

## XII

The sun came tumbling in through the open curtains of Emma's room and, frisking over her face, woke her.

"Oh, it's spring," she thought. Downstairs coffee was being made and the rich familiar smell was as nice as the sun outside her window. And those clear joyful notes -- weren't they the song of the mockingbird? He was probably sitting on Mr. Morris' chimney, all fluffed up like a stuffed animal after you've run your hand over his fur the wrong way, singing his heart out because it was spring.

Was it too early for violets?

Voices drifted up from downstairs. But there was something wrong about the voices -- Tommy's voice, Uncle Bill's, not her mother's. Then it was not a dream. She

had thought it was just a bad dream, her mother lying there in the hallway and Tommy standing over her with that look on his face like trying not to cry. Tommy saying, "Get dressed, Emma." Tommy was dressed already but his shirt-tail was hanging out. Emma went into her room and put on socks that didn't match and the yellow dress with a ruffle on it that her mother had made but it was really for church.

Tommy said, "Come on, Emma" and he held her hand, and men came and put their mother on a flat thing and carried it with her on it down the stairs, not saying anything to Emma or Tommy but when they got to the front door, one said to Tommy, "You kids -- " but Tommy just got that funny look on his face again and he said, "We're going with you."

Inside the ambulance everything was white and her mother lay on the flat thing in the back, and Emma's teeth chattered and her knees knocked together although it was not very cold. She sat on somebody's lap and Tommy let go her hand but he said, "It's all right, Emma." (He meant for Emma to be quiet.) And in the back of the ambulance on the flat thing, her mother was asleep and wouldn't wake up. The siren was quiet from inside the ambulance like voices are outside when it's snowed.

Ambulances were for sick people. Her mother was sick.

Whenever an ambulance went by Emma held her breath so she would not breathe in any of the germs. If you breathed in germs from an ambulance you might get polio. If you got polio the air you breathed out of your nose was cold. That was how you knew you had polio. If you found out in time that you had polio and they took you to the hospital fast enough, then you did not die. But they put you inside an iron lung, and it was cold in there, and only your head stuck out and you could never run and play again or even read unless somebody held the book for you and turned the pages. (Emma would learn to read in first grade but that was years away.)

Some people who got polio did not have to stay in an iron lung. But they had to have heavy braces on their legs like the braces children got on their teeth if their teeth were crooked. (Emma had crooked teeth but the dentist said that was all right; they would straighten out if she ate a lot of toast.)

The President had had polio and he could not walk very well. The President was going to make sure we won the war. He had always been president and always would be. Hearing his voice on the radio was exciting, and it made you feel good when he said everything was going to be all right again.

The sister of a boy who lived in the next block and was Tommy's age had died of polio. She went rowing in the middle of a lake in the summer with her boyfriend and that's how she got polio. The ambulance did not get to the hospital fast enough, and she died.

When you died you weren't there anymore. You went to Heaven and sang with the angels. You had wings. But Emma did not think Freddy's sister sang with the angels or wore a long white nightgown, her hair down her back, and flitted about the clouds with large wings that were veined green and black like those of the seventeen-year locusts that crawled out of holes in the ground in the summertime and left their little brown shells attached to tree trunks while they flew to the topmost branches, buzzing, and the birds ate them.

Freddy's sister was not like that. Freddy's sister slept high in the sky, beyond the blue part, where it was very dark and all the air was black. She lay in a little hammock (only you couldn't see the hammock because it wasn't a real hammock) and she didn't dream or smell the honeysuckle or hear the birds sing and if her mother should kiss her cheek she wouldn't feel it. She was marble cold to the touch and if you pushed her eyelids up, her eyes would stare at you but they would not see you. And she stayed

there for a long time and that was Eternity.

Then Jesus would come and it would be the Resurrection. All the people who were dead, floating about in the darkness in their little hammocks that weren't really hammocks, would come to life and be happier than they had ever been but they couldn't touch each other or speak to each other or even see each other. But they wouldn't care about those things anymore because they could see God.

It was awful to be dead.

Emma's mother looked like she was dead but she wasn't. She was just sleeping because she was sick.

Then they were at the hospital and the men took Emma's mother in on the flat thing, and Tommy and Emma went to a room that smelled like cigarette smoke, and there was orange furniture like in Dr. Johnson's office but there weren't any picture books or toys to play with like Dr. Johnson had, not even a teddy bear to hold. On a little table were two Time magazines but they were torn and creased as if a lot of people had read them over and over again.

Emma sat down where Tommy told her to sit and then after a long time Tommy said, "Wake up, Emma, we're going home now." She wasn't really asleep; she just had her eyes closed but for a few seconds it was hard to open them again, and when she did the bright light hurt them. Then the

doctor that they went to now instead of Dr. Johnson drove them home, and he and Tommy argued all the way but finally they were home and he went away, and Tommy said for Emma to go to bed now and that everything would be all right in the morning.

But now it was morning, and Uncle Bill was fixing breakfast and that meant that Emma's mother wasn't there. Emma's mother was still on that flat thing at the hospital and the hospital smelled awful, like it smelled when they gave you a shot, wiping your arm first with a piece of cold wet cotton, and telling you that it wouldn't hurt but of course it always did. It always hurt a lot. And there were loud noises in the hospital -- a voice called "Dr. Hamilton, to surgery, Dr. Hamilton, to surgery" over and over again. And if Emma's mother was still there, she would die like Freddy's sister, like Bambi's mother; she would die and lie in the darkness forever and Emma would never see her again.

There was no point in crying. Mommy would not come and sit on the side of the bed and say, "What's the matter, baby?" Mommy was not here; Mommy was not even at the hospital; Mommy lay with Freddy's sister in darkness in a little hammock in the black air beyond the sky.

But Emma cried anyway. She cried so hard she didn't hear Uncle Bill coming up the steps until he came into her room and picked her up and held her in his lap, saying comforting things of the sort you would say to a baby. And though Emma was not a baby, soon she began to stop crying and to want a tissue, and Uncle Bill got her a tissue, and then she began to feel better.

Uncle Bill said was she hungry and she said she was. Uncle Bill said to get dressed and come downstairs as breakfast was nearly ready.

Emma put on the yellow ruffled dress and her sneakers because the patent leather shoes were only for Sundays, and she went downstairs.

Tommy and Uncle Bill were in the kitchen fixing breakfast -- that is, Uncle Bill was fixing breakfast and Tommy was watching. It was like a holiday with Uncle Bill there in the morning, and Tommy home from school.

Tommy was being very nice to Uncle Bill for a change. Uncle Bill looked real serious and called Tommy "Tom" in a sort of worrying way as he moved around the kitchen cooking things. Nobody called Tommy "Tom." Everybody called him "Tommy" although his real name was "Thomas," like her father's, and his middle name was "Joshua." But

nobody could call him "Joshua" because then he would get mixed up with her father.

They sat down to breakfast and everything tasted good, everything was delicious -- the eggs and the toast and the orange juice -- and even though it was not exactly the way Emma's mother fixed breakfast, it was still very good.

Tommy said, "I'd like a cup of coffee" and he looked at Uncle Bill and Uncle Bill looked at him but didn't say anything.

So Tommy got up and fetched a cup and saucer and Uncle Bill poured coffee into it. Uncle Bill said, "Try a little milk." So Tommy put milk in the coffee and stirred it and then he drank it. He made a sort of face when he was finished.

Uncle Bill said, "Well, you don't have to drink it all at once like that."

"I suppose not," said Tommy. "It's pretty good actually, except for the taste."

"You get used to it," said Uncle Bill.

"Why didn't Tommy go to school?" Emma said.

Uncle Bill shrugged and said, "It won't hurt him to miss one day."

Then Uncle Bill and Tommy set up the chess board and began to play chess, and after awhile Emma got tired of watching



them because chess is a very slow game and takes a long time to play. Then they took turns playing checkers with her, but she got tired of that and so did they. Then Tommy looked in the top of the coat closet and got out a puzzle they hadn't done in a long time. It was a picture of a big house with a garden all around it and all the flowers were blooming. A woman wearing a white hat was watering the flowers with a red watering can. There was lots and lots of blue sky with little wispy white clouds in it.

"That's too hard," said Emma.

But Tommy found all the edge pieces, all those that had straight sides, and he put them all down in front of Emma and told her to put them together. Most of them were blue, being the sky, and that was still too hard. Then Uncle Bill helped. He said "Try these" and he pushed two edge pieces towards her. And if she tried to fit each knobby part in each hole part, sooner or later she'd find that one of the hole parts fit one of the knob parts. And as long as Uncle Bill kept giving her edge pieces two at a time she could put them together.

It seemed like they had been doing the puzzle for a long long time when the phone rang. They all jumped, even Uncle Bill. Tommy got to it so fast it didn't have a chance to ring again. He said, "Hello," in a high squeaky voice that

didn't sound like his voice. Then he said, "Speaking."  
Then he said "Thank you" and hung up and burst into tears.

Uncle Bill said, "She's all right?"

Tommy nodded but went on crying. Uncle Bill got up and went out of the room. Emma could hear him blowing his nose. He sounded like an elephant.

Emma patted Tommy on the arm and said, "Don't cry, Tommy. Why are you crying if Mommy's all right?" He stopped crying then and wiped his eyes on his sleeve.

"I wasn't crying," he said but he looked mad, like it was all Emma's fault.

But it wasn't. Emma loved her mother more than anyone in the whole world, and she always would. And her mother was all right. The person on the telephone had said so. Now life was long and beautiful again and outside the soft breezes would smell like spring, and soon the violets would bloom. Now her mother would leave the hospital where it smelled like medicine and it was hard to sleep because they kept calling people and the people never answered, and her mother would come home and smile at Emma, and she would play the piano perhaps, humming a little when she played, and then she would fix dinner and after dinner she might take Emma for a walk in the pasture and they might see that

bird again, that they had seen last summer, the one with the sun shining through his feathers like an orange floating high in the sky.

"I know you weren't crying, Tommy," said Emma.