

XV

"I grow old, I grow old/ I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled," thought Lizzy O'Connor. Bertie could recite whole sections of "Prufrock" but somehow only those two lines stuck in her head. She liked them. Now she was old -- seventy-something or other next summer -- and she often crooned the lines to herself at odd moments. She used them (though that was not Eliot's meaning) to congratulate herself on having gotten old. It was good to have gotten old, the line seemed to say to her; it was nice to be old. You could roll up the bottoms of your trousers if you liked, and nobody would mind. Allowances were made for you because you were old. You could do what you liked.

And so when Elizabeth had called and said, "Mother,

could you come down and stay with the children?" she'd thought "what fun!" Children also did what they liked, wore their hats crooked, put on socks that didn't match, said whatever they were thinking. Allowances were also made for children. It was the people in between who had to be good and do what they were supposed to do.

The train would never start, would it? Not that it mattered. There would be no one to meet her in Washington.

In the seat next to hers, a nice young woman (just a girl really but very pregnant) had smiled at her when she sat down. Later they would talk but right now Lizzy O'Connor was worn out. She'd stood in line for hours, it seemed, just to get on the train, resisting the guilt aroused by the signs plastered everywhere in South Station: "Is this trip necessary?" Indeed it was but still she hadn't wanted to take a seat from a weary soldier. But then what could she do when they did insist on getting up so politely to offer her a seat? She couldn't, after all, stand up all the way from Boston to Washington, though the aisles were filled with people who would.

Now she lay back in her seat a little breathless (there was no air on the train) and quite exhausted. That's what being old meant -- your allowance of energy was smaller

than it used to be. It got used up and you had to stop, lean back, close your eyes for a bit and slowly slowly it would come back to you. (She was better already.)

Elizabeth had said she should not worry. Elizabeth had said, "Now Mother, I'm going to be fine, just fine." But Lizzy knew that it had been bad, very bad indeed. Over the phone she could tell how bad it was by how relieved Elizabeth sounded, light-headed even, she was so relieved. On the other hand, she was surely grieving deeply -- or would be when the shock wore off -- over the loss of the baby. She would not tell her mother about that. She wouldn't tell anybody about that. She would keep up the bright facade, and there was no way to break through it, no way to offer comfort.

Lizzy sighed and resolutely turned her thoughts to her grandchildren, how their faces would look, the books she would read to Emma, how Tommy would play the piano for her, whether it would be nearly spring in Washington.

She loved Boston. She'd never live anywhere else. But the winters were long. Bertie loved the snow and cold weather. Now he had a cold because he'd been tromping through the snow, and he wouldn't even button his coat, oh, no, not he, the little idiot. What a pig-headed stubborn fool of a man he was! On account of his cold she hadn't let him come

to the station with her. But she would not shed a tear at the thought of leaving Bertie all alone and him with a cold. No, she'd not make a fool of herself in front of that pretty girl who gave her an anxious glance now and then. She, Lizzy, had been so breathless from hurrying when she sat down. The girl probably thought she was about to faint.

Would the train never leave? There -- no, a false start. How late it was getting to be. But no one would meet her so it did not matter. And now -- yes -- here we go. The train slid smoothly forward and South Station slipped away. Oh, she did love a train trip, even a crowded noisy one like this.

She would write Bertie every night -- dear sweet fool of a man. He was chubby now and his cheeks were fat and pink like Santa Claus's, the cute little man. And he said he'd mellowed. Well, she hadn't noticed any mellowing though maybe they didn't fight as much as they used to. The fights they had had in the beginning -- ! But that was what marriage was for. You cared what the other person thought, and when he disagreed with you you fought it through.

When she was growing up she was taught never to discuss politics or religion. That was supposed to prevent arguing. Arguing was vulgar. And everything was so genteel in those days you couldn't have got a good fight going no

matter what you said. As soon as you discovered the other person disagreed with you, you said quickly, "Oh, you may be right," and went on to discuss the latest fashion -- unless, of course, it was fashion you had disagreed about.

Bertie had really set that idea on its ear. The first argument they had had was when Bertie said they should get married. "Oh, you may be right" was obviously the wrong answer to that one (or so she thought at the time). In the first place she didn't want to marry anybody. In the second place she didn't want to marry Bertie. Her mother didn't approve of him. He wasn't in their class. He was Irish. He wasn't at all the kind of boy Lizzy would have met in the normal way -- children of her parents' friends, boys who came to the charity teas her mother occasionally presided over, brothers of the girls who went with their mothers and Lizzy and her mother to the Sunday afternoon concerts at Mrs. Jack Gardner's palace on the Fenway.

No, Bertie was an odd one. He was a friend of her brother Henry's, who had met him at a political meeting. Despite her brother's very proper upbringing and even more proper old age -- nowadays Henry was staunchly Republican, a hopeless Hoover man through and through -- he'd had a few wild years in the middle when he'd kept an open mind.

This was as out of character for Henry as Bertie's own behavior, shortly thereafter, was out of character for him. For as soon as Bertie realized the problems he'd have to overcome before he could carry Lizzy off to the savage land of his own true self (and for reasons Lizzy could never understand he had decided to do this the moment he saw her), he became utterly charming, courtly even, and oh so very proper you'd never have guessed the wild Irish passions he was hiding -- never, never, unless, of course, you were the mother of the sweet young thing (but she wasn't particularly young) he was hoping to carry off. He'd never have done it if she, Lizzy, hadn't been completely and overwhelmingly charmed by the artfulness of the deception he was attempting to put over on her poor dear but steadfastly unconvinced mother. Then Lizzy became stubborn, Lizzy became headstrong, Lizzy became determined -- she who barely knew the meaning of the word -- and before she knew what she was about, she'd done it. She'd married the man, and with her parents' blessings too. She'd never done anything so wise before nor since.

Now she, Lizzy O'Connor, was seventy-something or other and could ~~wear~~ her trousers rolled if she wanted to, and so could Bertie.

Yes, the fights in the beginning had really been something.

How she, the fledgling from her mother's mannerly house, had cringed the first time Bertie had hollered at her, "How can you say that?"

She had said he should not speak out against the church in front of his brother who was a priest. In fact it was a pretty charitable thing for her to say (she thought), not being a Catholic herself, nor brought up to think too highly of Catholics either. But Bertie's face had turned red with anger and he'd stomped about the room swinging his arms as though he might smash things if something wasn't done to stop him. She'd said quickly, "Oh, you're probably right," and retreated to the kitchen. After that she was careful not to say what she thought when she felt he might disagree. But one day she forgot. She said she thought all those men in the streets weren't working because they were shiftless and lazy. There were plenty of jobs, she said, they just didn't want to work. Why she'd just seen a "dishwasher wanted" sign and --

How could she say that, he'd exploded. Did she know she was trompling all over his basic beliefs? Did she care?

I grow old, I grow old, she mused, smiling at the thought of her saying that to Bertie, so many years ago, and him a raving maniac of a socialist.

She said, "Oh, you may be right," but this time it didn't work. He got madder than ever, seemed to swell up to twice his normal size. She began to worry about his health.

"Why won't you talk about it?" he cried.

"It's not that important," she said sulkily. They had just sat down to dinner. The roast was getting cold.

He pounded on the table. "It is important," he said. All the wedding china rattled.

Alarmed, she said, "I won't discuss anything when you're in such a state," and rose to go.

"God damn it, you will discuss it," he said -- oh, he was quite beside himself -- and he hit her.

She went to the bedroom then and threw herself down on the double bed. Making up after that was impossible. No one had ever hit her in her whole life. She would never forgive him. They would never again sleep together in the double bed, and sleeping together in the double bed was not something she gave up lightly. Yet how could she ever forgive him? People did not hit each other in her mother's house. In her mother's house, people continually deferred to one another so that it was a miracle that anyone ever ate the last lamb chop or sat in the best chair. The fact that he hadn't hit her very hard had nothing to do with anything.

She cried. She cried so hard she was nearly ill. And all the while Bertie knelt by the side of the bed trying to hold her hand (but she wouldn't let him), begging her to forgive him. That was just the way he was, he said (nearly crying himself), he couldn't couldn't couldn't keep things inside like she did. It was because he cared so much what she thought. Didn't she care what he thought? Wouldn't -- but his voice broke, a sob intervened -- wouldn't she give him a second chance? She knew he couldn't live without her.

So they made it up. He would never hit her again. She would never say "You may be right" again. Later, as they lay in the double bed together, tearful but tender, he explained socialism to her.

To this day she wasn't sure exactly how she did feel about socialism and she still didn't like the way Bertie treated his brother, dear Father Matthew, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that she no longer retreated to the kitchen when Bertie wanted to argue. Bertie had shaken her into the reasoning world, and she loved it.

Now when they disagreed, they put on their clanging armor, they grabbed their blunt staves, they rushed headlong at each other, and fell, crashing and banging, to roll about on the floor.

And so it went. He said that war was terrible but this one was necessary, and she said how could any war be necessary, ever ever? So though the armor was dented and rusty, though their voices were weaker and the staves -- the staves were worn to the nub -- still they struggled, still they jousted and shook each other about -- stopping to smile, to take a cup of tea, to roll the bottoms of their trousers.

"Tickets, please."

Yes, she had a ticket somewhere. Here -- no, that wasn't it. Patience fell over the conductor's face like a veil, hiding his true feelings.

(Oh, these old ladies. Oh God, deliver me from these old ladies and their lost tickets when there's such a mob of people to get through and my feet are killing me.)

Nervously she searched and searched and finally found the ticket.

Elizabeth and Joshua never quarreled, never fought. But then Elizabeth had never quarreled with anyone. Elizabeth so calm, so composed, she was not like Richard and Michael who were always full of mischief. But then maybe boys were always like that and girls were always like Elizabeth, gentle, calm, complete. Yet Elizabeth felt things. Elizabeth suffered. Elizabeth grew angry. But you never

saw it, she never told you about it.

There had always been something uncanny about Elizabeth that couldn't be traced to her feisty Irish father or her Yankee mother who'd been, perhaps, just a little too sheltered in early life. (But Bertie had changed that all right, making a different person of Lizzy by shaking her the way you shake a broken radio until the little watchamacillit that was loose falls into place and the thing begins to work again. Gone was the proper young lady who said the right things and wore the right sort of gloves to the right sort of places.)

"Providence, Providence, passengers exit to the rear."

Oh dear, that pretty pregnant girl wanted to get off. She would never make it. The mob jammed down the aisle and the girl just stood there, awkwardly, waiting for someone to be polite. But the train would go on before that happened. It was too crowded for politeness.

No, she was lucky; somebody stopped and held back the crowd and the girl clumsily joined the stream and was lost among the uniformed backs. Poor thing, thought Lizzy, it must be her first too. She walked with her back arched way back, like women do with their first. Probably going to see her husband one last time before he goes overseas, poor child, and such a pretty girl too, standing on the threshold

of adult life like that -- did she look back and regret leaving the magical world of childhood or did she rush forward eagerly, like most people did, without a backward look? We would never know, would we? Perhaps she herself didn't.

But here were a hundred soldiers rushing in. Surely the train would pop at the seams. Where would they all go?

"Excuse me, ma'am, is this seat taken?"

"Goodness no," she said. "Quick!" and she patted the seat for still he paused, being polite, and the seat would be taken by someone else while he hesitated. So he sat and the people poured in.

He was a nice-looking boy, she thought, practically a child -- oh, but they all were, if they weren't young men in the prime of life with children of their own who would cry for them. How it broke your heart.

And she smiled her most grandmotherly smile at the nice-looking soldier.

The stations ticked by: Kingston, Westerly, New London, Old Saybrook. They stopped for awhile in New Haven. The soldier said they were changing locomotives. For a little while she looked out on the ocean and then they went through New York City, over a bridge, through tunnels, through the city itself. (The possibility of moving to New York had hung

over her head her whole life, it seemed, like a serious disease you suspect you have but no doctor can ever find. Still it had come to nothing and now they were, thank goodness, too old.) In New York they paused and the wave of khaki, olive drab, grey, navy blue went out and came in again, and the train went on.

Such a nice young man, she thought two hours later, as he fought his way off at 30th Street Station in Philadelphia. And she tried to wave to him through the window but there were hundreds of soldiers on the platform and they did look all alike in their uniforms. (But of course that was the point of uniforms, wasn't it?) He had brought her water in those triangular cups that you got on trains -- how he'd ever made it through the crowd and back without spilling it she would never know. He'd tried to share his lunch with her but she never ate much on trains. She got motion sickness if she did.

He'd spoken eloquently about his reasons for going (he'd been drafted -- he was just eighteen -- but he would have gone anyway) and about the girl he'd left behind and how she would wait for him, he hoped, and if she didn't he wouldn't blame her. Because he spoke in sentences that were long and carefully thought out and he used a lot of adjectives, she

asked was he planning to be a writer after the war? He blushed and said well no, he didn't think so though there were, he admitted, a few poems in his desk drawer at home but they weren't any good (though his girl liked them). She found herself thinking of Rupert Brooke. She didn't want to think about Rupert Brooke, devoutly hoped that the sweet young man with big brown eyes like pools of thought would not have occasion to think of Rupert Brooke. But there was nothing she could say to him, while he spoke so movingly, to make sure he came home once again to his poems and to his girl.

Now he was gone to meet his fate, and the old man who'd taken his place, invulnerable to her encouraging smile (she wanted to talk about young boys with poems in their desk drawers going to meet their fate), had gone right to sleep. Had he been standing all the way from Boston, poor soul? War was so hard, so hard on everybody. Perhaps he had lost someone, he looked so sad as he slept.

Her throat tightened, and she blinked away the tears that came too easily now, because of the war, because she was old. All her boys had gone to war -- Richard and Michael and Joshua. She felt sometimes as if she'd been holding her breath since they left and celebrating the passing

of each day that saw them still alive, that brought them closer to the time when they could come home again.

But why, why had they to go? Bertie said it was a necessary war. But when they went to count up how many had died, would anything justify all those lost lives, from both sides? And the bombing -- obliteration bombing they called it, the papers exulting at the destruction of the German cities. What good did it do to kill civilians who had no say about whether their governments went to war or not?

But the old men, sitting in their comfortable offices or traveling around the world to meet each other, talked about unconditional surrender. They didn't have to go off to die. No, no, not they. Because, sitting in their cozy offices, they chose to disagree, eighteen-year-old American boys with poems in their desk drawers must try to kill eighteen-year-old German boys with poems of their own, perhaps. Why did they go? And they did go; as the bands played and the flags waved and their mothers cried, they went with a high marching step and a glow in their eyes. They went. Even Joshua, the man of science who had never before appeared to notice the striving writhing body politic that howled and bawled and contorted about in order to pat itself on the back -- even though it lurked just a few miles from

his laboratory, his dark and dusty laboratory in which murmured the mysteries of life. Even Joshua went.

Yet Lizzy O'Connor loved her country, would never live anywhere else, would have given her own life if it would have saved Bertie's. She paused to search her own soul -- yes, she'd give her own life if it could save a child, a young person, someone whose day for the rolling of the trousers was still far away. But look, just look, she silently reproached the Delaware River which was full of battleships, oil tankers, freighters, destroyers, going to and from Philadelphia, -- just look at all those boys, boys with poems in their bureau drawers going over there to kill and be killed. Oh, it broke your heart.

Years ago, when Richard was about five, she'd come upon him in the street, being mean to a cat. How hurt she'd been, how upset. She'd grabbed him, carried him into the house, spanked him. But that had only made him mad. He'd have been twice as mean to the cat then if she'd let him. So she'd talked to him and talked to him until she had talked him into tenderness. Then he was all right. He could be trusted to be nice to cats.

Had she been so angry and felt so bad because it was her little boy being mean to a cat? But if it had been

another little boy on her street, or even in her town, wouldn't she had felt just as bad? In some obscure way wasn't it her fault if little boys were mean to cats on Beacon Street, in Boston, in Massachusetts? Where did your responsibility end -- or did it ever end? Was it not her fault too if little boys in Florida, in Omaha, in Minnesota were mean to cats?

You could not say that as long as your own little boy was nice to cats you had nothing to worry about. But there you were. All those cat-loving little boys were marching off to war so eagerly with that high marching step and that look of glory in their innocent eyes. Yes, they were, she thought sadly, and they were doing it to make sure that no one anywhere was being mean to cats.

But Bertie said, "It's people, Lizzy, not cats!"

She sighed. What did she know about it, or about anything? She was old, she was old. And she took no joy at this weary moment -- the grey land rumbling by the dirty window -- from the rolling of her trousers. It was so much nicer to agree with Bertie than not. Bertie had said that the first war that had promised to end all wars was not a necessary war. It was just a quarrel between cousins. But now he'd mellowed. Now he'd grown old, wore the bottoms of

his trousers rolled. He said this war was unavoidable and they had to get in it, though he didn't try to defend the bombing.

Still, she didn't understand. "Why?" she'd cried when Richard and Michael went, when her nephews went, when Joshua looked up from his microscope and noticed for the first time that there was a war on, and went.

Old though he might be -- and mellowed -- Bertie leaped to battle. He drew for her a picture of Hitler's world in which those who did not say (or look like they would say) "You are right" were exterminated. Even gentle "you may be right" was not sufficient; you weren't left to think what you pleased, to roll about the floor banging and crashing with your opponent. They took away your staff, your armor, they took away -- if they pleased -- Richard, Michael, Elizabeth, even Bertie -- and you hung your head and said "yes" and "yes" again to everything. She didn't want that, did she?

"Of course not," she'd said impatiently, "but do we really know that that's the alternative?" And so he went on and they talked and talked and at the end all she could say was, "You may be right." He flushed as though stung but she patted his shoulder gently (he had bursitis) and said,

"I'm sorry, Bertie. This time I can't seem to understand it. But then I'm just an addle-headed old woman. I grow old, I grow old."

Bertie said, "You're just as good as you always were." And he put his good arm around her and hugged her. "And you were always just as good as gold," he said.