VII.

That evening as Tommy was lumbering down the street to the pasture, he thought to himself,"At some point we will have to think about the baby." He himself did not like to think about it. Why did his mother insist on having babies when they were such a nuisance? How sweet had been family life before Emma was born, so calm and quiet, and the long talks they had had, the long walks they went on, strolling in the pasture -- only he was always afraid of the cows. He had a cap he wore everywhere, a good cap. Whatever had happened to that cap? He didn't know. It was as if everything that happened before Emma was born stood out crystal clear in his mind. Halcyon days they were -- periods of peace between the wars was what that meant, his Grandfather

O'Connor had told him once, between the wars because there would always be wars.

Then his halcyon days were the days before Emma came. Before Emma they were all at peace with each other. Or perhaps it only seemed that way to him because he was still a baby, had not yet learned to read or to think for himself. Perhaps it was thinking that spoiled everything. Before he learned to think -- and to read -- his whole world consisted of the backyard, the sunny backyard, and that was still halcyon enough even today, although a little less sunny because the trees had grown up some since he was a baby, he supposed.

Then these days, in the middle of the worst war ever, were Emma's halcyon days and even when she learned better (if she ever did) she would look back on them the way he looked back on his.

Because even knowing what he knew today, those early years stood out in his mind, golden and perfect. He could remember sitting in the backyard watching things, sitting still and watching a squirrel dig up a nut, or perhaps find one by mistake (they never remembered where they had buried them), and turn it over and over in his paws, astonished, delighted, as if he had never seen a nut before. Well he,

Tommy, had been like that too. He could remember how everything had delighted him, how everything, even the most ordinary of things, had had a special magic. How he'd watched one whole afternoon his father painting with a wide brush, painting a bench that was green, painting it over white and painting it again so that the green didn't show through. How special, how magical that seemed then. There were bees in the clover, and his father smiled while he painted and whistled once in awhile, and the sun shone. If you cared about things like that it might break your heart to think of those days.

How much they had changed since then. Now he lay in his room with the door shut most of the time, and his father was off at the war and nobody knew what he thought about or if he thought at all or if he lay dead somewhere, an air raid casualty, buried in rubble. And his mother -- how did she feel about it? At first she hadn't liked his father going. Taking the woman's view, she thought only of herself. But lately, although she didn't say much about it, he thought that she had changed, that she had begun to see the glory in what his father had done. But then who could ever tell what anyone else thought -- or if they thought at all?

But the real problem -- now he was running around the pasture, mud squishing beneath his sneakers (it had just

rained) -- was the baby. Bill had said he would help. He would have his car ready. He would sleep on the couch the week it was due or as long as they wanted him, needed him. And of course Tommy's mother had said, "That's very sweet of you, Bill" or something like that. But Tommy wanted to say, "We don't need you. It's got nothing to do with you." But he couldn't. He was too scared. Still it was months away. His mother had said it wouldn't be till spring. Maybe his father would be home by then.

Now he went past the houses that were being built. They winked blackly at him. They had glass in the windows finally, after months of waiting. (It was hard to get glass without a priority.)

Now that he'd been running every night the gentle upward slope of the street with the new houses no longer seemed like a mountain. He would soon be back in shape again.

He sat on his own front steps and watched the moon, veiling and unveiling herself with a strand of wispy clouds. He had to get his mother to explain fractions. It was necessary to know fractions. He had always looked forward to learning them. Except for reading, fractions were the first real stuff you learned in school, and he had always felt they would be important.

The moon, having shed her clouds, lit up the street with silver light. Tommy found a piece of coal in the ditch. Before the war, the coal had been delivered through the basement window but now they just dumped it in the ditch and left it there. Tommy had to carry it in. This meant that there was always coal in the ditch and you could use it to draw on the sidewalk.

Tommy drew a large circle and divided the circle into thirds and looked at it for awhile. Then he divided the thirds in half and looked at that for a time. Finally he tossed the piece of coal aside. Another mystery solved, he thought. Was there nothing you could sink your teeth into, nothing too hard to be solved with a chunk of coal and a little sleight-of-hand, just like adding two oranges and two apples and getting four pieces of fruit? Oh, he would not be charmed any longer by a yellow blouse and a pretty smile, he would not. Whatever concessions he made to family stability and the war, he would never lose sight of the heart of the matter.

* * *

Elizabeth, oh, Elizabeth, thought William Tyler Jamison the Third, standing naked as a jaybird in front of the full-length mirror. There was definitely the beginning of a paunch but what could you expect at the age of thirty-six

when the only exercise you ever got was going to the refrigerator for a beer? Still, you could suck your stomach in and stand up straight (he did) and you didn't look too bad. Sighing, he let it out. What could you do, he thought. Big men with broad shoulders always run to fat when they get near their forties.

He stepped into the shower. How she'd got into his mind and stayed there he'd never know, he thought, as the needles of water tingled his skin. That first time I saw her. . . . We were all at school then. Joshua spent his time in the lab, and I ran around a lot. Yes, Joshua was always the quiet one, but the one with all the charm. He could charm the fleas off a dog, could Joshua, charm the tail off a rat if he wanted to. He had only to look at a girl and she'd do anything for him. But he never noticed. He never looked at any of them. And there am I, doing handstands in front of them, bringing them flowers by the truckload, falling in love every second minute, and they smile at me, they think "Good old Bill" and they say, "Who's your friend, Bill?"

Joshua could have had anyone he wanted but he didn't care. He wasn't interested. But then comes Elizabeth. God knows she wasn't my type -- not that I was ever choosy but I liked them little and blond and gay. But Elizabeth

was tall and quiet and solemn with curls all over her head whenever it rained, plain-looking almost except when she smiled. When she smiled you wanted to lie down at her feet and die.

You couldn't do a thing with either of them, Joshua or Elizabeth, you couldn't say a word to them from the moment they saw each other. They were utterly lost, head over heels.

And Bill rinsed off the last of the soap, stepped out of the shower, reached for the plush purple towel with WTJ on it, enfolded himself in it.

Elizabeth, he thought, Elizabeth. Yet he loved Joshua, his buddy Joshua, his boyhood friend, had loved him all his life. In his earliest memory their mothers sat talking on a white wooden bench under the spreading moss-draped branches of a live oak, while all around them bloomed oleander, crape myrtle, cape jasmine. Toddlers they'd been, chasing each other around, knocking each other down and rolling on the ground like puppies. To this day the smell of cape jasmine brought back that scene -- the oak, their mothers, flowers all around -- as sharp and clear as yesterday. More recently Joshua and he had sat together in the backyard in Bethesda watching first Tommy and then Emma play, and though there was no cape jasmine in Bethesda, no oleander, there was honeysuckle.

And Bill always thought -- because he was a sentimental man and Joshua was not -- does he remember the way I do? Probably he did now, now that he was overseas doing whatever it was that he had had to go do, at the risk of losing his life.

Tears came to Bill's eyes, grown man that he was (but easily moved, he had always been easily moved). He was closer to Joshua than to anyone, certainly closer than he was to his sister -- bossy, bitchy, discontented woman Evelyn had turned out to be, browbeating her husband all the time, the poor guy. He wasn't that bad though the family had certainly expected better for Evelyn. Still she'd never been out of the South, never left Louisiana, had lived in the same small town since she'd married. It was a war town now, and the war workers who had poured in had changed everything. Her letters were full of complaints about the changes, the plant, the once quiet streets crowded and noisy, and shanty towns going up on the outskirts. It was ruined, Evelyn wrote, just ruined. But then she was narrow, provincial, bitter, resisted every change no matter what it was, a born complainer.

Now Joshua, Joshua was made of finer stuff, the finest, a real southern gentlemen of the old type, was Joshua, like he, Bill, would have been if he didn't look so wrong for the

role -- too big, too hardy, too bluff -- yet underneath all was rotten. The heart, said Dr. Fredericks -- and if you couldn't believe Dr. Fredericks,who could you believe? -- the heart was none too reliable. You may feel fine today but you never knew what tomorrow might bring. You might wake up dead. You had to be careful; you had to take each day as it came.

But oh Elizabeth -- and he put on his shirt and pants (yes, he'd wear the double-breasted) and selected a blue and white tie which had a matching handkerchief. There, he did look nice -- well, he was nice, a man you could trust, not the sort of man to fall in love with his best friend's wife the moment his best friend goes off to war.

How, how, how had it happened that he'd gone out to Bethesda meaning nothing but friendship and come away gone completely out of his head with love for her? Oh Elizabeth.

But Elizabeth's hands lay loosely, idle, in her lap -- large beautiful hands, not at all delicate, not elegant. To see her touch Joshua, casually, on the shoulder, in passing, with her large and beautiful hands sent a shiver down his back, sent a shiver down his back today even just to think of it. And how she touched her children, smoothing down a curl (for they both had her beautiful curly hair),

taking Emma's hand as they crossed the street, touching them, cherishing them every minute of their lives. And if she would touch him like that someday, that was all he wanted. That she would touch him like that, meaning "There, I smooth down your curly hair" (but Bill's was straight and there was less of it every year). "There, I smooth down your curly hair" she meant, "like so, because you are mine to take care of, to love." Oh Elizabeth.

So calm she was while Joshua might any moment be in danger. It was as if she were resigned to whatever would come. But she would break down. She could not go on without him. That was clear. That was obvious. For to Elizabeth Joshua was perfect, not flawed like everybody else.

It was not true. Bill could be honest about Joshua. God knows he had known him long enough and well enough to be honest about him. He had charm and a brilliant mind but was that enough for Elizabeth? Wasn't there something missing from Joshua, some vigor, some force that Elizabeth deserved? He was so serious, so dedicated. Was this the sort of life, stuck way the hell out in the suburbs with nothing to do, that was best for Elizabeth? You had to put aside your feelings and think about what was best for Elizabeth. Didn't she deserve something a little more challenging?

He'd seen her at college. He knew the quality of her mind and what she could have done with it. Perhaps, he told himself, her calm, her resignation showed that she realized this, that she knew she was still something without Joshua -- even, perhaps, better without him, free to do the things she could do.

But this was nonsense and he knew it. What she wanted was Joshua and no one else.

There, he was ready. He looked quite the man about town but with kindness written all over his face. You couldn't miss it. It said, "Here's a man who's everybody's friend, a man who's good to children, kind to animals, would give you the shirt off his back if you needed it" (and he would too). Couldn't she see it (oh, Elizabeth)? Couldn't she see what he could give her? Flesh and blood love, passionate love! Yes, passionate.

But he could not think of her like that. It was unbearable -- to think of holding her in his arms, to think of kissing her -- no, it was unbearable. He did not think of her that way. You could not think of a woman like that in those terms. Yet sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night from a dream in which he held her in his arms, and she was pregnant, married to his best friend, and she

looked at him with a look of horror and disgust that remained imprinted on the air like the grin of the Cheshire cat, long after the rest of her, the long smooth loveliness of her, had vanished to wherever it is such dreams go.

He could not think of her like that.

Elizabeth.

He had, after all, been a little in love with her from the very beginning. Fifteen years ago, was it? Something like that. In the library she sat beside Joshua, gravely reading, as composed, as serious as if she were in church worshipping. He'd thought she was plain. He'd thought idly, as one does about a friend's friends, "What does he see in her?" Then Joshua looked up and saw him, smiled. "This is my love," said Joshua's smile, "this is my finest treasure." Then she looked up too and smiled. Elizabeth. What a smile she had. He would have done anything then. He would have cut Joshua's throat and walked over his dead body without a second thought if it would have done the slightest good. But no, it was hopeless for if she smiled gently at Bill (showering sweetness and beauty on him), she had a different smile altogether for Joshua. You could see it was hopeless, she was hopeless, and so was he.

It was too early to go but he went anyway. Each time

he got nervous, though he was not the nervous type, though he went there almost every week now, went as often as he thought he could go. He'd be too early but he could sit in the back-yard and talk to the children. He was awfully fond of the children. They were her children, and he loved them because of that but then he'd always been a sucker for children. And they were awfully nice children.

It was hot for October, and the sun was warm on the back of his neck and he thought yes, he would take the car because he wanted to stop for some flowers. And the OPA had lifted the ban against pleasure-driving. Besides going to Bethesda to visit Elizabeth was not really pleasure-driving. Pleasure-driving meant going to the races or night-clubbing, not visiting a friend's wife who was all alone with two children and a third on the way.

Perhaps she would have fried chicken tonight. She could always get a chicken even when nobody else could. How did she do it? Was it the black market? No, she was too scru-pulous for that; she was, even, painfully scrupulous. Her chicken was just like Joshua's mother's, even the gravy was the same. It was delicious. But he'd have to be careful, not make a pig of himself. Have to watch the old weight now, have to take better care of the old body now, look out for the

old heart -- couldn't get alone without it now, could you?

Joshua -- damn him! he'd never forgive Joshua if he went and got himself killed over there -- Joshua was as skinny as he'd been at the age of eight. Joshua was the delicate one, got sick easy, wasn't any too strong. He'd tried to talk him out of going. There was no reason for him to go anymore than there was reason for Bill to go. Even if they did start drafting fathers, and they would eventually, Joshua could easily have gotten a deferment. Dr. Lindsay was ready to say that the laboratory couldn't get along without him. Even the head of the Institute had taken an interest. But Joshua had just looked embarrassed and said he guessed he'd go but thanks a lot. And he'd gone, the idiot. Yet his going had much more of bravery in it than anybody suspected. Because Joshua was a coward, always had been. Since they were kids.

"You didn't know that, did you?" he silently addressed Elizabeth. Though he'd never say a word against Joshua. It was his creed. He would never never say a word against Joshua, that was the kind of guy Bill was. Let her think him a hero if she wanted to. And in fact wasn't she right? Didn't Joshua redeem himself (oh, totally!) by going off like that, when there was no need?

There was a story Elizabeth had never heard ("Have you?"

he challenged her. "No, I didn't think so.") but she'd never hear it from him. (He guided the car expertly through rush hour traffic. Here was Blackistone's, and there was a parking place, what luck! He got out, bought the flowers, got back in and went on.)

They must have been about ten at the time, and they were on a vacation, his family and Joshua's. He and Joshua were down at the lake. The others were all taking naps, or reading in their rooms, or just sitting and talking. There was a row-boat on the lake and Joshua had gotten into the boat and rowed out to the middle of the lake. Bill lay on the little rickety pier watching the clouds go by. He could remember it as if it were yesterday. There was a mockingbird singing and a locust buzzing away and the smell of honeysuckle was heavy and he'd just made up his mind to be a minister, like his granddaddy, and devote his life to helping people (he would have been good at it, too, and maybe a whole lot happier than he was today) when a small noise caught his attention. He sat up and looked out at the lake.

Joshua's boat was slowly sinking into the water, and Joshua looked at him and he looked at Joshua, and lower and lower the boat sank. Then Joshua said, "I can't swim." He said it very quietly but some trick in the air current made

it sound as loud and clear as if he'd said it right in Bill's ear. Yet for a minute Bill could make no sense of it. He kept thinking Joshua had said, "I'm too thin." He was too. And it seemed as if by saying that -- "I can't swim" or "I'm too thin," whichever it was -- that Joshua hadn't meant Bill (who could swim) had to rescue him or that he would hold it against Bill if he just sat there and watched him drown. It was as if Joshua had said, "Do what you like. I won't tell."

The whole scene, the lake, and the sinking boat, and the boy on the pier seemed to Bill to be part of a dream and he was outside the dream and feeling only a vague curiosity about whether or not the boy on the pier would rescue the boy in the boat. It was as if he were reading a book in which the characters weren't very interesting. He couldn't make himself care what the boy on the pier did although he saw, quite clearly, that the boy on the pier couldn't make up his mind. But then the dreamlike feeling disappeared and he felt with surprise the shock of cold water and that was how he knew the boy on the pier had made up his mind.

He'd had a long time to work over the incident in his mind. For years it had gotten itself mixed up in his dreams and even today, from time to time, he'd find himself at the

lake again, watching the boy on the pier. The odd thing was that every element of the incident was in the dream (the honeysuckle, the mockingbird, the feel of the sun on the back of his neck, even the determination to become a minister and do good) -- everything except the boy in the sinking boat. For there was nothing in the middle of the lake. It was quite empty.

The fact of the matter was (but here was Elizabeth's street now) that there was no decision to be made. Bill was not the sort of guy to think twice about helping someone, especially his best friend. It was Joshua who had invented the decision, Joshua who by saying "I can't swim" or "I'm too thin" made it into a moral dilemma and gave Bill a choice that was not really there. Had Joshua just cried "Help!" like anyone else would have done, Bill would have been in the water before the word was out of his mouth. He wouldn't have thought twice. But Joshua imagined himself into Bill's place, and Joshua was a coward. In Bill's place Joshua would have thought long and hard before taking the plunge, if he had taken it at all. Had Joshua been the boy on the pier and Bill the boy in the boat there was a good chance that Joshua would have turned and walked quietly up the hillside, too much of a gentleman, even then, to intrude on his friend's death agony. "I'm sorry," he might have said, or simply

"Goodbye, Bill!" Then of course he would have hated himself, tortured himself the rest of his life. But still he would have averted his eyes and gone quietly up the hill, yes, that is what he would have done. Bill was as sure of that as he was that his name was William Tyler Jamison the Third or that the woman, now holding the door open for him, now smiling and taking the flowers he had brought her (oh, Elizabeth) was beyond a shadow of a doubt the only woman he would ever love. And, yes, she had made fried chicken. He could smell it cooking.