HOME

By Mrs. Paul E. King

(Part 1)

Ashlie climbed into her yellow convertible and fastened the seat belt securely around her while Lorrie and Patti and Gaylene clambered in behind her, chattering like a flock of magpies and laughing gaily.
"Honestly," Ashlie exclaimed, "you girls seem to 'smell' when I'm going somewhere."

"Nothing doing!" Gaylene answered on a happy note. "You told us to watch for your car. You said whenever we saw it standing out front that you were home and would be going somewhere, soon, and for us to come over if we wanted to go along. So there Ashlie Brookfielding!"

Ashlie laughed, and with a wave of her hand and a flourish of her arm said conciliatorily, "Okay. Okay, so I did say that. And I meant it, of course. Now fasten your seat belts and then it's off to the shore for us. Oh, how I do love spring, with its balmy breezes, its redolent flowers and its singing, busy, nest-building birds. Why, even the bees are awake and working."

"Do they ever sleep?" Lorrie asked seriously.

"Well, I would imagine they do," Ashlie replied philosophically. "Doesn't everything sleep sometime or another? But then, how should I know? I've never made a study of bees."

Patti threw her head back and laughed heartily. "And why should you?" she finally asked. "Now, if you had plans of becoming a beekeeper, or the wife of a beekeeper even, it may be to your interest, Ashlie," she teased.

"All joking aside," Gaylene said, "bees are fascinating little creatures to study. Talk about organization and cleanliness! Whew! They'd put all of us to shame. Mother would agree 100% on this. She declares I'm the most disorganized person she's ever known. I can't say that I'm proud of that record, but what can one do when she'd rather study and read than clean and organize her drawers and closets? Poor Mother! I'm sure that is a trial to her."

"How did we ever get on the subject of bees?" Lorrie asked, laughing again. "Oh, I guess it was through you, Ashlie. You said you liked spring, with its warm breezes and flowers, and then you said something about bees being awake. That was it! Well, now that we've discussed our sweet . . . literally 'honey' . . . of a friend, let's turn our thoughts to what we're going to do this afternoon."
"Drive around and see springtime from this open convertible," Ashlie replied, turning the car toward the harbor and the shore road.

They drove along in silence for awhile and when they passed a small white frame church Ashlie remarked, "See that church we just passed? I'm going to go there one of these Sundays. Anyone care to go with me?"

"Oh, Ashlie, you can be so funny at times! " Patti exclaimed, thinking it was a joke.

"But I'm not trying to be funny, Patti. I mean it. I've passed here several times and listened to them sing. Can they ever sing! I never heard anything like it. Then one day while I was passing, they had some kind of outdoor service. It was right on the street. I parked across the street and listened to the singing and the music, which was wonderful. It made me feel all strange inside. And someday I'm coming to their services. Why not all of us come as a group? Ashlie asked.

Lorrie was on the edge of her seat. "You can't really be serious, Ashlie!"

"As serious as a person can be, Lorrie," Ashlie replied, deftly maneuvering her lemon-yellow car to a smooth stop at the red light. "I'm sure we'd be welcome there."

"You, go to church? I . . . well, I . . . I guess I just never knew you even so much as thought about attending church. Any church," Lorrie answered frankly.

"I went uptown one Easter with Aleena," Ashlie said seriously. "I didn't enjoy it, though. The preacher read some sort of essay and, truthfully, I nearly fell asleep. Needless to say, I never returned. Aleena said it's that way every Sunday."

"Then why have church?" Patti wanted to know. "I believe I could get more inspiration from a good book, if all one gets is an essay package in church. We get all those things in school, and can they ever become boring. Can they ever! Mr. Driggs drones on like a hive of bees. Boring! Ugh! "

Seems that we're right back to our 'sweet' little honey-makers," Ashlie remarked. "But seriously, that little church back there is different."
"How do you know? You've never gone there, from what you just said," Gaylene replied.

"I've heard enough, Gaylene. I'm convinced that those people are different and that we wouldn't be disappointed if we went. Their singing and their songs convinced me. Everything they sang had Christ as their theme. Christ, and the blood that He shed while hanging on the cross. That's more than I heard when I went with Aleena. And that was on Easter Sunday, too, when one would surely expect to hear something about Christ and His resurrection."

"Do you believe all that?" Patti asked quickly, searchingly.

"What little I know, I believe, Patti. After all, who created everything we're looking at right now if God doesn't exist, as some would try to tell us, and if God didn't do it? Who? Who did it?"

The girls were silent for a long while.

"I guess I just never gave creation too much thought," Lorrie admitted after awhile. "Guess that stems from the fact that I'm from a family who are totally unreligious. I doubt that Dad or Mother ever went to church in their lives."

Ashlie sighed. "That is sad, isn't it? I wish I could say that I went more than once. But that's my record. Oh, I forgot; I was christened in some church when I was an infant. But I don't remember a single thing about it; so I guess that doesn't count."

Patti, never one to be serious for long, said, "Let's talk about something more pleasant and stimulating. Something light and happy. This doesn't sound at all like us, this church thing."

"Let me say what I have to say, Patti, and then I'll keep my thoughts to myself. Unless anyone wants to hear more at another time, that is," Ashlie said, turning off the highway on to the shore road. "I want none of this to go farther than the four of us," she said casting a quick glance into the rear view mirror at Gaylene and Patti in the back seat and one at Lorrie, sitting beside her. "Promise?" she asked.
"Oh, Ashlie, you know we never divulge confidences," Lorrie commented in a hurt tone of voice. "Why make us promise when we've never broken a confidence before?"

"Because this is different."

"Whew! Whatever can it be?" Patti asked, turning a sickly looking white. "You know I don't enjoy suspense, Ashlie. It makes me sick; not just figuratively but literally and actually -- sick!"

"I'm not trying to create any sort of suspense, Patti, nor even to re-create some suspense-filled drama. This is just sort of, oh well, I don't know what to call it, not even what it is."

"Out with it!" Gaylene exclaimed. "We'll all expire . . . or faint, one . . . from curiosity."

"Like I said, I can't explain what I'm about to say. But I want nothing said to my parents. Nothing"

"As if we ever have," Patti piped up. "We've respected each other's secrets and/or trials too much to do anything except try to help solve them together. We're friends, Ashlie. Childhood, young adulthood friends! Are you convinced of our sincerity and genuineness now, or must we do something great and special to convince you? Have we ever squealed when any of us was told not to tell? Have we?"

"Oh, Patti, don't over-react. And don't sound so . . . so dramatic. I do believe you and I am convinced. I know how close we have become down across the years, and I also know how our trials have served as a bonding cement between us."

Lorrie's laughter broke into Ashlie's unfinished statement. "And Mother says that when we're older and really know what trials are all about, we'll laugh over what once seemed a trial," she said.

"You mean you told her?" Gaylene asked, feeling as though Lorrie had violated something every bit as serious as a breach of promise.
"'Course I didn't, silly! She just noticed me acting strangely one time and asked me what was wrong. I told her it was a trial, that's all. And that's when she said what she did. So relax, Gaylene."

"Thanks. I will, and I can," the blonde answered, sinking back against the soft cushion with a sigh of relief.

"Now," Patti said, "let's let Ashlie tell us whatever it is that she can't explain. Sounds silly; but knowing Ashlie, I'm sure there's logic behind it. Or to it."

"That is what is a bit frightening," Ashlie said, staring ahead at the narrow, winding ribbon of black road. "This logical part."

"Please, Ash!" Patti begged. "What is it?"

"Truthfully, I don't know. But inwardly, something's not right."

"What do you mean?" Lorrie asked in an almost breathless whispered question. "Do you mean your heart, Ashlie? Are you having pains?"

"If it was pain, I could pinpoint it. It's just that something's all out of kilter in my body. I'm tired all the time."

"Now?" Gaylene asked with genuine concern.

"Yes, now. And all the time. I'm never over being tired. And this is not normal. I bought some vitamins and some iron tablets from the drugstore but even they aren't changing the way I feel. And you know the course in nursing that I'm taking from Vocational Tech in preparation for graduation? Well, I'm afraid I have leukemia. The symptoms indicate as much."

"Ash-lie!" Lorrie exclaimed, bursting into tears.

Pattie became defensive. "How can you say such a thing when you haven't gone to a doctor for a proper diagnosis?" she asked. "And why haven't you gone? You know as well as the rest of us that early diagnosis and treatment are vitally important, Ashlie."
"Don't get so worked up, Patti," Ashlie soothed. "I know all that you have told me. And more than that even. But what's the use? Look at Deena and Bud. Did therapy help them?"

"But you're Ashlie; you're an individual. And if you'd get to a doctor and allow him to make tests and get a proper diagnosis, who knows, you may be helped if it is something serious," Patti said vehemently. "I only wish, now, that we didn't have this secret bond between us; I'd alert someone's parents. Believe me, I would!"

"By the way I'm declining physically day after day, they'll know soon enough,' Ashlie commented. "If what my body is trying to tell me by the way I feel is true, my days are numbered. Believe me, I know they are."

"Then . . . then maybe you'd better get to that church," Lorrie said tearfully. "And if no one else goes with you, you can count on me. I'll go, Ashlie."

"We're all going," Patti and Gaylene said simultaneously and seriously.

"We're friends, aren't we?" Ashlie said softly as the rolling surf came into view.

(Part II)

"Let's turn around and go home" Patti said. "Who cares about the ocean, or . . . or anything, when one's friend relays such sad news."

"I feel the same way," Gaylene echoed. "It's like there's a dark black cloud that has risen on our horizon. Why, we haven't had time to learn all the wonders that are out there in the future."

"Nobody ever learns everything!" Lorrie exclaimed earnestly and truthfully. "So long as one lives, my father says one can find something new to learn; something new to do. This learning process is a never ending thing, I take it."

"And that's right," Ashlie replied. "And I'm sure it's the way God intended for it to be. You take a person who is constantly learning new things; that person is never dull nor uninteresting. As for us, today is going to
be the beginning of something new for us too. We're going to see and feel with our ears and eyes and hearts wide open. Everyday sights and sounds and blessings take on new meaning and greater worth when one feels he or she is losing them; when slowly they are going from you. Or, maybe I should say, when you are leaving them. The last several weeks, since I have been feeling so completely exhausted and worn out, I have received an appreciation for things which I had always taken for granted before. Little, insignificant things have taken on great meaning for me. Oh, look at that dear little sandpiper on the beach! Can't he run!"

Lorrie gasped. This was a new Ashlie. Never had she been able to recall their friend being interested in birds and things of nature.

"See that beautiful wave!" Ashlie exclaimed again, stopping the car and looking out across the blue-green expanse of water. "Those waves look like giant sea horses racing each other to the shore," she remarked with the excitement of a small child.

Lorrie, studying this different Ashlie, felt like screaming to-whatever was sapping her best friend of her strength that "it" whatever it was, couldn't have her. Positively not! Instead, as she watched Ashlie's eyes light up with the wonders of nature, tears sprang to her eyes. She opened the door and rushed out on the sand, feeling she'd burst if she couldn't get alone and give vent to her pent-up tears.

She walked along the sandy beach, stopping every now and then to pick up a choice shell, washed inshore by recent waves. Her heart felt as heavy as the ever-present rock out near The Point and her tears spent themselves on the sand. She wished what Ashlie had said were only a dream. But her own heart knew differently. Hadn't she sensed and noticed this change in her friend for many weeks now.

She walked on, forgetful of the others, unmindful of the distance -- alone with her sorrow and grief. She felt helpless. Totally helpless. They had shared so much, the four of them. But especially, Ashlie and she. They were like sisters. Like real blood sisters. Maybe it was because they had no sisters; nor brothers either. Each was an only child. Or maybe it was because they thought a lot alike and had the same likes and dislikes. Or maybe it was simply because they loved each other so deeply and dearly like sisters are
supposed to. Whatever the reason, or reasons, there was a bond of mutual love and understanding between them.

Lorrie sat in the sand and buried her face in her hands, a fresh flow of tears mingling with the ocean spray. "Oh God!" she cried in anguish. "Help Ashlie. Please, help my friend."

She was amazed when she finished the anguished plea. Never in all her almost-eighteen years had she done such a thing. She supposed it could have been called a prayer but of this she wasn't sure. But she had talked to God, she told her trembling heart, and it made her feel better. Was He really listening? She wondered suddenly, with hope and excitement. And did He care about earth-people and their pains and sorrows?

A mammoth wave was rolling toward shore. Lorrie knew she'd feel the spray of its wash inward. But she didn't care; her mind was on something Ashlie had said to them on the ride out: "If God doesn't exist," she had said, "And if He didn't create this universe and all these beautiful things in it, then who did?" Yes, Lorrie admitted honestly, there was a God. He had created the universe and everything in it. How did she know? Well she couldn't say exactly, except that since she had talked to Him about helping Ashlie she felt better.

The giant wave rushed land-ward, crashing finally on the shore and spraying Lorrie with a fine sea mist. She watched, fascinated, as the water seemed sucked back into the sea by a giant vacuum, then came plunging back and racing shoreward again in wave after ceaseless wave. Who made this? She asked her heart silently. Quickly came back the answer: God.

The answer was as real as if someone had whispered it to her. Maybe Someone dial she thought ecstatically. Yes, she was sure He did!

A car horn nearby brought her quickly out of her deep thoughts. She turned and saw Ashlie coming along the beach. Ashlie parked the car then joined her on the sand.

"Where are Patti and Gaylene?" Lorrie asked hoping her eyes wouldn't betray the tears she had shed.
"They went for a walk along the beach. Each her own way, like you," Ashlie said. "Honestly, Lorrie, I didn't mean to make you three all sad and . . . and weepy."

Lorrie felt all choked up again, like a fresh fountain of tears was coming. "How . . . how would you feel if Patti or Gaylene or I should tell you such news?" she asked. "Wouldn't you feel like . . . like . . . Oh, Ashlie, I'm going to cry again. I'm sorry. Sorry! But I just can't help it. It breaks my heart to even think about it."

Ashlie's gaze seemed to be far out at sea. After a while she said, "You know, Lorrie, I guess death wouldn't be so bad if one knew what was out there."

"Out where?"

"Beyond death. Or maybe I should say, after death. What's out there, Lorrie? Do you know?"

Lorrie brushed the tears away. "I wish I did, Ashlie. Oh, I wish I knew. I'd feel a whole lot better and I'd let you know. But I don't know. Oh, I do believe we're more like heathens than anything else. And what makes it even more painful for me is the fact that we have all kinds of churches near us and yet I've never gone to any."

"That's why I'm determined to go to that little church, Lorrie. I know I'll find the answers to all these troublesome questions. I'm sure my days are numbered, and the thought of dying and not knowing what to do to die, well, and to die without fear, oh, you have no idea how much this troubles me." Grabbing Lorrie's hand and holding it tightly, Ashlie sobbed, "I . . . I'm scared, Lorrie. Frightened. Terribly frightened. I know I'm going to die. I know it. Oh, Lorrie, can't you help me?"

The waves washed shore-ward and the two clung to each other in fear. "I . . . don't know . . . any more . . . than you know," Lorrie confessed brokenly. "But I want to find out, Ashlie. Oh, I must find out. I'm scared, too. I don't know how to die without fear either."

"We're going to find out," Ashlie declared, brushing the tears off her cheeks and from her eyes. "For when we die, we die alone; no one can come
with us to help us. And, since I'm long since of age, I figure this makes me entirely responsible to God for what I do or don't do. It's time now that I learned these things; things I should have known about God, and dying, many years ago. Well, let's try to find Patti and Gaylene."

Lorrie stood up and brushed the sand off her skirt; then she followed Ashlie up the beach to her car, feeling like she was living in an unreal world, a world of shock.

Ashlie turned the car around and headed in the direction from which she had just come. But Patti and Gaylene were no where to be seen.

"I wonder where they've gone," Lorrie said, searching the sand with her keen eyes.

"Alone somewhere," Ashlie remarked, seeming to have full control of herself again.

"What about the dunes, Ashlie? Before you come to the dunes there's that 'island' of scrub trees. Why not go there? Remember?"

Ashlie smiled. "I think you are right. We may find them there. But each took off in a separate direction, Lorrie."

"We'll find them. If not, they'll find us . . . when their grief is spent. I felt I just had to be alone," Lorrie confessed. "And Ashlie, please, will you go to see a doctor?"

"I suppose I'll have to, one of these days. It seems unreal to me, this exhaustion and devastating fatigue and constant tiredness. Oh look, isn't that Patti coming this way?"

"It's Patti all right," Lorrie confirmed, "and she looks utterly desolate."

Ashlie drove toward the lonely looking figure, asking as she stopped to let her into the car, "Did you enjoy your walk, Patti?"

"I got some things settled in my mind," she answered soberly as she slid onto the back seat, the tell-tale red eyes a give-away. "Things like this change a person's thinking. And her values, too. Seems like I've had my
priorities all mixed up and in the wrong place. When are you going to that church, Ashlie? I'm going with you whenever you go."

"So am I," Lorrie told Patti.

"Then why not make it for this Sunday?" Ashlie asked, heading slowly toward the dunes where they found Gaylene, red-eyed and still weeping.

(Part III)

Two successive Sundays found all four of the girls in the small frame church. Everything Ashlie had told them about the singing was true. And even more. Ashlie, feeling worse by the day, had gone forward to the mourner's bench in response to the gray-haired minister's plea for sinners to come to Jesus, the second service in which she attended. She arose from the altar with a heavenly shine and glow on her face which astounded Patti and Lorrie and Gaylene.

"What happened?" Lorrie asked while bright tears danced from her eyes down her cheeks. "You . . . you look like an angel," she exclaimed in a reverent whisper.

"Oh Lorrie, I can't describe how I feel. It . . . it's wonder. full And best of all, my sins are gone."

"Bu . . . but how do you know?" Lorrie asked again.

"I just know, that's how. My burden is gone; it rolled off me like that," Ashlie exclaimed, blinking her eyes. "One minute I was burdened by sin and the next I was free. I have peace, peace, peace. And the fear of death is gone, too. Oh, I'm so happy. Why don't you girls get saved?" she asked. "How do you know you'll be here next year at this time? You may be the next leukemia victim. Or maybe something else will claim your life."

"But you don't know that you have leukemia," Patti said.

"Yes, I do. Mother insisted on a check-up last week. The doctor verified it. Rather, I should say, the tests confirmed it. Last stages. He wanted to hospitalize me. But with it in its advanced stage, I asked to be allowed to live as normal a life for as long as I possibly can without being confined to the
bed. And all I ask is that none of you begin to do for me. In other words, until it is an absolute necessity, don't wait on me nor treat me like an invalid. And don't feel sorry for me, nor pity me. I'm ready to die now. Jesus' precious Blood covers all my sins and my heart is whiter than snow. The most wonderful thing that could happen for me, now that I am saved, is to know that my three best friends are ready to die and will meet me in Heaven some day."

"Oh, Ashlie," Lorrie stammered, "I want to know! I want to!"

"Let's pray then, Lorrie. That's how I found soul-rest and peace." And Ashlie led her sobbing friend to the altar, followed by both Patti and Gaylene.

The days that followed found Ashlie victorious in soul but rapidly declining in body. Lorrie and Patti and Gaylene were almost constant companions; one or another remained at all times by her bedside, doing what little could be done to alleviate the suffering and pain and reading to her. Already, she had favorite scriptures and verses which she had hidden away in her heart, and when the suffering became intense her weak lips whispered the unshakeable, never-failing promises.

It was during times like these that the glory and the radiance of another world rested on her sweet countenance and illuminated her being. "Oh, I'm so happy!" she would exclaim weakly, her face aglow with Heaven's glory. "So happy. My soul is filled with His glory. Jesus bridged the stream of death for me and I'm crossing over with Him. I'm not afraid; He is with me. Glory! Glory!"

Death came suddenly, within a few days, as her father and mother stood by her side. Lorrie, too.

"I'm going Home now," she whispered with a smile, trying hard to focus eyes that were already partially set in death upon those whom she loved. "Mother, Father," she said tearfully, "meet me in Heaven. Give your heart to Jesus. Do it now. He's waited so long to save you. Please," she begged, "meet me in Heaven. Lorrie," she whispered, "you have been my very, very best friend. Stay true to Jesus. I'll be waiting for you. Until I meet you in Heaven, God bless you. Tell Gaylene and Patti I'll be waiting for them . . . ."
Her breath left the body; her spirit took its departure to a land where pain cannot enter and where the word is unheard of. Lorrie, still clinging to the now-lifeless hand, dropped on her knees beside the bed and sobbed.

"You must be strong," an inner voice whispered to Lorrie. "Ashlie's father and mother don't know Me. Rejoice that one of My children has come Home. 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'"

"She's Home" Lorrie whispered to the brokenhearted parents, 'And she's free from pain."

"Why would God allow this?" Mr. Brookfielding cried bitterly. "Our only child!"

Lorrie was silent for a while, weighing words which she wanted to say but fearful of offending Ashlie's father.

"Why" Mr. Brookfielding asked again between clenched teeth as he paced the floor and wrung his hands.

This time Lorrie's words tumbled out. "Maybe it's to bring you and Mrs. Brookfielding to God. The minister at the little church said the shepherd of sheep must actually pick a little lamb up in his arms and carry it across a stream many times, before the parent sheep will venture in and follow him, thus leading an entire flock of sheep across to the green pastures on the opposite shore. Jesus has taken Ashlie, no doubt, to try to persuade you both to follow; to get saved and ready for Heaven. You can see Ashlie again, someday, if you will get right with God and become converted."

The pacing ceased. Mr. Brookfielding rushed over to the bed, and taking his daughter's lifeless hand in his, he cried brokenly, "Oh, Ashlie! Ashlie! I will meet you in Heaven. I will. Come, Annabelle," he said, drawing his wife's hand into his free one, "promise Ashlie you'll meet her in Heaven. We can make it. Yes, together we can make it."

Tears flowed freely over the beloved form; prayers of sincerity and true repentance soared higher and higher, reaching clear through to Heaven's throne; pardoning grace . . . forgiving power . . . sped earth-ward with lightning speed; two souls were born again, made new in Christ.
Spring was a burst of glory the day of Ashlie's "laying away" . . . her funeral and burial. Lorrie was up earlier than usual, wanting to be alone; to go to a favorite place of Ashlie's and hers . . . a rippling brook near a forest outside of town.

The air was chilly, enough so as to merit the sweater which she had draped loosely around her shoulders and secured at the neck with the top button before she pedaled away on her bicycle.

The redwings and robins were back; she saw them. And the sound of the brook running down the hill was a glad, free song. The air possessed a different sweetness, like a clean, fresh-scrubbed wood floor, and even the unopened, swelling buds had the scent of spring impregnated heavily in them. She drank it all in, the way Ashlie would have done.

With aching, heavy heart she came. She sat in the cool stillness of the trees . . . in the silence of spring . . . as the waters danced past her, carrying away some of the pain and the heartache and the hurting inside her chest. Then she began to pray, and the lovely willows in the half-light of dawn, all smoky gold with the green mist on their fountain like graceful limbs, seemed to whisper soft Alleluia's of praise and comfort to her soul.

They had come here often to watch the sun play on the leaves and among the willows, she and Ashlie. The stream seemed to laugh with them at the little brown creatures romping through the brush and minnows playing hide-and-go-seek among the rocks in the creek bed. Yes, she had come here often with her friend to enjoy the wonders of nature which, she knew now, was all God's creation . . . His gift to mankind. But this marked the first time ever for her to come to pray. And she was richly rewarded and repaid for having come, her refreshed soul informed her.

The sun was well on its journey across the sky when she pedaled back to her home to dress for the funeral. Her heart leaped for joy when she glanced across the street at the Brookfielding's home. In front of the house, shiny-clean and bright, stood Ashlie's car. No printed sign was needed; the silent message was clear: I'm Home, it seemed to shout to the world. And to Lorrie and Patti and Gaylene, especially.

Lorrie rushed inside, the words from the Bible thrilling and blessing her soul, "Because I live, ye shall live also." "I am the resurrection and the Life;
He that believeth on me shall never die . . ." Ashlie was not dead; she had just gone Home.

The End