

Rowan, M. F. Littwin

The Age of Rowan

By

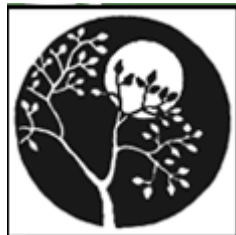
Michael F. Littwin
The Age of Rowan

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This is a tale of love and self discovery during the crisis that preceded the renewal of the covenant between the source humankind and the powers of the Earth.



My thanks to Cindy, my wife, you are my friend and muse.
My blessings to my children, you are the promise of the future.

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You have downloaded the Prologue where you will meet the main characters, Michael and Jordan, for the first time, as they set the stage for the life changing events that follow.

PROLOGUE

Jordan walked out onto the front porch, swung one leg over the banister and balanced herself on the rail. Her almost five-foot, early adolescent frame was very well proportioned. Her body moved gracefully, yet with a boyish strength. She looked up at the sky. Yes, it looked like a beautiful day, but she had a funny feeling that it wouldn't stay that way. She had always had an uncanny ability to sense things about nature. She walked out to the sidewalk and looked up the street, watching for someone. As she looked along the row of houses, she was reminded of how much she thought that they all looked the same. Her mother always said that Jordan was "very opinionated" for a twelve-year-old, but Jordan felt that her own opinion was as good as any. Michael, the neighborhood friend that she was watching for, had tried to convince her that each house was different in its own way, but said that they couldn't be too different or it wouldn't be right. A bunch of crazy houses stuck together, he had stated, would make the neighborhood look silly. They used to have conversations like this when they were walking to school together. Michael's parents sent him to the local Catholic school because he was Catholic. Jordan's parents enrolled her there because it was a good school and was within walking distance. He used to point out that the houses had different colors of bricks and different front doors and even the two car garages were on different sides of the houses. Jordan's parents called them "tract" houses and said that the style was pretty typical for modern, suburban housing developments in the 1980's.

She went back and sat on her porch steps to wait for Michael. She started thinking about her parents and wondering how they came to live in such a boring place. She had often overheard her parents and their friends talking about the old days, college parties, and the band they used to be in, how they were going to change the world, and stuff like that. Once, Uncle Doug, her father's brother, called them hippies. Her mom had just laughed at him and told him that they were social activists, and in fact, they would always be that way. She reminded him that the term "hippie" was trite and out of date. They talked fairly freely around her about stuff like the Vietnam War and everything from pot to politics. Jordan had even found out that her dad was arrested once at a rally that had something to do with the Democratic convention in Chicago. She wasn't supposed to know this, but Uncle Doug told her about it at a New Year's party, when he'd been drinking a lot. She thought it might be a sensitive topic, so she never asked her dad about the details. But she did think that it was very cool. Some of the college parties, concerts, festivals and adventures that they talked about, like when they traveled across the country with a band, in a second hand school bus, made them sound like much more fun than they are now. Jordan decided that she would have gotten along much better with her parents if she had known them when they were younger. She tried to steer them into telling her stories

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about their younger days whenever she could.

What Jordan didn't know was that her parents had been heavily influenced by the counter culture era and had been full-blown children of the free love generation. But, like so many other retired hippies, they got disillusioned when the social revolution, that they had believed in so deeply, fizzled. They went back to college, got degrees, got real jobs, got married, had kids and acquired a mortgage. Her mom worked for a government agency, and her dad was a history teacher at a local college. They had Jordan when they were in their late twenties, and they decided that one child was enough to keep them busy. All in all, Jordan figured that she was doing alright in the parent department. Although they still could be kind of weird from time to time.

There was that time, Jordan remembered, a few years ago, when her mom was growing what, Jordan now understood to be a pot plant. She had it in the basement under special, purplish-white lights and kept referring to it as "my baby". Yeah that was weird, but Jordan had to admit that her mother's way with plants was pretty amazing. Her gardens were always spectacular. She definitely had a special relationship with the earth. She would tell Jordan that it was because she had a "green mind". Some people called it a green thumb, but her mom insisted it was more than just a thumb; you had to think green to make it work. Jordan liked kneeling next to her mother, on warm spring mornings as they dug their fingers into the soft soil releasing wafts of damp earthy smells. Jordan could feel an almost electric energy rising up out of the earth and making her hands tingle. They would talk to the plants and even sing to them. Her mother's job was actually with the EPA. Her mom said it stood for "Every Plant Alive," but Jordan knew that it really meant Environmental Protection Agency. Yeah, in her own wacky way, mom was cool.

She liked her dad too. He was very kind, and could be funny also. He was very good at writing and singing songs and playing his guitar. And he was smart. Sometimes, Jordan thought, he was too smart for his own good; like when he would go off on a rambling tangent about how human history was full of bumbling and errors which were the cause of some of the greatest problems in the world today. She thought about something that had happened last year. The whole family was excited that he was being considered for the position of chairman of the history department at the college. She could picture how sad and frustrated he looked one evening when he came home and told them that he didn't get the job. He sighed as he explained how the college president congratulated him for being a finalist, but also informed him that, in the end, the regents just weren't completely comfortable with his style of teaching. She remembered that he said it was because he posed too many questions about history and didn't just give his students answers to memorize. She didn't exactly understand everything he said, but she clearly remembered how sad and angry he looked that day. Jordan still had a clear picture in her mind of how he had clenched his fists and dropped them on the table top as he stood up and walked out into the back yard. Jordan recalled that she had waited a minute and then went out to see if he was alright. She had walked up next to him and stood there quietly for a moment. He had been staring down at mom's garden. He reached out and gently twisted a ripe tomato from its vine. He held it in his two hands as if it was a precious object. "Dad,"

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she asked, “are you okay? I mean, you didn’t lose your job, did you?” As she spoke, she put her arms around him. He wrapped one arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to his side. Then drew in a deep breath and released it slowly with a sound that was kind of like an ocean wave hitting the beach.

“Oh, I’m alright,” he had assured her. “And I still have my teaching job. It’s just not easy trying to convince people that we can change the future by understanding the past.”

Jordan remembered being a little confused by his statement. “Like how?” she asked.

“It’s hard to explain, but I feel like this is a very important time for people all over the world. What they do now makes a huge difference in how things will be in the future. Do you remember the part of history I focused on in college?”

“Mesoamerica,” she recalled being proud of remembering the exact word.

“Right! The great civilizations that existed for centuries before Columbus ‘discovered’ the Americas. The Aztecs built a monumental city, but to do that they stripped the land for miles around it. They ended up abandoning their capitol because they didn’t have enough food or resources for the hundreds of thousands that lived there. They did it to themselves. Now, again, we are squeezing the earth to satisfy our own hungers. We focused on putting a man on the moon, but we seem to be ignoring the situation of mankind here on this planet. I can’t help seeing parallels in the destructive behaviors. Even the Mayans, who studied the heavens and made a calendar that has been totally accurate for over a thousand years, sensed that something was going wrong. They predicted that life as they knew it would end in 2012. They literally believed that human life was stolen from the gods and unless they showed some care for the rest of creation, the gods will simply take back what was stolen from them. I think that they used human sacrifice to bargain for time.” He had said the last part in such a serious way that she remembered being a little disturbed by it. She might not have understood everything that he had said that day, but she did feel the feeling that he was trying to express. “Thanks for the hug,” he said as he gently stroked her face. He must have seen the slightly troubled look on her face, because he smiled at her. “Come on,” he said, holding up the tomato, “let’s go in and get some salt so we can eat this red beauty while it’s still warm.” They did just that. As the juice ran down her chin, Jordan felt like she had witnessed something special, something tragic and yet heroic, about her dad.

Jordan realized she had been sitting there, lost in thought about her parents. She decided that she was tired of waiting for Michael. She got up, walked to the screen door, and shouted to her mom, “I’m going to the tree fort.”

“You’re not going into the woods alone are you?” her mom shouted back.

“No, mom, I’m going to meet Michael there.”

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“Okay, come back when you get hungry.”

“I will,” Jordan answered.

Before she jumped down the front porch stairs, she felt the pocket of her jeans to make sure that she had remembered to bring nails, in case the climbing rungs on the tree trunk were coming off again. With her fingers, she felt the nail points through the denim and she was off. Her shoulder length, auburn hair bounced as she ran. She was tall for her age and had long legs that moved with grace and speed. She ran the four blocks to the forest preserve, jumped the fence and was quickly on the trail that many trips to the tree fort had worn into the forest floor. She stopped when she got to a large oak tree near a pond. When she and Michael were ten, they had stolen some lumber from a nearby construction site, and, along with tools “borrowed” from their parents’ garages, they had built a tree house in a thick, sturdy oak that overlooked a pond in their forest kingdom.

It was a fairly simple affair, just a plywood platform about thirty feet up in the broad, oak branches. Several, short two-by-fours were nailed into the lower trunk to facilitate getting up into the climbable branches. From spring through fall, which they dubbed the “alive time”, privacy was provided by a curtain of leaves that grew from overhanging branches. In the “dead time”, which was winter, nature took the curtains down. Then, the tree fort was a good vantage point to observe the comings and goings of their neighbors, among the distant houses. As she approached the base of the oak, she could see that the bottom rung was crooked. She reached out and gave it a tug and it wiggled in her hand. She walked around the far side of the trunk

where, hidden among the roots, she found the hammer stone. It was a roundish pond rock, which had broken so that it had one flat side, and it was great for pounding in nails. She took it back to the ladder side, pulled the nails out of her pocket and drove two of them through the rung into the trunk. “There, that’s better,” she thought. Then she put the rock and the rest of the nails back in the hiding place. She was up the rungs and into the climbing branches in a flash, and she settled herself onto the platform to watch for Michael to come up the trail.

A breeze began to rustle the leaves around her. It reminded her of how she and Michael would say that the sound of the leaves was the forest whispering to them. Well, she said it was the forest, Michael, had this strange idea that it might be God trying to tell them something. He had tried to tell her about Moses and the burning bush, but she cut him short with the threat that if he tried to burn anything in the forest, she’d bust him in the head with the hammer rock. With that thought, she stood up on the platform in her Princess Leah pose. It was easy for her to act out here in the privacy of the woods, and safe too. Nobody was judging her here. One of her aunts once called her a tomboy, but her dad said not to worry. She was just a strong girl with such a natural beauty about her that no one could ever mistake her for a boy. He told her that if Aunt Ellen couldn’t tell the difference between a boy and a girl, well that was Ellen’s problem.

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She stood there thinking of all the acting out she and Michael had done here in the woods. They played kings and queens, gods and goddesses, soldiers and super heroes. The impromptu storylines depended upon which books they were reading in English and Social Studies at school, or on current TV shows, movies and popular comic books. Trying out different characters made her feel good. In spite of Michael's sometimes too serious nature, she knew that he liked it, too. She laughed to herself when she remembered that, in some of their games, she proclaimed herself Princess Leah from Star Wars, and he wanted to be Hans Solo. She had told him that he would make a better C-3PO. He was offended at being cast as an uptight robot. But, in the end, he reluctantly agreed to play his assigned roll.

Actually, in spite of their differences, the thing they had most in common was their enjoyment of being out in nature and conjuring up adventures together. The alive times were energizing, green and growing. Summer smells, like the musky scent of the forest floor, mixed with fresh grass and occasional clumps of wild flowers, added magic to this place. Even the dead time, when winter stripped the trees, and blankets of snow silenced their playground, gave the woods a peaceful feeling.

“Where the heck is C-3PO anyway?” she questioned to herself. She pulled back the branches to get a better view and saw Michael starting to climb the fence at the edge of the woods. Even at this distance, she could see his shock of jet black hair come down over his forehead as he jumped from the fence. With a sinister giggle, she decided to play a prank on him for making her wait. She climbed another twenty feet higher in the tree and hid herself in a clump of leaves. “This will be great,” she said to herself, as she pulled branches in around her perch to help her stay out of sight.

Within a few minutes, Michael was at the base of the tree. He was shorter than Jordan, and slender, but not scrawny. He climbed up the rungs, into the branches and up onto the platform with ample strength and agility. Michael sat cross-legged at one side of the platform and looked down and around. He cupped his hands, trumpet like, around his mouth and called out for Jordan a few times, then stopped to listen for an answer.

“Great, just great,” he said out loud with a frustrated tone in his voice, “she’s not here yet.”

He looked agitated by the circumstances. This made Jordan, watching him from up above, feel all the better about the prank she was about to pull on him. The breeze was rustling the leaves again and he turned his head slightly, and was listening intently. “Perfect,” she thought to herself. Jordan tried the best she could to disguise her voice. In the most profound God whisper she could muster, she said, “Michael, Michael Clarke, I have come in answer to your prayers.”

Michael went rigid and let out a gasp. Jordan couldn't take it any longer and started to laugh. He looked up and she popped her head out of the leaves and said, “Gotcha!”

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“Damn you Jordan,” he shouted, “you scared the crap out of me.”

She quickly climbed down out of her hiding place and joined him on the platform. When she reached him, she saw some anger on his face, but there was a look of worry there, too.

“Hey,” she said, “I was just trying to be funny. What’s wrong with you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Everybody’s getting on my case at home lately,” he answered. She knew that “everybody” at his house meant a lot of people. His Irish, Catholic parents had produced six kids and his equally prolific aunts and uncles insured that there were always numerous relatives visiting the house.

“Okay, okay,” Jordan said consolingly, “I’m sorry about messing with your head like that, but I just couldn’t resist.”

“It’s not that so much. I should be used to that from you by now,” Michael answered with a sigh.

“Well, what do you mean by ‘getting on your case’?” she asked.

“My brothers are razzing me about having a best friend that’s a girl. My mom is saying that I’m too old to be playing in the woods all the time. And my dad keeps pushing me to get on a sports team to ‘beef up and learn some self discipline and teamwork’. It’s that whole ex-Marine thing; you know what he’s like.”

“Jeez, you’re getting shot at from all sides,” Jordan said, trying to be empathetic.

Michael went on, “My grandparents are saying that the weather is getting weird. Then there’s stuff they’re saying at church about the end of the world, you know, freaky, scary stuff. And, to top it all off, I feel weird lately too.”

“Like how,” she asked.

“I don’t know, more worried about stuff. It’s like nothing is working out right,” he said, with a confused look on his face. “Speaking of weird weather,” he continued, “did you notice that the wind has gotten stronger?”

“Yeah, you’re right. And the sunlight is going away,” she said. She looked up and noticed that thick clouds had rolled in while they were talking, and it smelled like rain. “All right,” she said rubbing her hands together in an almost demonic glee. “A storm, I hope it’s a whopper! I love that kind.”

“I swear, Jordan, sometimes you scare me,” he retorted. “Well, we’d better get back before all

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hell brakes loose.”

They were barely to the base of the tree when the rain started coming down in sheets. It was accompanied by lightning and bursts of thunder.

“Come on, run!” shouted Michael.

“Wait,” said Jordan, as she bent down to take off her shoes, “I want to feel the puddles.”

They ran with all their might and were up and over the fence in no time. Jordan was still barefoot and carrying her shoes. Waves of rain beat down on them. Jordan squealed with delight when flashes of light, closely followed by sizzling cracks of thunder, exploded the air above them. Michael was sure that the ozone in the charged air was really the scent of some vengeful, spiritual presence closing in behind them. Jordan was holding out both her arms, spinning as she ran, like some kind of demented helicopter. She tilted her head back and opened her mouth to catch raindrops on her tongue.

“What are you doing? You could get killed!” Michael shouted at her through the roaring rain.

“I’m enjoying this. I’m dancing; dancing with danger. Isn’t this great?” She was almost singing her response. Suddenly, the air around them exploded with light that was immediately followed by a deafening sound. Michael fell to the ground and covered his head. When he opened his eyes to look for Jordan, he saw that she was still dancing, but now she was surrounded by a strange haze of purplish-blue light. The light dissipated after a few seconds. He stood up, grabbed her hand and they ran toward Jordan’s house. The hand that he had grabbed her with started to throb. He figured that he had probably cut it when he dropped to the ground.

When they reached the relative shelter of Jordan’s porch, she was standing beside him laughing wildly. She spun her head back and forth so that her wet hair flung water into Michael’s face. This made him even angrier, and he launched into a tirade.

“What’s wrong with you Jordan? You’ve changed. You’re acting so crazy. Back at the tree you were making fun of God. That was not cool. You...you...just can’t do stuff like that. It’s not right. It’s like you’ve lost faith in what’s important.”

At this, she stopped shaking her hair and stared him in the face. She sensed that he was trying to be serious and profound. She tried to suppress her laughter by pressing her lips shut, but it came out anyway in bursts that sounded like the fake fart sounds that kids make in class. Then her lips parted and she let out a full scale burst of laughter. It took a few moments before she was able to catch her breath and speak.

“Mikey, you’re so dramatic. I wasn’t making fun of God. I was making fun of how hung-up you are about making God talk to you. Anyway, if I’ve lost any faith, it must not be that

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important because I don't miss it, and it probably wasn't ever really there to begin with. So really, how could I lose something I never had?"

"Arrgghhh..." He let out a pirate sounding grunt. He was tongue-tied now, and rendered s" "And, for God's sake, grow up"

Things changed between them that day. They were, in fact, both growing up. They were losing the childlike power to turn fantasy into reality. That stormy afternoon, combined with the first traces of the hormonal surges of adolescence, had thrown them into what, for all practical purposes, could be seen as a pubescent, lovers' quarrel. It produced a sense of separateness between them. They were gradually less drawn to each other and to the whispering trees. As eighth grade drew to a close, and graduation came, they drifted even farther apart. Jordan entered an accelerated science program at the local high school. She was determined to get a "portable" profession, like nursing. It would be her ticket out of the conservative confines of the suburban Midwest. Her plan was to go to the college that her dad worked at, get her

nursing degree or maybe physical therapy, and escape to the cultural openness of California. There, she thought, she could live life to the fullest. Michael never really outgrew his preoccupation with the need to find an ordered universe with God at the helm. He enrolled in a Catholic high school, and planned on entering a Catholic seminary for college, with the hope of becoming a priest and fulfilling his quest.

In spite of their separation, something of substance would grow out of those childhood years. It was as if a seed had been planted during their shared time of fantasy among the trees by the pond. It really wasn't annual or perennial. It was a dormant seed that a simple, spring cycle couldn't germinate. It would take a more formidable force to draw it into blossom.

peechless by her laughing about God. It added to his consternation that he was still frightened and confused by the blue glow that had surrounded Jordan right after the near miss lightning strike. He wanted to ask her about it, but he was afraid she wouldn't believe what he saw, and use his question to make fun of him again. Jordan finally ended his fit of sputtering and stuttering by heading into her house.

She paused at the screen door, and with all the friendly concern she could muster, said, "Oh Michael, just go home and dry off." She couldn't help throwing in one more sarcastic quip,



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Before she jumped down the front porch stairs, she felt the pocket of her jeans to make sure that she had remembered to bring nails, in case the climbing rungs on the tree trunk were coming off again. With her fingers, she felt the nail points through the denim and she was off. Her shoulder length, auburn hair bounced as she ran. She was tall for her age and had long legs that moved with grace and speed. She ran the four blocks to the forest preserve, jumped the fence and was quickly on the trail that many trips to the tree fort had worn into the forest floor. She stopped when she got to a large oak tree near a pond. When she and Michael were ten, they had stolen some lumber from a nearby construction site, and, along with tools “borrowed” from their parents’ garages, they had built a tree house in a thick, sturdy oak that overlooked a pond in their forest kingdom.

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It was a fairly simple affair, just a plywood platform about thirty feet up in the broad, oak branches. Several, short two-by-fours were nailed into the lower trunk to facilitate getting up into the climbable branches. From spring through fall, which they dubbed the “alive time”, privacy was provided by a curtain of leaves that grew from overhanging branches. In the “dead time”, which was winter, nature took the curtains down. Then, the tree fort was a good vantage point to observe the comings and goings of their neighbors, among the distant houses. As she approached the base of the oak, she could see that the bottom rung was crooked. She reached out and gave it a tug and it wiggled in her hand. She walked around the far side of the trunk

where, hidden among the roots, she found the hammer stone. It was a roundish pond rock, which had broken so that it had one flat side, and it was great for pounding in nails. She took it back to the ladder side, pulled the nails out of her pocket and drove two of them through the rung into the trunk. “There, that’s better,” she thought. Then she put the rock and the rest of the nails back in the hiding place. She was up the rungs and into the climbing branches in a flash, and she settled herself onto the platform to watch for Michael to come up the trail.

A breeze began to rustle the leaves around her. It reminded her of how she and Michael would say that the sound of the leaves was the forest whispering to them. Well, she said it was the forest, Michael, had this strange idea that it might be God trying to tell them something. He had tried to tell her about Moses and the burning bush, but she cut him short with the threat that if he tried to burn anything in the forest, she’d bust him in the head with the hammer rock. With that thought, she stood up on the platform in her Princess Leah pose. It was easy for her to act out here in the privacy of the woods, and safe too. Nobody was judging her here. One of her aunts once called her a tomboy, but her dad said not to worry. She was just a strong girl with such a natural beauty about her that no one could ever mistake her for a boy. He told her that if Aunt Ellen couldn’t tell the difference between a boy and a girl, well that was Ellen’s problem.

She stood there thinking of all the acting out she and Michael had done here in the woods. They played kings and queens, gods and goddesses, soldiers and super heroes. The impromptu storylines depended upon which books they were reading in English and Social Studies at school, or on current TV shows, movies and popular comic books. Trying out different characters made her feel good. In spite of Michael’s sometimes too serious nature, she knew that he liked it, too. She laughed to herself when she remembered that, in some of their games, she proclaimed herself Princess Leah from Star Wars, and he wanted to be Hans Solo. She had told him that he would make a better C-3PO. He was offended at being cast as an uptight robot. But, in the end, he reluctantly agreed to play his assigned roll.

Actually, in spite of their differences, the thing they had most in common was their enjoyment of being out in nature and conjuring up adventures together. The alive times were energizing, green and growing. Summer smells, like the musky scent of the forest floor, mixed with fresh grass and occasional clumps of wild flowers, added magic to this place. Even the dead time, when winter stripped the trees, and blankets of snow silenced their playground, gave the woods

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a peaceful feeling.

“Where the heck is C-3PO anyway?” she questioned to herself. She pulled back the branches to get a better view and saw Michael starting to climb the fence at the edge of the woods. Even at this distance, she could see his shock of jet black hair come down over his forehead as he jumped from the fence. With a sinister giggle, she decided to play a prank on him for making her wait. She climbed another twenty feet higher in the tree and hid herself in a clump of leaves. “This will be great,” she said to herself, as she pulled branches in around her perch to help her stay out of sight.

Within a few minutes, Michael was at the base of the tree. He was shorter than Jordan, and slender, but not scrawny. He climbed up the rungs, into the branches and up onto the platform with ample strength and agility. Michael sat cross-legged at one side of the platform and looked down and around. He cupped his hands, trumpet like, around his mouth and called out for Jordan a few times, then stopped to listen for an answer.

“Great, just great,” he said out loud with a frustrated tone in his voice, “she’s not here yet.”

He looked agitated by the circumstances. This made Jordan, watching him from up above, feel all the better about the prank she was about to pull on him. The breeze was rustling the leaves again and he turned his head slightly, and was listening intently. “Perfect,” she thought to herself. Jordan tried the best she could to disguise her voice. In the most profound God whisper she could muster, she said, “Michael, Michael Clarke, I have come in answer to your prayers.”

Michael went rigid and let out a gasp. Jordan couldn’t take it any longer and started to laugh. He looked up and she popped her head out of the leaves and said, “Gotcha!”

“Damn you Jordan,” he shouted, “you scared the crap out of me.”

She quickly climbed down out of her hiding place and joined him on the platform. When she reached him, she saw some anger on his face, but there was a look of worry there, too.

“Hey,” she said, “I was just trying to be funny. What’s wrong with you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Everybody’s getting on my case at home lately,” he answered. She knew that “everybody” at his house meant a lot of people. His Irish, Catholic parents had produced six kids and his equally prolific aunts and uncles insured that there were always numerous relatives visiting the house.

“Okay, okay,” Jordan said consolingly, “I’m sorry about messing with your head like that, but I just couldn’t resist.”

“It’s not that so much. I should be used to that from you by now,” Michael answered with a sigh.

“Well, what do you mean by ‘getting on your case’?” she asked.

“My brothers are razzing me about having a best friend that’s a girl. My mom is saying that I’m too old to be playing in the woods all the time. And my dad keeps pushing me to get on a sports team to ‘beef up and learn some self discipline and teamwork’. It’s that whole ex-Marine thing; you know what he’s like.”

“Jeez, you’re getting shot at from all sides,” Jordan said, trying to be empathetic.

Michael went on, “My grandparents are saying that the weather is getting weird. Then there’s stuff they’re saying at church about the end of the world, you know, freaky, scary stuff. And, to top it all off, I feel weird lately too.”

“Like how,” she asked.

“I don’t know, more worried about stuff. It’s like nothing is working out right,” he said, with a confused look on his face. “Speaking of weird weather,” he continued, “did you notice that the wind has gotten stronger?”

“Yeah, you’re right. And the sunlight is going away,” she said. She looked up and noticed that thick clouds had rolled in while they were talking, and it smelled like rain. “All right,” she said rubbing her hands together in an almost demonic glee. “A storm, I hope it’s a whopper! I love that kind.”

“I swear, Jordan, sometimes you scare me,” he retorted. “Well, we’d better get back

before all hell brakes loose.”

They were barely to the base of the tree when the rain started coming down in sheets. It was accompanied by lightning and bursts of thunder.

“Come on, run!” shouted Michael.

“Wait,” said Jordan, as she bent down to take off her shoes, “I want to feel the puddles.”

They ran with all their might and were up and over the fence in no time. Jordan was still barefoot and carrying her shoes. Waves of rain beat down on them. Jordan squealed with delight when flashes of light, closely followed by sizzling cracks of thunder, exploded the air above them. Michael was sure that the ozone in the charged air was really the scent of some vengeful, spiritual presence closing in behind them. Jordan was holding out both her arms, spinning as she ran, like some kind of demented helicopter. She tilted her head back and opened her mouth to catch raindrops on her tongue.

“What are you doing? You could get killed!” Michael shouted at her through the roaring rain.

“I’m enjoying this. I’m dancing; dancing with danger. Isn’t this great?” She was almost singing her response. Suddenly, the air around them exploded with light that was immediately followed by a deafening sound. Michael fell to the ground and covered his head. When he opened his eyes to look for Jordan, he saw that she was still dancing, but now she was surrounded by a strange haze of purplish-blue light. The light dissipated after a few seconds. He stood up, grabbed her hand and they ran toward Jordan’s house. The hand that he had grabbed her with started to throb. He figured that he had probably cut it when he dropped to the ground.

When they reached the relative shelter of Jordan’s porch, she was standing beside him laughing wildly. She spun her head back and forth so that her wet hair flung water into Michael’s face. This made him even angrier, and he launched into a tirade.

“What’s wrong with you Jordan? You’ve changed. You’re acting so crazy. Back at the tree you were making fun of God. That was not cool. You...you...just can’t do stuff like that. It’s not right. It’s like you’ve lost faith in what’s important.”

At this, she stopped shaking her hair and stared him in the face. She sensed that he was trying to be serious and profound. She tried to suppress her laughter by pressing her lips shut, but it came out anyway in bursts that sounded like the fake fart sounds that kids make in class. Then her lips parted and she let out a full scale burst of laughter. It took a few moments before she was able to catch her breath and speak.

“Mikey, you’re so dramatic. I wasn’t making fun of God. I was making fun of how hung-up you are about making God talk to you. Anyway, if I’ve lost any faith, it must not be that important because I don’t miss it, and it probably wasn’t ever really there to

begin with. So really, how could I lose something I never had?"

"Arrgghhh...", He let out a pirate sounding grunt. He was tongue-tied now, and rendered speechless by her laughing about God. It added to his consternation that he was still frightened and confused by the blue glow that had surrounded Jordan right after the near miss lightning strike. He wanted to ask her about it, but he was afraid she wouldn't believe what he saw, and use his question to make fun of him again. Jordan finally ended his fit of sputtering and stuttering by heading into her house.

She paused at the screen door, and with all the friendly concern she could muster, said, "Oh Michael, just go home and dry off." She couldn't help throwing in one more sarcastic quip, "And, for God's sake, grow up"

Things changed between them that day. They were, in fact, both growing up. They were losing the childlike power to turn fantasy into reality. That stormy afternoon, combined with the first traces of the hormonal surges of adolescence, had thrown them into what, for all practical purposes, could be seen as a pubescent, lovers' quarrel. It produced a sense of separateness between them. They were gradually less drawn to each other and to the whispering trees. As eighth grade drew to a close, and graduation came, they drifted even farther apart. Jordan entered an accelerated science program at the local high school. She was determined to get a "portable" profession, like nursing. It would be her ticket out of the conservative confines of the suburban Midwest. Her plan was to go to the college that her dad worked at, get her

nursing degree or maybe physical therapy, and escape to the cultural openness of California. There, she thought, she could live life to the fullest. Michael never really outgrew his preoccupation with the need to find an ordered universe with God at the helm. He enrolled in a Catholic high school, and planned on entering a Catholic seminary for college, with the hope of becoming a priest and fulfilling his quest.

In spite of their separation, something of substance would grow out of those childhood years. It was as if a seed had been planted during their shared time of fantasy among the trees by the pond. It really wasn't annual or perennial. It was a dormant seed that a simple, spring cycle couldn't germinate. It would take a more formidable force to draw it into blossom.