

THE TALLEST ANGEL

SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER ONE. 1992. Captain Rich Elliott, 37, is being transferred from the Pensacola, Florida Naval Air Station to a new, as-yet-unrevealed location. But first he is taking some vacation leave and driving up the Atlantic coast to his home state of Maine to visit his parents. He found recently that his mother has cancer, a fact which is difficult for him to deal with, considering that his Naval career has kept him away from home for many years.

On the way north a bad storm in Alabama forces him to find shelter in the closest truck stop/hotel where, to his dismay, a tree is blown onto the U-Haul trailer they are towing, crushing it. The lights go out in the hotel complex and the “guests” take refuge around the fireplace in a large recreation area. Carolyn, Rich’s wife, remembers a time when she and Rich went through a similar storm at sea together when in the fifth grade, back home in Rock Harbor, Maine. Their children, Kelly, 7, and Michael, 10, beg Rich to tell the story.

CHAPTERS TWO THROUGH NINE. Rich begins by telling his children, and the other listeners, about a dream he had once as a boy, back in May of 1969. (These eight chapters in Angel are the first-person account that also make up the stand-alone Novella, Victory.)

Mid-coast Maine, 1969. 11½ year old Richard Clinton Elliott III stays up late one Friday evening to watch a rerun of the classic Errol Flynn film, Captain Blood. Richie falls asleep in the easy chair, and is wakened at 5 AM Saturday morning by the Star Spangled Banner, blaring from the TV. He slips quietly into the kitchen, where he meets some imagined characters—a refrigerator light who always jumps out and tries to run away and cookies who climb out of the cookie jar and waddle across the counter to say hello. (Obviously Richie has a wild imagination.) He leaves his dog, Ruff, at home and heads through the dense fog toward the marina for some early-morning fishing.

While on the dock, sleep catches Richie in its net as he drifts off into another adventure. In his dream, he finds a huge old three-masted sailing ship docked close by. But before he can climb on deck and examine his prize, he hears the muffled footsteps of someone coming. The intruder turns out to be the ugly white-eyed pirate, Shark, and his vile parrot, Compass. Shark curses the old ship, scares the bejeebers out of Richie, then hurries away in the fog, walking right off the end of the dock. Rich follows but instead of finding the pirate, he finds a large black shark in the water, glaring up at him ... with that one white eye!

Later, when Richie returns to the ship, he accidentally awakens her and finds that she is very much alive. She tells him her name is Victory and informs the boy that she has come to take him on an adventure cruise to teach him how his imagination, his faith, self determination, and old-fashioned New-England hard work strive together to make his dreams come true.

Victory and Richie set off in the fog, following the compass of Richie's imagination, and drift back in time until they come upon a pirate ship from the past. To Rich's surprise, the pirate ship is manned by his grade-school janitors and principal, and the captain is his fifth grade teacher, Miss Hurley.

Rich is assured by Victory that if he goes onboard the pirate ship, he can observe but he will not be seen. But while there, Captain Hurley comes on deck screaming because she found a small green snake in her desk drawer. (Richie had pulled that very trick on her, in real life, several days earlier, at school.) She sentences him to walk the plank and as he is falling toward the open mouths of several large green snakes in the water.

Richie lands instead on Victory's deck, shaking, crying, and upset. The old ship then proceeds (in her humorous sarcastic way) to set up "Imaginative Illustrations," as she puts it, to teach Richie the details of how his imagination works and how to make his dreams come true. She also explains why his imagination tricked him, back on the pirate ship.

As their adventure unfolds, Rich is introduced to a menagerie of animated characters who all play a part in his "education." Contributors include a group of teenage whales, a tiny ballerina who writes in the Captain's log with the tip of her toe, recording Richie's hour by hour history, a choir of butterflies, a dignified old-English swivel chair, a cockney dinghy with half a brain, a rusty pot-bellied stove who tells corny stories, and a distracted pelican.

Later, Victory spreads her wings (studding sails) and takes Rich up into the clouds to see himself in his future, as Captain Richard C. Elliott, U.S. Naval fighter pilot. While there, she teaches him the value of honesty and humility to keep "The Mirror of His Imagination" clear so he can see his future. And it is here that she also gives Richie and each reader a never-to-be-forgotten lesson in how to pre-visualize one's dreams as an aid to help them come true. After this, Victory returns Richie to the dock at the marina where she draws her teaching to a satisfying conclusion, laying out the simplicity of how to make our dreams come true. She promises to return another time, then disappears, leaving Richie alone to ponder his adventure and all he has learned. And he is satisfied, and very, very tired.

CHAPTERS TEN THROUGH 29. The Alabama storm subsides through the night and the next morning, with a fresh U-Haul trailer, the family continues on their way north. Rich continues the story over the balance of the trip to Maine.

Back in 1969 ... after Richie's dream adventure with Victory, he is wakened by Grandpa, who came to the marina to fetch him back for breakfast. From this point on in the extended flash back Richie is forced to live out his dream "in the real world." He is in great conflict with his father, who thinks him immature for almost 12 because of his constant daydreaming. To add to this, Richie must now return to school to tell his teacher, Miss Hurley, that he was the student who hid the little green snake in her desk drawer as a prank. His imagination and boyish stunts put him in conflict with almost everyone, except Grandpa, the supreme instigator.

During this encounter at school, Carolyn, “the girl next door,” discovers a life -and-death secret about Richie and threatens to squeal to the whole school if he doesn’t promise to take her along on a dream adventure soon. He thinks his life is over but agrees, just to shut her up. He later finds that she isn’t the tomboy he thought and they become fast friends.

When the day of their “dream adventure” arrives he is worried sick, knowing that nothing will happen. They ride their bikes out to the cove for a picnic, where he has promised Carolyn they would see Victory, his imaginary ship. At the last possible moment, when his world is about to crumble, to their amazement a vintage three-masted ship navigates into the cove. It is The Victory, the mascot of the Victor shoe company in Boston and practically a replica of Richie’s dream ship, Victory.

The kids find that the ship is there to film a commercial for an upcoming fall ad campaign for the shoe company but the young actor and actress hired to play the kid’s parts do not show up. When the owners of the shoe company, Ben and Gloria Victor, fly up to Maine to straighten out the problem, Richie realizes that Ben Victor is an old Navy buddy of his Grandpa, Rich Sr. Richie and Carolyn are hired to replace the young no-show actors and with their entire class from school, filming gets underway. Rich and Carolyn give the Victors valuable advice about the commercial and about what kids like in tennis shoes. They also pull some stunts during the filming that take the commercial to a much higher level than expected.

Note: Throughout the book, Victory pops in and out of the story, in various disguises, to encourage and instruct Richie in his travels.

As a highlight to the week of shooting, Ben Victor arranges to take the kids and their fifth-grade class on a sailing adventure on board the Victory Ship, up the Maine coast. As they approach home later that day they are hit with a vicious, unexpected lightning storm. The ship is crippled and begins to sink. It hangs up on a shoal at the mouth of Rock Harbor and in a brave but foolish attempt at rescue, young Richie jumps ship and swims for shore to get his family boat to save his class. Through trickery, he does just that, although he narrowly escapes with his life when thrown overboard on the way back out to save his class. He becomes the hero and later that day receives a call from the president of the United States, congratulating him on his heroism. End of the 1969 story.

CHAPTERS 30 THROUGH 33. Back in the present of 1992, the family has completed their trip to their home town in Maine and adult Captain Elliott must now come to grips with his mother’s cancer. He argues and wrestles in his heart with the Lord over it until, with the help of an old friend, the retired minister in town, Rich finds peace and release by placing the circumstances of life, which he can’t control, into the hands of a loving God. While home, Mom, of course, grouses that her boy has been all over the world for the Navy, but only gets “home” every few years. The surprise, last-page ending is when Rich announces at the Fourth of July backyard get together that he has been assigned to be a crew chief at the Brunswick, Maine, Naval Air Station, about an hour away from “home.” Mom’s boy has come home.