ONCE IN A LIFETIME
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Amber padded softly down the staisteps in stockinged feet, carrying her size 9 AAA loafers in her hand. Noiselessly she unlocked the back door and, slipping into her shoes, she ran across their large lawn to the alley that lay parallel with the street in front of the house.
Walking briskly, she hurried down the alley till she came to the edge of the village and the pond that shimmered and glistened like a jewel when the sun shone on it.

The early morning was gray and cloudy and the piquant scent in the air, which only yesterday had sent her spirits soaring and orbiting to the highest possible degree of delight and ecstasy, now effected a directly opposite kind of feeling, an, 'I could-care-less' kind of sensation.

She dropped to the thick grass beneath a willow that grew near the edge of the water and stared across at the other side where tall fir, hemlock, spruce and pine rose majestically and densely and looked darkly foreboding.

In the middle of the pond, mallards moved across the water with the easy poise and grace of a queen. Something inside Amber's chest felt like it would burst from the utter tranquility and peace the ducks manifested and seemed to enjoy. Why couldn't she be as peaceful, and feel as restful as the wild fowl? she wondered. Why? What was happening to her? Only yesterday she had felt happy and joyous, like the world could never be more beautiful and lovely. Her soul was at rest -- perfect rest -- and with Jack Frost painting the first rosy tint on the bushes and leaves. . . . Well, she felt like her heart would burst with thanksgiving and praise. But now. . . .The girl closed her eyes.

A flock of wild geese, honking raucously, landed on the pond with a splash, their wings a loud, fluttery noise and their honking suddenly quieting down to a soft murmur.

It was more than Amber could bear. Hugging her knees to her chest, she buried her face in the folds of her full skirt and wept.

Without warning, a cold, wet nose nudged her hand. Startled, Amber opened her eyes. "Why, Thunder!" she exclaimed, reaching a hand out and stroking the head of the black and white dog who was neither pure miniature collie nor German Shepherd, yet was a very definite and much pronounced combination of each.

"You frightened me!" she said, rubbing the ears of the dog who had come from seemingly nowhere to their house on a dark, rainy, stormy night when thunder was rolling across the heavens like noisy tanks discharging
their heavy artillery. The stray, dripping wet, trembling and much-frightened dog took instantly to the entire Holten family. That had been four years ago and the animal, whose name they didn't know -- if he so much as had one, even! -- got the grand title, 'Thunder.'

Stroking his head and ears now, Amber thought how utterly incongruous the name was. Thunder was totally unlike his name: he was of a gentle nature, easy to get along with and not at all thunderous and boisterous. There were times when the girl felt sure that he understood what was being said to him.

Thunder closed his eyes and wagged his tail fiercely, accepting with apparent delight and satisfaction Amber's gentle hands stroking the silky fur on his head.

Once, when the girl stopped to watch a doe and her fawn emerge from the dark woods on the opposite side of the pond and step into the cold mountain water for both a drink and a bath, Thunder moved closer and rested his head on her arm. Amber looked down into the sad but gentle looking eyes that seemed to be observing her with careful scrutiny.


Thunder sat deathly still, like he was listening, then quickly -- it was almost like he was disgusted with her, too, Amber thought -- the dog let out a tired sigh and, curling up on the grass near her, he fell asleep.

That's just it, Amber thought suddenly. I'm becoming tedious to everybody, even Thunder. Just look at me, she told herself silently: I'm growing out of my clothes; I have big feet, and I'm positively, absolutely, and without a doubt, entirely too slender. My face is too "pixie" looking for my tall frame; my eyes too enormous -- my mouth, also -- and I almost loathe this red sweater I have on.
How many years had the sweater been around? she wondered. A quick mental calculation told her that first it had been Beverly's -- she was her oldest sister. Next Alissa had "inherited" it; now, she.

She arose quickly and walked to the edge of the pond where she stood, statue-like, staring at the moving fowl skimming across the surface of the clear, blue-green water. Overhead, the clouds began to weep. Their raindrop tears made a soft, gentle pit-pit, drip-drip sound as they fell into the pond. Involuntarily, Amber's tears mingled with those of the clouds.

A brisk breeze blew suddenly out of the north, stirring the coniferous trees across the pond, causing them to shiver and shake. Amber drew the old red sweater more tightly about her, thankful for its warmth -- hand-me-down though it was -- then she started homeward.

By the time she reached the edge of the village the rain was coming down in a cold, steady drizzle. She buried her head and neck in the heavy collar of the sweater and hastened her footsteps just as a voice reached her ears.

"Amber Holten, what are you doing out on a day like this? You'll catch your death of cold! Come inside, dear girl, and have a cup of hot tea. I just brewed a fresh pot. . . ."

"I . . . I want to get home, Mrs. Salada. I. . . ."

"Nonsense, my child! This is Saturday; no school today. Furthermore, it's very early. Follow me; a cup of hot tea is just what you need."

Amber followed the aged widow woman into her meticulously-kept, old-fashioned kitchen and, seating herself across the table from her gracious hostess, she said a weak little "Thank you," wanting to be left alone more than anything else in the world.

Over the steaming-hot tea, Mrs. Salada studied the lovely girl before her, pushing her glasses up on the bridge of her nose from where they had slipped.
"Is something bothering you, dear Amber?" she asked finally. "You seem . . . ah . . . shall I say different? What's happened to the bubbly, bouncy young lady of yesterday?"

At mention of "yesterday," Amber's dam of tears broke loose. They poured unashamedly down her face, forming a small puddle on Mrs. Salada's poppy-red new oil cloth tablecloth.

"Cry it out," the old lady admonished. "You'll feel better. At least, I used to -- when I was your age and a crying spell possessed me."

In spite of her tears, Amber laughed. "You . . . you . . . mean you cried too, Mrs. Salada? When . . . you were my age, I mean?"

The gray-haired woman nodded assent and her sky-blue eyes had a merry twinkle in them, an "I-understand-you" look.

"It's stupid, in a way. At least I feel stupid; crying like a baby . . . over . . . nothing."

"I know what you mean; I used to feel the same way."

"You . . . did? I . . . I, Mrs. Salada, did you sometimes feel all confused and . . . mixed-up inside? You see, I have this funny, crazy, mixed-up feeling. One day I'm extremely happy and joyous; the next, I wonder where my happiness and light-heartedness has gone. There are times when I feel very much grownup and mature and then, quite suddenly and without warning, I feel kind of girlish and not at all mature and grown-up. It . . . it's stupid, and it sounds silly, doesn't it? I mean, do you think I'm abnormal? Am I all right? Normal, I mean?"

Mrs. Salada re-filled Amber's cup.

"It's not stupid, dear," she soothed. "Nor is it silly or crazy -- this that you are experiencing. This is a once in a lifetime thing. It is simply a part of growing up. Someday, the Lord willing -- I would say another year or two, if that long -- you should be through with these conflicting emotions. That's all it is, emotions, dear."

Amber sighed. Suddenly she thought about all the minuses about her features.
"Look at my feet, Mrs. Salada!" she exclaimed suddenly, sticking a foot out from behind the table to display the length of her shoe. "There isn't another girl in our entire school who has feet as big and long and narrow as mine! Look at them closely!" she said. "And my eyes! They're the biggest, most enormous eyes I've ever seen. Somehow, they don't seem to fit in at all with my face! Yesterday I didn't mind nor notice so much; but today. . . !"

Laying a wrinkled hand over Amber's soft, smooth one, the gentle woman said kindly, "God gave you two of the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen. And your feet, well, you'll be thankful for them when you've finished growing. They'll just fit your frame, Amber dear. Know what's wrong with you?" she asked, with a twinkle in her eyes.

"I wish I did. Oh, how I wish I knew!"

The ripply laughter of Mrs. Salada was like a beautiful pause, a sigh and a calm after a turbulent storm.

"You have 'growing pains,' my dear. Nothing more, nothing less. But how about your daily devotions? Have you prayed this morning and meditated upon His Word?"

Amber shook her head in embarrassment.

"Did you never talk to the Lord about how you feel, Amber dear? He's a great listener, and He's the one source of absolute help and comfort."

"I . . . I guess I just never thought about bothering Him with anything so . . . so silly. To me, it isn't funny; but . . . but . . . what would He think?"

"You must try it, Amber -- taking everything to God in prayer, I mean. He's an 'ever-present help in time of trouble' or need. Now, back to your devotions; have you prayed this morning?"

"No, I'm sorry to say. I . . . I . . . guess I was too preoccupied with how I felt to think about prayer, Mrs. Salada."
Gently the woman said, "As a new convert, you must develop the habit and practice of daffy prayer and Bible reading. It's your key to spiritual development, maturity, and stability, dear. In fact, you'll die inwardly unless you do this."

Amber's hand closed over that of the woman's. She loved Mrs. Salada very dearly. It was she who had taken her to church with her since she was eleven and a half years old. She, it was, who had influenced her to get saved and sanctified by her daily, godly, consistent living.

In a trembling voice she asked quickly, "Could we have morning devotions together? Right here, please? And will you lay your hand on my head, the way you did the night I got saved? I know I'll feel better after we pray. . . ."

"With pleasure, Amber. . . ."

The rain poured from the skies as Amber stood inside her bedroom window an hour later with a deep inner peace and calm in her heart. She had so many lessons to learn yet -- spiritual lessons. But she rejoiced that, inside her soul and her heart, she was learning to lean upon the Everlasting arms. And the Lord had given her a friend to help in the person of Mrs. Salada, her Sunday school teacher!