

IX

Below, the front door shut. Footsteps receded.

He said she'd led him on. But how could that be?

She felt numbed, as if she'd just lost her best friend.

She had.

And today of all days, when she'd been feeling so odd all day, not at all well. (Dr. Brown had never returned her call. It was because doctors were so busy these days.)

Bill said she'd led him on. But it wasn't true.

On the other hand, there was Tommy, so accusing, week after week, glaring at Bill because he sat in "Daddy's chair" at the dinner table. Yet where else was the man to sit? The table was square, had four sides to it. When four of them sat round it someone must sit in Joshua's chair. And it was Tommy himself who'd got her over last summer's sentimental

fidget -- there was no other word for it -- when she wouldn't sit in the living room and he'd gone himself and sat in Joshua's red leather chair, looking like he belonged there.

He could hardly resent Bill's taking Joshua's chair at the dinner table when there was no other place to sit.

Yet the fact was, no matter who sat in whose chair, Bill said she'd led him on.

Well, then (now she was smiling to herself though the whole thing was so distressing, though her heart bled for him, poor mixed up man) well then, was she so pretty after all? "Beautiful" he'd said. Not even good old "pretty" which you could say about any woman as long as she wasn't just plain ugly. "Beautiful." She looked at herself in the mirror. But it reflected too many other things to tell her such a simple fact (was she beautiful?). It reflected cobwebs in the corner of the bedroom -- there, by the closet. It reflected Joshua's baby picture which his mother had given her and didn't he look just like Tommy at the same age? It reflected the silver tray with bobby pins and safety pins in it, their engagement picture in its round gold frame, her bottles of perfume (light flower scents), the silver-backed comb and brush and mirror which had been her grandmother's. But herself she could not see. She saw only

Emma's mother, Tommy's mother, Joshua's wife, and the curve of her body which was -- or would be in just two more months -- a new person named Edward.

For the baby was a boy. She knew, she could tell. He would be called Edward after her mother's father. She normally took great joy in his presence but just now (for Bill had said she led him on and it was so unfair) she felt tired, and Edward seemed to weigh heavy on her heart. How odd she felt but it must be nothing to worry about. She had told Dr. Brown's nurse how she felt and if the symptoms were alarming, the doctor would have called.

No, she was not beautiful. Nor even pretty. And forgetting Bill, forgetting even Joshua whose absence nibbled at her heart every minute of her waking day, she laughed at herself in the mirror, so hopeful, so tentative (was her nose too big, was that a first grey hair, was her smile crooked?). She hadn't looked at herself like that ("Am I pretty?") since she had married. Then she had been pretty. Then she had been beautiful but it was all because of Joshua, the glow that went from him to her. And it had worn off over the years, she supposed; she'd been so busy she hadn't noticed. How odd not to notice, not to think about how you looked, just because you were married. Anyway

it was gone now, and the beauty Bill had reproached her with was also gone. It just wasn't there.

She looked terrible, pale and drawn.

Had she been too hard on Bill? He hadn't asked for anything. He'd made that clear, though not much else was clear -- like why, for example, he had decided to tell her. He could see, couldn't he, that it would ruin the friendship they had? Just when she had begun to depend on him -- oh, it wasn't fair!

"Elizabeth," he'd said in the beginning, just like that, out of the blue. When she heard him say her name like that, like a prayer, she knew at once what he was going to tell her, as if she had always known. And she also knew there was no way of stopping him once he'd said her name like that. Oh, it was quite indecent, how he said her name.

Oh, dear, and he said she led him on. That was the part that hurt. For being loved, like having your picture taken, couldn't hurt you.

What did he mean? How had she led him on? Did she let him come too often? Was she too nice to him? But how not to be nice to someone, especially someone who was your husband's best friend all his life, and besides was so good to your children? No, no, she'd had no idea -- none

at all until he said "Elizabeth" like that.

Perhaps it was Emma, perhaps she'd let Emma get out of hand. Emma got so easily out of hand, Tommy said. And perhaps, in a way, he was right. She couldn't be hard on Emma, couldn't be firm with her, didn't want to do anything to take away that magical look that was in Emma's eyes. Let her keep it as long as she could, whether or not there was a war on and her father in it. Emma needed her father. It wasn't fair to Emma that he had gone. Tommy could take it and so could she but Emma couldn't. So there was Emma, Emma asking Uncle Bill if he'd buy her a horse, Emma taking Uncle Bill around the garden to show him the winter akonites, the snowdrops, the crocuses, when his idea of a flower was something bought in a store with tissue paper wrapped around the stem, Emma asking Uncle Bill to read Hiawatha -- but she (Elizabeth) hadn't let him do that, that was going too far. She had to agree with Tommy: Hiawatha was going too far.

Still you couldn't blame Emma. She was only four and she needed a father. It had been a long time since she'd had one. You couldn't blame her for cuddling up close to Bill and saying, "I love you, Uncle Bill." But she, Elizabeth, could not be held responsible for Emma's pretending, could she? If there was anyone to blame it was Joshua.

And she'd quarreled with him, she'd thought he was wrong to go, wasteful. And look, look, she addressed him -- although she'd long since been converted to his way of thinking -- but just look, her unreconstructed self demanded: if he'd stayed, it wouldn't have been Dr. Reynolds who had made that discovery, that key discovery that Joshua had had almost, just almost at his very fingertips (Bill said; Bill said it was what they'd all been after and that Joshua had almost had it). Oh, if only he'd stayed! How things had fallen apart without him and now here was poor dear Bill blundering into a terrible mess.

But never mind, so Joshua had to go, so he did what he had to do, or thought he had to do, there was heroism in that too, never mind that she saw it too late to tell him, and that she sent him off with that frozen place in her heart, never mind, never mind, she was not about to take to Bill instead. Bill, of all people, should know that. But he was overwrought, he wasn't thinking clearly. War did that to people, even people on the fringes of it. And no one was really on the fringes of it. No one went untouched. If you tried to forget it for a second they rushed in with their rationing and their shortages and their war bonds and their strikes and all those advertisements promising you

luxuries after the war (new cars, refrigerators, your own helicopter) if only you would feel good and guilty for the duration, and they bullied you mercilessly until you almost did feel guilty in spite of yourself.

Poor Bill, with his 4-F status and his big healthy-looking body, how he agonized over it, seeking to justify himself to her (of all people), really trying to convince himself, she supposed.

Had she been too hard on him? He hadn't wanted, he said, anything. "I don't even ask that you think of me," he said miserably. But of course (she said) she did think of him, warmly and often. She thought how sad it was that he lived alone and had no wife, no children; she thought how sad it was that he had to eat out all the time, sitting at a small table somewhere and never getting good salads or enough vegetables. She thought how sad it was for him to go home to his dark and empty apartment from her warm bright house where the children upstairs glowed like little fires and Joshua's letters came like pieces of gold in every week's mail. And she thought of him and Joshua being friends all their lives, playmates as children, then going to college together, following the same career, finally coming to the Institute -- first Bill, then Joshua a year later. And how

Bill was best man at their wedding, how he held Joshua together, how he looked after the ice cream which Elizabeth's mother was supposed to order and which, of course, she forgot (as Elizabeth had known she would). How he made a tearful toast at the reception and gave them for a wedding present the most hideous umbrella stand he could find because Joshua had always joked that when you got married all your relatives gave you umbrella stands which you would hate and then you would have to buy a house with an attic to keep them in. They had the house, all right, and the attic too, but the umbrella stand stood by the front door, it stood there still, filled with broken or forgotten umbrellas.

And at the lab, Bill had smoothed the way with his good nature, his exuberance, and then Joshua came. Joshua was always the brilliant one while Bill, steady, sure, competent, played audience and publicist for his friend's triumphs. But now Dr. Reynolds -- crotchedy old Dr. Reynolds -- had got (so Bill said, so Joshua wrote wryly (it was his own fault and he knew it)) the brass ring.

What did Bill want? That she'd write to Joshua saying "Bill has asked me to run away with him and live happily ever after [though he hadn't] and I'm going to do it because otherwise he'll be so unhappy?" Of course Bill did not

want that. The point of the matter was that Bill did not know what he did want.

At the end of his little speech, he had said "Oh Elizabeth" one last time, caressing her name as he said it, and suddenly rage had risen up in her, she who was never angry, she who never lost her calm. (But it came of feeling so odd all day. If only the doctor had called, just to reassure her.) And she had shouted at him. For at that moment the idea had entered her head (it was wrong, she saw that now) that Bill meant she should become his mistress. She had shouted at him and at Joshua too for letting her in for all this foolishness for she was just utterly immune from the slightest flicker of desire for Bill, for anyone but Joshua, and at present (heavy with child) not even for Joshua.

"You make me sick," she had shouted.

Yet she never shouted at people.

Then she was upstairs, her bedroom door shut behind her. She believed she had run up the stairs, giving poor little Edward a good shaking up. But she could not remember coming up, could only remember shutting her door quietly (Emma was asleep) and leaning against it, the rage passing off her as quickly as it had come. Then there was the soft sad sound of the front door closing, the finality of it-- he would never

come through that front door again; he would not want to -- and his footsteps receding, the car starting up, driving away. But already she was forgiving him, already she was sorry. It was so unlike her.

And wasn't it just a little bit flattering, after all these years when she'd forgotten to wonder if she was pretty or not pretty, wasn't it nice -- and he'd said it so sweetly -- to hear that someone thought she was beautiful?

It was, yes it was. Though guilt tickled her conscience that she should take pleasure in his saying it, still she did. In spite of the fact that there was not a flicker of desire for him, or for anyone but Joshua.

But he was a sweet man, big and clumsy and sad. He fancied himself a southern gentleman, still clung to his accent, had even adopted some southern expressions which Joshua had told her, laughing (he loved Bill), they would never have said "at home," nor their parents either. And Bill was too clumsy, too hearty for the pose. He was so touched when she had his favorite dinner, fried chicken, those delectable little chickens from the dairy. Joshua's mother had taught her years ago how to fry it just right, light and crispy. It was Tommy's favorite too.

But why did this feeling weigh so on her heart? She

lay on the bed. Her head hurt too. Damn that doctor! But never mind, it was just the strain of having shouted at Bill. She never shouted at people. Not like her parents who were always shouting, they loved it. But it was not her way.

Tommy would be glad to see Bill gone. Tommy had quite suddenly got rather tall and rather thin. But when she said this to him -- he was sitting in the red leather chair reading a history of the steam engine -- he said, "It's not sudden, Mother, you just don't look at me very often." It wasn't true. She looked at him all the time. He took seriously his head-of-the-household role, and she loved him for it. So she'd tousled his hair, the lovely curls soft beneath her fingers. (Why did he slick his hair down in that ugly way? Boys did not like curls, she supposed.) He'd gotten so affable lately. She could feel him wanting to take care of her as she sat reading or knitting little blue things for the baby boy she was going to have. He asked her was she warm enough, there was the fire he had made, wouldn't she pull her chair closer to it? And gallantly, as if he were handing her a handkerchief she'd dropped, he said (like her father he loved a good quote), "Tyger, Tyger, burning bright/ In the forests of the night,/"

What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry?"
And couldn't he bring her more milk?

But when Bill was there Tommy turned sulky, and when she said gently at the dinner table (but how insensitive it was of her to say it), "Tommy, dear, you have some catsup on your chin," he flung his napkin down and fled from the table. Upstairs they heard his door slam behind him. And she'd slammed her own in exactly the same way -- or had she shut it quietly? she couldn't remember -- and was here inside sulking.

Was her heart breaking, or why did it hurt her so? (He said she'd led him on but surely he didn't mean it. He saw how surprised she was. He knew how she loved Joshua. How she did love Joshua!) But Joshua had already broken her heart last summer, going off like that when she felt there was no need, that he was deserting her but now, of course, she saw he was right (yes), but her heart so badly broken had not yet been mended, and so it could not be broken again, could it? She'd been so angry last summer -- oh, not at the end. At the end she'd sent him off warm with joy; oh, their love had flared up bright at the end (though she still thought he was wrong), at the end it was a fine high flame to keep them warm through their long separation.

She could not forgive herself her anger. When his letters came she read parts of them aloud to the children: how he had a "safe" job, a desk job (she could forgive him anything if he had a desk job), what England was like, how cold it was, the damp going right through you, and the food was awful like everybody said, but the people -- the people were wonderful; heroism in short was the tune of the day. She saw through that though. She was sure that he was bored, that he missed his work (which he loved), that he was wasted there, sitting at a desk (she saw it in her mind's eye, piled high with papers). But then he was making preparations, she supposed, for the invasion. That was all they talked about now, that was what was coming next. She felt a shiver of apprehension. In the papers they talked about how many Americans would die, how many Englishmen. But Joshua worked in an office. He was probably handling supplies, or something like that. The supplies were immense. They had had to build their own little railroad to carry the supplies. The papers said that England was so full of troops and supplies it was a wonder it didn't sink under the weight.

Anyway the invasion troops were young, they were fighting men, they were all under twenty-six, said the papers. Joshua was too old.

On the other hand, how did you know that that was true? How did you know what to believe?

And she wrote on the V-mail form, "It was 79 degrees today, a record for March. We've hardly had any snow this winter. Tommy got straight A's (again) although his teacher sent me a little note to say he was 'moody' in class. She's very pretty and I don't think he's moody, I think he's in love. (He denies it.) Emma refuses to give up that pink nightgown you gave her although I have mended it so many times there's nothing left to mend. They are both very good and, of course, miss you very much." Gentle everyday words she wrote on the paper but different words wrote themselves in her mind: "Joshua, Joshua -- " went this other letter which had to be resisted at all costs -- "my darling Joshua, forgive me, oh, Joshua, whatever you choose to do is right and good, only forgive me because I can't live without you." Instead she wrote, "Emma won't play with Willie anymore because she says he's too bossy, poor little boy. Mr. Morris says the cherry trees will be magnificent this year; Tommy is doing the decimal system and -- " but she wanted him home, not heroic. His side of the bed -- she could not bring herself to lie in the middle even when Edward lay so heavy on her as he did tonight -- was vast, empty, a desert

in her home. She sighed and sat up with difficulty; a wave of faintness came and went. Something was wrong. Something had been wrong all day, no matter what the nurse said, nor how busy the doctor was.

She should not have run up the stairs. She should not have shouted at Bill.

Something was terribly wrong.

Mustn't panic, she thought, and she went into the hall. Emma's pink horses glowed and Emma's breathing was slow and regular but there was a sliver of light under Tommy's door. He was probably slumped down in bed reading Trains magazine or learning quotes. The thought of Tommy, cool, capable Tommy, was like balm to her. She was not alone. She had Tommy.

But the pain had receded. It was odd. She hadn't been aware that there was pain until she felt that feeling of lightness that meant the pain had gone.

But had the pain gone, she thought (holding onto the banister for the floor would tilt to one side and then the other, for no reason at all) and what had she been about to do? No, she could not remember, not while the floor tilted first one way and then the other, like a restive animal who did not want you on its back. The pain toyed with her,

coming and going like a wave, and she cried out, not because the pain was particularly bad -- at the moment she was between one crest and the other, she was in the hollow between the pains -- but because in the flash of clarity that was left her before the animal that the floor had become gave her a toss and threw her off into the darkness, she remembered she'd been about to call Tommy.