Larry slumped into the kitchen chair, feeling wretched and miserable and unhappy in spite of the fact that it was a beautiful day outside, all gold and warm and bright with sunshine and myriads of flowers. How he wished he could feel a part of the glorious world in which he circulated and moved.

"Sit up straight in your chair!" his father barked, looking menacingly at him. "Straight!" he ejaculated a second time in no uncertain tone of voice.

Larry cringed. He always reacted the same way when his father bellowed at him this way.
He bit into a biscuit and washed it down quickly with a swallow of milk. It seemed he would choke on it; his throat had a lump that felt as big as the biscuit itself, and much harder.

He looked askance at his father, whose booming voice was now bellowing at his mother. Again he cringed. Involuntarily, he slumped down deeper in the chair.

His father's big hand came suddenly down upon his shoulder in a smarting slap. "How often must I tell you to sit straight!" he shouted, standing over Larry and looking down upon him with such perfect hatred and disdain that the sixteen-year-old winced. He hurt -- on the inside. He was sure he felt much the same way as the Willowby's little pup that seemed to be constantly cuffed and knocked about.

"Lay off him!" his mother exclaimed, her eyes flashing fire. "You've made a nervous wreck out of me but you'll not do this to my son. Not if I can help it, you won't!"

"He's my son too, Myra, and when I tell him to sit straight, I mean it. I'm sick and tired of seeing him slump in the chair at mealtime. . . ."

Waiting to hear no more, Larry pushed his chair away from the table and all but ran out of the house. Fight . . . fight . . . bicker . . . argue . . . this was all he ever heard anymore. Love? He was sure his parents didn't know what the word meant; especially where love for each other and their children entered the picture.

He sighed, feeling hurt, and deprived of something for which he had no explanation but which was as real as the air he was breathing.

The streets of the town were deserted and quiet and still, the residents, for the most part, still in bed. Larry was glad for this: he could walk without being observed.

Plunging his hands deep into his pockets, the boy made his way to the park on the east side of town. He had been there many times before; he liked it there: it was peaceful and restful.
At the park's edge he followed a path lined on either side with spirea and forsythia bushes -- thickly and beautifully laden with millions of blooms -- to a fountain, where water sprayed high into the air then fell, laughing and murmuring, into the circular conduit around it.

He stood for a long while, watching the endless flow of water and listening to its soothing murmur before settling himself on one of the many benches around the beautiful fountain.

Again the boy sighed. It was like the dying of a sob. Then he exhaled and inhaled quickly . . . deeply. Like the leaves on the trees above him, Larry decided he would exhale all the "carbon dioxide" of hatred and bitterness from his being and inhale the pure, clean, life-giving "oxygen" of things lovely and beautiful.

He sat, staring into the gushing water, his face cupped in his hands and his elbows resting on his knees, wondering where Cindy was and having a strong urge to do as she had done -- run away.

Why didn't he? he wondered suddenly, fiercely. He was almost a man now. Stature-wise he was a man: six foot two inches was no mere child. What was there at home to hold him? Certainly not happiness! nor love! He and his nineteen-year-old sister had never really known what happiness and real parental love was. They had gotten along well together, each trying to help the other and to compensate for the lack of love their parents failed to give and demonstrate. This kind of happiness they had known, what each made or did for the other.

When he was small, he always went to Cindy for comfort for his hurts and pains. It was she who wiped his nose, kissed his stubbed toes and crooned softly in his ear when he had a fever; and she it was who helped him with his spelling and arithmetic lessons too. But she was gone now -- where? Where? Oh, if only he knew!

He rose from the bench and paced nervously around the fountain. He would leave home . . . no, he wouldn't leave home: Cindy may write . . . or call . . . or return home. . . .

He felt like he was being torn apart. Oh, there must be a better way than this! There must! There must! he cried inwardly, slamming his fist into
the open palm of his hand. Certainly, there was more to life than bickering and fighting and backbiting. There had to be!

Propping a foot on the low stone wall surrounding the fountain, Larry's thoughts wandered to his father's job. He was an executive for a large firm, and to say that he provided well for his family was an understatement. With both his father and mother working--long hours, at that -- for the same firm, Cindy and he had had anything and everything money could buy. They'd had everything but love and happiness; the two things each had desired and craved most of all. They should have been happy but they weren't: no amount of money could buy happiness.

The sudden laughter of children brought Larry abruptly out of his thinking to the full reality of the fact that it was time for him to head for school.

Cutting across the park, away from the sidewalk and the laughing, carefree children -- he didn't feel like laughing -- he took the most isolated way to school, feeling miserable, unhappy and restless inside.

Once in his homeroom and his first class, Larry lost himself in his textbooks. At least that was one way to drown out the misery he'd felt earlier that morning. Then, too, he purposed within his heart that he would graduate with honors, if he graduated at all. To do this required diligent study and concentrated effort and time. It was an objective which had kept him going when the going was rough, like this morning. Not that he minded being told to sit straight; not at all: it was the way in which the command was given, and the tone of voice. He didn't resent parental guidance. On the contrary, he welcomed it, desiring most of all to please his parents -- his father, especially.

When the bell rang for the noon hour, he hurried to the cafeteria; a thing he rarely ever did, preferring Mac's Hamburger Castle and Pedro's Taco House to the school's lunchroom. It was as though a hand was leading him now.

Finding a vacant table at the far end of the cafeteria, he settled down with a book in one hand and a grilled cheese-tuna combination sandwich in the other when a friendly voice said pleasantly, "Mind if I join you? May I share your table? You look lonesome. . . ."
Larry lifted his eyes from the book and looked into the face of a tall sandy-haired, well-built young man much his own age. "It's OK by me," he said quickly, adding, "You're new here, aren't you?"

Setting his tray on the table across from Larry, the young man laughed. It was a deep, melodic-sounding kind of laughter. "Right. I'm Ken Hardesty. The reason I laughed is because so many fellows have asked me that same question so many times this year. . . ."

"I don't understand," Larry ventured, feeling totally at ease with Ken.

"I'm one of the 'moving-est' fellows in the world, I do believe. At least, I'll say I'm sure my folks move more than anybody i know. You see, my father's with Wilson and Humphries Company and this year they moved Dad five times. Naturally, this meant five different schools for me. Quite a record-setter, is Ken Hardesty. But wait, we'll talk after I thank God for my dinner. . . ."

Larry watched, fascinated, as Ken bowed his head and, aloud, offered thanks to God for the food he was about to eat.

"Why'd you do that?" he asked when Ken raised his head and opened his eyes. "And, oh, yes, I'm Larry Seymore, in case you're wondering who I am."

"Glad to know you, Larry," Ken said, extending his hand. "The reason I thank God for my food is because I love Him."

"You . . . love God! How is this possible? I mean . . . well, after all, God's not like man . . . you can't see Him. How do you know that He even exists?"

Swallowing the bite of food he'd taken, Ken said, "How do I know God exists? That's easy: He lives within my heart. Right inside here!" he exclaimed emphatically, smiting his chest with his hand. Turning searching eyes on Larry, he asked suddenly, pointedly, "Do you know where you'd go if you were to die this minute, Larry? Are you ready to die?"

Larry swallowed. His lips felt suddenly very dry. "That's hardly fair . . . I . . . I mean, well, who thinks about death or dying at our age?" he stuttered.
"I do. The Bible says, 'It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:

"'So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many. . . .' Death is inevitable, Larry. Unless, of course, the Lord comes after the living, bloodwashed saints in the rapture."

"I don't plan to die for ages and ages yet, Ken," Larry said, laughing nervously. "After all, I'm just beginning to live. Sixteen years isn't exactly ancient. . . ."

"That's true enough; but actually, we have no promise that we'll be here tomorrow, you and I. We could die tonight. Today, even. Are you ready to die . . .?"

"Can anybody ever say he's ready to die, Ken?" Larry countered seriously. "As I see it, it's not a matter of being ready to go when one's time comes, not at all: you just die; ready to go or not to go."

Ken studied Larry for a brief while; then he questioned, "Have you ever known what it means to be a Christian?"

"Well, I'm certainly not a heathen, if that's what you're wondering."

"I mean, have you ever had a change of heart, Larry? It's 'not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost' (Titus 3:5). You do want to go to Heaven someday, don't you?"

"What a foolish question, Ken! Of course I want to go to Heaven when I die. Who doesn't?"

"Then you'll have to make preparation to go there. Jesus is The Way, The Truth and The Life. Have you ever been born again? Converted? Are you happy, Larry? Really happy?"

Larry gulped. His gaze dropped from Ken to the table. His hands trembled. "No. No. I'm not happy," he confessed in a voice that trembled and shook with emotion. "I . . . I guess I'm one of the most unhappy people on earth. . . ."
Involuntarily, and without realizing why he was doing it, Larry unbared his heart to Ken Hardesty. It seemed the natural thing to do; the right thing.

When he finished, he said sadly, "That's the story of my life, Ken. Mine and Cindy's. You'll never know how desperate we've been, nor how diligently we have searched and longed for a better way of life and living. Only this morning I told myself that there had to be something better than what we've known and what has been displayed in our home. Why is joy such an elusive dream for some of us, Ken? Why?"

Ken sat on the edge of the seat now; his eyes were shining with eager anticipation. "Real joy is found only in Jesus Christ, Larry. The world offers fun; Christ gives joy -- joy and peace and soul-rest and an inner happiness and contentment. The soul that comes to Jesus for forgiveness and pardon finds all that he needs and longs for. Jesus is all you need, Larry."

Larry looked at his plate, not seeing the food at all. His mind seemed to be keeping pace with his racing heart. Now he knew why he had come to the cafeteria! It sounded incredible, this that Ken had said, almost too good to be really true!

"The Scripture tells us that, 'if we confess our sins, he [Christ] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.' " Ken's voice had a positive note to it; a jubilant sound.

"You think there's forgiveness for . . . me, Ken?" Larry asked quickly, turning his water glass 'round and 'round in his hands. "God knows how desperately in need of inward peace and rest I am. . . ."

"Jesus said, 'Come unto me and I will give you rest . . . .' Why not 'come' now, Larry?"

"Could we go somewhere and pray, Ken? I don't know anything much about talking to God but I'd like to 'come' -- if you think He'll have me. . . ."

Ken was on his feet in an instant. "My car! It's the perfect place to pray, Larry. Come, I'll lead the way. It's out in the parking lot. We'll have privacy there, and the old battered up back seat will make a great mourner's bench. . . ."
Returning to his homeroom a short time before the bell rang, Larry's face shone with the light of Heaven's glory. There was a smile on his face and a spring in his step. He had peace and soul-rest. Finally, his searching was over! Christ was His Savior, his joy and his happiness. It was wonderful. Wonderful! What's more, he felt sure that his conversion would effect a radical change in the lives of his parents. Someday, they too would be saved! Cindy, also!