XX

May

Of course I know I deserve it, I know I deserve it but if only she would say "yes" or "no" and stop all this shilly-shallying, thought Bill. For God's sake. A man can crawl only so long. She won't even let me kiss her except to say goodnight. She's mad, completely mad, I should look for somebody else. What a life she's leading me. How many nights I've spent in her bed during the last however-many-it-is years and now she looks at her watch at eleven and says "A kiss is just a kiss" and hands me my hat, shows me the door. God damn Humphrey Bogart anyway. What a hell of a spring this is turning out to be. . . .

* * *

Pain. There was a lot of pain somewhere nearby but

he couldn't, quite yet, figure out where it was coming from or whose pain it was.

* * *

What's this? A letter from Lucy and it's not even Christmas, thought Aunt Martha (or it might have been Aunt Louisa). She read the letter, folded it up, and left it on the mailtray for her sister. They either were or they weren't speaking, one or the other, she never could remember. It came of marrying. It was all his fault. He made trouble between them. They had always got along fine until he came into their lives with his clever ways and his gentle lies, oh he was a bad one, he was.

How sweetly little Lucy wrote, like dear dear Mary. After her terrible mistake, she had never got her strength back, neither in the body nor in the head, poor soul. Now she lay in her grave these years (four it was, come next winter) and either her soul was with God in Heaven or there wasn't any God or Heaven. That's all there was to it.

She (Martha or Louisa, it really doesn't matter which, by now they were so nearly the same) had never looked young and did not, at this moment, look old although she was well into her sixties. She'd been born middle-aged and bony, she used to say, had never known any other way of looking and

thought pretty damn highly of the way she was. She'd just got sharper-tongued and bonier, suffered fools less gladly as time went by. Still walked five miles a day if she felt like it but if she didn't, she didn't. Her digestion was good, and that's what counted.

Lucy wrote that it was spring in Washington and she was thinking of moving to California when the war was over. Well, let her come. There was plenty of room. Would be nice to see the child again, she was quite pretty, quite pretty, that was likely to get her into trouble, as it had her mother -- better not to be pretty, much better not.

So it was spring in Washington, was it? Well, she never had cared much for spring but she missed the seasons, she did. In California the seasons ran together like chocolates left out in the sun, that was what was wrong with California. She loved a good roaring bellowing winter, slapping snow all over the place, and a scorching summer when drops of sweat trickled down your backbone. She liked the nip in the air of fall with the leaves doing their damnedest to distract you from the coming of the cold. But spring, she never had cared much for spring. It was too sloppy, too sentimental. People talked too much about love and baby animals. People were such fools.

Speak of the devil, here was her sister who said (so they were speaking, after all), "Is that a letter for me?"

"It is not," she snapped.

* * *

The pain no longer scattered itself about the room. It had settled down in one place, and he saw that it was his pain.

* * *

Well, if it isn't a letter from Brother Bill, thought Evelyn Jamison Jones. Well, well, what is the old fool up to now? But her husband, a fool of a different sort, was hollering for his lunch (you just couldn't get help these days) so she had to go and fix it. And after that little Billy (he was named for her father, not her fool of a brother) cut himself and it wouldn't stop bleeding so she had to take him over to the doctor's and get it bandaged up. He was her fourth, and she didn't take him too seriously, and perhaps as a result he hadn't said a word yet although he was nearly three. The doctor had said he would talk as soon as he had anything to say. (That would certainly mark him as a queer one in this world.)

Coming home from the doctor's, she thought she was going to have sunstroke, the sun was so hot. She wasn't nearly

as strong as she looked. And little Billy wanted her to carry him and she did, to make him stop fussing, though her head was pounding and she would have liked to spank him for his whining but she couldn't do that when he'd hurt himself so bad.

She was exhausted when she got home and after she put Billy down for his nap she was all set to take one of her own when her husband came into the bedroom with that look on his face and although she said how tired she was and how bad her head was, still he would insist. Then there was dinner to fix and her head got worse and worse. So when she finally got around to reading Brother Bill's letter it was bedtime and she was too tired so she put it on the desk to read in the morning. But in the morning they were busy having breakfast and getting ready for church and matching socks had to be found for all the children, buttons buttoned, sashes tied, gloves fetched and faces washed and all the fights broken up, of course, and so she clean forgot the letter. And it wasn't till weeks later when she was looking through the things on the desk for the telephone bill she'd forgotten to pay and now they were threatening to cut off service that she came across the letter. And that's why by the time she learned Bill hated Washington and was going to go back home to live

the old fool had changed his mind and decided to get married instead.

* * *

The pain had established its domain in his foot. It was not quite bearable, as pains go, but there was nothing to be done about it. He saw that he was in a hospital ward, and it was dark. In the corner, in the farthest bed, someone sat up, reached out, and fell back -- all in silence, a pantomime of pain. And, not liking either the pain he saw or the pain he felt, he shut his eyes and slept.

* * *

"Did you have a nice birthday, baby?"

"It was wonderful, Mommy," said Emma. Her mother turned on the pink horses and kissed her goodnight.

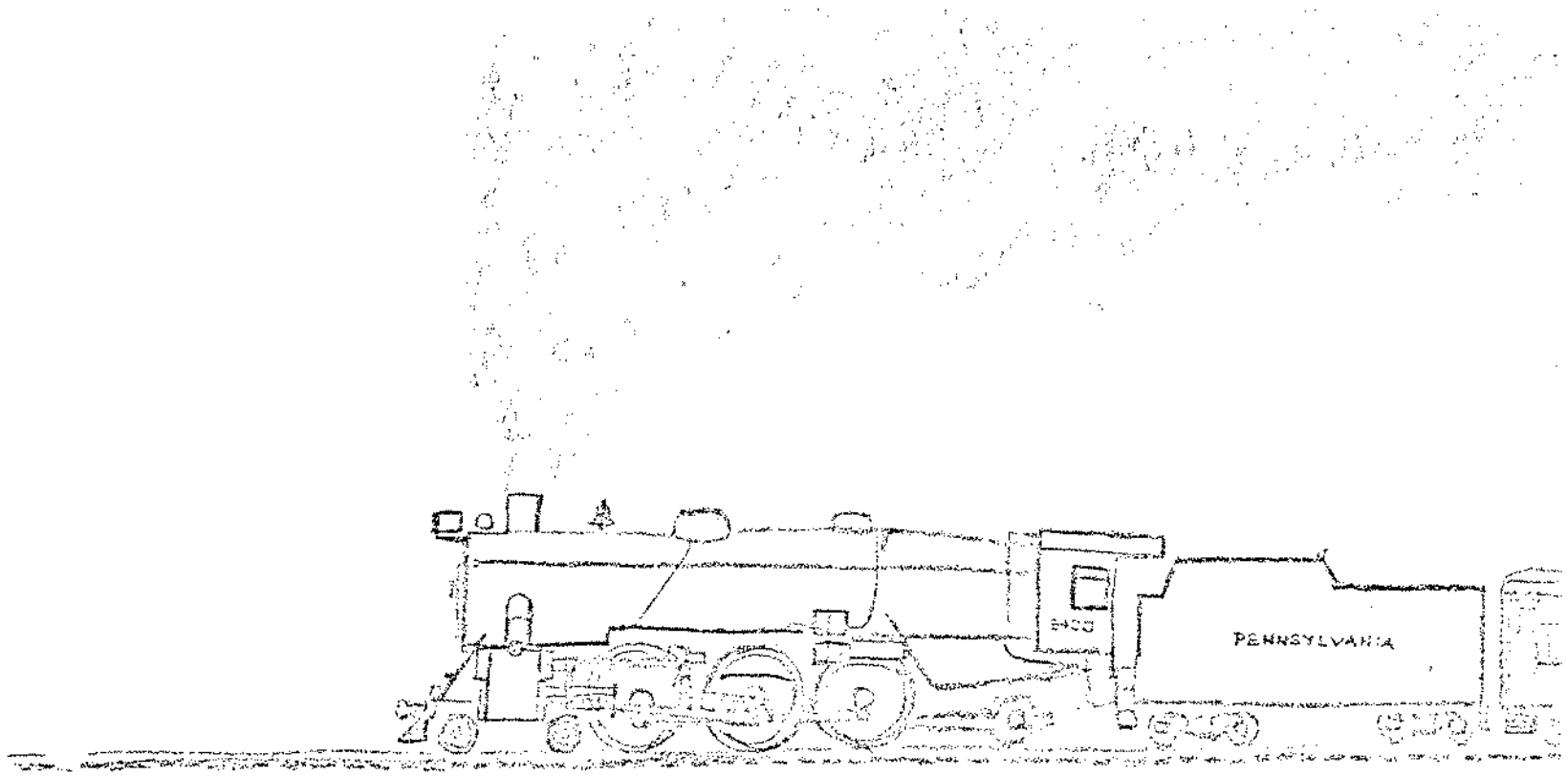
Through the open window she could smell the honeysuckle. It was nearly summer now, and she was five. Soon she would learn to read.

She had had a birthday party, and it had been nice. They had dropped clothespins into milk bottles, and they had played pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, and they had eaten lots and lots of cake and ice cream. Maybe even a little too much cake and ice cream.

All the kids had brought her presents. Willie had

given her the best present of all and she had told him so, though she wished she hadn't said it in front of the others. Her mother said later it might have hurt their feelings and that wasn't nice. Willie's present was a little cardboard house with twelve windows in it. And inside each window was a package of bubble bath. Each package was a different color and each smelled like a different flower.

In the morning at breakfast Tommy had given her a book. The cover had a picture of a steam engine on it. Tommy read the title to her. It was: "The History of the Pennsylvania Railroad."



Emma didn't know what to say. It was her birthday and she didn't want to hurt his feelings but she didn't want "The History of the Pennsylvania Railroad" for a present either. Then Tommy turned the cover rightside out and she saw it wasn't a book about trains at all. It was Mary Poppins. There she was flying through the sky with her umbrella. Tommy had drawn a picture of a train on the other side just to tease her. She laughed and laughed. If he had been anybody but her brother she would have hugged him.

Emma's father gave her a new nightgown exactly like the old one except that it was blue instead of pink. He hadn't really sent it all the way from England, her mother said, because that was too difficult. But he had asked Emma's mother to get it for him to give to her.

And Emma's mother gave her a music box that was a tiny pink wagon with flowers painted all over it. And she gave her a birdbook so that Emma could see the names of all the birds as well as pictures of them and whenever she forgot the name of the bird that she had seen in the pasture with her mother when she was four, she could look it up and read it to herself.

That is, as soon as she learned to read.

* * *

The farthest bed was empty now. It was morning.

"You've had a close call," said the doctor. "You were buried in rubble. They had to dig you out. You were lucky."

"I don't feel lucky."

"Well, your foot was pretty badly smashed. We've patched it up for now but you'll have to have more work done on it when you get home." And the doctor moved on.

It took a moment for the man in the bed to understand. Then joy fell upon him like a mantle. "Home," said Joshua, "I'm going home."

XXI

June

Perhaps her father would come today. It was very exciting not knowing when he would come. Emma sat in the swing eating the drops of honey out of a handful of brown honeysuckles. The brown ones were sweeter than the white ones -- everyone knew that. It was very quiet. Inside the house Emma's mother played a little bit of music and stopped. Then she played the same bit of music again and stopped at the same place. She'd been doing that for hours.

She had been acting funny all week and today she was worse than ever. All she did was play that little bit of music over and over again, and when she stopped she got up from the piano bench and cleaned the house. She had cleaned the whole house from top to bottom every day this week.

Everything was nearly worn away from being cleaned so much. She'd even given Monster a salt water bath to clean his shell -- that's how clean everything was.

It was the sort of week when it was better to stay outside than to go inside because no matter what you did you were likely to get in the way.

Meals were awful. Things were burnt or they weren't cooked enough, and Emma's mother didn't pay any attention to anything anybody said anymore, and she spilled things and dropped things and cried all of a sudden for no reason at all. Then she had to go to her room and lie down.

When Emma's father got home, things would go back to normal again. Emma would lie in bed at night and their laughter would trickle up the stairs to her room. Her mother would not play the piano that way anymore, and she would listen to what people said. She wouldn't cry all the time either.

Emma's father was a hero. He had been a hero in the war and now he was coming home.

Emma's father looked like Tommy only his hair wasn't curly so he didn't have to flatten it down with water. He was handsome and tall and strong. He could lift Emma up and throw her in the air and catch her again. When he pushed

her in the swing, he ran right under it so the swing went very high. Yes, it would be wonderful when her father came home.

* * *

Lying in the hammock, Tommy drew a picture of a train and waited. It had been a bad week and a good one at the same time. "It was the best of times and the worst of times," he thought. Of course, his mother was on edge, they all were. Any minute now the cab would come, his father would get out and limp up to the front door, tears of joy in his eyes. Tommy would say, "Welcome home, Father." He'd shake his father's hand. His father would be pale, thin. On occasion his eyes would look into the distance, seeing beyond the walls, hiding his deep disappointment. After all those preparations he would miss the invasion -- the biggest event of the war, perhaps the biggest event of the whole century.

Later, when they were alone (his mother, worn out with waiting and with cleaning the house so much, would go up to bed early), they would have a man-to-man talk. Tommy would sit on the sofa. His father would want to sit in the red leather chair on his first night home.

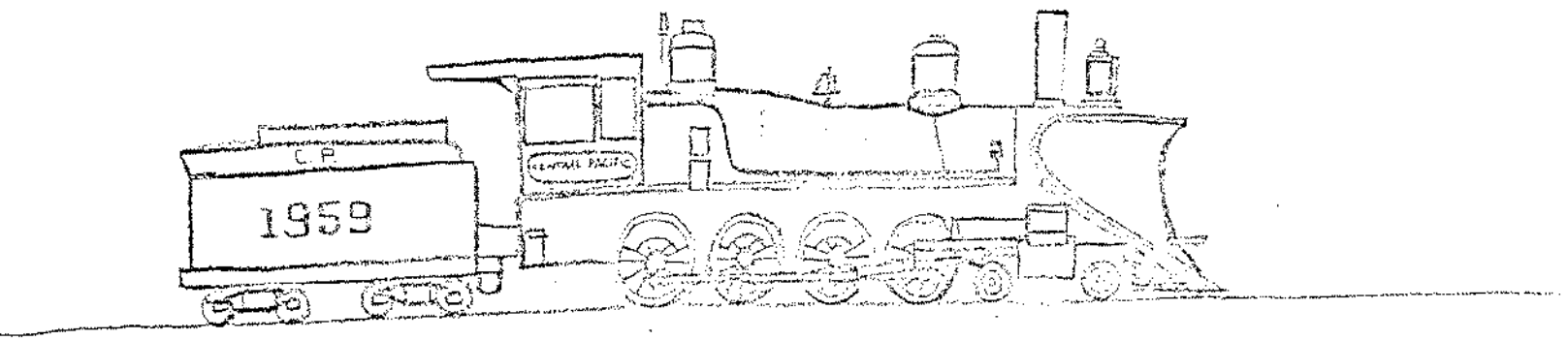
There would be a long meaningful silence. His father

would clear his throat then and say, a little shyly, "How have you been, son?"

Then Tommy would look him right in the eye. He'd be delicate but direct. He'd say, "Father, why did you decide it was the better part of valor for you to go and not to stay?"

Perhaps a tear would come into his father's eye as he thought of his comrades who would fight the good fight without him. He would hesitate. It was hard for him to speak of his part in it all, his heroism -- for there was no denying it, he had been heroic to go, and his smashed and broken foot was symbolic of his heroism. Yes, it was hard for him to speak but for the sake of his son, for the sake of his country, he would. He would say -- but what would he say?

That was the question. And Tommy, listening to his mother play the beginning of the gigue from that thing by Bach and stop, and play it again and stop at the same place, wondered if his father would know if it was really true that English locomotives had no cowcatchers because cows never got on the tracks in England. And he added to his Central Pacific engine a snowplow instead of a cowcatcher to clear the snow-covered tracks in the Sierra Nevadas which the train would have to cross on its way from Utah to San Francisco. But then his father never had paid much attention to trains.



The worst part of the year -- of the whole year -- he thought, was the waiting. But now Emma was running past him to the front yard, and she was calling, "He's here, he's here."

And he was.

* * *

But that's not how I remember him, Emma thought. He's not as tall. He doesn't look anything like Tommy. And though the strange man getting out of the taxi, standing on one foot, reaching back for crutches, then looked up and saw her, said "Emma" in a voice she both could and could not remember, still she did not run to him as she had thought she would, as all this long year she had thought she would. It was not her father -- it was some brother of his (but he had no brothers) who had bits and pieces of Daddy stuck on him with glue. He was not the person she remembered but another, pretending. And now the strange man came up the walk on the crutches and, before Emma had a chance to think that maybe after all she didn't want to be the first to see him, he was hugging her, saying her name again and again, saying "Emma, Emma." And she thought oh yes, oh yes, it was Daddy. Of course it was.

* * *

Naturally Emma gets to him first. She always has to be first, the little pig, thought Tommy. And yes, the foot is just as bad as I thought it would be, he'll never walk without a limp, a memento of heroism to carry with him his entire life. But is he ever going to stop hugging Emma and see me?

He did. He came the last two steps to where Tommy was. Now Tommy would shake his hand and say "Welcome home, Father" and a tear would come to his father's eye. "Thank you, Tommy," he would say. "Thank you for taking care of things while I was away."

But his father did not say that. Instead his father said "Well, well" and stopped as though he couldn't think of anything else to say. (It's not the hero who has at his fingertips the fine words that writers of histories like to believe are said on such occasions.) But someone would have to say something.

So Tommy said, "I've changed my name to T.J." That was not what he had meant to say at all, and he was just about to try "Welcome home, Father" (but it was too late for that now) when his father reached out and grabbed him, somehow managing not to drop the crutches at the same time, and he hugged him hard, so hard that Tommy, pressed against his chest, could hear his heart beating.

"I've missed you," said his father, "whatever your name is." And then they were both laughing, which was good, it was very good. His father let him go and slapped him gently on the back and Tommy straightened his glasses.

All this had taken only a few seconds. But Tommy began

to think that it was odd that he and Emma had heard the car and their mother hadn't. Perhaps the gigue had drowned it out.

But no, his mother was at the door, and she said, "Joshua" as calmly as if he'd only been away half an hour or so, as if he'd only gone up the block to mail a letter.

And he said, "Elizabeth, I'm home" in the same way that he used to say it when he came home from work every day. And anyway, thought Tommy, she could see for herself that he was home. Then his mother opened the screen door and his father went inside and shut the door gently behind him.

"They're awfully calm about it," Tommy said to Emma who still sat on the grass where her father had left her. She would get grass stains on her underpants but that wasn't Tommy's problem..

Emma said, "No, they're not. They're in there crying."

It might be true, thought Tommy, or it might not. Emma might have heard them crying even though he hadn't, but then again she might have made it up, you never could tell with Emma.