

Christopher sat the doorway of the tree house looking down at Melissa who was gathering flowers. He liked it that she was naked. Because of all the things her mother had told her about how dangerous the world was, for a long time she'd been afraid to be naked with him, or even with the other kids when they went swimming. She had gotten over that, largely because of his gentle encouragement. He liked watching her. And he liked it that she now seemed to trust him. He thought that perhaps someday soon he might try to teach her what Gaea had taught him. She was not as developed as Gaea. Her breasts were just beginning to grow, and she didn't have much hair down below. But he found her to be every bit as beautiful as Gaea – even more so in some ways. He knew, however, that it would be a mistake to push things too quickly. Just like she had to have time to get used to being naked, she needed time to get used to being touched by him and touching him in return.

It bothered Christopher that he had lied to Kyle. It was the first time he could recall ever having done that. At the same time it made it possible for him to spend the night alone with Melissa, and he wasn't quite sure that he wouldn't do the same thing again if the occasion arose.

For some time now he had sensed the competition between Kyle and Melissa, and a few weeks ago had written to his mother about his concerns. He had it sent by the cooperative email station in town. It was anticipated that pretty soon almost any computer could hook up again to the Internet, but the technology had not been repaired to that extent yet. They told him to come back in a few days and they would print out any answer that was sent to them. Before he left with Kyle on their journey to Indianapolis, his mother had told him that she would be checking every other day at the Internet Co-op near their house. It was a way for them to keep in touch. The answer came back to him in less than a week.

Christopher crawled back into the tree house, grabbed his blue jeans that were in the heap of his clothes that lay in one corner, and dragged them back to the tree house doorway. There he rummaged through the pockets until he found the letter his mother had written him. He pulled this out of his back pocket and carefully unfolded it. Then he glanced down at Melissa. She had gathered a pile of flowers and was sitting down beside them, and weaving them into a long chain.

The letter was somewhat worn from several readings at this point. He went directly to the place where she had answered his question, and read, half out loud:

*Everyone's got a different landscape. And that's a good way for it to be. Their ain't no gay nor straight nor pedo nor bi, and certainly no normal or abnormal, no more than you can say about an ocean or a continent, this one here is normal, and that one is abnormal. Each person is his or her own landscape – which like any landscape is a mixture of things. We just find ourselves among all these hills and forests with all the living things within them, and sometimes we find joy in their beauty and other times we tremble at the dangers that might pop out at us at any moment. To always see the beauty while at the same time never forgetting about the possible dangers – that is the way I think we should live. Beautiful and dangerous are useful words. They define real things that happen to us and around us – things we can know and see. But 'normal' and 'abnormal' – what use are those terms? When I look around me I don't see no normal or abnormal. I see beautiful and ugly and loving and hateful and helpful and dangerous – but not normal or abnormal. Those are life-killing words. Those are words narrow people use to try to put life in a little box because it's too big and unruly for them to accept on its own terms. Normal and abnormal? Pah! Show me an abnormal mountain.*

*All the things that go into making up a landscape – the hills and plains and forests and rivers – have a history. They come to be through volcanoes or continents colliding, or wind and rain or glaciers or whatever. Mostly the history of our landscapes is pretty much hidden.*

*How come one person is one way and another another way? Don't seem like anybody knows*

*that. That's like the history of landscapes. Mostly it is hidden. And suppose one day we are able to answer all these questions of how come one person is one way and another some other way? What then? Knowing the history of a beautiful mountain can't make it ugly. It can only make it more beautiful.*

*I got this friend who is hell bent on figuring this out. Like if your mama had square nipples, you going to turn out this way, and if your daddy tried to breastfeed you with those hairy nipples he got, you going to turn out this other way. Well, more power to my friend. But I don't think he's going to nail anything down very definite.*

*"How far you got on figuring it out?" I ask him from time to time.*

*"I'm gaining on it," he says.*

*"Gaining?" I say. "Tell my something you didn't know last week."*

*"Well, I'm just beginning," he admits. "Don't have nothing definite yet."*

*Always he is just beginning. "I've just pulled Truth's skirt up a tiny bit and can only see a bit of her ankle," he tells me.*

*"Well," I tell him, "You got to consider that maybe she don't want to be undressed. Maybe she's quite happy walking around in all her glitter and finery."*

*So Chris, you just live according to what your heart tells you. You love Kyle and you love Melissa. They're both beautiful things in the landscape of your heart. And that's fine. Now what you're going to do if you got two mountains on your hands that's likely to collide with each other, that I don't know. You just have to work it out as best you can. You just got to try not to hurt anybody, nor get hurt yourself – at least no more than can be helped.*

It was a good letter. It told him everything except the one thing that he most needed to know. What was he supposed to do about this situation? It was distressing that even his mother didn't seem to have an answer for that. He folded the letter back up, stuffed it into the back pocket of his blue jeans, and threw his things back into the corner of the tree house. Down below, Melissa had finished her flower chain and had wrapped it around into a hoop. She placed the hoop on her head and called up to Christopher.

"Look, Christopher, I'm a princess."

She stood up and twirled around and around in a graceful manner showing off how pretty she was in her flower crown