

ONE

Paul Kingsley helped his family finish packing their van. It was a Friday evening, the last day of the school year. The children were about to travel farther from home than they'd ever been. Lisa, a student of the violin, wanted to know how much music she could take with her. Darren wondered what books he should bring. Maria, the youngest by several years, asked what they'd do in the van, what would happen when they got to their cousins' place. Would they have adventures? Would they be back?

"Yes, we'll be back," Kingsley said. "But there won't be any adventures."

"Because Mother doesn't want us to?" Maria asked.

"No, not that," Kingsley said.

"It's because we want to get where we're going," Lisa answered. She was the second oldest, gifted, like her siblings, and like them wrapped up in her own doings.

"Partly that," Kingsley agreed.

"It may be because we're adventured out," said Darren, the oldest, a senior in high school, looking ahead to college, not sure what he wanted to do or be or what kinds of doing and being were available to him.

"It's because adventures aren't the most important things," Kingsley squeezed an overnight bag between two suitcases. "We'll spend time together. Get to know each other better."

He might have said more, but the children, with their own concerns, their energy and impatience, wouldn't hear what he had to say. "We should meet some interesting people," he said by way of consolation.

"They'll have to be pretty interesting," Maria said, "to be as interesting as us."

Tanya was the only one composed, at peace, and organized. She'd finished her preparations and now sat at the dining room table. She cherished an inner sense of escape from the confusion around her while she studied a map of the eastern seaboard.

Feeling played out, Kingsley went to the rec room to watch a discussion on the educational channel of a speech by our president at the time, Jeremiah Lockridge. Kingsley's energy came back more slowly than it once did, mostly because of a heart problem that his doctors had told him might be getting worse.

A part-time journalist, he envied the punch and vigor of the newspaper columnists and party advisers who argued with each other on the TV and wanted you to think they were as active as the president and much wiser. He stuck with the show to the end, when his thinking took on an inward, fretful tone.

Giving way to a spirit of decline, Kingsley wondered if he could cope well with a time of frailty, which might arrive with only whispers of pain, thanks to medication. His willingness to fight also rose up. He chided himself, using words that an army friend had murmured as he lay

dying of wartime injuries: life is valuable to the last minute – and then it goes on in a different form. Self-pity abated.

He surrendered to a penchant for woolgathering and mused about misfortune as unavoidable. *What about the millions of us who feel discouraged or displaced, he wondered, refugees, homeless people, the sick, orphans, folks who can't keep up. I'm the same as them. Nobody beats death.*"

Tanya came into the rec room and asked if the children had gone to bed.

"They're in their rooms anyway," he said. "Lisa and Darren would stay up all night if they could."

He turned down the volume on the TV. "I was thinking this afternoon that the house is full of echoes. We've been to a lot of parties and given a few ourselves. But what can we show for it?"

Twin Falls is an old seacoast town north of Botolph, the largest city in Sagadac. We've always been prosperous; we still manage to keep up. Our people pursue an active social life, in which the Kingsleys took part. Doing so, they stretched slender resources. Now their cupboard was empty, partly because of a recession that touched nearly all of us.

"It's silly to think that we have to keep pace with our neighbors." Kingsley meant the investment brokers and computer specialists who now live in the old houses on Coulter St. and also his cousin Bertram Hungerford, whose wife was about to open a resort hotel on Petrel Island, where they'd stay.

Hungerford was ambitious, daring, known throughout the country, usually deep in trouble, and rightly so, many of us who knew him said, because he was one of the ringleaders of a noxious cult called the Scythians. Now moping in jail on charges of tax evasion, Hungerford had left a message on Kingsley's answering machine to say that everything would be fine and that he and his family should come along as they'd planned.

"I thought we had that worked out a long time ago," Tanya said. "Are you worried that it's too late...?"

"To do something really good? I hope not. I have a plan to expose the Scythians and to keep Bertram where he belongs."

Many who knew Kingsley would have said that he wasn't cut out for that kind of work. He lacked experience. His one foray into an arena larger than he was used to brought him trouble. He was persistent, though, and earnest enough to move beyond ineptitude, the sort of person for whom ambitions would turn out well in the long run.

"Whatever we do, we have to make sure we don't get the children into a mess," Tanya said.

"That I promise you," he replied and went on after a moment, "You and I aren't ones to run for cover. We've always faced our problems."

Some of them, Tanya thought, not the ones we ignore.

Along with other interests and responsibilities, Kingsley kept busy writing fiction. He told Tanya about the progress he'd made that day on a thriller concerning a Russian who

gathered anecdotes of his country as it groaned under decades of oppression and who was willing to live on the sidelines rather than give up his quest. "I can almost guarantee it'll make money for us."

"We need something," Tanya replied.

The phone rang. "Hello, Wah Soo," she said and switched to Kulonese, the language of the Asian country she came from. Everyone knows that the U. S. fought a war there, lost, and scurried away with little to show for the fact that almost three million people served there.

Kingsley left the room quietly and went upstairs to arrange his briefcase. A cascade of memories and fragmented dreams and wilted hopes washed over him. The phone ring again.

Later, when he heard Tanya talking sharply with Lisa, he knew she'd finished exchanging gossip with her confidantes. He picked up the extension phone to make a call himself.

Michael Rainwater, father of the friend he'd lost in Kulon, was the artistic director of the Dolphin Court Theatre, the most respected repertory company on Florida's west coast. Kingsley became friendly with the family after George died from the injuries he received when a jeep he was driving rode over a land mine. Michael encouraged Kingsley's story-telling and from time to time asked for his opinion about his own work.

"I have another idea for the play you've been rehearsing," Kingsley said. "If parts of it are still dragging, bring in the devil – the source of all trouble – and then show that he's on a leash. He keeps going, but he never gets the total victory he's after. In other words, have the main character come out ahead after she goes through a terrible struggle."

"How can we do all that when we open next week?" Rainwater protested. "Besides, it already has an upbeat ending. You'll see when you get here."

