

V.

Things had gone too far. A person could not be expected to go on living this way. A person had to go to school and concentrate and do homework and still have the time and energy for the really important things in life, and that wasn't possible with the way things were at home now. Something would have to be done.

So thought Tommy, brushing his teeth and collecting the new pencil box with its finely sharpened number 1 pencils and the Statue of Liberty pencil sharpener, the eraser, the colored pencils, the paper. Of course nobody expected you to do any work on the first day of school, especially in fifth grade. He was not expecting much from fifth grade. He had to go to school -- he knew he did. There was no

getting out of it and no use making a fuss about it either. Still it was no good hoping you might learn something. Oh, a fact here, a fact there, but nothing deep, nothing exciting. Anytime they got near a subject that could make your heart race and send your brain into quivers of anticipation, they'd hurry on by while you were still waiting breathless to get to the heart of the matter.

It was like walking through a field of tall grasses and with every step you took birds and animals scattered in all directions but you had to keep on going in a straight line, maybe saying "Oh, there are some birds and animals" but never stopping for that long second look that went to the heart of the matter.

Tommy looked at himself in the mirror. How fat he was -- cheeks all swollen out like a gopher's. It was his mother's fault, always stuffing him full of food. "Tommy, have some more chicken, some more rice, another piece of bread." And he ate and ate and ate because -- well, why did he eat like that, shoveling it in without really tasting any of it, just gulping it down so it would be gone? Gluttony, gluttony, he said to his reflected face, and he crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue and made a retching sound in his throat. "You make me sick," he told his mirrored self.

At breakfast his mother was nervous and that made him nervous too. "Have some more cereal, dear," she said.

"Oh, it's just school," he wanted to say to her. "It's not important." But instead he picked up the box of cereal, poured some into his bowl and put honey on it (because of the sugar problem), added milk, and read the back of the cereal box. Only two boxtops plus a dime and you could get your very own spy decoder ring with which you could read any enemy message. "Big deal," Tommy silently reproached the cereal box. How could it possibly work? What did Wheaties know about codes anyway?

At the door his mother still would not leave him alone. "Do you have your pencil box? Your lunch? Did you have enough breakfast?"

It was so unnecessary. You'd think no kid ever went to the first day of school before. He snapped "yes" at her and grouched on down the walk. Did she have to stand in the door watching him for all the world like he was Emma's age instead of nearly eleven? Oh, things just could not go on like this.

He'd just about escaped from her watchful eyes, she was turning away from the door, she was about to close it (he felt) and go moping through the house picking up this

book, that magazine, unable to find anything to do, the light gone out of her, when he heard a plaintive cry from above.

"Tommy, Tommy!" And there at the window in that awful pink nightgown was Emma, hollering so all the neighborhood would see his disgrace. "Bye, Tommy," said Emma, "have a good time at school."

Tommy walked faster, not saying anything, pretending, just pretending he'd never seen that little white house with flowers all around it, and the big old trees whose leaves would soon turn all orange and brown and red and fall off but just now they practically hid the sight of Emma who you could always expect to be there when you'd rather she wasn't, to be loud when you preferred to slink off in silence, to be watchful when you were hoping to go in peace and anonymity. And he went on up the street without looking back.

Yet he wasn't really nervous. Why should he be? It was the same kids, year after year, and the teacher would probably be Mrs. Craig who'd taught fifth grade there ever since the school was built and probably would be teaching it there long after the walls had collapsed into rubble around her. She was an old bat and incredibly boring. Yes, everything would be the same as it had been last year and the year before and the year before that.

So he was free to ponder solutions to the situation at home. Things were bad. With his father away his mother took no interest in anything. She refused to sit in the living room which was the proper room to sit in and was by far the most comfortable room in the house. That was wrong, that was unnatural. It disturbed the even rhythm of their days when his mother refused -- never in so many words of course -- to sit in the living room just because the red leather chair was there. Of course it wasn't altogether her fault. You couldn't expect her to be totally rational under these conditions and especially not when she was pregnant. It couldn't be much fun going about with your stomach all swollen up as though you had swallowed a basketball and you could barely put on your shoes anymore (though she was not that bad yet by any means) and what was it all for anyway -- to produce yet another Emma? What a waste.

You could hope for a boy, of course, but even so it would be years before he would be worth talking to, or perhaps you had to wait until you were both grown up. Could he imagine carrying on a sensible conversation with Emma under any circumstances -- when he was sixteen and she was ten? No. When he was twenty and she was fourteen? No. Maybe when he was thirty and she was twenty-four? No, she would always

be a child with her vision no wider than what she could see in front of her. Growing up would not improve her.

Emma was a problem. Emma ran wild, did what she liked, climbed all over her mother, never mind that Mother was pregnant and probably didn't feel like being climbed on. And at times Emma was so silly. You began to wonder if perhaps she wasn't all there, she could be so dumb, like thinking their father was at the beach.

Now that he, Tommy, was at school all day, Emma would probably be worse.

It was up to him to look after them. He walked a little slower. He was going to be early and that was worse than being late. Then you had to stand around outside the school, waiting for the bell and talking to people or, if you couldn't find anyone you wanted to talk to, just standing there while everyone else talked and you felt stupid. And who was there to talk to? The kids he played baseball with? They were all right to play baseball with but how much conversation could you make out of baseball? There were a couple of girls in his class who were pretty smart but you couldn't stand around talking to girls -- it didn't look right.

Yes, it was up to him to take care of his mother and Emma, to try to instill an element of sanity in their lives.

His father had left him in charge, after all, hadn't he? He'd said, "You'll have to be the man of the house, Tommy." Of course that was the way people talked. They talked that way to flatter you and make you feel good while all along they didn't have any intention of letting you take over. His father hadn't meant that he, Tommy, should start telling his mother how to behave, or even Emma. What was missing was power.

He could say, "Emma, stop that," but Emma would just laugh and go on doing whatever it was, and it was only when his mother came along and said, "What are you doing, Emma?" that she would stop drawing pictures in the finger paint with Mother's good fountain pen or whatever bad thing she was doing. Then Emma would say, "I'm sorry." She thought saying "I'm sorry" excused anything she did. And it usually did, as far as Mother was concerned.

His mother did not approve of his father going. Tommy could see her point of view. After all, his father would clearly do more good at home working in his laboratory than anything he could do for the war effort. Now he had a desk job in London. That wasn't particularly heroic. Tommy could imagine him there, chaffing at the bit, excluded from the action. And anyway, what was the difference between shuffling papers on a desk in London and peering through a microscope

at some cells in Bethesda? No difference, except the paper shuffling was probably a waste of time and looking at the cells wasn't.

He hadn't had to go. It wasn't at all clear that they would draft fathers -- pre-Pearl Harbor fathers, that is, which was what he was. They kept putting it off from month to month. Now they were saying they wouldn't take them till October. But his father had volunteered which he certainly didn't have to do. No one was about to accuse him of being a slacker. But he probably hadn't known what he'd be doing -- he'd probably thought it would be more exciting. After all, life was pretty boring for most people. You couldn't blame a man for wanting to be where things were happening. After years huddled over a microscope and never doing anything more daring than riding the waves at Avalon, no wonder he wanted to be in on the excitement for a change.

Besides nobody knew whether he'd be in London for the duration. Oh, he told Mother that he would be, of course, but that was just to keep her from worrying. She worried anyhow. There were plenty of air raids in London. It was not by any means safe.

He was pretty heroic, actually, Tommy had to admit that. Not like Bill, a lazy pale slug of a fellow who couldn't even

talk intelligently about his work at the lab while Tommy's father could make it interesting even to someone who didn't know what a cell was. But then his father was brilliant, there was no denying that. It would be a real loss to science if anything happened to him. Meanwhile, Bill was 4-F, pleading a heart condition -- lucky Bill who was not a pre-Pearl Harbor father or any kind of father at all, not even married. So he got to stay behind and come mooching around Mother, poaching and fawning around Mother with his bunches of cut flowers when what she really wanted was Daddy's home-grown daffodils and daisies and that one tiny raggedy violet, the first of the season, that he always presented to her, in the tiny white vase that was too small for anything else, in April or May or whenever it was that the stupid things started blooming. But Bill's flowers were glossy and lush and store-bought, not a petal out of place. They were boring. And they always wilted right away while the home-grown ones lasted and lasted and lasted, till they had to be thrown out to make room for new ones.

A small guilt nagged. Tommy had meant to do the flower garden while his father was away but he hadn't done a thing and here it was September already. They'd had a victory garden, of course, with lettuce and carrots and spinach and

tomatoes but his father and he had done that together. And even if it wasn't patriotic to grow flowers -- you were supposed to plant only vegetables -- Tommy thought it would be nice to plant a few bulbs in the fall, as his father did every year. But he didn't know how to do it. His mother could have explained but she was so emotional these days. Asking her about the bulbs would remind her that his father was away and then she might start to cry and if there was one thing Tommy couldn't -- that is, wouldn't -- deal with, it was crying women. What was the point anyway? They were better left to cry it out by themselves and then they felt better and maybe even a little guilty about having cried in front of you, and they would try to make it up to you in pleasant ways -- like fixing your favorite foods for dinner.

Anyway the days weren't long enough for all the things Tommy wanted to do, just weren't long enough to waste precious hours fooling around with a shovel and watering can when there were so many books he wanted to read, so many quotes he wanted to get by heart so that they'd be there in his head when he needed them -- like the quote about Europe. That was a good one. He repeated it over to himself, walking in time to its sonorous rhythm, and pausing when he got to the best part, the "wherefore" part. It always sent chills down his back,

even to say it to himself silently, on this sidewalk down which children sadly trudged to school and dogs sadly watched them go. "Wherefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee."

Recently his grandfather had sent him a good quote. It began, "Life is action and passion" and went on from there. He hadn't had time to memorize it yet. There was always so little time.

He went on walking. Anxious mothers seemed to watch from every doorway and although they weren't watching him (because mothers have a way of thinking only about their own children) still there was a sort of mother grapevine, like in the Donne quote: Tommy would be the clod washed away by the sea and Europe, which was school, would be the less if he did not keep on walking. If he had gone on standing there on the sidewalk, hesitating, if he had turned around and walked away from this crowd of obedient children funneling toward the school where they would sit until the bell rang to tell them they could get up and go away, their brains left unsullied by knowledge, all those watching mothers would have seen.

But what if he should turn around and go in the opposite direction, go down to the pasture for example, and there lie

under a tree and spend the day -- till the bell would have, presumably, released him -- spend the whole sunny fall day lying under a tree and watching cloud formations float by overhead? A kid who did that, bringing a book with him perhaps, could get by heart all sorts of quotes, arming him for a lifetime of weighty sayings so that when everyday, normal kids said to their mothers, "Aw, gee, Mom, I don't want to do that" this kid would say -- what would he say? Tommy cast about in his quote collection for something suitable to say to a nagging mother, found nothing but "Wherefore never send to ask for whom the bell tolls -- " which really didn't fit. But that was the point; the kid under the tree would have had plenty of time to find the appropriate quote and learn it.

Still it was no good thinking that way. That was what this street filled with mothers was for. Tommy turning around and walking in the wrong direction would be cause of countless phone calls to his mother, and once your mother heard about it, you might as well forget your plans and just go on to school like everybody else. Once your mother knew about it, you'd lost all hope of that peaceful day spent reading under a tree.

But here was the school now -- a small red brick school

with a new junglegym this year, and everywhere there were children traipsing around, their new shoes squeaking like Tommy's, and on every head every strand of hair was in place or had been (you could tell) when they'd left home. School.

Tommy slicked down his own hair -- it wanted to curl, really, though he would not admit this to anyone. If left alone it would have curled up like a girl's all over his head. Water liberally applied made it lie flat for awhile. Sometimes. Now he pasted it down flat on his head and went over to talk to some boys in his class. They had nothing new to say to each other of course; they had all played baseball together just a few days ago and, besides, talking on the first day of school was a little like talking while you were waiting to see the dentist. You did it out of bravery, not interest. Not that there was any reason to be nervous about school, as there was to be nervous about the dentist, but still it was not a happy occasion.

The bell rang and they marched in and down the hall, which was dark and smelled like school, and into the appropriate classrooms. Lambs for the slaughter, thought Tommy, finding a seat in the fifth grade room next to an open window. Around him some of the kids went on talking but he sat silent, resigned to a year of Mrs. Craig, a year of boredom.

With or without Mrs. Craig, he was planning to learn a lot of new things this year. Perhaps he would read the Lincoln Library of Essential Information from beginning to end.

That would take a lot of time. He would have to give up trains if he did that. But no, he couldn't give up trains now -- certainly not now in the middle of the war when trains were so important. You needed to know where the railroad junctions, the interchanges were in Occupied Europe. That was where the solution lay. If you cut off the Axis supply lines, then you had them at your mercy.

The classroom began to get noisy but Tommy was no longer in it. "Bomb just there," he was saying to General Marshall, indicating on the map a red pin which marked the most important interchange in the German railroad. "That's the heart-beat of the enemy," said Tommy. "Bomb just there, sir, you'll bring the Axis to their knees. You'll have your unconditional surrender in a week. Guaranteed."

General Marshall stared at the map a long time. Finally he said, "Yes, yes, it might work. It just might." And stopping at the doorway of Tommy's room, taking a last look at the map on the wall with the significant red pin just there, General Marshall said, "You've done a great service for your country, my boy."

"It's nothing," said Tommy. Praise always embarrassed him. "It's a far far better thing that I do now than I have ever done before," he said softly.

The General nodded. "We must each do our part," he said.

After the general left, Tommy went downstairs to talk to his mother. Her melancholy eyes brightened at the sight of her favorite child. (Emma, alas, was nothing but a worry and a burden.) "Have something to eat," she said.

"You must keep your strength up. You've gotten so thin in the service of your country."

"All right," said Tommy, more for her sake than for his own. And he ate a piece of dry toast that nobody else wanted. Then, ignoring her protests that he needed to eat more, Tommy said gently (too much emotion was not good for his mother), "Father should be home in about a week."

Of course he was right. Just one week later, as all the church bells in the land pealed out the victory, his father shook his hand and said, with a tear in his eye, "My son -- " . . .

"Corbrey, Thomas."

"Here," said Tommy with a start.

"Fatty," someone whispered and there was a giggle or two. Tommy didn't care about things like that but the teacher -- it was not Mrs. Craig -- glared at the class and said,

"That's enough now" and went on down the roll.

"Darter, Susan."

"Here."

"Edwards, William."

"Present."

"Gaillard, Randall."

"Here."

No, the teacher most definitely was not Mrs. Craig.

This teacher had red hair and green eyes and she was not old like Mrs. Craig. Her name -- she'd written it on the board -- was Miss McAlpin. Down the roll she went because, being new, she didn't know any of them.

She was pretty, Tommy decided -- if you were the sort who noticed things like that. Perhaps she would be different. Perhaps she would read to them today, or start in on fractions which were the only thing worth learning in the fifth grade, or make them discuss something, like rationing or the Italian surrender. The kids wouldn't like that, thought Tommy. They liked to be asked questions but they didn't like to be asked what they thought, especially in the beginning of the year when they didn't know what the teacher wanted them to think. Because that was usually what the teacher wanted them to say -- not what they thought but what she thought.

But here was Miss McAlpin, new to the school and perhaps, just perhaps, there was the smallest slightest tiniest chance that she would do something different on the first day, something interesting.

She wore a navy blue dress with big white buttons down the front. Her skirt swished around her knees when she walked.

Why had he gotten so fat? Would he always be so fat, like an old turtle? Trapped inside the fat Tommy was a skinny Tommy who was quick on his feet and good at baseball. Would the skinny Tommy ever escape from the fat Tommy? There was hope, he thought. Today he would not eat the graham crackers that his mother had put in his lunchbox. He would throw them away. Tonight he would run around the block.

Miss McAlpin put away her roll book. She said, "Now I want you to write your name on the top of a piece of paper." And she waited until everybody had done that. Then she said, "The title is 'What I Did This Summer.'"

What was the use, Tommy thought. Why bother? He might as well eat the graham crackers after all. Nothing ever changed.