

The General Store

The Silver Lake Resort General Store is a log cabin structure just off the two-lane highway called the June Lake loop. It sits tucked into a grove of fragrant pines and restless aspens, tall and pale-barked with bright, green leaves in constant motion overhead. The trees follow the creek that flows into Silver Lake, where my family and I always camped when I was a kid. You could drive to this little country store from the campsite, but we always walked there along the creek footpath that crosses the flowing stream over a timber footbridge where the store was nestled across the highway. It was like our private corridor through the symphonic rushing creek and rustling trees that obscured passing cars.

A breeze that descends from the mountains would cool us on warm days and stir the glinting aspen leaves above, cascading us with the motion of dappled sun and shade. Sometimes we stopped on the bridge captivated by the dancing light and shadow over the clear flowing water, the deep-green foliage, and the sandy footpath. At moments like this, I felt so alive that I would suddenly inhale the clean, dry, fresh, mountain air deep into my lungs to store it forever.

I can smell it now, as I approach the rustic little emporium in my mind.

People are easy and jovial as they come out of the cabin storefront into the light, smiling, putting their caps and sunglasses on, and nodding at you even if you are a kid because you are a part of the camping life with them. They cross the gravel lot to their cars or walk back over the black road to the campsites, and you pass them as you come up with a quickening tempo in your heart that you can't rationalize. It's like you have regained a part of yourself – something you were forced to leave behind – and just now realize that *this* was what you had been missing in your life since last at Silver Lake.

"Isn't it cool Michael?" I tell my cousin.

"Yeah, it is," he beams.

"I'm telling you, they have THE best chocolate malts in the world."

We pass the pyramids of firewood stacked for sale on the porch deck, and I pull open the spring-tension door with a cling of the bell, into the small general store.

"Howdy" says the woman at the register.

"Hi," we smile. The sunlight from the windows brightens the dark, glossy-planked interior and we begin to survey the wares with delight. The glass cooler doors display milk and eggs and bacon and orange juice, and I am already thinking about the hearty campsite breakfast we will eat tomorrow. There are hotdogs and cheeses and butter and cans of soda and beer and ice for the cooler – everything a camper could ever need. The shelves offer insect repellent and lotions, soap and toothpaste, Bactine and Calamine and Band Aids. There are packages of pasta, cans of baked beans, sacks of

sugar, and canisters of coffee. The back wall bristles with fishing poles and tackle, bright lures and treble-hooks, bobbers striped red and white, black-handled jackknives, and needle-nosed pliers, along with jars of bright pink and yellow salmon eggs, and orange bait cheese. Around the paneled walls hang large trophy-stuffed rainbow trout and bass mounted on wooden plaques, as well as pictures of people with their catches listing dates and names and sizes. One sign posts fishing regulations, and another hangs over the register declaring, "Fishing Licenses Sold Here."

Most enticing of all are the racks of bright, scenic post cards, and other glorious "Mammoth Lakes" souvenirs. Some are shiny lacquered wooden signs branded with "June Lake" or "Gone Fishin'." There are plastic pink and blue wallets for kids decorated with colorful maps of the June Lake Loop, along with pewter raccoon key chains, and "Silver Lake" snow globes, and tiny tree stumps with miniature forest scenes glued on top, or plastic woodpeckers on souvenir pencils. There are ball caps and leaping trout T-shirts, and rolls of film and batteries and flashlights and tarps and axes and styrofoam coolers.

Since my earliest memories, I have always been enchanted by this campers' emporium. Each time I look around again, assuring myself of the bounty, I always find new things unnoticed, or unappreciated before. It is my greatest delight to be sent to the little store for any need at our campsite.

"Come on," I finally tell Michael. "Back here," and lead him to the doorway beneath the hanging canoe into the small café. There are other campers eating lunch at some of the five indoor tables, with a few more people enjoying the shade of the trees at tables out on the back deck that overhangs the creek. Up at the varnished-wood dining counter, there are some locals having coffee – unshaven older guys wearing plaid flannels over their T-shirts that say things like "Silver Lake Resort, est 1916" with cigarettes burning in the ashtray in front of them. They are laughing when we come in, telling some story or other to the cook behind the counter, and holding their mugs of coffee loosely through the handle. I go up to the counter and they stop laughing, looking bemusedly at me. "Hey girly, how ya doing?" says a gray-whiskered man.

"Hi," I say, and look away. You always feel like the jokes are about the city folk that come up trying to be country folk for a week, pitching tents in no more than a big dirt parking lot by the little river, "roughing it" for a week or so. And they may be, but there is always an amiable air of kindness toward our awkward ways.

I direct my words to the greasy-aproned man behind the counter, "Hi. Ahh, could we get two chocolate malts to go?" My mouth trickles inside at the words.

"You bet, young lady."

"And can you make sure there's lots of malt?"

"Oh, you know you don't have to worry about that," he winks at me.

I thank him as Michael and I eagerly scramble onto the green-cushioned stools at the counter. We watch the man lavishly scoop ingredients into the metal malt cup, then slip it onto the blender to whip with metallic whirling blades. Around the café, white plates pushed aside in front of some chatting patrons hold remnants of cold French fries and catsup pools and uneaten pickle spears. I resolve that we will come back this week and sit with a plate of hot, salty French fries, or maybe even chili fries and another malt.

The metal cup has grown frosty-white on the outside. The man removes it from the mixer, and scrapes the thick, chocolate contents out into wax-covered to-go cups.

"Sorry. I made too much," he grins, clunking the frosty container on the counter between us. "You want a couple-a spoons and finish it up before you go?"

"Oh yes, please," we lurch wide-eyed. He snaps down two long teaspoons and hand-writes our bill while we take turns clanking every delicious spoonful out. We pay the \$3.00, and leave a little tip – feeling much older than 12 – stab our straws through the plastic lid into our creamy malts, and go out into the afternoon sunshine to explore the creek.

In the sun-dappled shade of the wooden footbridge, we lean on the rough, dark rails as we revel in our cold, creamy treats. We can see the snow-melt cascading briskly down the mountain and track its run through the forested grove to our footbridge. The clear water ripples and flows under our feet over the pale granite bed on its long journey to Silver Lake. The grove of aspens sways around us like guardians, strong and kind, as we talk. We find leaves to drop into the creek, green or brown – twigs too – that we release into the stream for some undocumented experiment as we swallow the thick, cold, ice cream through teeth-pinched straws to make them last.

"Wasn't it crazy last week in Yosemite when I fell in that little waterfall?" I ask.

"Yeah!" Michael detaches from his straw. "I was all 'Where'd she go? She was right here?' And then you popped up downstream and grabbed that big, dead branch hanging over the river, and pulled yourself out! It happened so fast!"

"I know! I didn't even realize I had slipped off that rock! I-was-just, IN THE WATER! Boom!" and I recreate the body motion of falling in.

"Were you scared? That was kind of dangerous with all those rocks."

"I was shocked, but I don't know. Even when I fell in, and I realized I was going down the little falls, I felt – honestly I did – I felt like someone's hand was catching me and keeping me safe, you know?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, actually, kind of like God put his hand under me, so I didn't hit my head or anything on the rocks! I mean, that was the first thing I thought, 'It feels like God's catching me!'"

He turns around and leans both his elbows against the bridge rail. "Well, you probably just *felt* like that because you were floating on the water. I can see how it would *feel* that way."

For some reason, his doubt stings, and makes me feel foolish. I realize it is important that he believes me.

"Well, I don't know if it was *just* that. You remember the night we played cards and had cocoa with that old couple, Mr. and Mrs. Jeffries, in their RV?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"Well, I told Mrs. Jeffries what happened, and how I thought that maybe God had caught me in His hand. Do you know what she said?"

"I can guess," he replies, sucking his straw disinterestedly.

"Well, she said that it sounds *just* like something God would do, in her personal experience. She said that God probably wanted me to know how much He loves me."

"Hmmm. . ." he intones as he noisily sucks up the smallest molecule of sweetness from the bottom of his cup, and so, I do too. "Com'on," he urges, turning from the bridge. "Let's walk up this way and explore." We resolutely stride past the store, tossing our cups in the trash, and cross the road to the river side, where the campground lies.

We follow alongside the road northward on a little path cut through the, green wild grass, talking about things, and looking around, until we come to the end of the campground. We continue past, and the grass widens into a larger field with the big Rush Creek riverbed, lined by trees, hundreds of yards further to the east. The path we're on forks off into the field toward the river, and we follow it.

The grass around this path grows higher – at times above our waist. Here, the nature of nature enlivens, and the sky is in motion. Sparrows flutter through the air, and land on long stems, swaying there cheerfully in the warm wind before darting off to the trees. Butterflies meander among the wildflowers, orange, and purple, and yellow, and white, as various insects zip through the air. Above us, bright clouds in majestic ranks march over the mountains and eastward in their white on blue regalia. Michael finds a discarded stick, evidently used for a day's walking journey, and tries it in his grip. It is a good stick, and we proceed to take turns with it, both walking, and swatting at the grass.

We encounter many interesting subjects of study along the way. We examine several delicate mountain flowers, and springy grasshoppers, and strange beetles that

we don't really want to touch, but instead poke with various instruments to gage their reactions and abilities. A nice lady bug alights my Yosemite "Go Climb a Rock" T-shirt, and seems content to ride my shoulder for a while. I name her Beatrice and we become quite close before she flies off to continue her journey.

We follow the path to the tree line, where it parallels the river. There are many turn-outs to the water's edge where fishermen have discovered good open places to cast from, or to dig in their lawn chairs. Stopping at one of these secluded spots, we see a trout drifting in the ice-fresh water by the bank. We wish we had our poles and decide we will bring them back tomorrow. I watch the trout's body, waving smoothly in the current to stay in place, thinking how content he seems to be there in the shade.

"Michael, do you think it's wrong to catch fish?"

"Wrong, Why? What's wrong with it?"

"I just mean, they seem so happy to be alive, is it wrong to kill them?"

"Don't know why it'd be *wrong*; they're just fish, they don't think and feel the way people do."

"I know that. But like, if instead of a fish, what if this were like my cat, or your dog. . . We wouldn't want them killed, you know?"

"Yeah, but they're pets – fish are different. I mean, I like watching him, but still, there's others just like him. They aren't special, you know? Who would really miss this *specific* fish? No one, because there's a million more like it."

I look over the swift, clean, river and hear the bright green leaves rustling in the gentle breeze. In the quiet, there is a sharp trill of a bird, then a rapid tapping sound, and I wonder about it. I look back and watch our new friend drifting in the water.

"I don't know, Michael. What if *God* would miss him? What if he was special to God?"

"God? I don't think so. I don't really know if I believe in God." He breaks off a nearby twig and tosses it into the current.

"Really? Why not?" I toss a twig in too, and watch it align to the current and swift away.

"What do you care? Where'd this come from all of a sudden?"

I am embarrassed. I feel like I have divulged some private thought that he is repulsed by. I pluck a leaf and toss it at the river, but it flutters to the mud.

I remember the moment my hand reached up out of the water and grabbed that dead tree branch, and I muster my courage.

"I just think it's important."

Michael bends to dig out a large rock protruding from the bank of dark, wet soil. "Well, if there *was* a God. . ." his voice strains and he pauses, concentrating on the

extraction, ". . . He would stop my parents from getting a divorce." Triumphant, he lifts the rock to his shoulder and propels it a few feet out into the river with a "clunk" and splash. The trout scuttles away.

"I mean, there's all this *bad* stuff in the world. What kind of God lets it all go on like that?" He rubs his hands together to brush off the mud.

I find a boulder as well, and start digging it out, "Yeah, I know, but there's all kinds of good stuff too. More good than bad, really. That fish, and all the birds, and people and things . . . Don't you think that it all had to come from *somewhere*?"

"Yeah, the Big Bang," he teases sarcastically. "Haven't you ever heard of that?"

My boulder is too big and too deep, and my fingers get sore fast. I reach over and rinse my hands in the water, and come up feeling a hot face from exertion.

"No duh, I know about the Big Bang. But it doesn't make sense." I wipe my wet fingers on my shorts. "Like, *what* blew up?"

He shrugs, "I don't know, some gasses, I guess," and bends to rinse his hands also, then wipes them on the seat of his shorts.

"Well where did the gases come from? Everything had to come from *somewhere*. *Someone* had to make it all, don't you think? It's too perfect, you know?"

"Maybe, but I don't think it's THAT perfect, and that's the problem I have." He looks around his feet, and picks up a good, flat rock. "Look at that. Do you think I could skip it?"

"On the river?" I inspect it. "Maybe."

He takes aim, careful his arm motion parallels the water's smooth surface, and slings the rock. It skips twice, then hits a ripple, and submerges.

"Come on," he announces, "Let's look for a better place to skip rocks."

We continue northward on the path, collecting good river rocks as we go, until we come to a place where someone has strung a rope bridge over the narrow part of the river. It spans about 15 yards between large, X-angled wooden poles on either side, with one X imbedded in the middle. The rope is thick and hard. Two taught lines are strung across for the hands to hold, and one line passes through the V of each cross-beam, anchored on both sides of the river for the feet to walk across on. The other side of the rope-bridge is a little island created by the river waters dividing around it. Here, the river looks only about knee high to us, but it is swift over the boulders and rocks. On the other side, the island seems to be fairly large and forested, with a little clearing in the middle.

We excitedly assess the difficulty of the crossing and decide that since the water is shallow, and the drop is only about two feet high, the small obstacle challenge is safe enough to cross, and explore the other side. Michael sets down his walking stick and we

carefully mount the rigging, one at a time, adjusting our balance to the slight movements of the rope. Though it is an exciting challenge, it is an easy crossing, and we are thrilled as we touch down successfully on the other side. We follow the little path to a clearing and find two picnic tables, some tilted poles set up for a volleyball net, and a horseshoe pit in the mottled sunlight beneath the trees.

There are no horseshoes, but we initiate a competition to throw our rocks closest to the metal spike. We spend some time perfecting our aim, trying to imitate the way my Dad throws horseshoes—low, and with a smooth release. Overjoyed with our new secret island, we decide to convince everyone to come back here tomorrow with sandwiches and our poles and maybe some horseshoes.

"Uncle Buzz and Aunt Lynn will think this is cool, huh?" Michael effuses. I know he admires my dad, and likes being part of our family—especially with his splitting up.

"Oh yeah, I'm sure they will." I affirm.

Behind the picnic table is a group of boulders with a protruding slab of granite, and Michael scampers up about 15 feet to the top. "Hey come up here, this is great!"

"No, I don't know. I don't think I can do it."

"Sure you can! It's easy. You saw me do it, and you know I'm not that athletic."

"No, it's okay. Maybe tomorrow when we come back."

"Okay." Michael has fun throwing a few of the river rocks that are in his pocket, trying to hit some targets from his high vantage point.

"I can see the mountains better up here. Did you know there's still a patch of snow on this one?" He points westward.

"No," I say. "Cool."

"I can see where the river goes around this island too. You can't see it down there, but it's over that way a bit near the base of that big rock, you see? Pointing up?" He points toward the east side of the river. I look and see the tip of a jagged boulder through the trees.

"You see it?" he asks, still pointing.

"Oh yeah, I do"

"Well, that's where the river is on the other side."

"Okay," I say.

"Pick out a target for me," he challenges, and he begins testing his arm throwing more river rocks at some of them, commenting on his efforts.

When he is out, he starts looking over the top of the boulder for whatever sticks or pinecones, or smaller rocks might be there, and throws them.

"Hey, it's getting kinda late," I remark.

"Ok, I'm coming." When there is nothing left to throw, he begins to look for the best manner to come back down. After he evaluates a moment, I can see uncertainty emerge as he realizes that getting down will be trickier than going up. There is nothing to hold onto between the big inclined slab at the top and the smaller boulders at the bottom that he used to get up to it. After some serious assessing, he sits and carefully slides down the granite slab, aiming to stop himself with his foot on the lower boulder. However, he is unable to control his rate of descent on the slick face, and as he arrives quickly to the bottom, his foot slips off the second boulder, crashing his knee into it, and bounces him tumbling over to the ground on top of his shoulder. The fall is not far, but awkward.

I watch him get up, nervously asking, "Are you okay? Are you okay?" He turns around toward me, and I see his face is in a tight, silent grimace.

"Ah . . . yeah," he grunts, through tense releases of air. But his one shoulder looks a little lower than the other, and he is holding his arm tight against his body with his other hand.

"You're not okay, are you? What's wrong? What's wrong?" I mother him frantically.

"Nothing," he grunts, and holds his breath waiting for the pain to ease, but it doesn't. Embarrassed, he finally admits, wincing, "I think I hurt something in my shoulder."

"Oh no, Michael! We have to go! We have to go now!"

"I know," he agrees, controlling his breathing. His eyes are pinched tight. Then he opens them just enough to get his bearings toward the path.

"Can you walk okay? Oh Michael, what do you want me to do?" I nervously circle around him looking to help.

"No, no" he restrains, "I can make it. Let's just get out of here."

I am too anxious to go ahead of him, so I hook my hand gently around his good arm and walk off the path beside him to ensure he doesn't trip and fall. He is limping some from his sore knee.

The bright sun we played in earlier is gone as shadows deepen in the valley. By the time we reach the water's edge, the sun is just peeking above the westward mountains, leaving us in a quiet, blue glow by the swooshing cold river.

"Wow, it's getting dark fast," I wonder.

"It's those mountains," he strains. "It's not that late yet."

As I scan the opposite bank for other people, or an easier route, Michael looks doubtfully at the rope bridge contraption.

"Can you do it?"

"I don't know." After assessing the structure, he tentatively releases his injured arm in a disheartened attempt to mount. He reaches up unsteadily with the good arm and clasps the rope, but as he tries to step and pull himself up onto the foot rope with one arm, balancing causes him to move muscles in his other arm. He cries out.

"Oh Michael!" My hands fly up to my face, ready to cover my eyes from the sight of his pain.

He stops, grunting and breathing through it. Then, with the one hand holding the rope, and the opposite foot still resting on the lower rope, he peers across the short span, thinking. The frogs begin a croaking commentary, and in the dimming light, the mosquitoes swarm in a high, maddening hum over the surface of the white, flashing water. The bright orange tip of sun splashes behind the mountains, concealing the last evidence of daylight.

I wait nervously, and my tense jaw makes my teeth chatter sporadically. After a moment of visualizing, he confesses, "I can't cross on the bridge. I need both arms to balance." He releases the rope and carefully steps away, studying the swift impediment. I come close to him wanting to help, but not knowing how.

"I'm scared Michael."

"It's ok. I think I can walk across through the water. I think it's only up to my knees." As he surveys the turbulent passage, his face holds a squinted, determination intended to assure me, and bolster his own confidence.

"Are you sure?" Instinctively, I want to grab onto his good arm for comfort.

"I gotta try." He begins to shuffle into the river, which is shockingly cold, and holds onto the foot rope with his good arm. Feeling his way against the current is slow going, and in the growing dark, he is unable to discern where the larger rocks are. He moves deliberately, testing each step before shifting his weight to that foot, and then searches for good footing for the next step. He stumbles a few times, and his body waivers, jarring his injury. When he gets only about ten feet out, the water is already up to his knees, and I see him stop again. He tries to take another tentative step, then jerks his hand on the footrope to regain his center of gravity. After a pause he composes himself and then begins to walk backwards, even more cautiously, until he can turn and wade out without the rope back onto shore.

"What happened!" My teeth are chattering continuously now, as fear and cold creep over me. I can see it in his eyes too, as he gains secure footing on the muddy sand, and stands there, dripping, shivering, and gripping his limp arm to his side.

"I can't do it. It's too strong. I almost lost it out there. It's crazy." His teeth chatter too. "I didn't know it could be so strong."

"Oh God, Michael. What are we going to do?" In the dim, blue glow, the forest narrowly encircles us with silhouettes of trees and rocks, reclaiming our bright afternoon conquest.

"You have to go get help," he chatters.

"Oh, no! Not alone!" I plead. "I don't have a flashlight, and I can't leave you here!" We are both thinking of bears.

"You have to. There is no way I can make it across. You can do it."

"But what if I can't find it again?" I imagine the horror of him staying there all night, when the temperature drops to 40 degrees.

"You will. Come on, you have to go now, it's getting cold." He shivers, and I can see that it sends jolts of pain through his shoulder. He holds his injured arm tightly against his body. "Go. Please."

I agree, and reluctantly mount the rope bridge. Concentrating in the dim light, I unsteadily cross to the other side above the monstrously churning water. When I get there, I look back and see him standing, smaller and ill-defined, watching me. I cup my hands to my mouth to tell him, "I'll yell out if I have trouble finding the bridge, so listen for me!"

"What?" he calls back over the white noise of the river. It is disheartening.

"Nothing," I reply. Then louder "I'll be right back!"

Fueled by adrenaline and fear, I follow the path in the deepening dark through the trees back to the open field, praying fervently every step. The image of his sad, defeated face remains in my mind, and I hurry carelessly off the obscured path into the tall, foreboding grass. Unidentified fluttery things bounce off of my face and arms, and small obstacles entangle my steps. The way back is much further than the way in.

I stumble over a dead log and fall onto the hard ground, swallowed by the forest of grass. I remember the black and yellow-striped snake my Dad and I saw up here once, racing over a log. "It's harmless," he had laughed, amused at my little girl worries.

I get up and keep moving toward the dimly visible black band of road, many yards away. I am elated when I finally reach it, and the smooth, sure, surface of asphalt, though it still seems so far from camp or camper. Even the General Store is far enough around the bend that its lights are not visible in the low, blue twilight. I try to memorize that exact place before I start down the road, so I will recognize it when I come back with help. It all looks the same – the whole length of the road. Just grass on the side, paths every few yards, and trees near the river. I look for something to mark the road with, but only see grass. Then my eye catches sight of something pale glowing in the tall stems, several feet from the road, and find a large tree branch. I try ferociously to

drag it close enough to the road where it will be visible, but it is too heavy, and I can't dislodge it from the damp earth.

After several valiant attempts, I let it go, feeling the pain in my cold, tender hands. I look around for something else, and see nothing but darkness. The vastness of my surroundings and the sounds of quiet nature all around overwhelm me. It all looks the same in the dark. "How can I leave if I can't find it again?"

In panic, I begin to cry – so broken in despair. I cry to my only hope, "Oh God, please help me!"

I am locked – incapable of processing how to proceed. I am tempted to go back to Michael, and find a way to get through it together rather than risk not finding him tonight. "But how will that help? He is counting on me. He is scared too, but he doesn't want to see me come back without help."

I look up to find a single bright star glinting in the deep blue. "Oh God, what should I do? Please help me!" I cry aloud. "PLEASE!"

After a moment I fix my eyes through my tears back on the road, trying to make myself move forward. My sobs quiet in my throat, and I wipe my damp nose with my hand. In the silence, I hear a faint whistling. I squint and see a little light coming up the road north of me, swinging. My heart jumps, so relieved to see someone, but scared that he could be someone bad. I feel vulnerable, and think about just letting him pass by. But then, a little thought goes through my mind. A very convincing thought.

"You just prayed for God to help you, and you think that he would send you someone *bad*?"

I start calling out to him long before he reaches me.

"Hello! Can you help me sir?" He must hear the fear in my young voice, and comes running to me with his waders over his shoulder, and a pole and tackle box at his side.

"What's wrong, what happened?" I begin crying all over again from relief. I am not alone. God has sent help in my most urgent time of need. I am still scared for Michael, but so grateful to have someone who will take the burden from me.

I quickly explain what happened, and he drops his tackle box and pole, and follows me back to the bridge. When we get there, Michael sees the flashlight coming and faintly calls, "Over here!"

"What's his name?" The man asks me as he begins to pull on his waders. I tell him. "Ok Michael," he calls, "I'm coming to get you!" He is tall and strong looking, and he walks effortlessly into the river in his waders. "Shine the light for me honey," He calls back to me. He finds a good path over the rocks, and is confident, without a stumble, showing Michael he can trust him.

When he gets there, I see them talking in the beam of the flashlight. He is about a foot taller, and kindly bends his head down to Michael with the bill of his ball cap nodding, as Michael explains his situation. They seem to agree, and the man picks up Michael in his arms, careful to let him get his good arm around his neck. I start praying again, imagining the disaster of both of them falling in the cold, dark, river, and Michael tumbling away with his injured arm.

The man starts back carefully over the river, Michael hanging on tightly with one arm, and cradling the other gingerly in his lap. Not a single misstep. When the man emerges from the water, he gently sets Michael on the solid ground, and tips his hat to him. "How's that, young man?" he grins.

"Great, thank you," Michael grunts, still in pain from the jostling.

The man, points to Michael's shoulder, "You might have broken your collar bone, there, Buddy. I had one of those once. But they'll fix you up."

"Thanks." Michael seems a little embarrassed about his predicament.

"Don't feel bad – we all need help sometimes."

We have to walk all the way back to the campground, and to my waiting, worried parents. As we go, I tell Michael and the man, in amazement, about how I had just prayed to God for help, when I saw his light coming up the road. I can't get past the idea that in order for that man to come and answer my prayer, he had to already be walking toward me, and if he was already coming, then God knew in advance what I would need, and had it all planned out ahead of time. It is the most astonishing thing to me, and this becomes a defining moment in my understanding of God, and knowing that He is real.

Then the man, who has been listening with a white-teethed grin, says, "You have that exactly right. God has had that thing lined up from the beginning of eternity. He knew even back then that this moment would come. He timed it all out in such a way so that you would see it wasn't a coincidence, but that God was watching out for you two. The Bible says that 'All things work together for good for those who love God, and who are called according to His purpose.' It sounds like you believe in God already."

"I guess I do. I have been thinking about Him a lot lately, but not like today."

"What about you, Michael?" Michael is absorbed in his pain, listening inattentively.

"Oh, I don't really know. I guess there's probably a God, but no one knows for sure."

"Some people say that is the case," the man concedes, "but *my* experience is that there's at least a dozen or so ways God reveals Himself to each of us, and you just got one of them. Answered prayer."

"But I didn't pray, *she* did"

"Didn't you?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I was *hoping*, but I didn't *pray*."

"Hmmm . . . Well, I'll have to take your word for it," doubts the man, "but you must be a pretty stubborn person not to pray when you're in trouble. It doesn't matter, though, because *her* prayer was answered. And aren't you glad?"

"Oh, sure. However it happened, I am just glad you came along." Michael looks down at his arm, "Thanks a lot."

"Michael, you and all the rest of us have a lot bigger problems than broken arms and such. God loves you, and just like he sent me today to make sure you were safe, He sent Jesus to save us so we can always be in God's care. It was the most important thing He could do for us. But you've got to *believe* it."

I believe everything the man says, and hope that Michael will too. I am afraid for him because he won't see it. He doesn't want to, I can tell. But I start praying for him that night.

"Maybe I'll believe when God gets my parents back together." I can hear the bitterness that always comes when his mind is on the divorce.

"Okay," the man offers. "Maybe God will do that. If you pray."

I knew that day, like all the marvelous provisions in the Silver Lake General Store, that God has His own store of wonders to provide for our every need. He delights in supplying each of us with joy, comfort, help, love, memories, things to discover and enjoy, and people to share with. We just have to go to Him, open hearts, open arms, open eyes & ears.

When things get rough in my life, or it seems too complicated and full of disquiet, I sometimes think about that little General Store, and the innocent I was when I wandered, wide-eyed through such simple times. I remember when all I needed to fill me up was the best chocolate malt in the world, a walk by a flowing creek with a good friend, and a little answered prayer to show me I am loved.

Over the years, my view of the world has tainted a little, and my faith has gone through periods of neglect and renewal. But I have always believed—ever since the day we encountered that little bridge, and our rescuer.

Michael's parents did divorce. I am still praying for him.