

The Undercover Kingdom

by Con Chapman

They were less than a year apart, the boy and the girl, and for that reason they had always been preternaturally close, murmuring to each other behind cupped hands in what amounted to a private language. They fancied themselves a band of desperadoes, like the men they'd watched on television defending the Alamo, only their enemies were the adult world and big sisters.

The adults could be handled because they recognized lines of demarcation; they stayed downstairs once you went to bed unless you made too much noise, in which case they were justified in coming up and giving you a scolding and putting you in your separate beds. A big sister, on the other hand, would bust into the room whenever she felt like it, turn on the lights, make snotty comments and then just leave, on no provocation at all. It was the difference between fighting the British redcoats and the Swamp Fox. The Redcoats observed proper rules of war, but you never knew where the Swamp Fox was at.

It was better sleeping together because when they combined their stuffed animals they had a real menagerie going. It was a good way to learn words, to use them in a sentence. He had a green plaid Scottie dog that he always took to bed, never leaving it out at night, and she had a yellow plaid giraffe that she treated the same way. They were both the size of a child's hand, so you could maneuver them up and down the hills and dales formed by their pajama-clad legs and torsos.

The problem with a surprise attack by a big sister was that she would catch you speaking in your native tongue, perpetuating the culture of the Undercover Kingdom, when she was one of the guards who patrolled the border, ready to drag you kicking and screaming into the adult world if she caught you. It was like the guards they saw on the Berlin Wall on TV. They pretended they were just guarding the place, but if they caught you close to the border they'd pull you over into Russia, so they were more than just guards.



Mostly they got to sleep together on Friday nights when big sister had a date or a basketball game to go to and she'd sleep in the maid's room. Then they would ask if they could sleep together and mom would usually say yes since they didn't have school the next day. Unless one of them was sick. They never asked dad, he was usually reading the paper and it wasn't up to him anyhow.

On other nights the boy would try to sneak into the girl's room and crawl into the bed, but their parents had better ears on those nights, or they went to bed earlier because it was a school night so they always got caught.

If you had on pajamas with pockets you could sneak a handful of animal crackers upstairs, but first you had to get them out of the kitchen. They would come down and say good night, then go to the kitchen where the animal crackers were on the Lazy Susan in the corner. The girl would open the door and the boy would turn the wheel until the crackers were up front, then slowly open the cardboard and quietly unroll the wax paper lining. Once that was done, the girl would slip her fingers down into the box because her hand was skinnier; once she had enough, they would wheel the Lazy Susan around until the notch was facing outwards, then close the door. Nobody ever noticed what condition the animal crackers were in the next day.



When they added the animal crackers to the stuffed animals they would have what looked like the herds of buffalo they saw on TV, and they would eat them quietly under the covers, being careful to brush the crumbs out onto the floor when they were done. One night, as they sat there chewing and giggling, the big sister came into the room and turned on the lights.

"What are you two doing?" she asked with an angry look on her face. The nuns probably yelled at her at the basketball game for something she did, or not wearing stockings.

"Nuffing," the boy said through a mouth full of crackers. He knew his sister wouldn't answer, would leave the explaining to him, so he went ahead and did the duty that falls to a man in such circumstances.

"Are you two eating in bed?" she asked with exaggerated disbelief. She knew what they were doing—why pretend just to make a point.

"Yeth," the girl said, her mouth dry from the crackers.

"You're gonna get fat," the older sister said to the girl, then turned her glare on to the boy. "You're gonna get fatter."

The boy felt his face warm up, and he thought of how his grandfather had shown him how to do sit-ups and push-ups when they were in Atlanta, but he didn't like to do them, he didn't see how anybody ever could.

The older sister reached in her underwear drawer, pulled out a bra and tossed it on the bed.

"Don't look you little cretin," she said as she turned her back and took off her shirt.

"Does mom know you're going out?" the girl asked.

"Not if you don't tell her, you fink," the older sister said.

"She'll find out eventually," the girl said. "You might as well be honest."

"If I want to win a catechism medal I'll ask you. Until then, keep your trap shut."

The two cowered in the bed, beat down by the verbal assault. The older sister knew, or thought she knew, that the way to keep things under control was through intimidation. It was safer to be feared than to be loved, she had learned in Latin class. One of the boys in her ninth grade class had shown it to her in a book, and she had written it on the inside cover of her multi-subject notebook as her motto.

The boy and the girl watched the older sister put on earrings—which she was not allowed to do—then perfume. After she shaped her hair on her head she picked up a pile of books with a strap around it, and turned to face the boy and girl.

"I'm going to the library with Vicki, do you understand? And if either one of you tells on me I'll come back and give you a case of Indian sunburn you'll never forget—do you understand?"

The girl said yes, but the boy said nothing; he wasn't giving in so easily. He would resist torture, the way the stoic American serviceman on the poster at the National Guard Armory gave only his name, rank and serial number when tortured by evil soldiers on the service of a foreign despot.

"Do you understand?" the older girl demanded of the boy, grabbing his thigh under the covers in a monkey bite. She knew how to get to him from extensive prior experience.

"Yes," he said, and whimpered a little.

The older girl let go, and stood up with a look of disgusted triumph on her face.

"Why don't you just go back to your room?" she said as collected herself after the manual effort required to subdue a member of a subordinate class. "You're a little old to be sleeping with your sister."

"Mom lets me," the boy said.

"Mom hasn't had modern biology like I have," she said. "If something goes wrong in here your sister could end up giving birth to one of those monsters you see in the freak show at the state fair."

"Like what?" the girl asked, her voice brittle with fear.

"Like the two-headed calf," the older girl said. "Or the billy goat with two pee-pees."

"Ugh," the girl said, as her older sister turned out the light.



They older sister went out in the hall as little purple and brown balls flashed before their eyes where the light had been. Then they heard her call down the steps to her parents in the living room: "Mom, I'm going to the library with Vicki, she's picking me up on the driveway."

"All right—be home by ten," they heard her mother call back in a tone muffled by carpet and stairs.

Their eyes had adjusted to the light by now, and they saw the older sister turn around one last time. "Not a word—understand?"

"We understand," the boy said quietly.

They heard her go down the hall, then down the back stairs and out onto the driveway. They got up to look out the window and saw a car parked halfway down the block on the street, its motor running.

"That's that Roger guy," the girl said.

"The one with the greasy hair?"

"Right."

"He's disgusting," the boy said. "He has pimples."

"I know. I wouldn't kiss him for a million dollars."

The girl walked around to her side of the bed and slipped under the covers.

"I'm going to go sleep in my room," the boy said, as he picked up the Scottie dog.

