XIV

Tommy would never go to sleep. His mind was wound up so tight if it had been wound any tighter it would have snapped, and he would have gone crazy. All those bits and pieces of information and thought and feeling that were stored away in his brain would go flying about every which way. It would be like shaking one of those paperweights with snow in it so that the snow goes up, down, and sideways, and the little church is lost in a blizzard. Yes, the spring that kept Tommy's mind going and, when loosened, let it sleep, now sent it racing this way and that and no longer guided its normal progress from step one to step two.

And it wasn't just his mind. His body too kept wanting to race although it had nowhere to go except where it already was -- in bed, going to sleep after a day that had started

terribly but ended in a sort of glory.

Dr. Brown had said to Tommy's mother, in front of Bill and Emma, "If this boy here hadn't got you to the hospital so quick I don't know where we might have been tonight."

That was a funny way to put it. Dr. Brown meant he didn't know where Tommy's mother would have been. But he _did_ know. She would have been dead.

What did they do with people who died at the hospital? You never saw a dead body, its face covered with a sheet, being rolled through the halls. But people must die at the hospital. People went to the hospital either to be cured or to die. (Or to have babies, but he didn't want to think about that just now. There were some things that couldn't be helped by thinking about them and that was one.)

In the hospital they probably took dead people down to the basement. They couldn't leave them in the rooms until their families came and got them -- like a clock that couldn't, after all, be fixed. If you were sick, you wouldn't want to look over at the other bed and see that your roommate had suddenly become a dead person. It would be a bad influence. Besides the dead person would begin to smell after awhile. How long? Probably it depended on the weather.

But suppose: there you were in your hospital bed,

probably reading or if you were too sick to read, thinking about your loved ones and how long it would be before you could go home to them. Of course if you were going to die you'd be getting ready for that. If you believed in God, you'd be praying, you'd be asking to be forgiven for all the bad things you had done. Even if you didn't believe in God, you'd be wanting to make it up with people you had quarreled with or been mean to.

That would be Emma, thought Tommy, he was never mean to anybody else. Emma was such a nuisance sometimes. Sometimes, too, he got mad at his mother when she treated him like a kid and didn't take him seriously. But she didn't do that too much anymore, or anyway she did it mostly at meals when she didn't think he was eating enough. That was what had made it so hard to get thin. But he'd done it. He was his old self again now, had really almost forgotten that the old fat Tommy had ever existed. It had been so out of character for him to be fat, anyway.

If you were dying you would want to say goodbye to the people you cared about. You would want to cancel your subscription to _Trains_ (nobody else read it). You would want to ask somebody other than your parents to get rid of that _Time_ magazine with the picture of the naked girl

running down a beach -- you only saw her back of course but that was enough -- and the caption said "You don't have to think about the war all the time." It was an ad for something (vacations probably), and there it was in the box under your bed, beneath all the _Trains_ magazines. And, of course, most important, you would want to make a will so that your relatives wouldn't have to fight over your money -- if you had any.

Then suppose, while you were doing all that, you suddenly looked over at the person in the other bed and saw that it was a dead person. Well, that wouldn't be too nice, especially if you were about to die too. His eyes might be open and staring at the ceiling. He'd be getting stiff like a board. He'd begin to smell.

You'd have to call a nurse and say, "Get this dead person out of here!"

They'd cover him up with a sheet so you wouldn't see those awful open eyes, and they'd roll him away. Maybe they had a chute somewhere like the one for the coal in the basement window, and they put the dead person in the chute and down he went to the basement where he lay in a big pile of dead people, arms and legs going every which way, and when a relative came to claim him, they'd have to untangle him

from the pile. It was hard not to laugh at the thought of all those tangled up dead people but it wasn't wrong to laugh because if you believed in God, you believed that the dead person's soul -- like a little white bird -- had left him when he died and flown off to Heaven. And if you didn't believe in God, you wouldn't care if your body was tangled up in a heap of other bodies or not; you didn't need it anymore because you were dead and didn't exist anymore.

But of course the hospital didn't really do it that way. They probably had a morgue down in the basement where they kept each dead person in his own little box with his name on the outside.

Then they buried you while all your relatives cried and wished they'd been nicer to you while you were still alive. After that, it was over, and the worms ate you. "The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out," went that song, "The worms play pinochle on your snout,/ Your stomach turns a slimy green, and pus comes out like whipping cream."

He always sang that song to Emma when she was being a nuisance. It was a good way to get rid of her. If the stomach part didn't send her running in the opposite direction, then the pus did. That was because Emma was squeamish. Emma threw up a lot, in cars and on buses or the trolley car.

It was embarrassing. They hardly ever went downtown anymore because of Emma throwing up on the trolley car.

Being a boy, Tommy wasn't squeamish but he had cried today. That was awful. He had cried in front of Bill. That was just awful even if Bill said that it was because of the shock that Tommy had cried. Bill himself had gone into the dining room and blown his nose very hard when Dr. Brown had said Tommy's mother was going to be all right. When he came back his eyes were red. Still Bill was a sentimental man --he was always saying that he was -- and Tommy was not.

Emma cried all the time but she was just a little girl. She would stop real quick if you gave her whatever she was crying for.

Tonight she had cried whenever they told her she should go to bed, and then they had had to explain one more time why her mother couldn't come home. Finally they let her stay up until she fell asleep. Then Bill carried her up to her room and put her to bed. After that, although it was late, Bill and Tommy had stayed up talking. Bill was good to talk to. It was not like talking to your parents who might hold what you said against you later. Tommy could talk man-to-man to Bill. Now as he lay in bed, his brain still ticking away, he thought things would be different now, everything would

be different now -- although perhaps only in small ways at first.

The man-to-man talk had started off slowly. Bill had drunk beer. He had taken his shoes off, stretched out on the couch, and looked over at Tommy in the red leather chair.

It was embarrassing. Tommy kept remembering that he had cried and that Bill had seen him do it. He wished that he could go up to his room and read or draw pictures of trains but here was Bill, a guest, and he, Tommy, was the host, and it wouldn't be polite. On the other hand, Bill was also a sort of babysitter, and Tommy had never felt he had to talk to babysitters, but then they were usually old ladies and he couldn't have talked to them if he had wanted to.

Now they would have a man-to-man talk and it was up to Tommy to begin it because Bill was just lying there drinking his beer and obviously not thinking about much of anything, unless he was remembering Tommy crying.

Tommy said, "What does beer taste like?"

"Here," said Bill, "try some." And he held the bottle out to Tommy. Tommy didn't know if that meant Bill wanted him to drink out of the bottle or if he was supposed to get a glass. If he drank out of the bottle, Bill would get his germs and maybe Bill wouldn't like that. But if he got

a glass, then Bill might think it was because he, Tommy, didn't want to get Bill's germs, and his feelings might be hurt. Tommy didn't know what to do. It seemed that whichever he did it would be wrong.

Suddenly the glory he had attained last night by saving his mother's life, and again tonight when Dr. Brown had told everybody that that was what he had done, slipped away from him. He was carried back, far back to a time in second grade when he had first suffered embarrassment.

Even now he remembered it with chagrin.

It began ominously. He could not find his workbook. It was not in the place it was supposed to be. The second grade teacher was mean, she was old, he was afraid of her. So when she said, "Does everybody have their workbook?" he was afraid to put up his hand. Maybe, he thought desperately, maybe she would not notice that he didn't have his if he bent over his desk, pretending to be working. And so he hunched low and pretended. For awhile this seemed to be working but it was not his lucky day. The teacher happened to glance at Andy Evans who sat in the seat in front of Tommy's, and she didn't like what she saw. Andy was picking his nose and eating what he found there. It was his habit. Everybody (except the teacher) knew that he did it and that

it was a mistake to look at him when he was doing it.

"Andy, that is disgusting," said the teacher, and she advanced upon him. But when she got to his desk she was distracted from how disgusting Andy was by something else. "What is Tommy's workbook doing here?" she said, picking it up from Andy's desk.

It was a horrible moment -- Andy all crimson from this scrutiny of his habit (he knew it was disgusting and that he wasn't supposed to do it but sometimes, in moments of stress, he forgot) and Tommy waiting in horrified anticipation for the spotlight to move to him, which it did.

"Tommy, why didn't you say you didn't have your workbook?"

How stupid he felt, how utterly stupid. Unable to reply, he just sat there hanging his head, waiting for time to pass, waiting for the moment, the day, the whole horrible botched-up year of second grade to be over. And when the teacher finally slapped the workbook down on his desk and sighed and went away, Tommy knew he was destroyed: he would never do or say a smart thing again. It was no use even to try because all those people in the second grade class knew that he was hopeless. They would be watching him, waiting to jeer at his miserable attempts, just as the teacher, slapping the workbook down on his desk and sighing, had jeered. The fact

was that he, Tommy, didn't know how to handle himself out in the world.

This feeling, of course, had proved not to be true, had proved, in fact, to be almost the opposite of the truth except on very rare occasions when, for reasons he didn't understand, he suddenly reverted to a state he now knew to be temporary -- a state of hopeless stupidity.

He felt like that now, coming back from the kitchen with a little glass that had once had jelly or peanut butter in it. And when he poured a little beer into the glass and it came out mostly foam.

Bill said, "Oh, that's not even a swallow. Here," and he filled up the glass.

Tommy drank it. At first he just felt the coldness of it. Was anything ever as cold as that beer was? Then the prickles, that was the carbonation, like ginger ale. And then the taste. The taste was absolutely terrible. Lying in bed hours later, he could taste it still, he could taste it whenever he burped. It was stale and sour.

But he had drunk it all, in an agony of self-consciousness, while Bill watched. Then Bill had laughed and said, "You look just like your father did when he had his first beer."

And the stupid feeling -- the feeling of having gone

completely wrong in second grade -- vanished. He forgot it completely. For Bill had suddenly and effortlessly hoisted him up to his father's level. So he, Tommy, suddenly became a younger and different version of his father, Bill's best friend, his father who hadn't liked his first taste of beer either, his father who perhaps had made a fool of himself in the second grade but had gotten over it, had gone on in fact to become a scientist brilliant enough to awe and humble all his former second grade classmates, his father who, though he had gone off to war without properly explaining himself to his son (who was, after all, still a child at least in the eyes of the world), might have explained himself to his life-long friend.

So Tommy said, "Why did my father go to war?"

And that's when the man-to-man talk began.

Bill said he didn't know how to answer that question. Then he said that Joshua had always been like that, that he was a good man who would fight for what he believed in. And Bill talked about the free world and victory and a just and durable peace and he opened another beer and said Joshua's type of bravery was greater than anyone knew. That people like Joshua could exist only in a country like ours, a democracy, that when victory came (and it would come) people

like Joshua, the quiet ones who fought the good fight, would be our real heroes. That he, Bill, was honored to be Joshua's friend.

And Tommy saw that Bill didn't know why his father had gone either. And he cleared his throat, so Bill would know he was going to do a quote, and he said, slowly and carefully:

> "As life is action and passion, it is required of a man that he should share the passion and action of his time at peril of being judged not to have lived."

And Bill, who had shut his eyes during the quote (perhaps to listen better), kept his eyes shut for a minute longer so that Tommy was afraid he had fallen asleep. But then he opened his eyes and looked at Tommy and said, "*How* old are you?", accenting the "how" in that way people do when they know something but they've just forgotten it for a moment.

Tommy, feeling flattered, said that he was nearly eleven.

Bill shook his head as if in wonder. "That's a good quote," he said. Then he said, "Is your name Thomas Joshua, like your father's?"

"Yes," said Tommy.

Bill said that names were funny. That everybody had called Joshua "Shu" when he was little and that Joshua had gotten to hate it as he grew up.

Tommy said, "How did he make them stop calling him that?"

"He told them to and they did," Bill said. "Except his sister still calls him that but he doesn't mind anymore."

Tommy nodded. He had heard Aunt Sally call his father that but he had always thought she was saying "Shoe," like what you put on your foot. He had never asked her why she did it, and his father had never seemed to mind.

Tommy hesitated. There was something he had been thinking about for a long time but had never told anybody before. Would Bill laugh? He thought that he wouldn't, and anyway Bill had brought the subject up so it wouldn't be fair if he laughed. Tommy said, "Suppose I asked them to call me 'T.J.'?"

Bill thought about that for a minute. "T.J.," he said. "It has a nice sound to it. Like Thomas Jefferson. T.J. T.J."

They both listened for a moment to see if the name, thus gently released into the air, would come to harm, would crash into the edge of the table perhaps, would scrape along the floor.

"Yes, it sounds good," Bill concluded. "Why don't you do it?"

"I will," said Tommy. That a name could be changed like that astonished him. It was as if he'd spent his life in a small room in which there were several doors he supposed

to be locked. And then someone came along and said, "But the doors are open." Tonight he was "Tommy" -- a name that could be whined, a name by which he could be scolded, teased, made to kiss elderly relatives. _Tommy_ wiped catsup off his chin when his mother told him to and turned off his light at the appointed time. _Tommy_ misplaced his workbook in second grade and was too shy to ask for it. _Tommy_ was fat and grew tongue-tied at the wrong moments.

But from the ashes of "Tommy" rose the new T.J. _T.J._ was pure intellect. _T.J.'s_ mind was fast and sure and ruthless. _T.J._ kept his emotions tightly reined and he never cried. _T.J._ dwelt in the world of ideas. He had saved his mother's life not through heroic measures (though they were not beyond him) but through pure reason, through planning, through preparing. It was no coincidence that he knew Dr. Brown's number by heart, no coincidence that he sat up late night after night, that no sound was small enough to escape him. _T.J._ had done that, not _Tommy_.

Bill opened another beer and said, "Well, T.J." He was trying out the new name.

The new T.J. glowed. The name was not yet his, of course. He wore it as one wears a new hat, somewhat self-consciously, being careful not to wear it if it looks like

rain. (This is my new hat, isn't it a good one? Yet I am just a little embarrassed by its finery, its newness, its obviousness. And he walked around the room a bit, glancing in the mirror to see how the new hat looked, moving his head from side to side to see if the hat would fall off. Getting used to it so that it would be part of him.)

Bill helped. He said, "You've lost some weight there, T.J."

T.J. shrugged. He said, "I got taller." (I'm glad you like my new hat. I'm partial to it myself -- at least it keeps the old head warm.)

"How's school, T.J.?" said Bill.

(The hat fell off into a mud puddle, was stepped upon by a horse, was carried, dripping and crumpled, away by the wind. It was lost.)

They would not call him T.J. at school.

Bill read his mind. That's what three cans of beer in a row did for you; it gave you a second sight. You could read people's minds. Bill said he (T.J.) should sign his papers with his new name and after awhile they would get used to it. All it took was time. And next year, with a new teacher, it would be easy.

(The hat, retrieved, cleaned, shaped, was just as good

as new again. Yes, it was fine.)

After the problem of the name was settled they talked about a lot of different stuff -- about Bill and Joshua growing up and what it was like then, about Louisiana and New Orleans and mardi gras, and, of course, about Huey Long. And they talked about the victory garden which Tommy would plant all by himself this spring. Bill didn't know anything about gardening but he said there were books that told you exactly what to do in every month of the year and that Joshua probably had some of those books around the house. And they talked about trains and radio programs and the Civil War in which Bill's and Joshua's ancestors had fought heroically under General P.G.T. Beauregarde. And finally they began to yawn a lot because, in spite of taking a nap in the middle of the day, it had been a long day and a hard one. Then Bill said he would sleep on the couch and together they found some blankets and a pillow for him and then they said goodnight.

T.J. went on up to Tommy's old room with his mind still dashing this way and that.

But Tommy's room was filled with Tommy. T.J. had to fit himself into it and push out the old Tommy, the little boy Tommy who had cried. He was offstage now but not altogether forgotten. Would he have to be brought out again when his

father came home a hero from the war? Heroes did not, perhaps, appreciate finding a cold reasoning mind (pure logic) in the place of a sweet little boy (but he had never been "sweet") who turned his light out when told to and had once slept with (it was rumored) a very large rabbit named Mother Cottontail. He had, too, and he could remember wearing blue pajamas with feet on them and snuggling down with the stuffed rabbit and dreaming that he could fly. Yes, there he was on top of the roof, the leaves on the trees were so thick it was like being underwater in the green sea, only you were a fish and could breathe. And he flapped his arms hard and flew quite competently off the roof and above the tree tops close to the warm red sun. It was setting.

In the dream Mother Cottontail had liked his flying. He remembered that -- how she said, "I _knew_ you could do it." Perhaps it had even been her idea.

Now Emma had Mother Cottontail and did they fly at night as they slept?

You outgrew these things when you gave up "Tommy" for "T.J." But that was all right. T.J. would do other things, though what they were he couldn't have said just then.

But now his mind, like the snow in the paperweight, was settling down. The fears and the glory of the day crept

quietly into the drawer marked "emotions." The quote "As life is action and passion" tiptoed into the big old cabinet in the corner marked "Daddy," along with Bill's remark that Tommy looked like his father having his first beer. The beer itself -- or the taste of it that rode up on every burp -- along with the taste of the coffee went into a large cardboard box marked "grown-up stuff." But the new name, T.J., floated about the place looking over its new possessions and making itself right at home.

In the dream that came soon after that, Tommy woke to a world of ice. The house was dry and warm but outside all was ice -- clear smooth ice so bright it hurt your eyes at first. Tommy put on his skates and flew (for there really is no difference between skating and flying) up the street and down the next one to the pasture. He had never gone so fast or felt so free. And there, leaning against the fence in the pasture, was his father. When he saw Tommy he said, "My son, how I've missed you" and he put his arms out.

But Tommy, for some reason, couldn't hug him and so he shook his hand instead, and that was just as good.