Marlis Moore awoke to the rattle of window shutters against the house. She sat up in bed and pulled the curtains aside long enough to see outside. It was snowing again and the same wind that rattled the shutters, trying hard, it seemed, to loosen them from their moorings, was pushing the snow into piles and heaps among the rocks and the washed ashore seaweed. It swirled the
snow into eddies around the bushes in the yard and dusted the gate generously and thickly in white. It was beautiful.

She watched the rapidly falling snowflakes for a long while, feeling the excitement she always felt and experienced when it snowed, then she flung the bed clothes back and jumped out of bed, hurrying to the window across the room and closing it against the flow of brittle-brisk cold air that smelled of the sea and of fir trees. Shivering, she went to the clothes closet for her clothes. How delightful winter was, and how fresh and clean her room smelled with the partially opened window allowing the wind to sneak in and out at random all night long! Oh, she loved it; loved it all -- the snow, the brisk wind, the fresh-clean scent of the outside in her room. Everything was beautiful and wonderful except for one thing. . . .

Marlis felt the old familiar catch in her throat at thought of Arlis. Would she ever get over the feeling of loss and grief? Nine months, and still the pain and the hurt was as fresh and as new as the day the tragedy had occurred. Arlis, her look alike sister, thirteen months younger than she was, her best friend and prayer partner and her booster in everything she did.

There were times when she was sure she heard Arlis' soft footsteps on the stairs, coming along the hallway to the bedroom they shared. More than once she had run to the open bedroom door, expecting to see the dear, sweet familiar face, all aglow with the glad surprise of finding the first spring flower or a songbird's nest with speckled eggs in it. Arlis was so in love with life; she saw beauty in everything around her.

Marlis dressed quickly then she made the bed and hurried downstairs. The kitchen was warm and cozy, and fragrant with the odor of bacon and toast.

"Good morning, Mother," she said softly, going to her mother and kissing her lightly on the end of the nose.

"Good morning to you, Marlis dear. And what do you think of the snow this morning? It looks like we're in for a deep one this time. At least the weather man says so."

"Oh, I love it. You know that. Where's Dad? No lobstering today, for sure."
"He's down at the harbor in his shop, building lobster traps for the Hermann brothers and the Pelletts. You know your father, Marlis; he's happiest staying busy. And I guess he's happiest of all when his work's all caught up in the office over on the mainland and he can putter around in that gray-shingled building called a shop that's perched on long stilts above the water. What a shop! But your father loves it. Loves building the traps and painting lobster buoys and mending the gear, too."

Marlis laughed softly as she ate her bacon and eggs and toast. "This island's home to Daddy," she said. "And it's home to me, too. I'm ever so thankful Daddy didn't move us over to the mainland when he got the job there. Oh, Mother, can you imagine how displaced Arlis and you and I would have felt! Why, all of our life we've known nothing but Fir Island. And I love it here. Oh, how I love it! The people here are different from those on the main: here, everybody knows everybody else and looks out for each other. It . . . it's like we're one big family. And . . . if we hadn't gone over to the mainland that day after school clothing and some books and crafts, Arlis would still be alive."

Marlis felt like she would choke if she tried to swallow the bite of toast in her mouth. The thought of the drunken man driving up on the sidewalk and hitting Arlis made her feel sick all over. In an instant, the nightmarish happening flashed back across her mind with such vividness and reality until she collapsed in tears, moaning piteously, "Oh, Mother, it was horrible. Horrible! He got back on the road as fast as he had steered up onto the sidewalk. But Arlis was dead. He realized his mistake too late. Oh, Mother, Mother! He killed my sister. He's a villain. He's . . . ."

"Marlis," Mrs. Moore said the name softly. Gently. "Arlis was our daughter. Your father and I feel the loss greatly and deeply. But we have forgiven the man; completely and entirely so. And as a result, God has helped to take the keen edge of our hurt away. He has been pouring His oil of healing into our hearts and filling them with His marvelous peace and rest. We've made several trips to see the man and. . . ."

"Mother! You . . . you . . . how could you?" Marlis was incredulous.

"Easily. Jesus said, 'But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses' Matt. 6:15. He was bound by sin,
Marlis. Chained fast to the fetters of alcohol. But that's all changed now: our last trip to the jail, he became converted. He's saved; free from the binding chains of sin and sinful habits. And he's also out on parole."

"Parole! No. No! He killed my sister; my best friend. My prayer. . . ."

Mrs. Moore tilted Marlis' face to meet her eyes. "Say it, honey. I'm thankful that you have been in the practice of praying and reading the Bible daily. That's commendable. But until you can forgive Jerry Clarke I'm afraid your prayers are in vain. You see, trouble and tragedies and sorrows and heartbreak bring out what's really inside. Arlis' death has exposed your bitterness and also an unforgiving spirit."

"But Mother, he's a murderer. A drunken murderer!"

"Was, Marlis; not any more. Jerry's a new man. I wish you'd go see him."

"See the man who cut Arlis down in one single moment of time! The man who silenced my sister's laughing voice instantly and sped away, leaving her lying in a pool of blood on that cold, hard sidewalk!

Oh, Mother, I can't. I wish I could. Yes, I wish I could."

"If we hate anyone, honey, . . . we, . . . you know what the Bible says about that. Your father and I have been praying that the Lord will help you to forgive. Arlis is in Heaven. There's not the least shadow of doubt about this. And were she able to give you a message, I know she'd tell you to forgive Jerry. You'll have to do it if you plan on going to Heaven, Marlis."

Marlis broke into loud sobbing. Her mother was right, she knew: She would have to forgive. Yes, in spite of everything that happened, she would have to forgive She knew what the Bible said. How well she knew!

It was hard for her to finish her breakfast; every bite she took she felt like she was choking. When she was finally finished she carried the dishes to the sink and, with those of her father and mother, who had eaten earlier, she ran hot water into the sink and began the job of washing the dirty dishes and pots and pans. Her mother always insisted that her father be sent to work on a well-filled stomach, and her idea of well filled consisted of freshly baked,
airy-light buttermilk biscuits with a creamy-thick milk gravy made from either the bacon or sausage drippings, eggs, over ever so easy (her father's special delight) and a skillet of freshly sliced potatoes and onions, fried to a delectable golden brown. For sure, her father's stomach had to be well-filled.

Marlis made quick work of washing the dishes. Then she set to straightening up the living room, a job she'd been doing for nearly so long as she could remember. She and Arlis, together. Same way with the dishes. And oh, what fun times they'd had as they worked together. It was not uncommon for strangers on the main to think they were identical twins, so much alike they were in every way. And her heart always felt happy when she knew people thought they were twins, even though they would always tell them they were actually thirteen months apart.

She worked now, much like she knew a robot worked -- mechanically. At least she felt more like something mechanized than like a human. Her world had changed so suddenly and unbelievably radically until she didn't feel like a real person at times. Shock, someone had told her, did this to some people. But she was weary with the depressing feeling. It was like a heavy weight upon her. She longed to cast it off, like the sea cast off its driftwood and its debris.

She finished the work then hurried to where her mother was busy putting stitches in a quilt for a missionary family abroad. The quilt was well underway in its frame in a room off the kitchen. Each winter, Mrs. Moore made quilts for missionary families and native pastors and their families. It was her special gift of love to them. Both Marlis and her sister Arlis, when she was alive, enjoyed putting their share of stitches into the quilts.

"Mother," Marlis said softly, standing in the doorway and watching the gentle woman busy at work, "I'm going for a walk."

"In this heavy downfall of snow?" Mrs. Moore asked without looking up.

"I love snow. And I've been out when we've had blizzards, remember?"

"I remember, Marlis. But do be careful, dear. And, by the way, do you realize that you haven't put a single stitch in this quilt? This will make the second one you haven't helped with."
"I know, Mother. But it's ever so hard to even think of quilting without Arlis. We used to have so much fun seeing who could make the tiniest stitches and keep them even."

"I'll challenge you to this, Marlis."

"Not now, Mother. I'm going out, if you don't mind. I need to think."

"Be careful, dear. And Marlis, I love you."

"I know you do. Thanks, Mom." Turning, Marlis hurried to the closet after her coat and her boots. Dressed like the Eskimos of the far north, her face framed in a warm parka and her coat collar turned up around her neck and tucked beneath the parka to keep the snow out, Marlis slipped outside to the winter world of white.

(Part 2)

Marlis lifted her face skyward, wanting to feel the cold goodness of the snow against her cheeks. Somehow it had a soothing effect upon her, and if ever she needed the feel of that it was now. It was dreadful to be torn up in one's emotions, she soliloquized pensively.

She walked just to be walking at first. Then she made a quick decision: She would walk over to the Backside. The Backside was the outer shore of the island -- a wild stretch of coast constantly exposed to storms and high seas. In milder weather one could always find something of value or interest to take home, for the sea washed ever so many things up and deposited them on the shore. When she and Arlis were small they found myriad treasures which they gave to their parents as "gifts from the sea," their thought-up name for the sea's "gift shop."

She buried her face deep into the folds of her upturned coat collar. It felt snugly-warm. It was wonderful to be alone with the falling snow. Everything was so still and silent. It made her feel like the world was deep in thought, like she was. Usually there were gulls; gulls everywhere -- wheeling, crying, mewing, circling, calling. Today there were none. She knew they could be found at the wharf, however, huddled disconsolately in shelter there.
It made her feel good. There was nothing to mar or break the beautiful silence of the falling snow. She was alone -- with her troublesome thoughts and the battle that raged inside her heart; the battle that had to be won: "But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:15). Oh, it was so hard. Did this . . . this Jerry Clarke deserve forgiveness? Could he get off Scot free? Especially so since he had killed a God-fearing, perfectly saintly and sweetly innocent young woman, namely, her sister Arlis? It didn't seem fair; nor right; nor even moral.

Marlis walked on. And on. She could hear the low, dull roar of the surf, more like a vibration in the air than an actual sound. She walked across the big field and into the woods that covered the crest of the island, pausing occasionally to lift her face skyward and be showered with the heavily falling snow. It was wonderful, this deep, cold silence and the world of white.

She had not been up here for a long time -- not since Arlis was killed -- and she had forgotten, almost, how lovely and nice it was. The tops of the trees tossed ever so slightly in the gentle wind that chased the snow flakes downward. Faintly, she heard the rumble of the Backside surf. The snow stretched clean and white before her in every direction with not even the hint of animal tracks. Marlis smiled faintly, knowing that when the snow had "played" itself out and had scurried out to sea, the land would once again be crisscrossed with deer and rabbit tracks.

Deep in thought and a silent prayer, she walked on until she burst out of the shelter of the woods onto the windswept turf that crowned the ledges of the Backside. Here the wind was cold. Very cold. And the sound of the surf was almost deafening. Marlis stopped short in awe. The surf was as turbulent and restless as her heart was, she thought, sensing a slight hint of fear. She looked around her. The whole length of the cobblestone beach below her was a smother of crashing, roaring green water, leaping spray and blowing foam. Through the falling snow, it reminded her of a viciously violent sea monster reaching out to grab whatever was within reach.

She remembered how she and her sister had enjoyed watching in awe and fascination as the great combers formed offshore, then gathered size and speed as they neared the land, piling up one above the other, then tumbled in thunderous ruin onto the long curve of the beach. As each wave withdrew, they heard a sighing sound and a faint, chime-like rattle of dislodged stones. How they had delighted to watch and to listen! But with
Arlis dead -- and buried -- well, life just wasn't the same, the slender, blonde-haired girl thought, as she turned and headed for the high outcropping of ledge that marked the farther limit of the beach.

She slowed her pace considerably as she approached the rocky ledge. Up here, out of reach of the snow, was a hideaway; she and Arlis had used it as a playhouse when they were small and as a perfect picnic site when they were a bit older. What memories she possessed! she thought, picking her way carefully over the slippery snow-covered rocks to the shelter and seclusion of the rock alcove.

She stood for a while and looked around, feeling almost as if her sister were there with her again. There, on a narrow ledge were the smooth, white stones Arlis had gathered years ago on the beach and "hidden" for safekeeping. And there in a corner was the flat outcropping of gray stone that served as their playhouse sofa, large enough and strong enough to hold both of them comfortably. Too, that "sofa" had served as a mourner's bench when they played church. And what a mourner's bench it was! And yes, she, Marlis, had forgotten about it and allowed her grief and sorrow and bitterness to drown out all that was good and sweet and wonderful and . . . and worthwhile to remember and to think about.

Drawn by an irresistible force, she walked over to that childhood "sofa" and stood before it with bowed head. Almost, she could see her sister's upturned face, praying for lost souls as they played church there so many, many years ago.

Life could deal one some heavy blows, she thought sadly, as she reminisced over those happier, carefree days when she and Arlis were together, playing at childhood's play with never a thought of a drunken driver interrupting a life and snuffing out its light. No, thoughts like that were unknown to them. They lived in a world all their own; they and their parents and the people who lived on the island. Nor were they afraid on the island: everybody knew everybody else and helped each other out like family.

She sat down upon the rock now and buried her face in the palms of her gloved hands and began to cry. She felt like Jerry Clarke had destroyed the most precious thing of her life: he took the laughter from her lips and the song from her heart when he killed her sister. Yes, he did. Since that day, she had become morbid, morose, depressed, unhappy and, yes, angry. It
was as if her life was dead. Oh, not literally and actually, to be sure; but much like it, she thought, shivering slightly. If only her mother would understand, and knew just how much she was suffering and how great her pain was!

At thought of her mother, Marlis suddenly felt ashamed of herself. If only her mother knew? How selfish she'd been; and how completely full of self-pity she was! she thought suddenly, realizing for the first time since Arlis died just what agony and pain and grief her father and mother must have experienced and endured and passed through. For, like her mother had so sweetly reminded her, Arlis was their daughter: she was bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh.

"Oh, God," she cried out suddenly, "forgive me. I've thought of no one but Marlis; no one but myself. Oh-h, how miserable and unhappy I've been making life for my dear parents. I'm sorry, Lord. Sorry. Forgive me, please... ."

Like a bright light was turned on inside her being, Marlis realized painfully that she had not possessed within her heart what she had been professing to have had. It was suddenly as clear to her as a cloudless sky on a sunny day. If she had had the Lord Jesus Christ living within her, no sorrow could have taken the joy from her heart nor the song from her lips: Jesus was the source of both. She had had a god, and she had worshipped that god -- her sister! Arlis was the source of her happiness and the reason for her song, she realized now. And . . . and . . . God, the Eternal and only God, had . . . had allowed Arlis -- her god -- to . . . to . . .

"Oh, no. No!" she cried in agony. "Oh, God, I'm truly sorry. Forgive me and save me. Come into my heart. Maybe if . . . if I had been where I should have been spiritually, You . . . You would have spared Arlis. I'm sorry I worshipped her instead of You. Your Word says, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.' I did; and I'm repenting. Forgive me, O God, for Jesus' sake. . . ."

The alcove, which was cold when she entered, became suddenly spiritually warm and sunny and bright as Marlis cast off the old coat of sin and became clothed in Heaven's garment of righteousness. She was saved. Forgiven. And she was beside herself with holy joy.

(Part 3)
Marlis had no idea how long she remained inside the sheltered rock alcove; but she knew one thing and that was that she would never again be the same: God did something so radical and wonderful inside her heart until she knew she was changed. It was blissfully glorious and wonderful. Birds seemed to be singing in her heart and bells of heavenly music were ringing in her soul. She was free. Free. And her soul was at peace and at rest with God and man.

At thought of man, Marlis knew instinctively what she must do and, with God's forgiveness flowing over and through her soul, flooding it wondrously with His love and His pardon, she knew He would provide the needed grace for her to do what was necessary: She must get the address of Jerry Clarke and write to him; confessing her hatred for him and asking his forgiveness. And then she would testify to him -- of deliverance from that hatred and of her so great salvation and freedom from sin.

She felt as free as a bird on wing as she poked her head through the alcove opening and emerged to the winter wonderland outside. White and cold though the world outside was, her heart was flooded with Heavenly sunshine and song. Over and over, again and again, the joybells of Heaven kept pealing out their glorious song of victory and love and joy and peace. And of triumph and inner rest too. She felt like her feet were flying as she walked through the deep snow; so light and free was her spirit. Now she knew why Arlis was always joyful and victorious and sweet. Yes, at last she knew -- by experience, A Heaven-sent personal and radical experience of heart change through the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ made all the difference.

She took much the same route back that she had taken in to the alcove, The sound of the surf was still just as deafening as before and the whole length of the cobblestone beach below her was still a smother of crashing green water, leaping spray, and blowing foam, but no longer did she sense fear; no longer did it seem to be a violently vicious monster of the sea, searching and seeking to grab anything and everything within its reach. Instead, she recalled something which she had read from the book of Job. So she smiled now, and tossed a kiss toward the noisy, boisterous, crashing combers, remembering, "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed." It was the Lord answering Job. (Job 38:11)
For so long as she could remember, the Backside had always been a thunderous rumble, and it would remain that way for so long as myriad others would be able to recall too, she knew. But in spite of its noise, she liked the Backside; it was as much a part of the island as was the harbor, the orchards and fir woods and the peaceful little village itself.

Marlis walked away from the rumbling noise and soon found herself in the Keeleys' apple orchard, heading to the southerly side of the island. The shore here was not far from the village, yet people seldom visited it except in autumn, when they came to rake the wild cranberries that grew in great abundance and covered the rough ground. She purposely came this way, wanting to see her father and talk to him and tell him what had happened in her heart. It was a sort of short cut to the harbor and to his shop there.

The snow was falling in almost blinding sheets now and she was thankful that, for the present at least, there was no gusty wind accompanying the heavy downfall. She knew, however, that on the island all of this could change any moment. She recalled times when the wind had gusted to fearful speeds and driven the snow with such blinding force that she could barely see her hand in front of her. It would have been ever so easy to have gotten lost within a few feet of one's doorstep and have frozen to death.

She tucked her head and face more snugly into her coat collar as she hurried on now and soon she was at the harbor. Through the falling snow she saw a few ghostly looking lobster boats tugging at their moorings. Veiled in the falling snow, were gulls, looking both disconsolate and hungry as they huddled in the shelter of the wharf. Everything around the harbor looked nebulous and different. But Marlis liked it; it was much like the fog when it rolled in, seeming to isolate them totally and completely from the outside world. She liked the feeling; she always did and always would, no matter how old she became.

The smell of woodsmoke made her look upward. There, wafted away by the rapidly falling snow almost as quickly as she saw it, was the gray woodsmoke blowing from her father's chimney at the shop. At the small windows the golden glow of the kerosene lanterns shone out like warm, welcome orbs. Marlis lifted the latch to the door and literally blew in on a sudden, unexpected gust of wind and snow, calling out cheerfully, "Hi Dad, I came to see you. Glad?" she asked cheerfully.
Like one coming out of shock, her father got to his feet. "Glad, Marlis? Glad, you ask! Oh, Marlis. . . ." And in a sudden rush he had her in his arms, crying uncontrollably and saying, "At last, my Marlis is coming back."

"You . . . had us so worried, honey," he cried, burying his face in her snow-covered parka. "Your mother and I . . . we . . . we've been so concerned for you and about you."

"I know, Dad. That's why I'm here: I wanted you to be the first to know that, over on the Backside, in the alcove where Arlis and I used to play as children, I prayed through. I'm saved, Dad. I'm different: Jesus forgave me of all my sins and came into my heart. I'm so happy. Forgive me, Daddy, for being so selfish and so full of self-pity. I'm sorry for all the grief and heartache I added on to you. And Dad, I want Jerry Clarke's address: I must write him and ask him to forgive me for the hatred I had in my heart towards him."

"Jerry's address, Marlis? That won't be necessary: Turn around -- Jerry's my helper now. We couldn't tell you while you were so bitter."

Marlis turned and, with her father's arm still around her shoulders, she saw the one who had killed her sister. He was sitting on a lobster trap, mending gear. For a brief moment she felt faint, but only for a brief moment.

"Jerry," she said, walking over toward where he sat, "I want you to forgive me for my sin of hating you and for being bitter toward you. In God's sight, I was as wicked and sinful as you. Forgive me, please. I am sorry. The Lord has forgiven me; will you forgive me, please?"

Getting to his feet, Jerry stepped toward Marlis. He tried to speak but broke down sobbing instead. In a fatherly way, Mr. Moore walked over and put his arms around Jerry's shoulders, saying softly, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus,' Jerry. The Lord Jesus Christ remembers your sins no more, Son. They are buried. Buried. So far as the east is from the west -- remember?"

Jerry lifted his tear-filled eyes. "Thank you, Mr. Moore. I remember. Yes, I remember," he said with a smile.

Turning slightly, he faced Marlis. "Forgive you!" he exclaimed softly. "It is I who need to do the asking. You are forgiven. But please, please, can you
ever forgive me? The Lord Jesus Christ, through your wonderful parents' true
Christian love and compassion, has become my personal Savior and He has
freely and fully forgiven me. But I want your forgiveness."

"Oh, Jerry, I freely forgive you. Don't let this bother you; not ever again.
The Lord showed me out there in the alcove that I was guilty of idol worship.
What a wicked sin this is!" Marlis exclaimed.

"Idol worship?" Mr. Moore questioned, not understanding.

"Yes, Daddy, idol worship! I worshipped my beautiful and lovely sister
Arlis. But that is all in the past; and now that I have found the same wonderful
Lord and Savior as she, my soul is overflowing with the kind of love and joy
and peace which she possessed and demonstrated all the time. You know
how God detested idol worship, Daddy, and how He punished the Israelites
for that dreadful sin. Well, He hated my kind of idol worship just as greatly
and as deeply. In one place in scripture, He states, 'I am the Lord: that is my
name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven
images."

"That's found in Isaiah, Marlis; chapter 42:8. And, yes, anything that we
love more than we love God is an idol. How faithful the gentle Holy Spirit is to
reveal the depravity of our heart to us, pinpointing precisely and expressly
what our sins are! Oh, the wonder of it all!"

"I am the greatest wonder and miracle of all," Jerry said humbly. "You,
Brother Moore, and your wife . . . I . . . I owe everything to you. You freely
forgave me for my cruel and heinous sin and . . . and you loved me in spite of
all the grief and heartbreak and heartache and pain and hurt I brought into
your life when I killed your daughter on the sidewalk with my car. Oh, the
horribleness of drink! I thought I was on the road. Imagine it!

"But you . . . you loved me. And you led me to Christ! I have the
forgiveness of sins and the comfort of the Holy Ghost, since I have been
sanctified wholly. And, added to all these spiritual blessings is the joy and
benefit of working for you and with you. Oh, my heart fairly bursts with praise
and thankfulness for all that has happened to me since you came to visit me
and pray for me while I was incarcerated. God used you to change my life."
"All the glory and praise must go to Christ, Jerry," Mr. Moore said softly and kindly. "If He had not saved and sanctified Mrs. Moore and me, God alone knows how different the story may have been. It is because of Him, and His marvelous love and forgiveness toward us that my wife and I have been able to love you and to forgive you. And it is because of Him, and the wonderful transformation in your own life, that you have been paroled and are in my working care, both here and over on the mainland."

Jerry brushed tears from his eyes." I know one thing," he said, with a catch in his voice. "No, two things; 'once I was blind, now I see.' And you, Brother Moore, are like a father to me. This New Year is going to be the best year of my life. I'm starting it out with a new Master; One who has freed me from the demon of alcoholic beverages and has filled my soul with Divine Love and flood tides of peace and joy."

"That makes two of us, Jerry," Marlis remarked, marveling at the glorious freedom she was experiencing in Christ. Turning to her father, she said, "Well, I'll hurry home; I want Mother to hear the good news too."

"Hold on, Marlis," her father said, grabbing his heavy coat off a peg behind the door and tossing Jerry his coat at the same time. "We're all going. Now that you're in God's family and are changed, Jerry's coming home to dinner with me. His mother works all day long over on the main, and he doesn't know where his father is, nor, even, if he's living. He's been gone since Jerry was eight."

"Oh, Jerry, that's too bad. I'm sorry," Marlis said. And she meant it from the depth of her heart.

Walking homeward together in the snow, Marlis linked her arm through her father's and smiled up into his face. Always before she and Arlis did this.

With silver looking tears bouncing merrily off his cheeks, her father said softly-quiet like, "Thanks, Marlis, for coming back to us. Into our hearts again, I mean."

"Thank God for it, Daddy, not me. He did the work."

For response, Mr. Moore squeezed his daughter's gloved hand tightly.