

## XIII

Elizabeth said, "Thank you for all you've done, Bill." Tears would come but they both ignored them. She cried easily and inappropriately. That came from being so sick. It stripped you down, took away your props of habits and normality so that when you woke up once after passing close to death, you would never take it for granted when you went to sleep at night that you would wake up again the next morning.

Stripped down you were, with nothing between you and death but that thin thread by which they had pulled you back from the edge, tied you down on the hard white bed that had sides like a crib to keep you from falling out when you were delirious and which, to Emma's delight, could be cranked up or down in the middle or at either end.

And when they pulled you back, you opened your eyes to a cool sensation. Somebody was smiling down at you and putting water on your lips with a sponge -- nothing ever refreshed you like those cool drops of water on the way back from death's door -- and she said (for it was a nurse), "Thought we'd lost you there for a minute."

Dr. Brown minimized. Dr. Brown said it was not that bad. But wasn't that because it was partly his fault for not calling her back? And how could he say it was not that bad when she had lost Edward?

Edward was gone, and she grieved for him, but just now, as she looked out at the fading sunset and Bill held her hand, just now she felt relief, relief so keen she could feel nothing else.

She was not going to die.

"I wanted to tell you," Bill said (he'd sent the children on ahead, out to the car), "how terrible I feel about -- " he stopped, could not go on.

(Yet, thought Bill, holding her hand means no more to me than holding my mother's. Remorse had driven out love. For it was his fault. He, he had done this to her.)

"It had nothing to do with that," said Elizabeth gently. "Really, you mustn't think that." The baby had not been right.

There was no explanation for it -- no missing vitamin or too strenuous a walk to put it on, nor Bill either. It was just something that had happened.

And Tommy, acting quickly, had saved her life. Even Dr. Brown hadn't succeeded in minimizing that away. And in some subtle way Bill (she was still holding his hand though visiting hours were over and the children waited in the car) had saved Tommy's. Tommy had said as much though not in so many words. While Bill dickered with the nurse on how to arrange the roses he had brought, Tommy said shyly, "Uncle Bill taught me how to make soft-boiled eggs."

She sighed and released Bill's hand. Let him go. He would stay with the children till she came home, he had said. He had insisted, and she had sighed and given in for now because she was too tired to call her mother, too tired to put the necessary reassurance into her voice (her mother must not be allowed to worry). The glow of her recaptured life was high but not strong.

She smiled at Bill as he left. Then the room danced before her eyes and the deep red of the roses in the corner lent their color to the dull green walls, the too-bright overhead light, the other bed (which, mercifully, was empty) with its white sheets that looked (and felt) as though they'd

been boiled and the flat hard pillow. But though the room was bleak (except for the roses) and though there was pain when she moved, though her head hurt a bit and the tears would well up and fall on her cheeks no matter what the texture and tenor of her thoughts (and they were mostly vague and sentimental), Elizabeth luxuriated. She was alive.

Perhaps -- but a nurse came in, gave her a pill, took her pulse -- the wire would get to Joshua tonight. Bill had sent it on his way to the hospital. She didn't know what was in it. Perhaps Joshua would come home when he got it. Poor Joshua, how bad he would feel about Edward. (She would not think about Edward now.)

How soon could Joshua be here if he left at once? Would he come to her in the hospital -- for they seemed determined never to let her out -- and surprise her, appearing quite suddenly at the door of her room? She opened her heavy lids -- for the ether still floated in and out of her blood, sometimes she was quite herself and other times she wasn't -- but the doorway was empty. He would come and take her in his arms but she was too tired, too sore; she would cry out in pain. She needed some time, sweet time . . . and there were oranges on popsicle sticks so pretty floating past the doorway and she walked in the sunshine by a river somewhere

in England but unfortunately she had forgotten her hat and you could not walk by the river without one, that was the law, . . . but no, she was awake again.

Would somebody turn out the overhead light? A halo shimmered around it. No one could sleep with that light on. But that was all right, she didn't mind being awake. Her children slept in their own beds, and Bill watched over them, good old Bill, poor Bill, a balding foolish fairy godmother who had said she was beautiful, who had taught her boy to softboil eggs, who had helped Emma put together pieces of a blue sky.

Yes, it was all blue sky and easy sailing now. She would not die. The hospital had stripped her down, peered into all her secret places, and found her able to go on living. But not Edward. Well, that stab of pain -- it was in her head but went straight to her heart -- would be dealt with tomorrow. Tomorrow (she could feel it coming and shrank from it), tomorrow the depression would come, the loss of Edward that today was just words would be real tomorrow. (But never again, never never would she give a baby a name until she held it in her arms in a blue blanket or a pink one.)

She closed her eyes and saw circles in the darkness where she had been looking at the light, and the circles were red,

they were yellow, they were green. Now Joshua -- she did not need to open her eyes to see him -- now Joshua stood in the doorway in his pajamas, the ones with the big staring eyes that Richard had given him as a joke but he wore them anyway, even when she said they kept her awake. (They didn't really.) There stood Joshua in the doorway in those funny pajamas. So he was in the hospital too and sick, and they could not sleep in the same bed together, intertwined as marriage and living together and having babies who grew up to be children who called you "Mommy" and "Daddy" intertwined you so that even your thoughts were not yours alone but the other's too, like the silver you bought together and the china. But why hadn't he told her he was in the hospital? He smiled at her then -- there were circles of color around his head from the overhead light -- and he called her "Beth" which was what he called her when they made love, made babies, babies that became children or were lost during a night of pain she was glad she could not remember.

But, Joshua said, what if she had tried harder (standing there in the doorway he wore his gardening pants, shabby and spotted with paint and with dirt), if she had tried harder would Edward -- ? But no, she said, Dr. Brown had said the baby was not right, he was not right regardless,

it had nothing to do with shouting at Bill or running up the stairs or not drinking enough milk. And besides she had drunk so much milk.

Joshua wanted to know had Dr. Brown called the baby "he"?

Then Joshua came closer. He wore a dull green uniform and it was stained with sweat, or was that blood? Now she saw one trouser leg hung empty. That was why he argued with her about the baby, that was why he tried to tell her it was her fault when it was not. Joshua was on crutches and a sleeve was pinned back. Pieces of him were missing. He was bleeding. He was crying out in pain. And that was her fault, it was her fault that he had been wounded because she had not wanted him to go in the first place. She had sent him off in anger. "Beth!" he cried.

No, no, it was a dream again. And that was her own voice crying out. There was the too bright overhead light, there the empty doorway. Joshua sat safe at a desk, moving men and supplies around England, like pieces on a chess board, knight to King's Bishop's third, and already they had closed hundreds of miles of England's coastline which meant the invasion would be any day now, any day, and the war would be over soon, and Joshua could come home -- that is, if he didn't get killed first. Waking herself she'd

moved suddenly and there was pain but it subsided, a fire dying down.

What time was it? Was it night? Outside the window was darkness but the sounds of the hospital went on as if it were day. "Dr. Long, to the Emergency Room, Dr. Long, to the Emergency Room." The calls were never answered; Dr. Long never went to the emergency room, nor to surgery if that was where he was wanted. Never did a voice come down the hall (always too loud) and say, "Dr. Long has finally reached the emergency room." The calls continued until the caller gave up. Dr. Long would not come to the emergency room. He was home at the dinner table. "Take your elbows off the table, Bobby," he said severely and ate his dinner thinking "It will be cold tomorrow" or "It will be warm." The child with appendicitis in the Emergency Room was not Dr. Long's affair; his affair was the dinner table, the weather, and his little boy's table manners. (They were not at all what they should be.) Yet the voice continued to call him until it wore itself out. Then it tried instead to get Dr. Murphy to surgery. But at nine o'clock Dr. Murphy had put down the newspaper and said cheerfully to his wife, "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise" as he had done every night of their married life.



Now he lay in bed, snoring a little and dreaming about fishing which was the only thing he cared about while his wife tossed and turned and gave him a little poke now and then (but he went on snoring anyway) and wondered what had possessed her to marry him when Richard Cornell, whom she'd known all her life (when they were children they would go in the bushes together and do naughty things), had always loved her and probably still did. But he was not a doctor.

If it was ten now it was four in the morning in England, and Joshua slept.

She should too. A nurse came in, a stout woman with floppy breasts, beyond the prime of life. (But she, Elizabeth, was in the prime of life now and look at her.)

"All right, dearie?" said the nurse.

"Yes," said Elizabeth, "just some bad dreams."

"That's the ether," said the nurse, nodding as if she were pleased with the ether's effect.

She poured some water into Elizabeth's water glass and left it on the table beside her. "Shall I turn the light out?" she said.

"Please," said Elizabeth. "And could you close the door?"

"Oh, I can't do that," said the nurse. "It's against regulations." And she went away.

It was better without the light. Even if the noise in the hall went on, calling, calling, the darkness was soft and soothing. And it would be nice to have some water. Elizabeth reached for it -- slowly, carefully. It did not hurt that much to move, if she moved carefully. The water was lovely. It would have been nice to drink the whole glass, and then another, supposing you could sit up in bed and lift the water pitcher to fill the glass. But Elizabeth couldn't. And besides there was the inevitable price to pay for the glass of water -- she would have to go to the bathroom. This appeared to be an impossibility. Bedpan there surely was but not within sight -- or, more important, reach. Going to the bathroom was out of the question until morning.

Still the one swallow of water (and it was cold) was very nice. Now she would sleep, drifting smoothly on the current of her thoughts, drifting slowly off, on sweet thoughts of gentle Joshua -- no, he would not come now any more than he would stay when she had wanted him to. But if he came, how sweet life would be. It was the ether playing tricks with her brain for partly she lay in bed -- a bit tense now, a bit anxious for was there not a piece of pain there, starting up slow but ready to become worse? -- and partly she walked across her own front lawn, wearing that blue dress

he loved. Surely the dress was not warm enough for March. But it was not March. She was warm and the sun was hot on her back. She wore her old white hat that had sand in it no matter how she shook it and shook it, sprinkling sand everywhere, but she had had that hat at Avalon last summer (no, the summer before, they had not gone to Avalon last summer), and it had never been the same. She seemed to have an armful of gold but looking closer (the pain was gone) she saw it was daffodils.

Now she sat in a movie theater hung with red velvet, glittering with gold paint, and watched herself on a screen, in black and white, moving too fast, jerky, like a silent movie, and her eyes were enormous and very dark, her mouth rosebud perfect, and in the black and white movie the daffodils were white. The subtitle read "Oh! Oh! Joshua!" and the girl on the screen threw the white daffodils into the air with both hands and then threw herself with the same abandon (but somehow artificial, stagey) into the arms of a man whose face Elizabeth (from her seat in the movie theater) could not quite see because the image on the screen had gone fuzzy, out of focus, there was something wrong with the film. The picture disappeared and was replaced with an enormous backward "7" followed in rapid succession with "6, 5, 4, 3,

2, 1, 0" and the screen went black.

But the sky was blue now with fluffy clouds in it and the pieces had all been fitted together. If you looked close you could see the cracks where they joined. The flowers she held were roses and their thorns hurt her hands but it did not matter. Here was a taxi coming down the street. It was Joshua come home. The taxi slowed in front of the house. She could see him (oh! oh! Joshua!) but he was talking to the driver and did not look at her, though there she stood, in her best blue dress with her arms full of roses to welcome him. The taxi went on by. Joshua had forgotten where he lived.

The taxi went all the way up the street and stopped at the corner. Then it backed up until it was in front of the house again, Joshua's house. Joshua got out, paid the driver, lifted his suitcase out. He had not yet looked up and seen her standing there with the roses in her arms, in her blue dress.

Such joy, such happiness -- it lit her up like a beacon. She glowed with it. She throbbed with it. All those months she'd longed to hold him in her arms, her sweet, her gentle Joshua, Joshua her hero. Now he looked up and saw her for the first time. Now his face would light up like hers. It would be too much to bear.

Joshua looked up and saw her. Joshua said, "Hello, Elizabeth" politely, so very politely, and walked on past her, went into the house, closed the door behind him.

The roses wilted, they dropped, the thorns pierced her fingers and snow began to fall, white and thick, blanking out everything. She took a step forward and slipped on the snow and caught herself with a start to keep from falling -- and woke up.

Oh, it was a dream. She'd moved, keeping herself from falling, and hurt herself awake but it was all right. It did not hurt too bad -- not as bad as the dream had hurt. But then it was only a dream, thank goodness, only a bad dream. The nurse had said the ether did that. It was all right then, it was just the ether.

But what a dream. How different from what Joshua would say, what Joshua would do when Joshua came home, came finally home a hero.

She kept herself awake for a minute longer, taking a small sip of water, looking at the darkness outside the window, moving around in bed the smallest bit to see where it hurt, pushing her hair back from her face, listening to the sounds in the hallway -- they were still calling Doctor This and Doctor That, did they ever stop? Were people in this very

hospital at this very minute dying alone, unattended even by Doctor This or Doctor That? No, no, it was people who had cut themselves on broken glass and needed a stitch or two, it was people who'd broken their legs but the legs would be put back together again and they would be all right, it was people who had fallen on their heads and their heads were all right (there was just a bump and a bruise) but Doctor This or Doctor That needed to take a look just to be sure.

There, now it was all right, it was safe, the ether (her head felt completely clear now) would play no more tricks with her dreams. She could sleep now.