

There is Always Someplace Else

(from a novel by)

Reed McColm

IN 1957, A YEAR AND A HALF before she married the man who would leave her, Kören Dixon was almost the Carnival Queen of Conjuring Creek. There were only three nominations for the job, and seventeen-year-old Kören had two of them; she turned down the high school nomination, red-faced, because the town of Calmar had asked her first, at an informal council meeting held at the Dixon farm the night before the high school vote. Kören was delighted but abashed by too much attention. She hadn't campaigned for the position. The idea that she deserved it came from other people—her father's friends in the Lions Club, or her three brothers and their hockey buddies. Tickets to the County Ice Carnival were sold one to a customer in the name of each nominee, and the girl selling the most would then be crowned Queen. For weeks, friends swirled around Kören to buy and help sell. Her brothers called her "Highness." But at the carnival that winter, in an awkward ceremony held in the cold center of the county skating rink, Kören lost the crown to Dagmar Eriksson, two years older and a tartish flirt. Unsteady in her first heels, with the tin tiara of the runner-up freezing to her forehead, Kören waved from her wrist to family and friends watching in the stands. Late that night alone in her room, pulling out her pin curls with tugs and yanks, she said "damn" for the first time.

Kören didn't know Dagmar well and never would, but they crossed paths here and there through the years like distant fish from the same pond. They each married Texaco Oil boys, and then set up houses in a small-town succession around the province. Though Kören never asked, mutual friends now and then mentioned Dagmar's whereabouts, that she had left Calmar for Hinton, then Hinton for Grande Prairie, where she left her husband and moved back to Leduc. It seemed to Kören that Dagmar's moves were proof of a forlorn restlessness, and her divorce, when it happened, the sad but predictable reward for the tease she had

been. Kören had also moved (from Fort McMurray before Kirsten was born and again within three years from Thorsby while pregnant with Toller), but she didn't think herself at all restless. Instead, she considered herself loyal and dutiful and *married* in a solid way that didn't apply in comparison to Dagmar Eriksson. The fact that Kören was this surely connected, to husband and children and to her future with both, separated her in a vague but vast way from that unsettled, faraway woman.

Turned out, though, that Dagmar would be seen again, even a few times, in the same Edmonton hospital where Kören took Sam. Sam was born in Wetaskiwin, Kören's third baby, scrawny and sickly as neither of her other children had ever been. He nursed more often, sucking hungrily, but not much stayed inside. His diapers soiled an ugly green and stank terribly, much worse than Toller's, who was two and healthy. Sam's breathing was clogged with thick phlegm, and at six months he was no bigger than Toller had been at six weeks. Neighbors said to Kören, "He sounds colicky," and, "Give him solids," as though they could help.

At the town hospital in Wetaskiwin, Dr. Sowby first said Sam had the flu. But shots didn't help, and Sowby reconsidered. He suggested that Sam might be allergic to Kören's milk, then that one of his lungs hadn't formed. Finally, after consultation with doctors from Camrose, Sowby decided that Sam had celiac disease, a chronic case of it, the worst he'd ever seen. He put the baby on a gluten-free diet and instructed Kören to stop using wheat flour. But at nineteen months Sam remained gaunt like a plucked bird with horrible diarrhea Sowby couldn't cure. Shaking his head and lifting his moustache to his nose, the doctor gave up. He told Kören she must take Sam to gastroenterologists up in Edmonton, 40 miles away. "You'd better get him there quick," he said, looking at the floor.

That was on a Tuesday, and Peter was away checking pipelines until the weekend. So Kören asked a neighbor four trailers down to take Kirsten and Toller overnight, then bundled Sam in several layers and walked with him on hard crunchy snow to the Greyhound stop at Mel Markoe's Esso gas station on the north end of town. Sam fussed with rough coughs and sharp cries during the long ride to the city, and needed to be changed twice. Kören bounced him and cooed into his ears, but the child would not be soothed. Other passengers glared sharply at Kören with alarm and reproach; she felt blamed and unwelcome. She swallowed and looked away, pressing into her narrow seat, lightly scratching out letters of the alphabet on the fabric over Sam's back. She rocked him, whispering, "There, there, my baby, there, there."

For the rest of the family's time in Wetaskiwin, almost another year, Dr. Sowby was attentive and protective toward Sam. He called Kören at home with news of research in Baltimore or a magazine article that promised a raised life expectancy of some CF children, from three years

to five, or even seven. Claiming he needed to visit a chemist in the city, Sowby twice drove Kören and Sam to Edmonton for the boy's monthly stay at the University of Alberta Hospital. To Kören the doctor's courtesies seemed guilty and compensatory, but also sincere and, heavens, they were needed. She wanted every hopeful word he had to say.

Kören had never heard of cystic fibrosis until the day it was explained to her that Sam had it. She spent the first few weeks thereafter reading about it in library encyclopedias, fidgety between entries, scanning for contradictions. Within a day (and for ever after) the disease became "CF" to her, like a title, a code, a password. She knew its name like her own.

Because the sickness was genetically passed, both Kirsten and Toller were also given the CF sweat test in Edmonton. Sam's first CF test had inexplicably come out negative, delaying the diagnosis by three weeks, and so Kören insisted the doctors test Kirsten and Toller twice. "We're sure," the doctors had told her after her older children's initial tests, but she closed her eyes and shook her head: "I'm not," she said, "Please do it again." A week later she paced between Kirsten and Toller, in separate tinny-clean rooms on the third floor, and Sam's cramped room on the fourth. She imagined clearing space in Sam's room for two more children, began strategies for keeping Toller quiet in bed, considered words for telling her daughter she too had a breathless disease. But both tests for Kirsten and Toller claimed they were strong and unblemished. A rough-skinned nurse said, "They sweat like we do," gave Kören's arm two swift pats, and left her. Kören blinked, watching the nurse's back shrink down the hospital hall. For a while she just stood, wondering how her children had been divided. Until now she'd believed she'd given each child almost the same parts of herself—pretty much the same pieces of her body, more or less identical pieces of her devotion; though relieved, she was also baffled, plainly baffled, when informed that in at least this way, this one remarkable way, she had not.

On one of her trips between floors, while staring only at the numbers above the elevator doors, Kören heard someone call her name. It was a dry, throaty growl, and said, "Hello, Kory."

Kören turned and blinked at a bony woman in purple stretch pants, wearing sunglasses indoors, with narrow black hair swept up on her head, spun like cotton candy. The woman stood smiling at her, and Kören automatically, unsteadily, smiled in return. Then she realized this woman was Dagmar Eriksson.

They hugged like friends, and chatted in broad catch-up sentences that covered several towns and ten years. They exchanged news of the maladies that brought them into the city: Kören lightly explained cystic fibrosis, while Dagmar shook her head and grimaced; for her turn, Dagmar tapped her own chest and said, "TB. Just getting out."

Kören said, "Oh, Dagmar, I'm sorry," because seeing Dagmar's pained expression, it seemed the appropriate thing to say. But she thought Dagmar had said, "BB," and had no idea what it was. In the split second when she could have easily cleared it up, Kören chose instead not to ask, because at the root of her, she just didn't want to know.

Dagmar, though, was thrilled to see Kören, and said so, again and again. They had coffee in the cafeteria, then went together into the child care ward, where Sam and three other toddlers sat and lay, playing with blocks or sleeping in elevated cribs, all of them attached to individual intravenous bags, which hung like vines of clear ivy beside them. Sam smiled with a big open mouth seeing Kören, then smiled and laughed for Dagmar, delighting her. "Look at this boy," Dagmar said, and said it again, laughing and coughing, poking Sam's stomach, while he laughed and coughed along. They played on the floor, and Kören sat on a bed and watched. She felt relieved of the need to entertain, because Sam could do it well. He was freed of mystery now and, lately he'd become her Ever-Cheerful Boy.

Kören walked with Dagmar to the front doors of the hospital. In the waiting area across the hall, Kören noticed a tall spindly man in a plaid cloth jacket toss aside the magazine he'd been reading and arise when he saw Dagmar approach. Kören whispered to Dagmar, "Someone you know?"

Dagmar said, with a casual flip of her hand, "Oh, that's Philip."

Kören said, "Your husband?"

And Dagmar said, "No, he's just Philip," which made Kören laugh, and in turn surprised them both.

Dagmar looked up at her, as though to ask, "What?"

The laugh caught in Kören's throat, and hung on. The women gawked at one another, like schoolgirls with some bright shared secret, about to well up inside them both and gush out. Kören saw Dagmar's lips turning up, nearing glee, and together at once, they laughed, uncapped, clear and loud, in front of Just Philip and all the strangers in a somber hospital.

"Goodbye, Kören," Dagmar said and kissed Kören's cheek. "I always liked you."

Kören scanned Dagmar's face to see if she was joking; it was that peculiar.

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After Sam's childhood had been survived and his teenage at last begun, Kören often heard other Mormons recount with dreamy recollection their own first experiences at the church, and how they came to stay there. Kören learned to nod along and appreciate their stories of amazed,

convoluted conversions. But when she told *her* story of how it had happened to her and her kids, she felt a little shamed because she hadn't anything angelic to share; it was a place to take the *Astre*.

Kören thought of Sam as an enduringly glad and lucky child, who charmed doctors and nurses and neighbors and fates. Through his first years in Wetaskiwin as an undersized tot, his digestive tablets had been large and legion, sometimes pink and sometimes chalk, the size of pennies. He'd needed between six and twelve of them, at every meal, before every snack or treat, every day, forever. As the Edmonton doctors rotated, some seen by chance only once or twice, others consistently greeting Kören for months or years, the medications changed with them, given new names, or sizes, or forms, often as powders and occasionally liquids. When at last they moved into the city, Kören devoted an entire kitchen shelf to Sam's pills.

Painfully, Sam built up immunities to every drug, slowly needing more pills to eat smaller portions of food. Doctors nervously tapped Sam's file with their pens or rubbed their foreheads wearily, while they admitted to Kören their fears that helplessness was inevitable and approaching with every coming week. Still, Sam repeatedly outlived his drugs, as breakthroughs were announced just as he needed them most, and new medications began his diet cycle anew. With sputters and hacks, he grew past three, five, and seven. By his eleventh birthday, Kören simply expected him to live.

That was 1976, the year Peter left her. Toller was thirteen, and Kirsten two and a half years older. One of Sam's doctors charitably referred Kören to a secretarial job in a public relations office downtown. She was under qualified but determined, and after several weeks managed to acquit herself at her desk with relative skill. Her brother Gôran co-signed with her for a car loan, which bought a used '73 Pontiac *Astre* at monthly payments of \$106. She and the kids stayed in the house, but Peter wanted to sell it. Kören began reading real estate ads. She depended with increasing heaviness on Kirsten to wash clothes, to make dinners, to keep Toller from pummeling Sam.

Traffic snarled and tugged at Kören's panting little car, pulling her in every morning and holding on too long every night. Behind the wheel Kören twinged with restless guilt over recent grimaces from her children. Kirsten sighed and gritted her teeth when Kören told her in the morning she might be late that night; Sam took sick and to bed for her first three weeks at work; Toller taunted her, saying "I hate you," slamming doors whenever he left a room she was in. She yearned for time with them.

Every weekend Kören took the family together for a trip in the *Astre*, whether grocery shopping or to the U of A for Sam's treatments or to Calmar to visit her parents or (on special occasions) to a movie. They would all go, often fighting or sullen or giddy, tightly packed in a small

green car. Kören spent her weekday commutes thinking up a new need, a new place for the family to go when the weekend came. She planned Saturdays until Toller joined the junior high wrestling team and Sam tagged along, keeping stats. Thereafter Kören looked to Sundays for something to do.

Two of the five Steadman children from two blocks over had CF—a daughter named Alissa, a year younger than Sam, and a boy of two named Spencer. Kören met Maureen Steadman at the hospital where their mutual wheezers once stayed overnight in adjoining rooms. When they discovered both families lived in the same neighborhood, they became friends, sometimes carpooling together.

After one such checkup, as soon as they were out of the Steadman's station wagon and Maureen had pulled away, Sam asked Kören, "What's a Mormon?"

Kören made him repeat the word because she didn't know it. To her it sounded like the name of an elk or something Peter used to hunt; she told Sam that she thought maybe a mormon was a type of deer. He made a face and said that didn't make sense at all.

A few nights later, Maureen dropped by the house to ask Kören if Sam could go to church with the Steadmans the following week. Kören blinked twice, then asked, "What church?"

Surprised, Maureen said, "Oh, we're Mormons!"

For a flash, Kören was shocked, aware what was meant but reminded of the elk, imagining a herd of Steadmans, grazing around the dinner table. She laughed at the thought and then covered her mouth with her free hand.

She told Maureen she'd have to talk to Sam about it, which seemed to make Maureen apologetic. "Whichever way you go is fine, Kory," she said. "I just wanted to ask."

The following Saturday in the Astre, shopping for cheap wrestling shoes for Toller after his first week on the team, Kören asked the kids if they'd like to go to church the next day.

"Yeah, Mom," Sam chirped from the back seat, "Let's go with the Steadmans."

Kirsten said, "I like this song," and turned up the radio.

Kören said to her, "Did you hear what I said?"

Kirsten nodded and sang, "*She get down on her knees and hug me, she loves me like a rock.*"

Toller reached between the front bucket seats from the back and pointed across his mother's face. "There, Mom, Sportsworld, they have wrestling shoes!"

Sam pulled on Kirsten's shoulder and said, "Who is this?"

Kören pushed away Toller's hand. "You'll cause an accident here, Toller; that place is too expensive; sit back when I'm driving!"

Kirsten said to Sam, "Paul Simon."

Sam asked, "What's the difference between an Astre and a Pinto?"

Toller slugged Sam's arm and said, "The name. Shut up."

Kirsten sang, "*Who do you think you're fooling?*" and Sam echoed her, both of them swaying one side to the other.

Kören checked Toller in the rearview. "Can't you borrow some old shoes from someone on the team?"

Sam said, "Yeah, he can," and continued singing.

Toller grimaced, shouting, "I want my own!"

"*She rock me like the rock of ages, oh she love me love me love me—*"

Kirsten nudged Kören, saying, "Mom, sing with us."

Kören raised her eyebrows to Toller's reflection. "We can't afford eighteen-dollar shoes just for wrestling, Toller."

Toller hit Kirsten's seat with his fist. "I hate you to hell," he said, pointing at Kören's eyes in the mirror.

Kirsten sang, "*Ooo, your mama loves you, she loves you—*"

Toller swiped at her but missed.

Sam said, pulling on Kören's arm, "Mom, sing."

Kören's face worried up, and for a moment she reconsidered her budget, glancing back in the rearview at Toller, who was angry to the edge of flushed tears. She raised her brow and sighed, clearing her own eyes, smoothing her face, deciding to calm. She joined Kirsten and Sam, singing, shifting their shoulders up and down, chanting off-key and bouncing their elbows, stubborn warblers insisting to Toller how his mama loved him loved him loved him, while he sulked, and hit Kirsten's seat, and yelled to Kören how he hated her to hell. She wouldn't believe him.

For years, riding a bus toward or away from the U of A hospital, Kören had seen the Mormon church on Whyte Avenue, but the red brick exterior struck her as so plain that until going inside she had thought it a school. Kören expected churches to declare themselves, with a cross on the lawn, or a vendor sign abutting the sidewalk, announcing the week's sermon title in imprecisely spaced plastic letters. Where the Southgate/University bus turned on 109th Street, there sat a small corner church with a sad, weathered sign that said *Jesus Saves*. Across the street was a grocery store with a sign four times that size, which said *Loblaws Saves You More*. Kören thought, now there's a church.

But the Mormon church was nondescript on the outside and fairly plain within. There weren't any paintings or candles as she expected, just the chapel with an organ and a piano and maybe flowers—and a rec hall built for basketball.

So Kören began going to church and meeting missionaries and sort of seeing Jack O'Carroll, a high school teacher and recently divorced father of four, whom married members repeatedly asked if she had yet met. It was an awkward first meeting (Maureen introduced them and

shyly excused herself), but Jack was kind and sweet, amused and unhurried by the social pressures of the ward. For Kören he became a shield, an insulation from too much information or expectation or even just too many names, with new "Brothers" and "Sisters" eager to make her acquaintance, to shake her hand, to meet her children, to ask her questions and wait for hers, to gladly insist they were "available" to her for anything at all. Kören let words and names slide over her, and offers and scriptures and doctrines, allowing everything to course around or past, knowing Jack would catch it for her when and if it was ever needed. She didn't see him through the week unless he came to the house with the missionaries. He was her church guide and her weekend friend.

But believing—in God or Jesus or Joseph Smith or any of it—was clearly a crucial part of the going, and Kören began to doubt she could stay. The kids had followed right along: Kirsten blithely made several friends and resisted not a bit; Sam trusted the church completely; even Toller had started attending meetings with them. As the weeks grew more serious, Kören felt herself and her children mired in place and wondered where she had led them all and where they would go.

Back in Wetaskiwin, in the early winter days of Dr. Sowby's guesses and Peter's far-off pipelines, Toller had caught one leg between the branches of a tree while playing with Kirsten in the field behind the trailer park. He fell back and hung there, unable to climb up or down, twisting his calf. Kirsten had started climbing first and was a limb above Toller, but she jumped out of the tree when he screamed. From the ground she reached up to her dangling brother and held his shoulders so that he was almost parallel to the branch. The lift stopped his screaming, but he couldn't unhook his foot. So Kirsten called across the field to a neighbor boy, commanding him to get Kören and bring her to the tree, which he urgently did.

Thinking someone dead, Kören ran to the field with Sam swaddled in her arms. She breathed when she arrived and then laughed: her five-year-old daughter with her arms over her head, holding her two-year-old stuck in a tree. Kören carefully lifted Toller with one arm and with the other handed Sam to Kirsten. While Kören untangled Toller's leg, Kirsten sniffled, saying with enormous shame, "I'm sorry, Mommy. I was supposed to take care of him." More with sorrow for Kirsten than pain of his leg, Toller began crying too, and Sam had been doing so since Kören left running from the trailer. The chorus made Kören giggle, but it touched her too, as she led them back home, promising all would be well, that they'd take care of each other forever.

Kören told the story of "Toller in the Tree" to Dagmar Eriksson in the U of A hospital one Tuesday night in March. After supper on Monday, while in with Sam for hardly an hour, Kören had caught a glimpse of Dagmar in a tv room, wearing a dark blue bathrobe and fuzzy pink slip-

pers, smoking and watching *Maude*. Kören knocked on the door and called Dagmar's name.

Dagmar turned sharply, as though caught like a deer in headlights, but relaxed after a second or two of refocusing. At last, she smiled right across her face and held out her arms. "C'mere, honey," she croaked, and Kören hugged her in her chair.

"Where's my boy?" she asked, meaning Sam, which was what she had asked the last time Kören had seen her here when Sam was six.

"He went ahead to the pharmacy. He's eleven now."

"Eleven," said Dagmar, sitting back. She leaned forward again. "And he's all right?"

For some reason she didn't grasp, this question moved Kören, and she felt her eyes sting. She looked up at the wall to help it pass, and answered simply, "He's fine, Dagmar."

"Well, you see," Dagmar said, brushing Kören's hand with her own in a mock sort of slap, "Not so bad after all, is it?"

Kören smiled. She asked, "Why are you back?"

Dagmar fluttered a hand around her, sweeping the couch and table and television. "The decor, dear. I love it. I'm thinking of moving in."

For a while they swapped gossip and brief news of their lives until Sam appeared in the door and Dagmar squealed to see him. She insisted on walking them out to the front, but walking was a struggle, and she stopped instead at the elevator, winded and hacking and waving Kören's arm from her back.

"Come see me while I'm here," she said, straightening. "I'll sneak an extra plate; we'll have dinner."

Kören said maybe she would, if she could find the time. Dagmar nodded, smiling, and winked at Sam before the elevator doors closed.

But the next night at home while the tv hummed, Kören found herself thinking of Dagmar up at the U of A, smoking through *Laverne and Shirley*, and on a whim she put on her coat, left Kirsten in charge, and drove the *Astre* back to the hospital.

Dagmar was sitting in bed in her room, awake with a book on her lap but not reading it. When Kören entered the room, Dagmar raised both her hands over her shoulders in burlesque surprise. She said, "Honey, I forgot all about dinner!"

"You owe me," Kören said and sat next to Dagmar on her bed.

Dagmar was animated, sputtering machine-gun opinions and making Kören laugh, gesturing pointedly, stabbing the air on one side and then slicing it with a grand sweep on the other. But as Dagmar talked, Kören studied the thin lines of her face and the clawed digits her fingers had become, and saw nothing at all of the woman in the ice rink of her own youth. Discreetly looking down now and again, Kören examined her own hands in comparison, amazed to think Dagmar was only two years older than she.

Dagmar must have read the difference, too, because after a while she fell silent and held her hands up to her face. "Liver spots! God!" she said, twisting up her face. "I look like Old Man Hlushko."

Kören dropped her jaw and held it with one hand. "Mr. Hlushko," she said.

"Remember Bud? All those liver spots he had?"

Well, she didn't particularly remember the liver spots. But Kören nodded yes, she certainly remembered the man. "He crowned us the night of the carnival," Kören said, smiling.

"And as drunk as a skunk that night, too." Dagmar scratched one hand lightly and watched for any result.

"No!" Kören said, puzzled, remembering differently now.

Dagmar looked up and said, "Oh Kory, c'mon. He slipped and slid all over the rink. I practically had to hold him up. That man was flammable."

Kören started to laugh. Of course he was drunk.

"And I'll tell you something else I'll bet you never figured," Dagmar said, sitting up, warming. "Why do you think you lost that crown to me?"

Kören blanched. She shook her head.

"Because I cheated, that's why!" Dagmar said and nodded once for emphasis and jabbed the air.

Kören said, "What?"

"I cheated. I did. Remember, the girl who sold the most tickets to the carnival got to be queen. And you were just little Miss Popular, everybody was buying your tickets."

Kören forced a chuckle, feeling flushed and embarrassed.

Dagmar rolled her eyes. "But see, you were just selling one at a time. That was how it was supposed to work, of course, but hell, those Lions Club dodgers, they just wanted to raise money; they didn't care. I sold tickets by the case to truckers in town. I batted my eyes and promised them I'd win and, hey, they'd buy me out. I was a real rotter."

Kören laughed once, a resigned sigh. Then she laughed again, longer, bringing her hand up to her head.

Dagmar smoothed her blanket and did not laugh along. After a minute, staring at her lap, Dagmar said softly, "Everywhere I've gone, I've wanted to be someplace else. I think I'll be happier there,"—she jabbed at the air—"or better yet, there." And she jabbed again, on the other side.

She cupped her hands together, rubbing her joints. "But there is never here, Kory," Dagmar said. "There is always someplace else."

Kören placed her hand on both of Dagmar's, and Dagmar started to cry. To her amazement, Kören thought she understood. In bed with Peter, their legs entwined, their arms searching up and down each other, when

their lives rolled up together, he had whispered to her, "Are you there?" And sometimes she answered "Yes," and sometimes she answered "Soon," but mostly either was a lie because, honestly, she could never quite tell. Where had they been, then—Thorsby? Wetaskiwin? Not Edmonton, anyway. Not here.

And Kören knew she had been naive. Seeing herself in Conjuring Creek through Dagmar's eyes, she was even shallow. But Kören also knew that she had since drifted away from that shoal where she had been, and for a moment the knowledge made her wonder. Her eyes drifted off to no specific spot, and she idly patted Dagmar's hands. She thought, a person starts in the shallows and, without intention, softly treads from no sorrows to many, to a pool full of them, poured steadily over time until heavily they sink, deep like a lake, and fill a life. It seemed to Kören that this was how a woman was defined: she was only the sum of the sadnesses that submerged her.

Her answer about the church came two weeks later, through Sam, on the night of the Academy Awards.

The *Edmonton Journal* had predicted a sweep for *All the President's Men*, and *Maclean's* magazine said *Network* or *Taxi Driver*, but Kören couldn't find anything that gave the edge to *Rocky*, and she knew Sam would be shattered. He'd wrapped up his whole faith in the expectation that the underappreciated underdog would beat the odds, as in the film, and win everything. Kören pointed out that in the movie, Rocky didn't actually win, that for him "going the distance" was reward enough, but Sam would not be dissuaded. Rocky may have lost the fight then, but this time he was going to win Best Picture. Sam was praying for it.

No one could argue with Sam without losing their point. He was buoyant and persuasive. Figuring that Bishop Fairbanks, the Mormon ward leader, represented for Sam the ultimate local authority, Kören asked the bishop to talk to Sam about *Rocky* and Oscars and how they weren't necessarily connected to the Lord. A good-natured dentist during the week, with plenty of experience dealing with kids, Bishop Fairbanks chuckled and agreed, taking Sam into his office after sacrament meeting the Sunday before the awards. They talked privately for about twenty minutes while Kören, Toller, Kirsten, and Jack waited in the hall. The bishop opened his door with his arm over Sam's shoulder and announced, "Tomorrow night, the Best Picture will be *Rocky!*"

Toller rolled his eyes and said, "Someone shoot that kid."

But by suppertime Monday night, Kören didn't think Sam's ardor was funny or trivial; it had become too significant, and insistent, and dangerous. A few minutes before the program began, while Sam was antsy and eager to watch, Kören pulled him into the kitchen for one last try.

"Sam, listen to me," she said, stern against his puppydog eyes. "What will you do if *Rocky* doesn't win?"

"It will win."

"I know, but if it doesn't, what will you do?"

Sam considered. At last. He said, "What do you want?"

"I want you to promise me you won't get upset, or kick the coffee table, or get sick, or be mad at God."

Sam stared up at her, morally offended. But he said, "Okay."

"Okay," Kören said in return, and let him go.

He didn't move. He said, "What'll you do if it wins?"

Kören smiled and thought, you little rock. "I don't know," she answered. "What do you want?"

"You get baptized."

Kören paled, thinking, you awful little kid.

"Mom?"

"What?"

"If *Rocky* wins Best Picture, you get baptized. Okay?"

She stared back at him and said, "Okay."

It was then that Kören realized that *Rocky* would win, that it had all come to this, that her son had the power to give Oscars. She laughed to herself all through the evening until the last award was given, and her fate was sealed, and Sam shouted, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

Formally interviewing her the next week, a small sheet called a baptismal recommend filled out and ready to sign, Bishop Fairbanks asked Kören, "Do you have a testimony that the Church is true?"

It was the question of her conversion, the story she never knew how to tell. What did these people mean when they said "testimony"? A pact? A surety? Kören had given testimony in her divorce papers; the bishop could go down to the courthouse and read it for himself. In stark, short terms, her lawyer had set down the facts of her life: she was a displaced Swede, a farm girl grown up, without college, without work experience, without a husband, and with kids. She wondered what she would add to her testimony now.

Only that she knew where she was, where she might always be. The man she'd slept with for seventeen years would forever sleep some place else. She had three children. Her home was sold, her car a cost, and the weather was harsh. She needed a place, and hope, and a faster route to work. These were the convictions to which she could swear.

Finally she brushed her eyelashes with one finger, and answered the bishop. "Oh yes," she said. He seemed satisfied, and nodded, and signed the recommend paper.

But the answer she suppressed was, "For God's sake, Bishop, I'm *here*."