

XIX

April

"Robinson. Four-F." Thump.

"Jarvis. Two-A." Thump.

"Corbrey. One-A. Volunteered." Thump.

"Morris. Too old." Splash.

The paperboy groaned and broke off his roll call of Selective Service status to fish the Morris morning paper out of the puddle into which he had so exuberantly tossed it. Mr. Morris probably got up late, being old. The paper would have dried by then.

And, somewhat subdued, he went on up the street.

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Willie would turn out all right, thought his mother

as she watched him go down the street to Emma's house. He was so happy to have his playmate back he'd been an absolute angel all week. He hadn't bothered the cat, he hadn't broken anything, he hadn't even drawn pictures on the wall. What a relief that was. The pictures frightened her. What went on in the child's mind, she wanted to know. Why did he put such terrible teeth in the largest of the figures in his family scenes? She supposed it was supposed to be his father. But a sweeter gentler man could not be found than Philip. How glad she was that he had his position at OPA and his deferment; even if he worked till midnight some nights it was worth it to have him home and safe. Because they were taking pre-Pearl Harbor fathers after all.

Emma's mother was home from the hospital now, still pale and shaky-looking. She didn't go out much. Her mother was there. Willie had had to promise to be very very good before she'd let him go down there and then she only let him go because Mrs. Corbrey had called and said it would be nice for Emma if he came. There. Emma's door opened and Willie went in and it closed behind him. Oh, she'd wring his little neck if he misbehaved.

There was still a chill in the air but it grew softer day by day and the rain that fell was no longer icy. Soon

she would have to get to work on the front garden. Poor Philip could not raise even a weed. He cajoled and pleaded with the flowers when what was needed was a firm hand. You had to make them grow whether they wanted to or not, especially in the front yard which all the neighborhood dogs treated as their own private stomping ground even though because of the rabies epidemic dogs were supposed to be locked up and strays could be shot on sight (though they never were, of course).

But poor Philip just flapped his hands at the dogs and said "shoo" as if they were chickens. If dogs could have laughed, these would have been rolling in the aisle. Philip just wasn't hard enough for this world.

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It wasn't raining anymore and Emma said it was warm enough to go outside. That they could button up their jackets and go outside and climb the apple tree or take turns on the swing. Only watch for the puddles, Emma said. But it was too late. Squish! The water sloshed up over the edges of Willie's shoe and down inside. When he walked it went squish, step, squish, step, because he only had water in one shoe. It was a little cold but not too bad.

Emma said he should push her in the big swing but he said he wouldn't. She was bigger than him so it wasn't fair

that he should push her. They argued. He couldn't push her and make her fall into one of the big mud puddles either because her mother or her grandmother might be looking out the back window.

So they climbed up into the apple tree instead and he said she could go first because it was her tree. That way he got to see her underpants.

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Miss McAlpin turned pink when the sixth grade teacher, Mr. Branford, came in to borrow something. Miss McAlpin was ruled by her emotions, even if she was a teacher. Teachers were just people, after all, that was what first persuaded you that life was not as they had described it. Teachers were not so smart either. Here was Miss McAlpin laughing -- inviting the class to laugh -- at something funny Mr. Branford had said. It wasn't very funny but they laughed, they all laughed, even T.J. But their laughing had more to do with the good spring smell of the breeze coming through the open window than it had to do with the dumb thing Mr. Branford had said. Mr. Branford was only there teaching instead of in the army because he had asthma. If he laughed too hard he would start to wheeze and his face would turn red. That was another reason the class was laughing. They were

hoping that Mr. Branford would laugh himself into an asthma attack.

But before he could laugh hard enough for that, Mr. Branford heard an uproar from down the hall. That was his class making a commotion. Mr. Branford was always dashing off to borrow things from Miss McAlpin and whenever he did it his class went crazy. They could be heard all the way down the hall screaming and laughing. Mr. Branford abruptly departed. Miss McAlpin, blushing pink at his retreating back, was mired in her passions and didn't know how boring it all was.

In the evening did Miss McAlpin sit with Mr. Branford on the couch in her living room discussing the ancient Egyptians or the decimal system? On the walls of her living room did she hang posters that showed the natural resources of the different regions of the United States, how to find the lowest common denominator, and what animals do in the winter?

We all know what they do in the spring, thought T.J. evilly. They do what the sparrows do, what the dogs do, what Miss McAlpin would like to do with Mr. Branford. And he began to imagine Miss McAlpin sitting on a branch in the tree outside his window, swinging her legs (which were pretty nice for a teacher's) and looking cross, as

the female sparrows did, as Miss McAlpin herself often did when somebody couldn't answer a particularly easy question. Then suddenly Mr. Branford flew up to her and knelt on her back, flailing his arms about while Miss McAlpin vigorously protested, for she really hadn't liked Mr. Branford (who was sort of a fool) all that much.

Tommy suppressed a giggle. It was not easy to keep a straight face when your fifth grade teacher was behaving like that. Fortunately they were reading aloud now, tediously, but in reverse alphabetical order so he needn't pay attention.

Soon Miss McAlpin had an enormous egg which she carried about in her arms. The egg had a pink ribbon around its equator. Miss McAlpin laid the egg in a crib, gave it a little pat, and covered it with a pink blanket. With her finger to her lips ("Let sleeping eggs lie") she backed out of the room. When it hatched, there would be a new little teacher in the world.

How long would it take, T.J. wondered, to softboil an egg that big?

He sighed. Who was he kidding? He knew that it wasn't that simple, that honest. Nor was it funny. The Time magazine with its picture of the naked girl, seen from the back, had told him so as clearly as it had told him, "You don't have

to think about the war all the time." He would rather think about the war all the time. He would rather think about the progress of the Allies toward Rome, slow and painful and costly, or the number of tons of bombs dropped on German cities (so terrible, his grandmother said, that it hardly mattered whether it was necessary or not). Yes, he would rather think about that than about what the Time magazine girl, naked and beautiful, or Miss McAlpin flirting wanted him to think about. Yet once he began to think about what they were forcing him to think about it was impossible to stop. His mind slipped out of control and that, in itself, was frightening, never mind what came next.

Resolutely, Tommy looked out of the window and said firmly but silently to himself: "As life is action and passion. . . ."

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That Tommy Corbrey has got so thin he really is cute, she thought, casting a sideways glance at him. But he was looking out the window. George Patterson was reading, and he stumbled so badly over the words that it made you nervous to listen. George Patterson was a real dope.

I wish -- she thought, but she didn't know what she wished or which of all the things she wished she wished most.

Last week she had gone to the hardware store with her father and while he was buying some nails, one at a time, she looked in all the barrels and bins in the store to see if any of them had pickles. Somebody had told her that hardware stores had big barrels of pickles, and you could eat one without paying for it. But no, there was only grass seed and bird seed and fertilizer and dirt to plant things in and lots of other stuff but no pickles. Then the lady behind the counter looked at her and said, "You look so sad, little girl. Why don't you smile?"

She had thought she was smiling.

When she got home she smiled at herself in the mirror to see what it looked like. But the smile came out funny. It was ugly. And when she didn't smile it was even uglier.

Lots of people got pretty when they grew up, but she would never be pretty like Miss McAlpin was pretty. Probably she would just get a little less ugly.

Tommy Corbrey always got the highest grade in the class and she got the next highest unless it was the other way round. And that time she had written a story about a little Egyptian boy who got his foot stuck in a crack in the sidewalk and was rescued by a little Egyptian dog and Miss McAlpin had read it to the class because she was too shy to read it herself,

it was Tommy Corbrey who had laughed first at the funny parts. On Valentine's Day somebody sent her a valentine with "I love you" written on the back instead of a name but Tommy Corbrey would never do something like that.

So why did she think, as she looked at him (but he was looking out the window), that it would be nice to be pretty?

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The piano teacher closed the door with a sigh. It was a waste of money for little Cassady to take piano lessons, and she had told him so, in her heavily accented English which, because he was quite stupid, he never understood. Now she had half an hour before Corbrey came. It was a relief not to have to think in English for half an hour. English was such a strain, its rules of grammar crippling your every attempt at eloquence. She wasn't the same person in English as she was in German. Her English limped and stammered, as was the nature of that language, while her German soared, it dominated.

After Corbrey there was Peterson and after Peterson Raleigh. Wretched little boys. Why did their mothers feel they should spend their afternoons playing the piano in her basement room where the rug was faded and on the wall were photographs of people the wretched little creatures should

have heard of but hadn't? And next year wretched little Corbrey's wretched little sister would join the ranks, beating and bruising and wounding her jewel of a piano, her Beckstein piano, which had traveled further in its life than any of them ever would.

But Corbrey could play if only he'd practice. He had a real gift for it. Sometimes it made her want to shake him. What right had he to ignore his talent, the lazy lump of a child? An hour a day she suggested, but she should have gotten three. He could have been good. But he didn't care. He had a drop of pure gold, this talent, and he didn't care.

Oh, well, she thought, she didn't care that much either, at least not about Corbrey. (Either you wanted to be good or you didn't, there wasn't anything she could do about it.)

She sat down on the piano bench, caressed the keys and drew from them something somber and lovely. She never played anything light and gay these days. Why should she? How could she? She was in mourning for so many, so many lost, so many vanished into the night without a word. Not a single second passed that she didn't suffer agonies for them, and for every second of delay. The Allies had been talking about an invasion for six months now but there was no urgency to their talk. Maybe it was just talk. Maybe the nightmare

would go on forever. As she played, her thoughts got darker and darker so that when Corbrey finally came she was glad to see him. Today he played sweetly if imperfectly (he hadn't practiced enough of course) and with style and feeling. However, instead of telling him how much she had enjoyed it, she scolded him for the technical failings. Well, that was what she was paid for -- to scold, not to enjoy.

But she relented as he was saying goodbye (she was not, after all, as old and as mean as he probably thought she was and she had suffered to a degree of which he had utterly no comprehension and probably never would) and said gruffly, quickly, for there was little Peterson coming up the walk, "Still, you do not do so bad for so little practicing."

* * *

"Bertie, you wear your coat!"

"But Lizzy," (he was halfway out the door) "it's like summer."

"'April is the cruellest month,'" she said.

But he just kissed her cheek and went off, hatless, coatless, and only just over a cold. The pig-headed stubborn fool of a man.

Still (she stood at the door watching him go) the air was balmy. Perhaps when she had finished her letter, she'd

go out for a walk too. She could catch up with him, she knew his route. She could take along a sweater for him, just in case. This weather was pneumonia weather, first hot, then cold. It was hard to dress right for it.

Ten minutes later she set off, carrying a sweater for each of them and her letter to Elizabeth. She'd stayed in Bethesda long after Elizabeth, still pale and wobbly, had said, "I'm fine now, Mother, don't you think you should be getting back to Daddy?" Lizzy had said no, she didn't think so, she would stay until she was sure that Elizabeth was going to be all right. It was the first time in years she had not done what Elizabeth had told her to do. She'd stayed until Elizabeth was very nearly her old self again, could go for walks with Emma, could help Tommy plant a garden, could spend a Saturday shopping and not get tired. And even now, home again, she continued to worry, continued to send Elizabeth long loving letters full of wise advice which probably would not be followed.

This departure from the well established tradition of their mother-daughter relationship (Lizzy was flighty, Elizabeth reasonable) had come about in the first five minutes of the night she had gone to the hospital almost direct from Union Station.

Illness can do funny things. While weakening your body it also weakens your fictions about yourself. In health you carry about with you a fantastic image of yourself, how you see yourself, what you think you are, or fear you are, or wish you were. Illness knocks this all apart and leaves you with nothing but your real self.

So Elizabeth discarded her serenity and said, "I'm so miserable I don't know what to do." And they cried and clung together and became a sad and sodden lump, like two small puddles running together in a heavy rainstorm. Lizzy, trying to find words of comfort and failing -- for there was no way to tell if Elizabeth cried for the baby she'd lost or the husband she was afraid of losing, or both -- thought, "My poor poor child." And she knew, as she had always known but momentarily forgotten, that Elizabeth wore her serenity as she wore her clothes -- for the public parade.

Then almost at once it was over. They were withdrawing. Embarrassed they searched for tissues, they said sensible things, they went about rebuilding brick by brick the wall between them.

But there, up ahead, arguing heatedly with a policeman, ("Oh good Lord!" she thought) was Bertie. But it was all right, it was just about when the invasion would be.

May? June? She couldn't settle the argument; she didn't want to think about the invasion. All three boys were in England. Richard was a paratrooper. Joshua had a safe desk job but how did you know it would stay that way? And Michael couldn't even say what he was doing.

She didn't want to think about the invasion at all.

Instead she said did Bertie want the sweater she'd brought for him? Didn't he think the air had gotten a little cooler just in the last few minutes? Didn't he know "April is the cruellest month"?