I unlocked my 10-speed bicycle from its place among the dozens of others parked at Crawford High. Then I pedaled full-speed out of the school yard, my mind a turmoil of unhappy thoughts and my heart filled with unrest and confusion. "Hey, Perry!"

Dan Blattner called my name loudly, but I shot away down the sidewalk like a streak of lightning almost. I didn't feel like talking, not even to my best friend.

"Perry, wait," Dan shouted again.

I continued pedaling and was thankful when I had to turn; at least that way I was out of "eye shot" of my friend. Seeing an alleyway crossing the street down which I'd turned, I swung quickly into it, pedaling fiercely so as to lose Dan completely. I couldn't bear talking to him!

My little game of hide-and-go-seek (mainly of hide, I must confess) must have worked, for nobody followed me. Nobody--or nothing, I should say--except a bunch of yapping, barking, tail-wagging dogs. I felt almost like the Pied Piper; this was humiliating. Believe me, it was.

Instead of going straight home from school like I always did, I swung the bike around by the lake, following the sandy road that encircled the blue-green water completely. The air had the slightest hint of autumn to it and the leaves smelled
wonderfully woodsy and fragrant. I rode on until I came to a favorite spot of mine beneath a stand of tall pines.

Here the air had a low brilliance, amber diffused with green lights. The floor of the woods was spongy with its age-old covering of brown needles, and the tall pines, whose lowest branches began fifty or sixty feet above the ground, stood apart from each other like columns in a dim cathedral holding a roof of restless green.

It was quiet here among the trees, a thing I needed desperately for the present. Now and then a bird flew through the soundless air, slowly, on wings that made not the slightest stir even.

Walking beside the bicycle now, I moved deeper into the fragrant pine woods. In a little while, I came to a clearing. The trees seemed to have moved back to make this space in the center of the woods. Moss and needle covered, about fifty feet across, with branches meeting high above, it was like a great empty room. A cathedral in the pines. My private cathedral, I thought, standing the bike at an angle before dropping down on the fragrant, needly floor.

With my head bowed in the palms of my hands, my mind raced involuntarily and instantly to Malcom Brooks. The Malcom Burke Brooks, newcomer to Crawford High.

At thought of Malcom, my pulse rate did a quick and oft-repeated upbeat. I was sure--certain-sure-that, were my blood pressure taken just then, it would have been "sky-high," as the saying goes.

I looked up into the pine canopy above me, wondering why Malcom's folks decided to settle in our small city and wishing with all that was within me that I'd never heard of or seen him. He was a threat to me, and to everything that meant anything to my life.

Malcom was good-looking, to put it mildly. Fact is, he was downright handsome. And he had a personality that matched his super good looks, too.

I closed my eyes, squeezed them shut tight, trying to close Malcom totally and completely out of my mind. But it didn't work. No, it didn't. He was still there, in my heart, my mind . . . my thoughts. He wouldn't give me rest, not in the privacy and the seclusion of the beautiful pine woods even.

Disgusted, I jumped to my feet. Brushing the pine needles off my clothes, I pushed the bike through the woods to the road. I was ready to mount it and start for home when Cheryl's voice sliced into my muddled thoughts.
"O there you are, Perry!" she exclaimed with an air of glad surprise. "I knew you had to be somewhere near by; Gil saw you take the lake road. What's bothering you?" she asked quickly, coming immediately to the reason for her being here.

Talk about a bomb falling and exploding--whew!

"Well, what is it, Perry? You're not fooling any of us; something's bothering you. Is it Malcom Brooks?"

At the mere mention of the name, I felt my blood pressure soar. And the way Cheryl said his name! Ugh, it was sickening.

"It is Malcom!"

Cheryl's words came out in a sad way, an I-thought-better-of-you way. It was more than I could stand.

"Don't make me feel worse than I already do, Cheryl. Please!" I begged. "I wish I'd never seen or heard of Malcom, that's all."

Cheryl dropped down on the pine needle carpet alongside the road. "You're jealous of Malcom," she said softly-quiet in her usual way. "No, you're envious of him, Perry. Well, maybe it's a super-abundance of both. At any rate, that's your problem. 'Jealousy is Cruel as the grave,' " she quoted. "That's from the Song of Solomon, in case you forgot--chapter 8, verse 6. And Proverbs 14:30 tells us that 'envy is the rottenness of bones.' Not meaning to sound preachy, Perry, but you will remember that it was 'for envy' that the Jews delivered Jesus up to be crucified. Better watch yourself; envy is a deadly weapon in the hands of sinners."

I felt like I'd just had my heart x-rayed. The inner part, that is. Me! Not the physical, active, moving part of me and of my ever-working, blood-pumping heart; but my secret, inmost being.

I cast a quick sideways glance at Cheryl and saw tears were trickling down her pretty cheeks. I thought I'd suffocate or choke with the hurt and pain that filled my heart when I saw those tears. Cheryl was a deeply-spiritual and Spirit-filled young woman. Nothing chaffy or shallow about her. She was respected by everyone in our church and in Crawford High, as well. What's more, she was my very special girlfriend.

"You . . . you've . . ." she was speaking again, faltering for words. "Malcom's been a... a threat to you and your life, hasn't he, Perry?"

Bomb number two exploded. Had my feelings and actions been so obvious . . . so transparent . . . that the kids at school could read my thoughts? I wondered, feeling embarrassed and wretchedly miserable.
Cheryl scraped pine needles away near her right side, making a small recession in the thick carpet. "Just because he was voted in as president of our class shouldn't bother you. You've held that title for two years. Sometimes a new leader can do wonders for a group. Malcom has initiative, insight and..."

"Go on, Cheryl, give me your list of credits for the great Malcom. Plunge the blade deeper into the wound. You just don't understand. You can't know how it hurts--to suddenly be a nobody after years of prominence and service. Overnight, almost, the newcomer steals my prestige, my positions and my... my prominence. He's made the leader of our prayer group in church, is voted in as Young People's President and then gets put in as president of our Junior class here in C. High. The rug's been pulled out from beneath me. I can't believe it, Cheryl. I can't! What is there left for me to do? Of any value or significance, I mean?"

Cheryl toyed with the long needles for a moment, sifting them through her wide-opened fingers as she scooped them up in her hands. "Get saved, Perry, that's what you can do. In fact, it's the most important in all the world for you to do. Now. Lay the ground work for a 'perfect' heart by confessing your sins of pride and vanity and self-esteem and getting soundly converted."

"But I am saved!" I defended quickly.

Cheryl's eyes met mine in a look of utter frankness. "Are you?" she asked quickly. Then, "O Perry, how deceived can you be? Jesus said, 'Except ye become converted and become as little children, ye can in no wise enter into the kingdom of Heaven.' You are not like a little child..., humble, meek and mild. You are filled with big-headedness--with pride. And unless you get total forgiveness for it, you'll lose your soul. O Perry, I honestly believed in you... once..."

Her voice trailed meaningfully above my head in the canopy of pines, and when she got to her feet and left quickly, sobbing like her heart was broken, I felt for sure that I would suffocate.

Again I "walked" the bicycle back to the open-spaced, high-canopied pine room in the woods and there I did serious business with my heart. I bowed myself in humble submission before a just and holy God and begged Him to show me my heart exactly the way He saw it. And He did. Oh, how He did! I saw that what Cheryl had told me I must do was what I had to do--first. God could never sanctify my sinful heart --which is precisely what it was, sinful. It must first be forgiven of its own sinfulness--of its feelings of ill-will and hatred toward Malcom. Yes, I said hatred; my heart was full of this deadly venom toward Malcom Brooks.

The startling revelation of my heart--I, who had always had a good reputation; I, who was always in the lime-light and whose praises had ever been sung both in my home
church and in school, not to mention the neighborhood--Well, the revelation from God was indeed startling and terrifying. I was uncovered--by the Holy Ghost.

Tears fell. Great sobs of deep remorse and repentance shook my frame. I didn't care; I was not embarrassed. I saw myself as a wicked sinner not far from the burning abyss of an eternal, everlasting hell. Talk about a prayer meeting; I had one. Never have I prayed like I prayed beneath those pines. And God, Who knoweth man's heart, in pity and mercy heard my earnest pleas for forgiveness and wondrously saved my soul. If that woods had never heard shouting before, it heard it when I prayed through; I couldn't contain myself, so happy and full of peace was I.

Determined now that nothing should ever again rob me of my inner peace and soul-rest, I immediately began seeking after a cleansed heart--a "perfect" and pure heart--in and through God's Holy Spirit.

It was a fierce battle at first: the devil fighting to keep the carnal man alive, my soul crying out for total, complete and full deliverance; the devil telling me to wait a few days before seeking holiness; my soul longing for freedom from the "old man" of inbred sin.

On and on I wrestled, using the word of God and the precious blood of Jesus as my weapons against the suggestions and onslaughts of the devil. When the last "yes" was submitted and self was turned over to God with no reservation whatever., no holding on to a single thing . . . the fire fell from the Pentecostal skies. I was sanctified wholly. Oh, the glory of this Divine Love that went flowing through and through my being! It was like waves of holy fire and love. I wouldn't have thanked an angel to come down from Heaven and tell me I was made perfect in love, so real was my personal Pentecost.

The sun, swinging low through the languid afternoon into the earliest hint of evening, found a slanting entry through the trees. Here and there in the high branches, bird songs began to link the lightest chain of music, counterpoint to the melody now deep in my soul. I knew I must get home; my parents were no doubt worried sick over me. (I had never been late getting home from school without telling them why I would be a bit delayed).

Slowly, reluctantly, I stood to my feet. As I did so, the ray of sunlight lingered slantingly through the trees a moment longer then came to rest on my face. It was a sort of benediction, I decided, as I headed for the road and home. I would explain everything to my wonderful father and mother when I got home and they would understand. Yes, they would understand.

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THE END