

## XVI

"Baltimore, Baltimore, all out for Baltimore."

My, how time does slip by. She was almost there. An air of gaiety began to permeate the crowd -- even the people packed like sardines in the aisle began to get lively. Only Lizzy's seatmate slept on, impervious. Was it possible, she wondered, for a little old lady with oddly rolled trousers (but of course she wore a dress) to get all the way out to Bethesda by herself? And soon it would be getting dark. She barely knew the way, even by daylight.

Try to borrow some of Elizabeth's calm, she told herself. Elizabeth never got rattled about anything, never lost her ticket, never went out the "in" door or found in her bureau drawer one solitary black glove and one solitary white one.

Tommy too was a cool little boy, a reasoning man, Bertie called him -- and Bertie ought to know. Bertie talked politics to Tommy, toning it down a bit (one hoped). They talked about the Civil War and disagreed, coming, as Bertie said, from opposing sides. All the same, Tommy was no little rebel. While he argued the Confederate side to his Boston grandfather, it was quite possible that he took the Union side to his grandfather Corbrey. Anything for an argument. He did not get that from either of his parents; soft-spoken, agreeable they both were.

Yet how did she know? How did you ever know? Marrying, two people presented a different picture of themselves to the world. A painter works alone but in marriage each partner holds a brush and they talk as they paint. ("Let's make the sky brighter, the afternoon shadows deeper." "Shall we put in an apple tree, just there?") But the picture they show you ("How happy we are." "How miserable, we stay together for the sake of the children,") is not necessarily the true one although they might think it is, although they might choose to hang a copy in their bedroom. But how are you, especially if you are the mother of the bride -- for it's mothers not wives who are always the last to know, if they know at all-- to tell what relation the picture

has to reality?

Baltimore slid away. Nearly there, nearly there, the train murmured, soothing its heavy, weary load.

For example, one would not have expected Joshua to go to this war, nor that Elizabeth would be so proud that he had gone, for wasn't it true that he was more useful here than there? Yet Elizabeth said ("sharply" you would have said had it been anybody but Elizabeth) "I'm very proud of him." Well, well, a mother-in-law couldn't be expected to know what went on in her daughter's husband's head. All that was necessary was that her daughter knew.

Bertie had not been surprised at all. When she had brought her "why" to Bertie over this one, over Joshua (for Richard and Michael had gone at once and she had known they would), Bertie had said: "'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.'" That was Oliver Wendell Holmes Junior on the Civil War. It was a good quote too. She hadn't believed it anymore than she'd believed anything else but she had to admit it was a good quote. You might well march off with a high step and a gleam in your eye if you had that quote floating about your mind. Bertie had sent it to

Tommy in a sweet letter he had written (oh he had mellowed). When Joshua left, Tommy had written how proud they were of him (proud, proud, they were all so proud, or said they were) for going although he didn't have to and was far more use in his laboratory discovering important things about cells. Bertie said the letter was Tommy's way of asking "why?" and so he had sent the quote back as an answer, along with the sweet letter.

How fast the time went -- no, she didn't mean the train but life, life, jolly old life with its bumps and its jolts and the bad places in the track. Once you got on that particular train, you couldn't get off till the end, you couldn't say, "I'm tired of always moving, moving, moving, I'll get off here for awhile and rest. Go on without me, I'll catch up later." No you couldn't get off, you had to keep on, and on would go that pain in your side that took hold of you on occasion and hung on for months (but the doctor said it was just nerves) or the fear that Bertie -- and without Bertie there would be no train at all -- that Bertie would get sick, would get hurt, would die. And now you couldn't shake off your obsession that shocked everyone when you talked about it (so you mostly kept quiet, except with Bertie) that even Hitler was not big enough, not bad enough

to justify all these deaths. You were tired of these worries, you wanted to sit in the sun somewhere, at peace, no longer moving, no longer having to wrestle these problems to the ground. You were tired.

But you couldn't get off the train, you had to stay on till the last stop and once you got off there, you could rest all right but you wouldn't want to then, would you? You'd say, "Please let me back on the train just for a stop or two, don't leave me here in this darkness." But no, no, the train would go whizzing on, merrily, merrily, leaving you behind, never even missing you, not for one second. (Yet she did believe in Heaven, and she believed that Bertie would be there too, whether he wanted to be or not though she had to smile at the thought of how furious he would be to find himself there after a long life of atheism.)

But why did the train -- that is life, not the Colonial to Washington -- go faster and faster the older you got, the more you wanted it to slow down so you could savor it? It seemed like only yesterday, not over eleven years ago, that Elizabeth had called her on the phone and said, "Mother, I have some news for you." For a long time Lizzy had been hoping to hear the particular news that Elizabeth was about to tell her but at that moment, unsuspecting, her mind

elsewhere, she'd said, "What is it, dear?" She was thinking they're moving, Elizabeth's changing jobs, Joshua's made an important discovery. And she was also wondering what Bertie had been going to say. Just as the phone rang he'd begun, "If there's one thing I really hate --" and she wanted to hear what that one thing was. But she forgot that instantly, forgot everything when Elizabeth said, "Do you think you'll like being a grandmother?"

How the time had flown since then. She'd only just hung up the phone, the taste of her joy still fresh, it seemed, when suddenly there was Tommy, a big fat lump of a baby in a blue blanket, nine pounds three ounces he'd been at birth. He tended to fat from the beginning. Oh, she did feel Elizabeth should have done something about that. He was such a brilliant child and so nice-looking when he wasn't fat. It wasn't good for him to be fat. But Elizabeth never seemed to worry about it. She just said, "He'll lose it as soon as he gets his height." But would he -- get his height, that is? Or did he already have it? Bertie was just five six and she was five two. But then Elizabeth herself was tall and so was Joshua so probably she was right.

And on went the train, too fast for pleasure or safety. Why it had hardly been more than a minute before the lump

of baby in the blue blanket was sitting on her knee while she read Winnie-the-Pooh. And then she'd turned her back for a second -- through the window of the speeding train the landscape blurred -- and when she looked again he was reading it himself. How she relished (and still had) his first letter to them. ("Dear Grandmother and Granddaddy, Thank you for the present. Thank you again for the present. Love, Tommy.") The present, whatever it was, was long ago handed down to Emma or relegated to the attic. And now -- the train zoomed, practically flew down the track -- and now Tommy wrote reasoned letters, decorated with pictures of trains and much adorned with quotes that were sometimes relevant, sometimes not.

Was this the sort of child you produced when you never argued? Richard and Michael had never been so reflective, so thoughtful though they loved to argue, and if Elizabeth had been thoughtful (and she had) you never got to hear the results of her reflections.

The picture Joshua and Elizabeth painted of their marriage, then, was one of bucolic bliss in Bethesda, practically farmland it was, tucked away in a corner of a dairy farm, though that would change and change soon (new houses were going up already even with the wartime shortages). But while they painted so peaceful a scene, did they fight like cats

and dogs in the bedroom with the door shut?

What they did in the bedroom with the door shut was none of her business, Bertie would have said severely. He was such a Puritan in some ways although not in others. He believed that those private matters were too private for speculation. When they'd first come together, she and Bertie, in that bedroom in the Savoy on their wedding night, and shut the door behind them, they'd come from opposite directions -- she so sheltered, he so lusty (yes, that was the word for it, lusty). And what a lovely surprise it had turned out to be, like getting a puppy for Christmas when you were expecting sensible underwear. Yes, a lovely surprise, a rose unfolding from what had been described (no, not described, it was only hinted at) as a bramble or worse. Yes, it had been (and still was) a lovely surprise. But still, she wanted to know (and Bertie the unshockable was shocked), did other people do the same? Her mother -- had her mother really liked it?

Oh, it just changed everything, turned the silly old world upside down and shook it to think of her mother laying aside her white gloves, her wide brimmed hat, her sober but elegant dress with those outrageous leg-of-mutton sleeves, her corset -- casting these pieces of her dignity aside and frolicking with Lizzy's father. Had they done that?



Had they frolicked dolphinlike in their severe austere marital bed which Lizzy had never ever in her whole childhood seen unmade? She hoped they had.

But no, no, she was sure they hadn't. It was a slur to their memory to think such a thing, she felt, though the feeling went against everything else she believed. Still you couldn't be expected to feel sensibly about your parents even if you felt sensibly about everything else in the world, even though they'd been dead these many years. And besides you could never know what people did behind their bedroom door and whether or not they liked what they did. Just as you couldn't really know from the painting they so carefully made and hung in the living room for you to see what their marriage was like.

But Elizabeth and Joshua's painting was no fake. How gently Elizabeth in passing would put her hand on Joshua's shoulder, just as she put her hand on her children ("yes, you're all right," it seemed to say). But then you had to love your children, you couldn't help it. If you didn't love them, who would? But you didn't have to love your husband. You could begin to hate him the moment you finished saying your vows. Perhaps he said his too loud or not loud enough. Perhaps you didn't like the way he looked at you

as he stood there in all his finery, his best friend at his side, and you didn't like the best friend much either -- or maybe you liked him too much. Perhaps you didn't like the way your new husband looked you up and looked you down as though you were something he'd just bought. But in that case you did not put your hand on his shoulder as you passed by, as Elizabeth did.

So they loved each other dearly but in what way precisely only they would know. You could not peek into their minds and find out, especially if one of them happened to be your own daughter who had been a mystery to you her whole life long.

Now Emma was different. Emma was too close to what she, Lizzy, might have been if she'd been born in this age when children did what they liked instead of her own, when they didn't. For Emma told you how she felt and what she thought and Lizzy could see that she herself might have thought and felt the same at four if she'd been born now instead of then.

But weren't we nearly there? Yes, we were in the train yard, so ugly -- but all train yards were. Suddenly she felt an old-lady fright grabbing at her. How would she ever find her way to Elizabeth's house?

"Washington, Washington, all out for Washington, this way."

And no one was meeting poor old Lizzy, tired old woman

of seventy-something years, come all the way from Boston, down the chilly rainy East Coast. So tired, so weary, how could she manage, how had she ever managed, and Bertie sick with a cold all alone and all the boys at war and her nephews too, and the cities of Europe lay in ruins, and Rome would go next, any day now. What good after all was the rolling of the trousers when everything was against you?

She didn't even know how she was going to get her suitcase down from the overhead rack, poor old lady that she was.

But the man in the next seat suddenly woke, suddenly jumped up and fetched her suitcase down. "Oh, thank you very much," she said. Horrid man, he'd slept all the way from Philadelphia, not said one word, and now was rested and refreshed. How nimbly he went down the aisle. Someone was meeting him or else he knew the way perfectly to wherever it was that he was going.

She would have to find a cab -- if there were any cabs.

The step was too high for her and it was no warmer here than in Boston and ("Oh, thank you" -- the flagman helped her down) her suitcase was heavy and all the redcaps had gone to war or somewhere else because there weren't any here, in Union Station, in Washington, D.C. She sighed and went

out with all the others, and there she was in the awesome Grand Concourse with pigeons flying about overhead and someone calling off the unintelligible route of an unidentifiable train, and crowds and crowds of people, and she didn't know where to go to get a cab or what to tell the driver if he didn't know the way, or what to do if there were no cabs.

"Grandmother, Grandmother!"

Not me -- there's no one here to call me "Grandmother," she thought.

"Grandmother!" And Emma, taller, her hair in curls all over her head, had jumped out from nowhere, from Bethesda, into her arms.

I grow old, I grow old, could never get through a meeting like this without a tear. How beautiful she is.

"Why Tommy!" He was so tall and thin. (Yes, she would hug him even if he preferred not to be hugged but what's a grandmother for if not to hug?)

"I've changed my name," said Tommy. "Now it's 'T.J.'"

And there was William Jamison. What a nice man. Why hadn't he married? It was not too late.

"William," she said. He kissed her cheek and took her bag. "Oh, thank you." Without her suitcase she could take each child's hand -- no, not Tommy's, he was too old.

(She took it anyway. Grandmothers can do whatever they like.)

"How do we get home now?" she said. "Shall we walk?"

That set the children off laughing and laughing. Oh, wasn't it good to hear them laugh like that? Didn't it take the magic out of your life when your children got too old to laugh like that -- so innocently, so uncontrollably? Their laughter made you lose all respect for the dry chuckle, the wry smile. To laugh like children laughed was bliss indeed, and to hear them do it was nearly as nice.

"It's too far," said Emma, recovering.

But Lizzy, striding forth with them in search of car or cab or bus or trolley or whatever they had in mind, knew herself to be renewed. She was ready for anything now.