Caroline admiring her. Caroline looked back into the lion’s eyes, dark and deep and wonderful as eternity, and could feel the lion’s love for her gesture of support.

“ROAR.....”

The lion let out a loud, fierce roar directed at Caroline. He nudged her again, harder this time, to go away.

“NO! I will not leave you,” cried Caroline.

“Caroline,” said the lion rather sternly. “You must leave.”

“NO! I will not leave you,” cried Caroline.

“That is three times you have disobeyed me.”

At that, Caroline stepped back with Wolf, Beaver, and Kingfisher.

The great lion turned to the badgers, peacocks, and wolverines.

“Why do you come against me at night with swords as a thief?”

The badgers, peacocks, and wolverines did not answer. Instead they lurched forward. The strongest wolverines pulled down hard on their ropes. The other wolverines came towards the lion with spears and swords to capture the lion.

Frightened, Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver abandoned the lion and ran away to hide in the night. From behind a nearby tree, Caroline watched the soldiers leading the lion down the mountain by their ropes. She did not know what to do. She wanted to help the lion, but knew that she had only the strength of a twelve year old girl and no sword.

From a safe distance Caroline continued to watch the wolverine soldiers lead the lion down the mountain towards the great city. She followed the best she could coming down the mountain off the trail, stumbling over fallen trees. At times she tripped on the unevenness of the ground. Other times she bruised her shins on rocks hidden in dark shadows. The pain made her want to cry. Then sensing something in the darkness, a cold chill ran through her.

“Who is that?” called out Caroline afraid.

“It’s me Wolf. Is that you Caroline?”

“Yes it’s me. Where are they taking him?”

“To the chief peacock.”

“Why?”

“It’s too horrible to say.”

“I must know.”

Caroline could see Wolf somewhat clear in the moonlight. He hung his head and struggled with his words.

“To put him to death,” Wolf finally said.

“Oh no,” cried Caroline. “It is the time he told me about.”

“Quick. Get on my back. We’ll make better time. Hold onto the fur on my neck. And don’t be afraid to pull hard if you have to stay on.”

From a fallen tree branch, Caroline climbed up on Wolf’s back. With Caroline secure Wolf raced towards the great city. Riding on Wolf she remembered the words of the lion and how there would be another great night.

After traveling a great distance with much difficulty, Caroline and Wolf arrived at the palace of the high peacock. Caroline climbed down from Wolf’s back. Together they ran up the stairs and into the grand palace lit up in the night by torches and tubs of oil suspended on stilts that ignited in huge fires that could be seen from miles around.

She and Wolf went inside the building and mingled with the servants to hide themselves. Through an open doorway they could see the lion. In the firelight lighting up the room, the great lion stood silent. The badgers and peacocks mocked the lion. Caroline and Wolf came to the doorway and listened.

“This fellow said, I am able to destroy the grand building, and to build it in three days,” accused a badger.

The high peacock came over to the lion.

“Answer nothing?” asked the peacock.

Caroline and Wolf watched the lion majestic and strong, but silent.

“Tell us whether you be the Son of the Greatest Lion of All Lions.”

Then finally the great lion opened his mouth to speak.

“Hereafter you shall see me coming in the clouds of heaven.”

In his anger, the high peacock opened his feathers in a full display of color and pageantry, and said, “The lion is guilty of death.”

Caroline and Wolf watched as the high peacock spit in the lion’s face. Then the badgers came forward and hit the lion on his strong face with their clawed paws.

“We must put a stop to this,” said Caroline about to charge in the room.

Wolf bit into the back of her dress so Caroline could not go any farther. For a moment she swung back and forth with her feet off the floor. Then Wolf put her down.

“I too want to go in there and tear them to pieces, but we need to keep ourselves safe,” said Wolf. “Come, let’s go outside.”

Wolf and Caroline went outside. In the night air they stood among the animals gathered about the palace on porches. They looked down upon the great city and the streets and houses lit up by fires where animals cooked their food. They both were so sad they didn’t feel like talking. They listened to the animal on the porches chatting about the events of the festival.

Wolf and Caroline glanced up to the room where the lion was being mistreated by the badgers and peacocks. A baboon with a red and white face came up to Wolf. He looked at Wolf as if he knew him.

“You were with the lion,” said the baboon.

“I know not what you say,” denied Wolf.

“You are a follower of the lion,” said another baboon.

“I am not,” denied Wolf.

Then leaning into Caroline Wolf whispered, “We must not tell them. For if we do, we will be in there in ropes and they’ll be spitting and hitting on us.”

On the porch of the grand building high above the great city, in the torch light, another baboon came to Wolf. By now a group of baboons had surrounded Wolf and Caroline.

“This wolf was also with the lion,” said the third baboon.

“I do not know the lion,” swore Wolf loudly.

Then in the distance a rooster crowed. Wolf looked over. He could see the lion being led somewhere by the wolverines in ropes. An icy chill feeling went through Wolf remembering the lion’s words. The lion looked down on wolf, their eyes connecting for a brief morning. Caroline watched as Wolf hung his head low and slowly walked off into the dark night ashamed of himself. Then Caroline could hear Wolf howling and weeping bitterly.

Alone, Caroline came closer. In the shadows she watched the badgers lead the lion bound with ropes away from the grand building. They brought him down the steps to the streets filled with animals celebrating the festival. Through the streets the badgers and wolverines paraded the lion by torch light on their way to the governor’s palace.

In the meantime, back in the great building the cat who had betrayed the lion had come to the badgers. He held the bag with the thirty pieces of silver.

“I have betrayed an innocent lion,” said the cat with a sorrow in his voice.

“What is that to us?” said the chief peacock.

“Here take them back,” said the cat spilling the thirty pieces of silver on the floor, the coins making a ringing sound.

“They are yours,” laughed a badger. “You have done our dirty work for us.”

His heart racing, the cat looked at the badgers and peacocks laughing at him – the sound of their hideous laughter driving him to madness. The cat ran out of the palace and into the night wanting to die one thousand deaths for his act of betrayal of the innocent lion. But the die was cast. It was too late to unwind his treacherous act.

Hiding in the shadows, Caroline followed at a safe distance as the badgers and wolverines led the lion through the streets. The animals in the streets called out mean names at the lion. The lion, tired and hungry, was led up the marble stairs to the governor’s palace. Coming into the governor’s chambers, in his ropes the lion looked up at the elephant and his giant tusks. He was dressed in beautiful silks with baskets full of fruits and nuts spread around him that he could easily reach with his trunk. The lion studied the richly dressed elephant who sat like a king on a throne.

“Art thou the King of these badgers and peacocks?” asked the elephant impatiently.

The lion sat silent, not answering. He looked the elephant square in the eyes. The elephant became uncomfortable under the great lion’s gaze. The pachyderm squirmed on his throne. He felt a coldness spread inside him. Looking at the lion, standing silent and noble and handsome in his palace, the elephant sensed the lion’s greatness and thought how this lion could be the greatest ruler the world had ever known.

“Art thou the King of these badgers and peacocks?” asked the elephant.

The lion opened his mouth to speak.

“Thou sayest.”

The elephant marveled greatly at the lion.

“Do you know I have power to release you?”

The lion did not speak, but again looked the elephant square in the eyes. The elephant continued to marvel at the greatness of the lion. He sensed something more powerful than himself as king that existed from beyond this world in the great lion.

The elephant turned to the wolverine soldiers and said, “Bring him outside for the animals at the festival to see.”

The wolverines pulled hard on the ropes binding the lion, but he walked peacefully. The soldiers led the lion out of the elephant’s chambers and onto the porch. The lion stood nobly and silently on the high porch, high above the animals who had come for the festival. The lion glanced at the other prisoner beside him. A panther in chains with teeth and claws lashed out at the wolverines that held him bound. The elephant came forward and stood between the lion on his right, and the panther on his left so the crowd could see him. The elephant spoke to the animals below gathered about the courtyard.

“Whom shall I release?” yelled out the elephant loudly to be heard above the cheering crowd.

Down below, the badgers and peacocks moved through the crowd.

“Tell him to release the panther and kill the lion,” they told the other animals. “Tell the governor to release the panther.”

Spread through the crowd, the badgers and peacocks began to chant themselves to kill the lion. The other animals joined in. The elephant listened to the crowd hearing “Save the panther, kill the lion... Save the panther, kill the lion... Save the panther, kill the lion.”

The elephant then dipped his tusks into a bowl of clean water to wash them.

“As your ruler, I speak to you below me. I wash my tusks to show you that I am innocent of the blood of this just lion.”

“His blood be on us, and on our children.” “His blood be on us, and on our children.” “His blood be on us, and on our children,” chanted the crowd, the badgers and peacocks leading the chant.

With heavy, heavy heart, Caroline turned from the scene as the elephant walked back into his chambers. She walked alone through the streets hoping to find where the soldiers would take the lion. Then she recognized her friends, also hiding in the shadows.

“Wolf, Kingfisher, Beaver ... what are you doing here?”

“Come over here quick... and whisper or we’ll all be caught,” whispered Wolf from the shadow of an alleyway.

Caroline quickly crossed the street and entered the dark alleyway. She could see only the faces of Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver in the moonlight.

“We’ve come to see what they will do with the lion,” said the kingfisher.

“But we must not make it known who we are,” said Beaver.

“That is why we are cloaked. They will kill us too,” said Wolf.

Ahead on the street Caroline could hear the clanking of soldier's armor. She peaked around the corner. Wolverines holding torches, swords, and spears lead the lion over the cobblestones.

"Come let's follow, but not too closely," said Caroline.

Doing their best to stay out of sight, Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver watched as the Wolverines lead the lion to a secluded area in the city. They passed through a stone archway that opened onto a small courtyard. The wolverines carrying the ropes slid the ropes through metal rings cemented into the stone floor. From a distance Caroline watched as the soldiers tighten the ropes over the great lion.

This time it was Caroline and Beaver who had to hold back Wolf. Wolf lunged as he watched the wolverines cruelly come at the lion with scissors and knives, and began to cut away at his mane.

"Someone get the pliers to pull out his claws so he is powerless," said a wolverine

The wolverine soldiers laughed as they made big swipes at the great lion's golden mane. Next they took a crown of thorns and pushed it down on his head. The dried thorns tore through his fur. Great drops of blood coursed down the lion's face. To also mock him as a king the wolverines placed a scarlet robe over the lion's back. The soldier's laughed, "Hail to the king."

Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver all cried as they watched the lion whom they loved treated so meanly. But the worse was not yet over. A soldier stepped forward. He held a leather whip with pieces of bone sewn into the ends of it. He sent the tip of the whip sailing backwards in the air. Then with a snap he brought it down hard, the whip and pieces of bone cutting through the fur and skin of the lion. Again and again, the soldier hit the back of the lion with the whip.

Wolf cringed with every pass of the whip, wondering why the lion did not put a stop to the torture.

"How can he not open his fierce jaw and let out a roar, I'll never know," said Wolf.

But then Wolf remembered 12 legions of angels and loved the lion even more.

"I want to tear them limb for limb," said Beaver hitting his clenched paw into his palm.

Kingfisher just looked very sad wanting to fly to the aid of the lion.

And tears streamed down Caroline's face.

The wolverine at the whip gave one last blast to the back of the lion. Several other wolverines ran to untie their ropes, and once unloosed held them fast.

"Look, they're setting him free," said Caroline quietly and hopefully to Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver.

"Let's follow where they are taking him. Maybe they are setting him free."

Caroline and the others followed as the wolverines pulled the lion forward through the streets. Realizing that the lion would not resist, they lead him like a lamb by a single rope. Other wolverine soldiers followed behind with pointy spears. They lead the great lion out of the city into the countryside, but not a nice spot of countryside.

"I bet my bottom dollar that they are not letting him free," said Beaver.

"You are right. This is the place of the skull," said Kingfisher.

"Skull for death," said Wolf.

"Oh no," cried Caroline.

Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver watched as the wolverines left a tired and beaten lion alone at the bottom against a group of dismal cliffs. No plants or flowers grew in this rock covered soil. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. The lion sat out in the open with the hard rock of the cliffs behind him. He appeared to be looking off into the sky. He looked very tired.

Then came the sound of the charge of elephant feet, and what happened next is too sad and upsetting to even mention. But the great lion had died.

As the elephant charged, Caroline had tried to run to the lion from where she was hidden with the others. But Wolf grabbed the back of her dress again with his teeth. Wolf held her dangling listening to her crying. Then he let her down and cried himself, along with Beaver and Kingfisher.

Then feeling as if the ground was moving under their feet, Beaver was the first to call out.

“What is that? What is that?” cried out Beaver. “The ground is shaking.”

“It’s an earthquake,” called out Wolf watching the wolverine soldiers falling to the ground in fear.

Caroline heard the voice of a soldier cry out, “Truly this was the Son of the Greatest Lion of all Lions that Ever Were.”

“Come on, we need to get out of here now. If they catch us, we’re next,” said Wolf throwing Caroline on his back and then Beaver.

Then the four friends disappeared into the countryside with Wolf running over the shaky ground as fast as he could and Kingfisher flying overhead.

Chapter 34

Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver stayed in the countryside away from the great city. Wolf wanted to stay in a cave that he had found. But Beaver wanted to stay in a beaver damn – both safe places and good for hiding. After debating the situation, and beaver dams being very wet places, Caroline and Kingfisher persuaded everyone to stay in the cave. The four friends passed the time in the cave talking of how much they loved the lion and how wonderful he had made them feel. They talked about his miracles and kindness to everyone.

“We saw with our own eyes his great miracles. We saw with our own eyes his great healings. We felt the earth shake under our very feet when he died,” said Beaver. “Why can’t all animals see that he is the son of the Greatest Lion of All the Great Lions that Ever Were?”

“But where is he? He said he would rise again,” said Caroline feeling sad and wanting to be with her lion again.

“It’s been more than three days. Wouldn’t he be risen by now?” asked Kingfisher.

“I just don’t know what to do,” said Wolf downhearted.

Just then a beautiful deer came charging into the cave.

“Halt, who goes there?” asked Wolf.

“I bring word. I bring the happiest news,” said the deer.

“What is it? What is it?” asked Beaver waddling to the mouth of the cave.

“The lion has risen. The lion has risen.”

Caroline felt as if her heart had jumped for joy one million miles in a single leap she was so happy. It was like the happiness a disappointed child would feel who had thought that Santa Claus had not brought presents for one thousand Christmas’s to realize that all those piles of presents were really up in their attic after all.

“How do you know? Have you seen him?” asked Wolf

“We’ve seen him and we’ve seen an angel.”

“That is terrific news,” said Kingfisher buzzing around in circles he was so happy.

“We went to the place of his burial, cut out of a rock. The great stone had been rolled away from the opening.”

“Amazing,” said Caroline clapping her hands together and jumping up and down for joy.

“Did you see this angel?” asked Wolf.

“With my very eyes. She was like lightning – her clothing white as fresh snow.”

“And you saw the lion. Risen?” asked Wolf.

“Yes. Don’t you believe me?”

“Yes ... it’s just sounds too good to be true,” said Wolf, his tail wagging like an excited dog whose told he can go outside to play fetch.

“What did he say? What did he look like?” asked Kingfisher.

“Honestly, words cannot describe it. He was more beautiful than you can imagine, and he was already a very handsome lion. About him was gold and silver and light all mixed together. He looked more heavenly than one thousand angels.”

“What did he say to you? What did he say to you?” asked Beaver excitedly.

“That you are to come to see the empty tomb – to see for yourself so you can tell others.”

Wolf crouched to the ground and Caroline and Beaver climbed on board. Wolf ran and Kingfisher flew as fast as lightening. Arriving there, the four friends looked inside. And, indeed, the tomb was empty.

“It is miracles of all miracles,” said Wolf.

“I knew he would do it, I just knew it,” said Caroline again jumping for joy.

Then Caroline’s jumping for joy was interrupted by a loud and ferocious roar. It was a louder and more ferocious roar than anything Caroline, Wolf, Kingfisher, and Beaver had heard before. They looked up and standing above them on a ridge above the empty tomb stood the lion. He leaped through the air and landed at the feet of his friends. He did look more heavenly than one thousand angels. Caroline ran to the lion and hugged him, feeling the gold and silver and light of his mane all mixed together.

Chapter 35

Now the story comes to an end...

As the story began, like God does, if you were to peer down from the bluest sky, past the prettiest clouds, through the tall leafy branches of a certain mulberry tree, and into a particular hospital window, you'd see Caroline Weathersby, a very sick and very scared little girl.

But now that the story has ended you'd see a very changed little girl, changed by a lion. Looking into her hospital window you'd see a Caroline Weathersby who was not scared of dying any more. For she had met the lion, the source of all life, light, and truth, and strange and wonderful magical powers that he puts in people, animals, and things when the time is right.

Now, please don't be upset with me, the author. But I have a dilemma. I know that children's novels are not supposed to end with the main character dying, especially if the main character is a child. After all, we all like happy endings.

But like some girls and boys in our world do, Caroline did die. At the moment that her last breath escaped her lips Caroline was staring out a window past the mulberry tree into a blue sky thinking of all the magical and sweet events of her life.

It was the saddest day in the lives of Caroline's mother and father. It was a sad day at the hospital as well. Even Dr. Snodgrass and Nurse Nancy and Mr. Billsley cried. The children in the playroom were all very quiet that day, drawing pictures of lions, wolfs, kingfishers, beavers and more. Even the branches on the mulberry tree sagged that day.

At the funeral it was a beautiful bright day. It had rained that morning. But in the afternoon sun everything living in the cemetery looked fresh and new. With the rain and dew upon them, the trees and shrubs and grass sparkled in the sunlight.

Caroline's mother and father were very sad and weepy. But then something strange and exciting happened. All of a sudden, from the invisible world of spiritual wonder, a surge of light and love passed through their bodies from head to toes. Although still very sad and weepy, for a moment they felt a ray of happiness. They looked at each other and smiled. The sadness inside them changed. Their sadness would be with them always, but now their sadness would be mingled with joy and hope of seeing their little Caroline again in a new world created by the lion – a world filled with light and love and truth and goodness where everything is golden, and no tears ever fall from weepy faces.

The change was most profound in Caroline's father. It was as if the wild curious pain he had been living with so long was altering – as when the steadiness of spring sunlight gradually increases, day-after-day, and very slowly melts the hardened ice and snow after a long cold winter and you see a crocus or something sprouting up through the melting snow and you know that spring is coming bringing with it much goodness.

If Caroline's parents could have seen into the invisible world of spiritual wonder that day at the cemetery – when they felt that surge of love spread through their bodies – they would have seen the beautiful mane of gold and silver and light all mixed together rubbing against them. They would also have seen Caroline next to the lion. If they

had looked down around them, they would have seen six foot prints in the grass – two for Caroline and four for the lion.

But Caroline's father did see something. From a nearby tree a kingfisher perched on a branch. Caroline's father admired the bird's turquoise back and burnt orange chest and white dots and markings. He was a handsome bird even with his unusually long beak. The bird alighted from the tree. Caroline's father watched the bird come near. Then approaching him, the bird landed on his shoulder.

"You have a new friend there," laughed Caroline's mother at the sight of a bird on her husband's shoulder.

It was the first time that she had laughed in a long while.

"He rather seems to like me," laughed Caroline's father admiring his wife's beautiful face. "He may just follow me home."

The bird pushed off Caroline's father shoulder and flew to a tree near where her father had parked the family car.

"I think he's planning to do just that," said Caroline's mother laughing again and remembering Caroline and the blackbird.

Then, if they could have seen into the invisible world they would have seen the lion and Caroline walking away through the soft, wet grass laughing and talking – for in the invisible world of spiritual wonder there is no sadness, only joy. At the edge of the lawn they would have seen the golden lion crouching and Caroline climbing on his back. Then the two friends would sail away into the blue sky.

But the important thing is that Caroline knows the magic of the lion and how he will set all things right in a beautiful eternity filled with real things like parents and brother and sister and even Cats named Chester. These very real things will be filled with his light and strange and wonderful magical powers – all because of the lion.

And I hope you know this too!

It is my hope that there just may be a girl or boy who is very sick like Caroline in a hospital bed who reads this book and understands now that dying is a part of living, and there is nothing to be afraid of because there is someone a lot like the lion who will make everything alright.

Like the lion did from the empty tomb, Caroline, and you and me, and everybody, will rise again and be filled with the lion's light and live in a golden eternal world of real things. Caroline's parents will live in a house with Caroline and Maggie, unless they get married, which they probably will. Then they will live in their own house in heaven and Chester will probably live with Caroline.

I, the author, know a little about how Caroline's mother and father felt. My daughter passed away on a cold winter's day. It was cold for more reasons than the snow and wind outside. It was very sad until I remembered the lion and all his promises of filling me and my daughter with light and truth and strange and wonderful magical powers.

For me, it was undeniable. Just like the lion rubbing his mane on Caroline's parents, I felt my daughter and the lion near me from the invisible world of spiritual wonder, shaking his mane of gold and silver and light all over me. The lion made it all better. And my daughter who now lives in the invisible world, no longer has cerebral palsy, but instead has a body not only healed but filled with light, truth, and wonder.

And speaking of light ... When the paramedics arrived at our house our daughter was gone. They did their best to bring her back from the invisible world of spiritual wonder, but the lion said it was not to be. As the paramedics went to leave, one stopped to say that he could see a light in the room that he had never seen before.

Never for a minute don't believe in the invisible world of spiritual wonder and the lion – The son of the Greatest Lion of All Lions that Ever Lived!

– The End