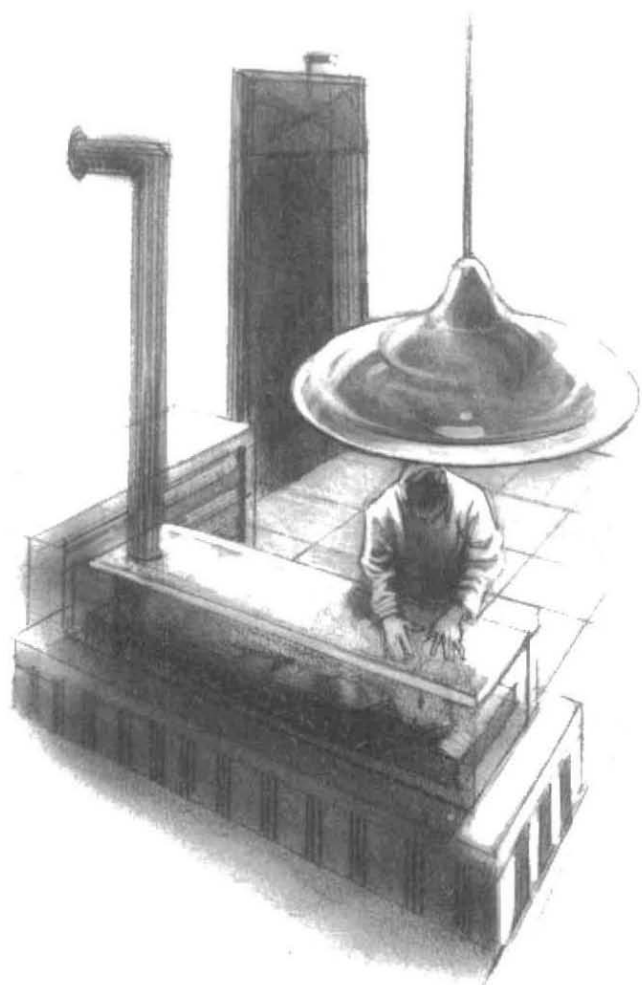


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1

The Last Night on Earth

Josh Adams lived with his parents in a small brick house not far from a large city but close to the open countryside. For the first thirteen years of his life—up until about a year before the adventure began—he had led a happy life, enjoying his parents, his school, and his friends. But all at once he shot up until he was more than a head taller than any of his friends. He was, of course, quite clumsy, and several of his schoolmates made matters worse by calling him “Ichabod Crane” or just “Icky” for short.

His father noticed that Josh began to walk with a slouch that made him even more conspicuous. One day, he put his arm around Josh’s thin shoulders and pointed at the collie puppy next door, all legs and falling over his own feet.

“That’s you, Josh,” Mr. Adams said.

“Yeah,” Josh muttered grimly.

“And that’s what you will be before too long.”

Josh stared at the perfectly shaped grown-up collie, then shook his head sadly. “Not in a million years. I’m just a clumsy jerk!” he said.

It was not only that he was clumsy and towered over his friends, though that seemed bad enough. But just when he felt most isolated from what he bitterly called normal people, Sarah came to live at the Adamses’ house.

Josh had heard his family talk about some old college friends whose daughter might come for a visit, but when he came home from school one afternoon to find her already moved in, he was caught off guard.

He opened the door and found his mother standing there with a very pretty girl a little younger than himself.

"Josh, this is Sarah Collingwood. We've told you about her so often. Sarah, this is Josh."

Now if Sarah had been a boy, or even if she had been tall and awkward, or if she had been plain, Josh would probably have taken the small hand she reached out to him, and he would have found a close friend, which he sorely needed. However, since Sarah was small, graceful, and quite pretty, Josh turned red and ignored the hand, muttering, "Hi ya," under his breath.

"You know, Josh, we told you that Sarah might get to make a visit, but her parents have agreed that she can stay for the rest of the school year."

Mrs. Adams hugged Sarah warmly. "It'll be so nice for me to have a girl in the house. Josh and his father hunt and fish together all the time—now you and I can do things together."

"I hope so, Mrs. Adams." Sarah smiled. She had large brown eyes and very black hair.

Josh sneaked a glance and saw that she was slender. Her hands were so small that they made his own look like catchers' mitts.

"Josh, I want to discuss some business with your father. Sarah and I have been so busy talking that we haven't even gotten her things up to her room. Why don't you help her do that, and I'll be back soon to start supper."

She gave Sarah another hug, then left them alone.

Josh looked everywhere but at Sarah. His thoughts were gloomy. He was thinking how Sarah would be just like the other girls at school who made fun of him and his appearance.

Now there were two things wrong with this. In the first place, the girls were not making fun of him. Instead, they were noticing that he was filling out and getting to be good-looking.

In the second place, Sarah did not disapprove of him. If Josh had had the courage to look at her, he would have seen a rather frightened young girl, uncertain at being in a strange place and very anxious to be liked by the young man before her. She had just passed out of the leggy, coltish stage that some girls go through and knew very well Josh's feelings of inadequacy.

"Josh," she said shyly, "I hope you don't mind my coming to live here."

Josh wanted to say that he was glad that she'd come, but he covered up his feeling by answering roughly, "Well, where are your folks? Why'd they send you here?"

Sarah said, "They're missionaries in Africa."

"Missionaries! Your folks are preachers?"

Actually, Josh enjoyed going to church with his parents. However, he was afraid of being considered "soft," so he affected the tough manner he had seen in others. "Well, don't go trying to preach at me!"

Sarah stiffened and said sharply, "Don't worry about that! I just wish I was home!"

"Why'd you come anyway?"

"My parents said it was because I needed a good school—but it wasn't really that." Her voice trembled slightly as she continued. "The real reason is that there's a revolution in Africa, and it's dangerous. I didn't want to come!"

Josh saw to his dismay that she was about to cry, and he *almost* did the right thing. He *almost* smiled, and he *almost* told Sarah it was great to have her. He *almost* assured her that they would be great friends and that her parents would be safe. And if he had done this, the following days would have been much more comfortable.

But Sarah was too pretty, and Josh was too afraid of girls.

He merely shrugged toughly. "I don't guess you have

to worry about your folks. Missionaries never get killed in revolutions."

Instantly Sarah drew back and blinked away the tears.

Josh could have bitten his tongue, but it was too late.

From that moment, Sarah kept as far from him as possible. They ate at the same table and even walked to school together. But there was a wall between them that Josh could not break down. Sarah found new friends at school, and Josh felt even more sorry for himself, forgetting that he had closed the door on her.

* * *

It was almost a year after Sarah came that the adventure began. Josh was sound asleep one winter evening when he heard his name being called.

"Josh! Josh! Wake up!"

He sat up at once, shielding his eyes against the overhead light. He saw his father standing over him, his face pale and tense.

"What's the matter, Dad?" he cried in sudden fear.

"Son," Mr. Adams said, "we've got to go to the silo. Get dressed quickly."

Josh's father was a scientist who did some sort of secret work for the government. The silo had been part of an old underground missile base that had been made into a laboratory.

"What's wrong, Dad?" Josh asked as he started pulling on his clothes. "Is something wrong with Mom?"

"No, I'll explain on the way, Josh. I've given Sarah a call, but you go by and make sure she's up. Meet us in the car." He rushed out of the room without another word.

Josh scrambled into his clothes, shaking from cold and fear. When he was dressed, he ran down the hall and knocked on Sarah's door.

She opened it at once. She was fully dressed too, and Josh saw that her eyes were large with fear.

"Hurry up," Josh said. "My mom and dad are waiting for us in the car."

"Do you know what's wrong?" Sarah whispered.

"No. Come on, let's hurry."

"I—I think I know what it is," she said. "I think something's wrong with my parents."

Josh paused for a moment. He knew there had been a lot of trouble in the African nation where Sarah's parents were doing their missionary work.

"Well," he said, "I don't think that's it. Why would we be going to the lab in the middle of the night for that?"

Quickly they scurried out of the house through the freezing cold and piled into the car where Josh's parents were waiting.

As soon as Josh slammed the door, Mr. Adams sent the car onto the highway so suddenly that the young people were thrown back against the rear of the seat. Josh had never known his father to drive like that before. Something had to be very wrong.

"Josh and Sarah," Mr. Adams said quietly, "you might have guessed what's happened."

"Is it something about my parents?" Sarah asked quickly.

"Well, Sarah, I just don't know about them, but we're *all* in danger now."

Suddenly Josh knew what was happening. "It's a war, isn't it, Dad?"

"Yes, Josh, it is. There's been an attack on the East Coast, and reports are that the rest of the country will be bombed at any time. We have to get to the silo."

Then he turned on the radio, and they heard the familiar voice of the president.

". . . indeed the most terrible crisis in the history of

mankind. I have declared a national emergency, and our armed forces are even now being deployed for our nation's defense. I must warn you, my fellow Americans, that not just our own country but the entire world stands on the brink of destruction tonight. I ask that you pray for—"

Squeak! Crash! Suddenly, the radio went dead. Mr. Adams could find no other station on the dial. The airways were quiet, and everyone in the car fell just as silent.

Soon they pulled up before the plain concrete building that contained the silo. They got out of the car just as the eastern sky was beginning to turn red.

"It's almost daylight," Josh said.

Mr. Adams paused and looked at the sky. Then he said quietly, "That's not the sun."

They moved quickly into the silo. Turning on the lights, Mr. Adams led the way down a winding staircase. As they descended into the earth, Josh had the feeling that he was being buried alive. He suspected that Sarah held the same thought.

Finally, they came to the foot of the stairs. After Mr. Adams unlocked a strange steel door, they entered the silo.

Josh had never been inside the silo. He had always thought it would be filled with huge banks of scientific equipment like the spaceships in movies. But all he saw was a small room and something that looked like a white coffin covered with clear plastic. Several tubes and cables were attached to a machine next to the wall. There was nothing else in the room except a small desk.

Josh and Sarah looked at the casketlike device.

"What's *that* for, Dad?" Josh asked with sudden fear.

"It's for you, Josh," Mr. Adams said quietly.

"But—what's it *for*?" Josh asked. He felt Sarah moving closer until she touched him, and he knew that she was sharing his alarm.

Mr. Adams put his arm around his wife and looked at the two youngsters, his face deadly serious. "The world is ending tonight—for a while, at least."

Josh felt Sarah's small hand creep into his. He took her hand and held it tight.

"This war won't be like any that you've ever read about," Mr. Adams said. "It will probably last only a day or two—but it will be so terrible that the world as we know it now will be gone forever."

Suddenly, there was a rumble like distant thunder. They all looked up. Josh knew that anything they could hear so far under the earth through heavy concrete had to be something monstrous. He felt the concrete vibrate under his feet. Then there was a buzzing sound, and a red light went on over the door.

Mr. and Mrs. Adams looked at one another. Then Mrs. Adams put her arm around Sarah and said, "Sarah, it's time for you to go."

"Go!" Sarah cried and held Josh's hand more tightly. "Go where? I—I want to stay with Josh."

"You can't, child," Mr. Adams said. "You see, this is what we've been working on ever since we saw that war was coming." He put his hand on the plastic canopy. "You can call it—well—call it a 'Sleep Capsule,' for that's its purpose. You'll just go to sleep. Then, when it's safe, you'll be awakened—safe and alive."

Josh's mother spoke gently to Sarah. "You see, there aren't two capsules in one place. This way, if something happens, some of the capsules will be sure to get through."

"No one knows where the capsules are," Mr. Adams said. "It's a closely guarded secret. But after you come out, there'll be a way to get all of you together—and start a better world!"

The buzzer sounded, and the red light flashed insistently.

"Come along, Sarah," Mrs. Adams said. "I insisted on going with you to your location so you wouldn't be alone."

She turned and held Josh in her arms tightly and said, "Good night, son. I love you very much."

Josh's mother turned suddenly and moved to the desk. Opening a drawer, she took out a leather-bound book. She stroked the covers, then said, "Josh, for many years I've kept a journal. In it I've put down all the things I believe in." She held it out to him, and there were tears in her eyes. "I want you to have it, son."

Josh took the book and held it carefully. He'd seen his mother writing in her journal and knew that she prized it highly. "I'll—I'll keep it, Mom. And I'll read it too."

Mrs. Adams suddenly threw her arms around him again, whispering, "Whatever happens, Josh, we'll meet again."

Then she released him, and Josh's father opened the massive steel door. An officer in uniform was standing outside. Josh's mother pulled Sarah through the door, and, just as it swung closed, Josh caught one glimpse of Sarah's pale face.

With a catch in her voice, Sarah said, "Josh, I—I'll see you soon!"

Then the door clanged shut. Josh was left alone with his father.

"Dad—what about you and Mom? Where will you be?"

"Well, son, it's very complicated. You'll just have to trust me. We don't have much time, and—" A heavy rumble shook the silo again. "It's time, son."

He must have seen the stark fear in the boy's eyes, and he asked gently, "Josh, do you remember last year when you and I climbed down the mountain in Colorado?"

Joshua nodded silently.

"Well, you remember how you were afraid to go down the face of the steepest cliff? You said, 'I'll go down if you'll hold the rope, Dad.'"

"I remember," Josh said.

"Well, I'm asking you to do that again. I know you're afraid—anyone would be—but if you'll trust me, *I'll hold the rope!*"

Joshua looked into his father's face for a long moment. Then he said slowly, "All right, Dad. I'll do it."

"Good!" Josh's father hugged him. Then he stepped back and said, "Josh, for the last few weeks, something has been happening to me. I've been having—well, *dreams* you might call them."

He stopped, and there was the strangest look on his face. "I'm a scientist, and I've always laughed at such things, but Josh, night after night, I've had the same dream."

"What was it, Dad?" Josh asked, seeing his father hesitate.

"Well, a man comes to me. I can never see his face, and I can't really remember what he says. But he always says the same thing, and I can't understand any of it."

"Are you afraid of him, Dad?" Josh questioned.

"No! I always feel better after one of these—visits. It's like everything's going to be all right. But I just can't remember *him* much—only the song."

"The song?" Josh asked.

"Yes. You know I don't sing very well. But almost every night for a long time, he's been teaching me a song. I don't understand it much, but I think it has something to do with you and Sarah, and what you'll find when you go up to the world again."

"What does the song say?"

"I made a tape of it—the tape is in there," Mr. Adams said, pointing to a brown case. "And some other things. I wanted to study the song, but it must be for you

and Sarah. I'm almost sure the man in my dream told me that. You can keep your mother's journal in the case too."

The lights dimmed again, and Josh's father motioned for his son to climb into the white box.

After Josh was comfortably settled, his father moved to unhook the props of the plastic canopy. Then he stopped and nodded to the control board.

"See that switch, son?"

Josh saw one red switch marked simply AWAKE.

"One day, someone will throw that switch. Then you and Sarah and some others will come out of places like this and go into the world. I don't know what kind of a place that world will be—but it won't be like anything you've ever known. Now it's time for us to go, and I want you to promise me to do two things—OK, son?"

"Yes, Dad."

"First, when you come out of here, I want you to believe the song—the one on the tape. Then, for your mother, obey the book—the one she's given you. Will you say those things over and over again, Josh?"

Josh began to say the words. "Believe the song, obey the book."

As he repeated them, he heard his father say quietly, "Good night, Josh. I'll be near you."

Then the lid closed, and there was a sound of escaping gas. Josh began to dive down into a deep sleep.

He found himself saying again, "Believe the song . . . obey the book . . ." just as he dropped off into a strange sleep. He heard himself murmur, "Good night, Dad. I'll see you . . ."

Then he became part of the darkness that was all about.

2

The First Sleeper

Someone far off was calling his name over and over, but Josh tried to close his ears and slip back into the comfortable cocoon of warm darkness.

"Joshua—awake!" the faint voice insisted. *"Awake, Joshua, awake!"*

As he slowly came to full consciousness, Josh thought at first that one of his parents was calling him for breakfast. He slowly opened his eyes, expecting to see his familiar bedroom.

Instead, there was nothing but white overhead. At the same time, he realized that he could hear none of the familiar wake-up noises—kitchen sounds, someone in the shower singing, early morning traffic—none of these. All he heard was a quiet hiss, like a huge tire leaking air.

Josh turned his head and looked around wildly. There was only one very small light in the room, but when he saw the bare walls and remembered suddenly his last moment awake, his mouth went dry with fear.

He began to shout, "Dad! Mom!" He tried to sit up, but his forehead struck the clear plastic shell that covered the bed. "Ow," he cried, and then, before he could utter another sound, the plastic cover swung back, and he was free.

Quickly he scrambled off the bed and peered into the semidarkness. He saw nothing and cried out more loudly than before.

"Dad! Mom!"

But not even an echo stirred in the darkness.

Where's the door? His thoughts were in a swirl. He had to get out of here!

He moved to the wall, groping until he found the single door into the room. He fumbled for the knob. There was no knob, no handle . . . nothing.

Panic grabbed him, and he began to beat on the door with his fists.

"Someone let me out! Please! Let me out! Please, let me out!"

He never remembered afterward how long this went on, but when he finally slumped down on the floor, his voice was worn thin and his fists hurt.

Then Josh recalled a story he had read about a man who had been walled up, buried alive. Buried alive! He huddled in the dim light, his mind racing to seek some answer, but nothing came. Then, just as he was about to begin crying out again, the hissing noise stopped. The room was totally silent. Silent, that is, except for—

Except for what? He held his breath, and then he heard it—a faint, raspy wheezing.

Now Josh, who had been desperately crying for someone to come, was terrified at the knowledge that someone was with him! He scrunched himself into the smallest possible shape, peering blindly into the dark corners. Again he heard the steady wheeze of someone's breath.

Moments passed. He had almost decided that the noise was some sort of machinery or perhaps the wind, when out of the darkness a voice said, "Don't be afraid, young man."

It was a high, scratchy voice, to which Josh managed to whisper a question. "Who are you?"

"My name, you mean?" the scratchy voice asked. "Well, I haven't used a name in so long I've almost forgotten. But you can call me—Crusoe." The voice laughed

softly. "I guess I've been marooned long enough to have that name."

Josh got to his feet and asked, "Isn't there more light? I can't see you."

"Well, there is, but I didn't turn it on before because—well, you might have been a little frightened at the sight of me. But here we are."

There was a quiet click, and the room suddenly grew bright. Josh gazed fearfully at the small figure across the room. He had been expecting something terrible—a gorilla-like form or something like Frankenstein's monster. What he saw was *different*, but certainly not frightening.

Crusoe, as he called himself, reminded Josh of a very old kangaroo, perhaps because of the way he hopped across the room, holding his hands together in front of him.

His face *was* a little frightening—wrinkled like a dried prune, with several white scar patches across his cheeks. He had a pointed nose and big front teeth that stuck out. But the brown eyes peering from the scarred and wrinkled face were warm and friendly.

Crusoe was bent over almost like a hunchback, and he had to twist his head to look up at the taller Josh. Softly he asked, "Are you hungry?"

All of a sudden Josh realized that he *was* hungry, hungrier than he could ever remember. But questions overwhelmed him. He hurriedly began to ask, "What's happened? Where is everyone? And what—"

"Later! Later!" Crusoe wheezed. "First, eat! Then we can talk. Come, come!"

Crusoe pulled Josh toward the door, then stopped and said something in a language Josh did not understand. The door swung smoothly open. In his queer hopping gait, Crusoe pulled and pushed Josh down the hall into a room that looked and smelled like a kitchen.

"Sit here, Joshua," Crusoe said, pushing him into a chair.

Josh noticed that the old man knew his name, but before he could ask how, he found hot food in front of him. It smelled delicious, though he didn't recognize any of it.

"What is it?" he asked between bites.

"It's *good!* That's what it is," Crusoe said. "Just eat, and don't ask questions."

Crusoe kept hopping off his high stool to refill Josh's plate with food and his own cup with some sort of red drink.

Finally, Josh could not eat another bite. "It was very good, Mr. Crusoe. Now can I ask some questions?"

"Yes." Crusoe nodded. "However, you may not like my answers."

Josh asked the first question that flew into his mind. "Where are my mother and father?"

Even as he spoke, he saw something in Crusoe's eyes that made his heart turn cold.

Crusoe looked steadily at Josh for a long moment, then spoke gently, "You must begin to be brave, Joshua."

He put one thin hand, almost like a tiny claw, on Josh's arm and said, "They're gone, my boy."

A wave of pain and fear engulfed Josh. Tears welled into his eyes, but he held them back as he saw Crusoe watching him, nodding his head in sympathy. He swallowed hard, trying to choke back the sobs.

"Later, Joshua—" Crusoe nodded again "—later, you will mourn your parents as you should. For now, don't be ashamed of honest tears," he added, as Josh tried to blink them away. "I think you can see much farther through a tear than you can through a telescope."

Josh managed a small smile. Then he asked, "How did it happen?"

Hopping off his stool, Crusoe pulled out a large map. The terrain on the map seemed unfamiliar to Josh, though

part of it, he thought, did look a little like something he had seen somewhere else.

"What place is that?" he asked.

"This is the world," Crusoe said, "as it is *now*—Nuworld is its name."

"But—it's all *different!*" Josh protested. "What happened?"

"There was a war, and terrible weapons were used," Crusoe said. "It wasn't like other wars. The bombs melted the ice caps and flooded whole nations. Florida and California both disappeared. And the bombs set off earthquakes, pushing up mountains. There are deserts now where there were once fertile fields. Your world is gone, Joshua."

"But it can't be," Josh protested. "It's only been a little while—" He paused, seeing Crusoe shake his head sadly. "How long has it been?" he asked slowly. He was somehow hoping that it had not been too long, no more than a few months or even a year or two. Perhaps he hoped that, if it had not been too long, he might find someone he had known.

"You have been asleep for fifty years, Joshua."

Josh felt as if he had been hit in the stomach. "*Fifty years!*" he whispered. "They're all dead then! Everyone I knew."

Crusoe reached up and took a small brown bottle from a cabinet. Then he poured some clear liquid into a glass and handed it to Joshua, saying, "Drink this."

Josh swallowed it obediently. The liquid burned his throat like fire, but it also drove away his faintness. "I'm all right now."

"Good boy, Joshua." Crusoe capped the bottle and put it back in the cabinet. "Now, perhaps we'd better—" Here he was interrupted as the door swung open and two dwarfs walked in.

At least they looked like dwarfs, those in the books that Josh had always loved. They were short, not much more than three feet tall, and fat as sausages. Their bellies gave promise of exploding any minute were it not for their broad black leather belts with shiny brass buckles. Both had fat red cheeks with small black eyes peering out from under impossibly bushy eyebrows. Both also had beards that came down almost to their belt buckles. The pair stared at Josh, mouths open, and he stared back at them, speechless.

"Joshua, this is Mat, and this is Tam," Crusoe said.

"Why, you're twins!" Josh said. "How can I tell you apart?"

The dwarf on the left sniffed and said, "That won't be hard. Just listen, and the one who talks a lot of happy nonsense without a grain of common sense—that one'll be him, Tam." With a thick forefinger, he prodded his brother, who was smiling broadly.

"Greetings!" the other dwarf said. "And if you hear anyone talking about doom and funerals and calamities—why, it'll be him, brother Mat."

Crusoe interrupted to say, "That's often the case with two like those. They're Gemini twins, Joshua."

"What's that?"

"After the Terror—the war, I mean—many sets of twins were born—"

"And many worse things!" Mat grumped.

"—and for some reason, many of these twins, though they looked exactly alike, were just the opposite in every other way. If one was rather happy, the other would be sure to be sad. If one was timid, the other would be a fighter—"

Mat interrupted. "And if one was foolish and always looked for pie-in-the-sky—" he poked Tam again "—the other would have to have enough caution and common sense for *two*."

"Ho!" Tam grinned. "And if one of them—" here he glanced slyly at his brother "—was sour and gloomy enough to curdle milk, why the other would have to have enough fun for *both*!"

"Don't get them started." Crusoe groaned. "They never agree on anything, and they can never in this world get away from one another."

"Why not?" Josh asked in surprise.

"Because there's something in them—nobody knows what it is—that makes it necessary for them to stay close. You never see *one* Gemini. If they get separated, the farther apart they get the weaker they become. And if they get too far apart, they both just die."

"Yep," Tam agreed cheerfully. "And when one goes—the other goes. *Pop*—off the other pops too! Dead as a bucket."

"If it *weren't* so," Mat muttered under his breath, "I'd have knocked this cheerful idiot in the head years ago!"

"You'll learn to trust them soon enough," Crusoe said. "They fight all the time, but they are always truthful. They also know a lot more than it appears they might."

At that moment, the brothers began to quarrel and seemed nearly ready to attack each other. But Crusoe got between them, trying to calm them down.

As Josh looked at the two dwarfs and the hunchbacked form of Crusoe, a lump rose again in his throat.

"What's wrong, Joshua?" Crusoe asked.

"I feel so—so *foreign*!" Josh said. "My whole world is gone, and all I see is dwarfs and—" He paused abruptly, for he had been about to say something about hunchbacked kangaroos. "Well, I just wish I could see some—normal people!"

"*Normal* people!" Mat suddenly roared. "Normal people, indeed! I like that! Haven't you told him yet, Crusoe?"

"Told me what?" Josh asked anxiously.

"Why, *we're* normal," Mat said loudly, pointing at Tam and himself. "You're the freak around here!"

"Now, Mat, that's no way to talk," Tam said.

"It's the truth, and that's what he needs to know. You can't feed him on sugar candy forever," Mat said grimly.

"What does he mean?" Josh asked Crusoe.

"Well, most of the 'normal' people like yourself were killed during the Terror. And those that were born afterward were different—like the Gemini twins."

"And a lot better off we are too," Tam cried. "Why, in the old days almost everybody looked pretty much alike. Now you got lots of variety!"

"Ho!" Mat sneered at his brother. "We've got variety all right! Giants to stomp you, Wolfpeople to tear your throat out, those nice Serpent-folk from the north to sink their fangs into you—"

He would have gone on, but Crusoe broke in. "Now, now, that's enough, Mat! It's true that strange effects resulted from the Terror, but you can find people to love and trust here, just as in Oldtime."

Even as Crusoe was talking, something was happening to Josh. In the din of the argument, a peculiar quiet had fallen on him, as if he were somehow surrounded and shut off from the outside world. And this quiet brought a peace that rushed into his troubled mind, blocking off all his fears.

Out of the silence came a faint voice, both familiar and loving. The voice was singing a song with words that he had never heard. Yet he knew that the words were true. And he began singing them softly as they came to him out of the silence.

*"Some sleep beneath the heavy earth,
Some higher than the sky,
All waiting for a timely birth,
The Seven Sleepers lie.*

*"The house of Goél will be filled,
The earth itself will quake!
The beast will be forever stilled,
When Seven Sleepers wake!"*

Josh finished the song and was startled at himself. It was as if he had heard another voice and not his own.

Crusoe, he saw, was smiling.

But suddenly Mat threw his soft cap on the floor and stomped it angrily. "Just what we need!" he snarled. "A *fanatic* to play keeper to. You don't believe that crazy nonsense?" he asked Josh.

"What do you mean?" Josh asked in confusion.

The dwarf sniffed. "Don't give me that."

"Wait a minute, brother," Tam interrupted. "Maybe there is something to the stories."

"There's something to it, all right—foolish superstition!" Mat stomped his cap again. "No one with any sense believes any of that ancient drivel."

"I don't understand," Josh protested.

"That old hunk of hokum about Seven Sleepers—that's what I mean."

Crusoe came and stood close to Josh. "Be quiet, Mat. You must remember that Joshua is somewhat like a baby. He doesn't know anything about the Promise."

"What promise?" Josh asked.

"Why, *the* Promise!" Tam cried. "The promise that one day there'll be an end to all the evil in the world—and things will be *good* again like they never were, and—"

"And that's the kind of talk that will get us all put in the Tower!" Mat grunted.

"But think of the old stories and the old songs all telling about the Seven Sleepers. What about all that?" Tam asked.

"Moonshine and applesauce," Mat snapped. "Who in his right mind believes all that garbage?"

"I do!" Tam answered cheerfully.

"Well, I don't," Mat returned.

They appeared ready for another violent disagreement, but Josh asked suddenly, "Mat, what about *me*?"

"Well," Mat asked suspiciously, "what about you?"

"He means," Crusoe said wheezily, "how can you explain his being here? We've all known that he's been asleep—all your lives you've known that. Now he's awake—just as I told you he would be one day."

"That's right!" Tam shouted excitedly. "Remember, brother, Crusoe always said the Sleeper would awake. You always said it could never be. Now there he is!" And in his excitement, Tam turned a cartwheel.

"Be still, you fool!" Mat looked hard at Joshua as if weighing him in his mind. Then he said, "Seven, eh? Well, where are they—the other six? You don't know. How will you find them? You don't know. What will you do after you find them? Don't know, do you?" He glared triumphantly at Tam, then pounded the map with his stubby fist. "Show me the places on the map!" he demanded.

Crusoe held up his hand for silence. "True places are never shown on a map. Joshua, do *you* believe the song you just sang? Because if you do believe, you have to do something about it, don't you? And if you don't believe, you can never make anyone else believe."

Once again the strange stillness fell over Josh, and he thought he heard a voice say, "*I'll be near you.*" Then he looked at the misshapen figures before him. They reminded him of creatures from a nightmare.

Almost to himself Josh said, "Maybe this is all a dream. But I didn't dream the song. I don't even know what most of it means. But somewhere I think there are six other people just like me. And I'm either going to find them and wake them up—or else die trying."

"Hooray!" shouted Tam and turned another cartwheel.

"Humbug!" snorted Mat and stomped his cap.

Crusoe touched Josh's arm and whispered so low that Josh alone could hear him. "I'll help you, Joshua."

