

VI.

Tommy walked home from school, scuffling his new shoes through the dust in the road where they hadn't yet put in sidewalks. It would be another dull horrible year. But the first day was over, and he hadn't eaten the graham crackers after all, and Miss McAlpin had said his essay on the summer was very very good and she had made him read it to the class. Now the day was over and he was free. His heart leaped up at the thought of it. Free, and at home an unread Trains magazine waited for him, full of information and photographs, and a September sun dusted the road, and it was a long long time till tomorrow.

There was Emma, sitting on the front steps waiting for him. At times Emma was all right, he reflected. Just now she

looked up at him with awe and envy as though he too had been off to war. (Emma wanted to learn to read more than anything in the world but she was still too young.)

"How was it, dear?" said his mother, coming across the lawn. She had a bunch of bright orange and yellow flowers in one hand and the cutting shears in the other, and she wore her big white hat, and underneath the hat she was smiling. When she wore her white hat and carried flowers in her hand she looked like an English lady of the manor.

Tommy felt changed, purified by the day. Being back in the public eye had trimmed away his bad temper and his discontent, and left him easy and open. He could handle anything now. And so he swept them both through the house (turning down apples and milk -- no, he would not eat, he would not) and in the backyard he settled down in the hammock and told them all about school.

That night his mother made fried chicken, which was his favorite. You couldn't get chickens in the regular stores anymore but the dairy sold a few every week to people in the neighborhood. That was what was so nice about living in Bethesda -- it wasn't really country but it wasn't city either. The dairy chickens were smaller than what Tommy thought of as "pre-Pearl Harbor chickens" but they tasted better too.

Still, though it hurt his mother's feelings, Tommy only had three pieces and only two helpings of rice, and no broccoli, and only one bunch of concord grapes for dessert.

After dinner he sat in the red leather chair with his legs draped over one arm of the chair, and he drank ice water and read "What The Railroads Do When Enemy Planes Attack Their Track and Trains." But he did not get too deeply engrossed to say to his mother, "How do you feel?" as she passed through the living room on her way to somewhere else. But this was by far the most comfortable room in the house, he thought, no point in giving it up out of sentimentality. After all, as long as there are wars, men will go to them but that's no reason those who stay home should be uncomfortable and not sit in their own living rooms. How are we to keep the home fires burning if we won't sit in the only room with a fireplace?

His mother paused, surprised, and no wonder. This new phony Tommy that had suddenly come into existence was behaving wildly differently from the old Tommy. He had never before asked anyone how they felt. That was woman's work.

"I feel fine," said his mother, and she sat down in the chair that had always been her chair and began to read.

Yes, thought Tommy, all it takes is some firmness. And

this somewhat compensated for the fact that his stomach felt like the inside of a church on a Monday, large and holy and quite quite empty.

Then Emma came creeping down the stairs with her coloring book and her crayons, and she settled on the rug at Mother's feet. This is my family, thought Tommy. They are basically boring but it's not their fault. I've just outgrown them. Outside is the world, infinite, sparkling with a variety and richness one can only guess at but, because of the war and being still a kid, right now I can go no further than these two. Well, that was the way it was. You just had to wait and time would pass and the war would end and eventually you could go out into the world and do whatever it was that you wanted to do -- and by that time you would be thin enough to be able to do it.

In the meantime, the months -- or years -- ahead required the presence of this phony Tommy who involved himself with people, who cared if their feelings were hurt and who, even, had feelings of his own that could be hurt and sometimes were. This was what was required when war turned everything upside down and your father went off to participate in it without really explaining why. You had to relinquish the life of the mind (but only temporarily) and fill up the hole left

in the family fabric. It wasn't the sort of thing Tommy enjoyed. Like his skin he preferred his family to be unobtrusive. He preferred not to have to think about them. It took too much time. Yet there might be some consolations -- new freedoms acquired. Some had already fallen his way simply because his father wasn't here. Was that taking unfair advantage, being a war profiteer of sorts? It was, but then in the total scheme of things, in the context of a world war, with people dying like flies and countries changing hands overnight, it didn't make much difference if Tommy went to sleep at nine o'clock or ten o'clock or not at all. Or if he sat in his father's chair with his legs over the arm as he certainly would not have done when his father was here. These things just didn't matter anymore.

At eight o'clock, after Emma had been cajoled into going to bed, Tommy said, "I'm going out to get some air" and, ignoring the protest his mother would normally have made -- and so preventing her from making it -- out he went.

He didn't plan to run far -- down to the pasture and back -- but that was considerably farther than a home run. He could do it, he was sure; he would have to. He was sick of being fat. Being fat did bad things to you. You had to think about yourself, you had to feel your body about

you, encumbering and embarrassing you as if you'd come out in a Halloween costume on the wrong day. Inside the fat was the real person wanting not to have to think about the body, not to have it jiggling and bouncing when you ran. "'Oh, that this too too solid flesh would melt,'" Tommy said to himself though that was not the sort of quote he wanted to learn. It was too common. Still some quotes clung to you in passing, like burrs, so that you could not get them out of your mind. But the value of a quote depended on its freshness; it was better to avoid the quotes that were worn, the edges smoothed down by other people handling them.

Well, there was no point in putting it off, he thought, and he took a deep breath and ran up the street. But just getting to the corner was so hard he thought he would have to give up right then. But he pushed himself on -- down the road where they were building new houses and the darkened frames were like skeletons of the warm and cozy neighborhood they would eventually become, and over the stile to the pasture -- all the cows in bed, tucked away in their hay or wherever cows went at night, still munching the sweet grass, still making it into milk. What he, Tommy, -- looping a great circle into the pasture -- would give for a glass of cold sweet milk. ("My kingdom for a horse.") Above, the stars

were clear and sharp and clean, shining down on Tommy, shining down on his father in London where perhaps a German plane passed overhead, leaving death and destruction, but he wouldn't think about that now, wouldn't think about anything now but running.

Then back up the road, he went, the gentle downward slope now quite mountainous, he would have to stop and rest (he wouldn't, no), now on his own street, now it was downhill all the way, now he was loping down it, panting and sweating, now he was home. There. A few minutes -- of sitting on the step -- and -- (a deep breath) -- he was restored. He could go back in, calmly, quietly, sit down in the red leather chair and tell his mother all about modern signaling practice, which was quite complicated (not just stop and go) and more important than ever in wartime when there were sometimes more than seventy trains a day on a single track.

* * *

October

Miss McAlpin, wearing a dark blue suit with a yellow blouse, talked about fractions. The pyracantha bush outside the window was alive with birds, small trim birds with bright eyes, black masks, and crests, not unlike greenish-yellow cardinals but much more elegant. His mother would

know what they were. They were migrating, fresh from distant places, en route to others. And we didn't even go to Avalon this summer, thought Tommy and, leaning his cheek on his hand, he watched more and more of the birds settle on the bush, a whole row of them squeezing close together to make room for new arrivals. How polite they were. And with a number 1 pencil Tommy drew a tiny picture of one of the birds on the corner of the paper he was supposed to be writing fractions on.

Oh, to be somewhere new -- anywhere but here, sitting in the warm sun by the open window while Miss McAlpin did fractions. Not that she was a bad teacher. She wasn't. And fractions should be interesting. Fractions were the only good thing to learn in fifth grade. But she went so slow and people were always calling out, whining "I don't understand." Sometimes they even interrupted her explanation to say they didn't understand what she had not yet explained. Then she got angry and said, "If you'd just listen -- ." It was her first year of teaching someone had said, and she didn't know how slow she had to go, how she had to repeat everything over and over and over again. Even Emma could learn faster than some of the people in Miss McAlpin's fifth grade class. And when they thought they were learning something hard, they scuffled their feet underneath their desks and grumbled

as if it would be the worst thing in the world if by mistake a piece of pure information should slip into their heads which they could not then throw out again as soon as possible. Of course, they were not all like that but some days it seemed like they all were.

And so Tommy sighed and drew a bird and then another, and then turned the page over and drew a train with a Frisco engine which could take you, if you so desired, to someplace new and exciting, to St. Louis or Oklahoma City, for example. The birds, of course, were probably going South, down the coast to South America. Well, the Corbreys had planned to go South this winter on Christmas vacation to see their grandparents, but the war had intervened. And besides before you went anywhere you were supposed to say to yourself, "Is this trip necessary?" Going to see your relatives wasn't, really, but Tommy loved to go South, to Louisiana, even though there were all those grandparents, aunts, and uncles there who had to be kissed and responded to politely when they said how you had grown as if some year you might grow smaller instead of bigger, and there were no empty rooms into which you could go to be by yourself and quietly read. Still it was fun to be among the relatives, seeing bits and pieces of your father in their faces

and their mannerisms. And if your father were killed in the war -- and in your own mind you had to dispense with the softeners that were necessary in dealing with Emma and your mother; you had to face facts and prepare for whatever was going to happen -- you could go back to these people in the South and attempt to reconstruct your father's image from the fragments that lay about among them. But of course you would never be able to put together the whole man.

And if his mother should marry Bill! That would be the end of everything. There was something about Bill that made Tommy's skin crawl -- but not Mother's, obviously. Funny how his feeling about somebody could change overnight. He had always liked Bill. But it was not right for him to come, and come so often, while Tommy's father was away. He came more now than he ever had before.

"Want to play a game of catch, Tom, old fellow?" he would say, charm laid thick like peanut butter on bread. And Tommy would turn surly, turn little boy again, fat and awkward, with chocolate ice cream from dessert on his chin (he later discovered while brushing his teeth) and he said no, he didn't want to play catch, he didn't feel like it.

And Bill sat in the red leather chair and made it obvious that he didn't want anybody but Tommy's mother

around -- or, that is, he didn't want Tommy around. But Emma, little Emma, precious child with her hair in little stupid curls all over her head because she had just taken a bath, wearing the old pink nightgown though it was full of holes and not nearly warm enough now that it was fall, little Emma playing adorable, climbed into Bill's lap, crooning, "Uncle Bill, Uncle Bill," in that stupid way she had. How could she? Asking him if he'd buy her a horse! Emma didn't care where her father was. It didn't matter to Emma that he might get killed. Emma would cuddle up to whoever was there. And Tommy stomped upstairs, not saying goodnight, and slammed the door to his room and listened to the Great Gildersleeve and Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy all by himself because Emma forgot.

But he was shedding his mantle of fat. His stomach hurt all the time and made awful noises in class and the girl who sat next to him giggled and whispered something to the boy next to her. It didn't matter. It wasn't important.

"Tommy?" said Miss McAlpin.

Looking up blankly, he knew he'd missed something and even though he had stored up enough good will with Miss McAlpin who saw him, as teachers invariably did, as the silver lining in their five-day week of rain, he still brought

himself to attention somewhat nervously and somewhat anxiously said, "What was the question?"

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God damn little fat boy, thought Miss McAlpin bitterly, and she might perhaps be excused this ill nature. She was tired. It was Friday. She hated fractions, and here was her best pupil -- he could write like an angel and brought out at strangely inappropriate moments the most gorgeous quotes, like starbursts in an otherwise dark night -- here he was daydreaming while she sang her heart out about those wretched fractions, which she could herself comprehend only by imagining countless pies divided, redivided, combined, and the slices counted. Why had she wanted to teach in the first place?

And the diamond on her finger, a cheap, tiny diamond, meant nothing at all to her. Bob gave that to her for one reason only -- so that she would sit at home with her mother and read great books at night and never go out dancing, never go to a movie if someone should ask her, never go to parties. But she knew him, she knew what he was up to over there, as he walked those streets Shakespeare had walked which she would probably never get to see. Yes, he walked down those streets which to her would have been

resonant with ancestral memories, filled with literature -- Shakespeare, Marlowe, Ben Johnson, Pope, Virginia Woolf, so tragically dead over two years now, and some portion of the light gone out of the world when she left it, but yes, there went Bob down that same street that Virginia Woolf had once walked on and he was wishing for a beer, he was wanting to see a baseball game, he was whistling a tune heard in a dance hall, casting an eye on the beautiful English girls and thinking of her not one bit, thinking of her no more than she thought of him.

What was the matter with that fat little boy, dreaming out of the window like that?

"One sixth plus one third," said Miss McAlpin sharply.

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What a new and interesting, though not at all pleasant, sensation it was to feel so stupid, thought Tommy. Fortunately it was cushioned by years of knowing the answer -- and knowing that he knew it -- and so caused no more pain than a twig might, brushing the hard skin of a turtle.

"I don't know," he said.

She left him alone. Another she might have dragged up to the board, fluttered figures around his head, insisting that he chalk up for everyone to see the concrete evidence

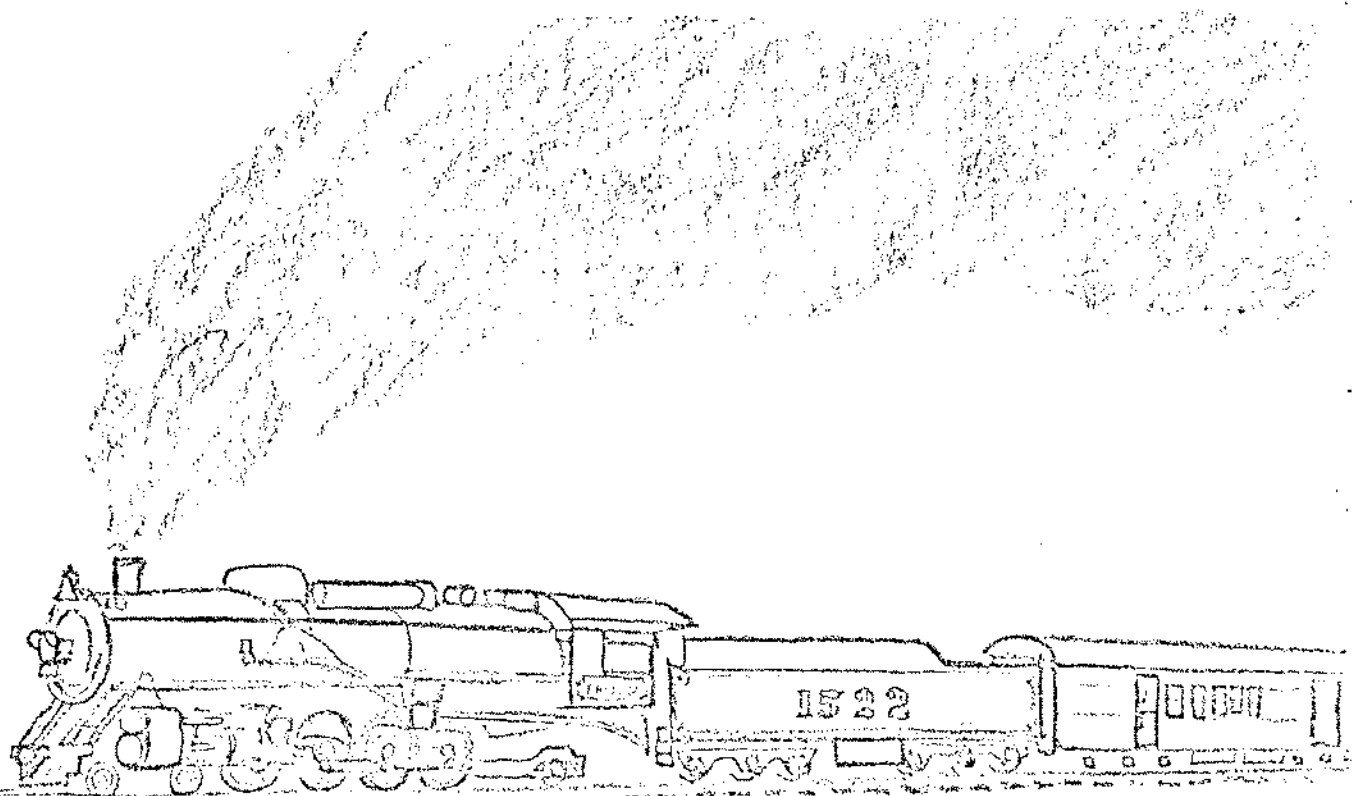
of his failure. But Tommy was solid, untouchable; if he did not know it, he did not know it. It could not be tricked out of him.

And besides his father had gone to war and people treated him, Tommy, with the sort of gentleness and respect appropriate to the son of a hero. For the fathers of most of the other kids were doing the smart thing -- waiting to be called, waiting for Congress and the Selective Service to decide if they really wanted the pre-Pearl Harbor fathers. And so Tommy shone with his uniqueness.

Of course you did not talk about your father as you ate your sandwich at lunchtime (but not the graham crackers which you continued to bring to school every day, because you did not want to hurt your mother's feelings, but threw away because it would be disloyal to her to let anyone else eat them). You were no more likely to talk about what your father did or where he was than you were to mention that you had a four-year-old sister who was a pain in the neck. But the mothers talked -- you could not stop mothers from talking and talking -- so everybody knew where everybody else's father was.

"The moving finger writes and having writ moves on," Tommy thought. This was not really appropriate. Nobody

had "writ" but Miss McAlpin had indeed moved on. She was right to be annoyed, Tommy thought (for it was clear that she had been annoyed). He should have been paying attention, especially when she was teaching fractions. Cautiously and quickly, he finished the Frisco picture, writing "1522" on the tender, and slipped it into his desk.



For some reason Miss McAlpin was talking about pies. She had no business doing that in the middle of school. Especially since, what with the sugar rationing, people didn't have pies anymore.

Lemon meringue pie was his favorite. It was so light, like a dream, not like something to eat -- the lemon tart and yet sweet and the meringue golden brown around the edges, coming to points over its shiny white surface, like waves in a lake. Beautiful. And the crust, rich and flaky and buttery, it melted in your mouth. Then there was mince pie for Thanksgiving. The Corbreys usually went to Boston for Thanksgiving, and all the O'Connor relatives came. You didn't have to kiss Grandfather O'Connor but you did have to talk to him. He always wanted to know what you were thinking. In some ways this was harder than just letting people kiss you -- though of course that was pretty awful. But Grandfather O'Connor wanted to turn your mind inside out and see what was there. It was exciting because generally when he did it, it turned out that what you were thinking was a lot better than you had thought it was, and that what you were interested in was something he was interested in, or had been interested in, or was about to be interested in, or would just plain listen to whether he was interested or not. And whatever

it was you talked about there were always books, books, and more books, which Grandfather would pull down from the bookcases that were everywhere in the house. He would blow the layer of dust off a book and perhaps read the inscription inside the front cover. "To Bertie from Lizzy, Christmas 1915," it might say or "Happy birthday to Elizabeth, from Aunt Linda." Then Mother would jump up and say "I've been looking for that book for years." And she would take it in her hands, gently, as though it were a little piece of her Aunt Linda whom she had loved, you could tell from the way she held the book.

Then you read the book, and it was old and dusty and smelled the way old books smell, like libraries, and made you think of a castle, surrounded by a moat, in which a mysterious man with dark eyes lived and he knew the secrets of the ages and would never tell anybody but here, here in this book bound in red leather which hadn't faded after all these years, and the edges of the pages were browned like toasted marshmallows, here in this book you were about to read he had written all of his secrets, and now you would know them too.

Then there was chess pie which Grandmother Corbrey made, so rich you could feel yourself getting fatter as you ate it. And the chocolate pie that Aunt Sally made, with whipped

cream and chocolate pudding and a coating of chocolate that hardened on the crust and it was so good it was worth the stomach ache you always got because you always ate too much of it. And apple pie was good too but pumpkin pie was boring, and you just ate it to be polite. And there was key lime pie -- but the bell rang then, and the mysteries of fractions and the delights of key lime pie were both forgotten, and Tommy went home.