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THE EARLIEST DREAMS

NANCY HALE

THAT WAS long, long ago. Your bed was maple, the color of brown sugar, and upon the small round posts of it in the darkness some moonlight danced in the hush, in the quiet. Your mother had rustled away, far away and bright and legendary, and your window stood open to the great stars and the wide dark snow. It was so quiet, and the air of the night and the snow came through the window and smelled so cold, so sweet, and of faraway sad promises. What was it you wanted so? From miles and miles away you heard a late train breathing across the countryside, hurrying distantly through the white winter night to the yellow lights and the little quiet towns. Its whistle blew, so far far away, three times, Ah, Ah, Aaaaah. . . . You longed for something, lying still between two smooth slices of sheet, but you could not think what it was, and now you will never know what it was.

Downstairs they were all laughing in the dining room, and you could hear both the two sounds, the waves of cool mythical laughter underneath your room, and from the back of the house, coming up the back stairs, the comfortable low clatter in the kitchen. Bridie and Catherine, moving about in the hot yellow light in the kitchen, over the dry brown boards of the floor, between the white table and the sink, from the pantry with all the cups on hooks, the bags of flour and the crocks of potatoes and the jugs of molasses and vinegar that stood in a black cupboard under the marble slab, up a little creaking step to the stove. You thought of the stove, as black as your hat with strange wonderful things to eat steaming in

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covered pots, and the piles of plates heating up on the shelf at the back. You could hear the footsteps heavy and busy across the old boards, and your heart caught in your throat when they opened the door to go in to wait on the dinner-party, and all the laughter came upstairs suddenly in a gust.

Outside the house a car drove by up the dark road, with a broken chain around its wheel, rapping as fast and muffled as a heart-beat upon the frozen snow, louder and louder, and the lights came in the window and ran along the wall until they came to the bed. For just a minute your bed was blue-white and bright, and then the lights scraped along the other wall, bobbing up and down along the pictures and over the book-case, and ran out of the window so fast. Far up the road the broken chain beat on the snow on the road, farther and farther and then it was gone away. It was enormous and still outside, deep in the breathing snow, with the stars a million miles deep in the high sky.

They were laughing downstairs. It rang like bells, like the wind running in and out among little bells, fewer and fewer and then all at once another and another until the bells were all tinkling and singing in different keys. You heard the important clatter of plates, fragile, impossible, fairy plates. What were they all laughing at? Something you knew nothing about, something beautiful and exalted. You wondered why they always laughed so much in the evenings after you had gone to bed. In the lovely evenings, in the pale candle-light shut in from the white night, they were all so beautiful downstairs in their dresses and their little colored slippers. They knew about strange things, places, and shining people, great singers, and dancers from Russia, balls in Vienna and cities in China, and they knew slender little jokes that nobody but they could understand. You never knew what they were laughing at when they laughed so long in the evenings.

II

You lay very still in your bed and listened to something, perhaps a dead leaf, perhaps a twig from the top of the house, fall with the gentlest pat upon the surface of the vast, murmurous snow. Forever, all over the round smooth world it was dark and still and beautifully cold, fatefully and eternally hushed; under you only was a house full of lights and the sound of people laughing. Lying there you felt yourself rising higher and higher into the dark sky where the stars shone; where the stars burned like heavenly secrets, high and coldly radiant.

You were suspended in a dark tower above the world. Planets and great winds, chimeras and islands lost under the sea, and arch-angels striding among the stars. And a great bell tolling.

You heard the peal of the front-doorbell sing through the house, and some one opened a door and all the laughter came up to you in a clear sudden burst. And then they closed the door, somewhere, and the sound clapped shut, and you could hear them laughing faintly, far away.

You thought about the little animals in the woods beyond the snow, the rabbits packed together in warm clusters in holes, and little mice among the roots of trees. You thought about the unheard fall of cold leaves at intervals, among the trees upon the drifted snow. You thought of the silent woods, where there were no lights and no sound, with perhaps the infinitely small track of an animal running momentarily under the trees in the dark. Beyond lay the meadows rolling over the hills, with the moon shining blank white and pure upon the snow, with the wind sliding like a skimmer over the crust, and the great stars in the sky above the world.

You held the pillow up to your face and fitted it to your cheek, and lay still in the room you knew so well. You alone were alive in this still, unbelievable world, in your own room with its long window.

The moonlight lay along the glass of the pictures and across the bookcase, and you thought about the books in their shelves and the

three white chairs and the black table and your desk, all ranged in the darkness around you.

III

Then downstairs some one began to play the piano, and you listened to the muted music. What was it that you did not know about, what was it that the music had known and wept for, something that was over and could never be forgotten, but for you it had never been begun. You felt so sad, so happy and so sad, because something that was all the beauty and the tears in the world was over, because something lovely was lost and could only be remembered, and still you knew that for you the thing had not yet started. Perhaps you were sad for the regret you knew you would feel some day for this sadness. The music was bitter and sweet and sorrowfully reckless, very fast and resigned and gay in a minor key. You wondered what it was that had made the music so sad, that made you so sad.

Then they stopped playing and it was all still again. The moon moved as slow as a cloud into the frame of your window, and stood still in the sky outside, and you lay in your bed in the dark and watched the moon. Outdoors the quiet snow and the sky beat like a pulse, and then you heard a leaf scrambling across the crust of the snow, scratching minutely with fingers of wire; it slid, and ceased.

They were all laughing in the drawing-room below. You wondered what they were laughing at, that made the laughter sound so wise, so gay, so confident and foreign. You never knew what things they laughed at when they laughed so long in the evenings, and now you never will know.