

XVII

Everything was all right again now that Grandmother was here. She was at the hospital now but soon she would come home and read Winnie-the-Pooh to Emma. She would sit on the side of Emma's bed and Emma would tell her about the bird she had seen in the pasture one day last summer. The bird flew so high, the sun shone orange through its feathers, and the bees kissed the clover, and the honeysuckle smelled so sweet. If only she could remember the bird's name.

She didn't want to fall asleep, though the horses in the corner glowed so pinkly. She wanted to stay awake till Grandmother came home.

Grandmother had such a rosy face, not like her mother's which was white like a white rose. That was because she was sick. But she was getting better now. When she was better

she would come home. And Grandmother would stay until she came home.

She would come home smiling, her cheeks would be once again like the pale pink roses that bloomed on the bush in the front yard. They bloomed on Emma's birthday, and they did not last like the other roses did, like the tall red ones her father grew and picked, one or two at a time, and put in the tall glass vase that sparkled with rainbow colors whenever the sun touched it.

Emma's father had been away for a long long time. They were all very proud of him. He wrote lots of letters. He said he hoped Emma was being good. She was always very good.

Tonight they had gone to the train station on the bus and the trolley car. The trolley car bumped and screeched about until Emma thought she was going to throw up. But Tommy said for her not to throw up. He said, "Don't throw up, stupid." And Uncle Bill also said for her not to throw up, that they were almost there (but they weren't, there was miles and miles to go). Uncle Bill did not call her "stupid." Tommy called her that just because she was his sister; it didn't mean she really was stupid. So she didn't throw up after all. That was being good especially since she felt so sick and would have felt a whole lot better if she had thrown up.

Emma's father looked like Tommy, only he was taller and of course much much older, and his hair was lighter than Tommy's. There was a picture of him on her mother's bureau and sometimes Emma went in and looked at it, without touching anything, even though there was a little silver dish of buttons and bobby pins and safety pins and a tiny little conch shell that had been found at Avalon. She was not supposed to touch anything on the bureau. She was not even supposed to hold the little conch shell to her ear so that she could hear the ocean. But if her mother didn't know she had taken the little shell out of the little dish so carefully and listened to it and then put it back in the very same place, carefully, carefully, her mother wouldn't mind. It was not like the fountain pen that hadn't worked after Emma had used it in the finger paint. But her mother had gotten the pen fixed. It worked fine now.

Her father was very young in the picture and he was dressed like a little girl. He had a dress on with a lace collar. It was very very long ago, more years than Emma could count.

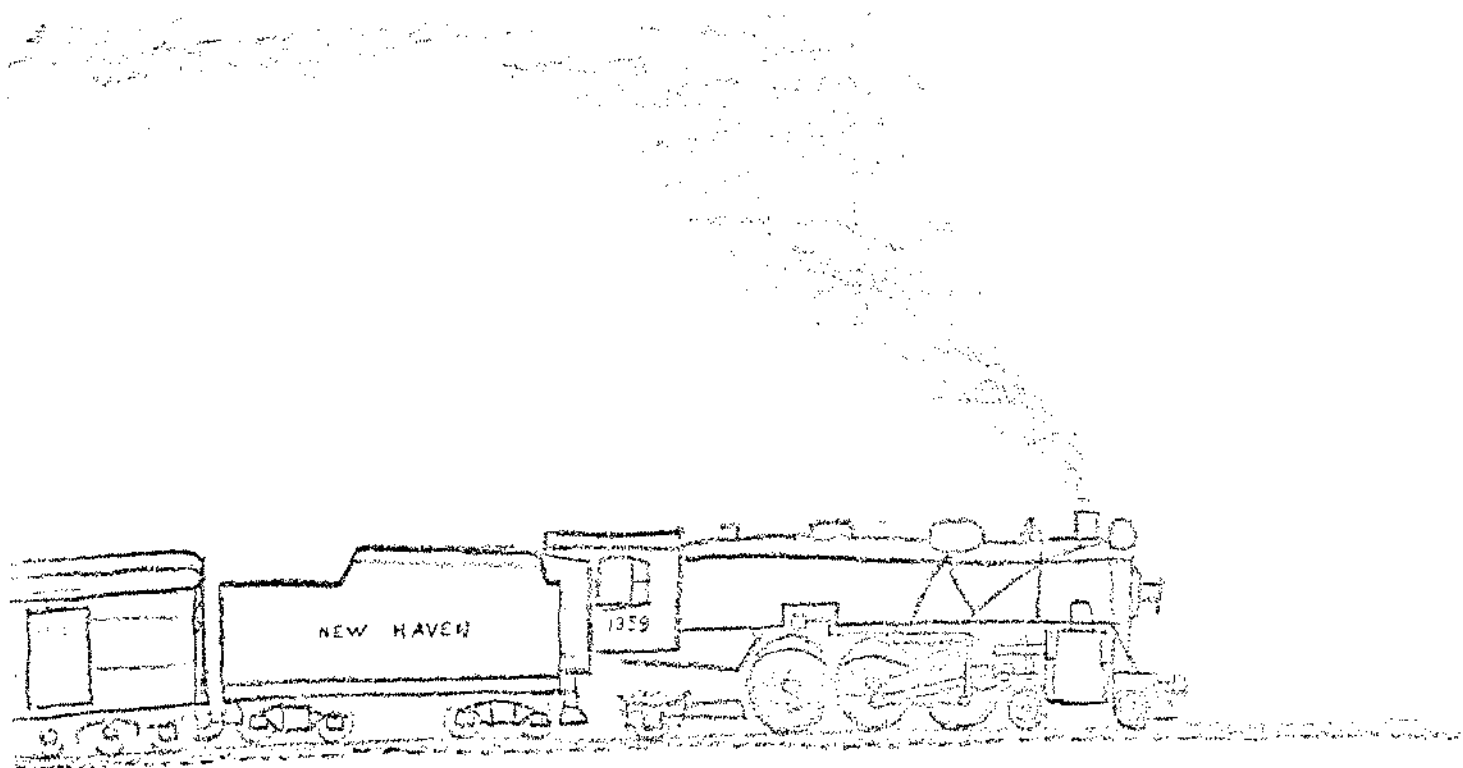
Her father had straight blond hair and Tommy's hair was curly, like her's, only he put water on it to make it lie flat, and he said everybody had to call him "T.J." That

was letters, T.J., but it was also words. "Jay" was the name of the big blue bird that made lots of noise early in the morning. Tea was what Emma's grandmother drank. It was the color of the ring that her grandmother wore which had belonged to her mother (Grandmother's mother, that is). But Grandmother's mother wasn't alive anymore, poor, poor Grandmother. She told Emma that. "My mother died years ago," she said. She didn't seem to mind the way Emma would have minded. She could talk about it without crying. Her mother must not have been very nice to her because otherwise she would have loved her, like Emma loved her mother, and she wouldn't have been able to say that ("My mother died years ago") without crying. Maybe her mother had spanked her like Willie Jarvis' mother spanked him. But then Willie deserved it and Emma's grandmother could never have been bad like Willie was. She never drew pictures on the walls or threw puppies over the fence or broke other people's little china raccoons those many years ago when she was little. Probably she was like Emma who only did bad things by mistake, like using the fountain pen in the finger paint which had seemed at the time like a good idea (but it wasn't), or going in the water at Avalon when she hadn't meant to, or dropping the jar of mustard, but that was a real accident and didn't count.

Emma's grandfather hadn't come down this time. That was too bad. When he came he took Emma and Tommy to the zoo, and he read them beautiful poems. His voice seemed to sing when he read the poems. His voice sounded the way his pipe smelled -- it was like the feeling you got when you had taken your bath and lay under the blankets and outside the wind scratched at the windows but inside you were warm and safe and everything was all right. That was how Emma felt now, trying to stay awake till Grandmother came home.

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Grandmother hadn't forgotten once to call him "T.J." At Union Station she had said, "Now you remind me if I forget, Tommy." She was teasing him. Because she was his grandmother she could tease him and he didn't mind. And she loved trains although you might ask her about her train ride (and he had) and she wouldn't have noticed any of the important things. She could tell you the life story of everyone she had talked to but she hadn't noticed if the engine was a 4-6-2 or a 4-6-4. Tommy drew Engine No. 1359 (which was a 4-6-2 but they didn't use it on the Colonial anymore) and wondered how Grandmother could have lost such a golden opportunity to see what they did use.



Still Grandmother was a rare person. There was nobody quite like her. There was nobody like Grandfather either. They were a rare pair.

Grandmother had cried a little when they met her. She said she hadn't expected them to come. But all the same she'd been looking around for them as if she thought they might be there. Tommy was glad they had gone. Union Station

was the best place in the world even though it was so crowded now, because of the war, that it was hard to see anything.

He would have been glad to go there any day of the week.

Bill called Grandmother "Lizzy" and so did Tommy's father. Grandmother was like that. It was hard to remember that she was an old lady, except at certain times, like when she cried a little because they had come to meet her. In a lot of ways she seemed younger than his mother. You could talk about anything you wanted to to her. She always wanted to know what you were thinking about. But she didn't argue about everything like his grandfather did, though that was fun too. It was good to be made to examine everything you said and everything the other person said -- as a squirrel might roll an acorn over and over in his paws looking for the perfect spot to bite. So it was with his grandfather. If he asked you why you believed something you couldn't say "because."

"The unexamined life is not worth living," Grandfather always said. (That was from Aristotle.)

You couldn't back down in an argument with Grandfather unless you really had changed your mind. You couldn't end the argument by saying all of a sudden, when you didn't really mean it, "I guess you're right," just because you

were tired of arguing and wanted to go up to your room and shut your door and read Trains magazine all by yourself while their laughter floated up the stairs and made you think that either you were missing all the fun or they were laughing at you. But they never laughed at you, not even in the nicest of ways. They took you too seriously to do that.

Now that his grandmother was here things would go back to normal. They would have to eat vegetables again and drink milk, and Bill would go home. Bill had his own life to lead. They had had some nice man-to-man talks, he and Bill, and he would miss them. But maybe, all the same, it was good that they were over for now. He was beginning to run out of man-to-man things to talk about.

But because of the talks, things were different now. First of all, he had his new name. And his grandmother had called him by it. That was more important than Bill calling him T.J. because his grandmother was family and Bill wasn't. His grandmother had said that T.J. was very nice, it made her think of Thomas Jefferson, and that using initials instead of a name was very southern. Tommy was pleased at having done something southern, especially when he hadn't even known it was southern. That was his ancestry showing itself.

Emma was in bed now, waiting for Grandmother to come home and read to her. But she would fall asleep before that happened. Emma had not thrown up on the trolley to Union Station, although she had wanted to. Oh, that awful sinking feeling he got when he saw that look come over Emma's face. She's going to throw up, he thought. He knew she did it on purpose. His mother didn't believe him but he knew. He was the one who liked to take the trolley, he was the one who liked to go downtown and see those wide streets, those marble buildings, and, of course, Union Station.

Downtown was where all the important things happened in the country, in the world even. You might be lucky and see the President go sailing by, smiling and waving from the back of his car. Only now he was sick with a cold and his doctor wasn't letting him go out -- but sometimes the President did what he wanted to do even when his doctor told him not to. (That was mind over matter.)

The President was a real hero but lots of people hated him. He had been president all of Tommy's life and a third of his father's. That was a long time, and there was some justification for the people who said that it was too long and that he should not have a fourth term. But who could take his place? That was the problem. There wasn't anybody

but Wendell Willkie and Wendell Willkie was impossible. So at least until the war was over, they would have to stay with FDR. It was the only way. There were no alternatives.

If he, T.J., had had his father's decision to make, he probably wouldn't have gone to war. It was heroic for his father to have gone but it was not sensible. No, it was not sensible, it was heroic. They were, perhaps, mutually exclusive. He, T.J., would not have let heroism deflect him from the path of pure reason. Like his grandmother had said, he was the Jeffersonian man of reason. It was better, it was more admirable, to rise above reason to heroism. He was very proud that his father had done that. Still he, T.J., would never be able to do it. His father would always be the hero, the doer of great deeds while he, T.J., would never be able to give up the life of the mind. That was just the way he was, there wasn't anything he could do about it.

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No, he wouldn't come in this time, Bill had said, but he would come in the car for her at nine o'clock when visiting hours were over. Elizabeth had seen enough of him the last few days, she'd want to see her mother alone.

She'd asked him not to bring the children today. Not

because the hospital frowned on children visiting -- which it did -- but because she wanted them to see as little of the hospital as possible so that they could forget the whole thing. Yes, they should all forget, he thought -- only he would not. He never would.

It was ten of nine, he was early. Lizzy would stay until the last possible moment. There was a chill in the air but not a serious one. March was nearly over and with it this terrible winter in which he'd made a fool of himself and caused irremediable harm to the one he loved.

But who was that?

In the last few days it seemed to him that the love had drained out of him when the guilt had poured in. The guilt was permanent. The love had been -- what had it been? A momentary madness. He could say her name now (Elizabeth) and feel nothing but the ache of guilt. She had said it wasn't his fault but that was just her kindness.

And when he thought of Lucy -- Lucy who was so much a part of him after all these years that he had got in the habit of giving her no more thought than he gave his own right hand -- when he thought of Lucy and that he hadn't gone to see her, hadn't even called on her birthday, misery grabbed him by the throat and shook him about.

He had not been a sane man. He had not been himself for the last months. She would never forgive him. He would never forgive himself.

Still it would be a relief to go home where what he had done to Elizabeth would not reach out to him as it had in every room of her house.

No, he had never loved her. He would face it, he would. She was a wonderful woman. Oh, she was a wonderful woman indeed but not his type. He liked them small and blond and gay. What a fool he had been. And what woman, wonderful or otherwise -- even Elizabeth with her beautiful hands, with her serenity that spread over you when you were near, like a mist, and put you at peace with yourself -- what woman was worth Joshua to him? What madness. It was Joshua who had given her that glow -- she had it still, even pale and weak and a little tearful in that tiny hospital room he had succeeded in filling with flowers (flowers of guilt). But it was Joshua's glow not hers. What it amounted to was that Joshua was his friend -- oh, more a brother than a friend -- and he had loved Joshua's wife because she was Joshua's wife. It was all quite simple, he saw now.

What it amounted to was that Joshua was off getting killed -- the invasion would be any day now and Joshua would

be involved in it in some way -- and Bill should have prevented him from going or he should have gone with him.

Yes, that was it. Off they'd all gone, tall and straight and heroic with glory in their souls, and Joshua -- Joshua was at the head of the line. (But he was too thin, too thin, he got sick so easily, he could not be spared.) While Bill sulked in the dark corners of his soul and thought only of women.

But then he could not have gone. His heart would not have let him.

Certain people did not believe that. Certain people made oblique references to "doing your bit." Never mind that Frank Sinatra was 4-F because he had a punctured eardrum, caused no doubt by his own singing. (Lucy was crazy about Sinatra but then Lucy's taste in that sort of thing had always been peculiar to say the least.) Now the Selective Service was going to "comb the 4-F lists" for slackers.

But he was no slacker. And anyway they wanted young men, "invasion material," men under twenty-six. Not him (thirty-six and with a bad heart). And it was true that he had a bad heart. Dr. Fredericks had said so. He had said that Bill could not go. He had said it flat outright. And Bill knew it was true.

It had only happened once -- that feeling that his chest was being crushed, that he couldn't breathe, that he was dying. This is it, he had thought. This is the end of everything. Well, he'd been wrong but the warning was clear and he took it (no pun intended) to heart.

But still, he could have gone if he'd wanted to. He certainly could have sat at a desk over there as well as Joshua could. He could have done his part. The Jamisons had never shirked from war. His great-grandfather had been wounded at Shiloh, and two of his brothers had died there. They were strong passionate men who gave their lives freely for what they believed in.

He could have gone if he had wanted to. He knew it. He didn't have to mention his heart -- they probably wouldn't have found it. Plenty of people went with secret but serious disabilities that turned up later, reaping tons of glory for them, often posthumously. He could have gone if he'd wanted to.

But he didn't.

At four in the morning as he lay awake on Elizabeth's couch, listening for a sick or wakeful child (but all was silent), he faced it. He didn't want to go.

But Joshua did. Joshua who was the real scientist, never caring for anything but his work, had gone without

a second thought. Joshua was the real hero. Joshua would come marching home with his wounds and his medals and they'd give him a hearty welcome then, hurrah, hurrah.

Joshua -- Joshua who sat in the sinking boat so many years ago not wanting to ask Bill to risk his life -- Joshua was the real hero, And Bill, who had had to think long and hard before diving into those still waters of that Louisiana lake so long ago, had done nothing -- nothing but stay home and make trouble among the women.

Five of nine. Lizzy would come soon. Lizzy couldn't comprehend evil and so saw war as an aberration, not a necessity. Lizzy, dear soul, thought Hitler would get bored and give it up if left alone. Bertie shouldn't let her go around saying things like that -- she could get into trouble. Pacificism had gone out of style since Pearl Harbor. Still, was there any way of stopping Lizzy from speaking her mind?

Lizzy called him "William." That was nice, he liked that. Everyone had always called him "Bill" or "good old Bill." How could you be heroic when everyone called you "good old Bill"?

But Lizzy did not believe in nicknames except, of course, for her own and Bertie's. Her children had always been Elizabeth, Richard, Michael -- never Betty, Dick, Mike.

She felt a nickname (except her own and Bertie's) deprived a person of the "self" his name represented. But she had liked calling Tommy "T.J." She had got it at once and had not called him anything else. She had talked a lot about Thomas Jefferson.

A good-hearted soul she was, despite her wild politics. She had always treated him like one of the family which, of course, he was.

Elizabeth had said it wasn't his fault. But she said that out of kindness, the way she was kind to her children, never letting anything hurt them, like a tigress with her cubs, always sheltering them.

Like a tigress. . . . But then --

There was Lizzy at the door. He got out and went to meet her. She smiled at him in that way she had so that he felt momentarily sure that he was a good man in spite of it all.

He drove her home. She said Elizabeth was coming along but had been a lot worse than she had made herself out to be ("of course" said Bill and Lizzy nodded, echoing "of course").

"She was never sick as a child," said Lizzy.

He walked her to the door but wouldn't come in. He had,

he said, another stop to make.

But he sat in the car in front of the house for a few minutes. His thought, his crucial thought which Lizzy's arrival had interrupted, was so simple it was hard to see why he hadn't thought of it earlier: Elizabeth would never have forgiven him if it were his fault. She had lost her baby. If it had been his fault he would never have set foot in her hospital room or in her house again. It was that simple.

He took a deep breath and started the car.

He was a free man.