XXII

And so, thought Tommy many hours later, the long summer afternoon was finally over. They had sat inside, they had sat outside. They had talked and his father had listened, and his father had talked and they had listened. But his father had not talked about the war -- not this war anyway. He had talked about _his_ father coming home from the first war, he had talked about the Civil War, he had even talked about the French Revolution,making it necessary for Tommy to quote, "It's a far far better thing that I do now than I have ever done before" and so forth. But his father had not leaped up, had not said "Yes, yes, that's just why I went." In fact, if you hadn't known better, you would have thought that he _had_ been out mailing a letter for the last

year. What, after all, was the point of going if you came back pretending you had just been around the block?

There were stories about London, of course, but you might have thought he had gone to London as a tourist. The food was bad, the weather was cold and very wet, and everyone's nerves were worn down between getting ready for the invasion and trying to ignore the air raids which, while not as heavy as the Blitz, were somehow nastier because more concentrated, said his father, glancing at his foot as he spoke. But still, he went on, the flowers at Kew Gardens were really something to see, Bethesda was practically a desert by comparison, and the London Times was so discreet they put all their classified ads on the front page instead of the news, and on the subway everyone was as polite as they could be and nobody ever pushed you except by mistake and then they apologized, not at all like New York's subway. He had seen the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace -- "Like in Christopher Robin?" said Emma -- yes, like in Christopher Robin, and he had caught a glimpse or two of the Prime Minister, in the flesh, complete with cigar, going into Number 10 Downing Street, and he had ridden on the double-decker buses, and learned to use the English money which wasn't based on the decimal system like ours.

T.J. had learned the decimal system in school this year, hadn't he?

Tommy said yes. It made him uneasy to hear his father call him that as though he did it to humor him. He would much rather his father called him "Tommy" and told him how he really felt about the war.

But the conversation rolled on and on, and there was no guiding it, no heading it down this path or that, to the one that might take you to the heart of the matter, what his father really thought.

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Was Emma really learning to read, her father asked. Mother had sent him her drawing of all of them -- Mommy and Daddy and Tommy and Emma. She'd written the name under each person. And at the top of the picture she'd put the title, "Us." Now the picture was really true. They were together again -- they were "us." But oh no! She'd forgotten the flower surprise. She'd made one for him every day this week because they didn't know which day he was coming, and now he was here and she'd forgotten to show it to him. But maybe -- maybe he didn't care about flower surprises anymore. Maybe he didn't want to see it.

Of course, of course he wanted to see the flower surprise.

And so they went into the backyard together and she pushed the grass away and took the board off and there --

It was all wilted, it was all brown. Every last rose petal, every buttercup, even the honeysuckles at the bottom were all shriveled up. Oh, it was too much, too much. Her father's coming home was ruined, it was just ruined. And Emma began to cry.

* * *

I am so happy, thought Elizabeth as she set the table for dinner (four places, count them, four!) that nothing will ever make me unhappy again. And there, there, out in his own backyard where he belonged, Joshua sat on the swing holding Emma in his lap and pushing with his good foot so that the swing rocked gently.

But wasn't he too heavy for the swing? If it should break and he should fall, with his poor foot -- !

And she opened the back door and called them in though it was still half an hour to dinner. He couldn't go hurting himself on the very first day.

* * *

It was because there were too many people around. He couldn't be expected to say what he really thought with Emma and Mother there. Tommy had seen at once it was

ridiculous to think that his mother might go to bed early and leave them to a man-to-man talk. Of course she had missed his father but wasn't she going a little too far? Every time he, Tommy, turned around they were hugging or kissing each other. Really, you didn't expect that sort of thing from your own parents. Maybe at first, but the day was almost over and still they kept on doing it. It was embarrassing.

This had nothing to do with the girl in Time magazine (you don't have to think about the war all the time). It was wrong to think about her in connection with his parents kissing. But still it was awfully embarrassing to be around them while they were behaving like that.

And wasn't it a little heartless how they seemed to have forgotten all about little Edward? They were completely happy as if their children -- whether there were two of them or three of them or none at all -- counted for nothing. It was true his father had mentioned it while Emma was out of the room. He'd said soberly, "You've had a bad time." He was looking at Tommy's mother when he said this -- though Tommy hadn't particularly *enjoyed* his mother nearly dying like that and losing a potential baby brother too -- but she had shrugged it away as if his coming home wiped it out.

That was the trouble with both of them. They could forget. They could act as if the past -- whether it was Edward or a world war -- had never existed. It wasn't that Tommy couldn't do that. He didn't want to. The motto on the Archives, "Past is Prologue," was right. Putting the past away in a tidy little compartment as soon as it was over -- that made the past worthless, it denied all of civilization. Well, they could try to do it but Tommy wasn't going to let them.

After dinner his mother put all the dirty dishes in the sink, all the plates covered with fried chicken bones and hardening bits of rice and chicken gravy and Emma's little pile of brocoli. (His mother hadn't even made Emma clear her plate, that's how bad she was tonight.) And she said, "We'll leave the dishes till morning" which wasn't fair since today was Emma's day to dry, and that meant Tommy had to dry all tonight's dinner dishes tomorrow when it was his day. And he'd been counting on that half hour of peace and quiet while his mother and Emma were in the kitchen.

Bill was coming over tomorrow. That would have been all right (Bill being so good at man-to-man talks) but he never went anywhere these days without Lucy. Lucy herself

was nice. She was almost as pretty as Miss McAlpin though she was older. (She wouldn't say how old she was. If you asked her, she just giggled and said "Old enough to know better.") But you could talk to Lucy. She was all right even if she did get a bit silly if there was wine at dinner and tell stories on Bill. Even Bill laughed at the stories they were so funny. Lucy was all right but you could hardly have a man-to-man talk with her around.

There was a crash upstairs and they heard Emma cry out. Mother went up to investigate and soon she leaned over the banister to tell them what had happened. Emma had dropped her nightlight and it had broken. She'd been trying to unplug it to bring it down to "show Daddy" although he had bought it for her years ago, but she didn't remember that. She had cut her fingers on the glass, not real bad but bad enough for bandaids and iodine. Now she had to be comforted, promised a new nightlight just as nice as the pink horses. The glass had to be cleaned up so she wouldn't cut her feet on it. And while they were at it, she might as well have her bath.

There, said Tommy to himself, I've got my chance.

His father sat in the red leather chair drinking a beer because today was a special day.

Tommy leaned forward (not wasting one sweet second of this unexpected moment) and said, "Why did you go?"

"What?" said his father, holding the beer bottle suspended. "Why did I go where?"

"To war," said Tommy as patiently as he could. But it was terrible when your own father couldn't think as fast as you could.

"Why did I go to war?" A faraway expression came into his father's eyes.

Good, good, good, thought Tommy, seeing himself so close to the heart of the matter, finally, after all this time. And he sat further forward, on the very edge of his chair, willing the words out of his father. _Say it_, _say it_, he thought. Never mind if it doesn't come out beautiful. You're a hero, not a historian. You can leave the fancy phrases to the historians. I just want to hear whatever you want to say. (All this went on in his head in such a clear loud voice that it was hard to believe he hadn't said it aloud.)

His father looked at the beer bottle and away, off into space, and back down at the beer bottle. He tapped it with his fingernail. _Click_, _click_ went the sound. He was going to speak -- he was.

Upstairs Emma said loudly, "But it's got to have pink horses."

His father sighed and leaned back in his chair. "You know what?" he said.

"What?" said Tommy.

"You can't get beer like this in England," said his father. "No fizz."

Tommy sat back in his chair. What was the point of it all, of anything? His father was a fraud. "'No fizz.'"

But his father hadn't finished. He raised his bad, his wounded foot and looked at it -- but he'd been hurt in an air raid, he hadn't been wounded in battle.

He said, "Do you know how many bones there are in the human foot, T.J.?"

"No." This wasn't what he wanted to hear but it was better than talking about beer. Tommy edged forward in the chair. Upstairs water was running into the bathtub and they could hear Emma say despairingly, "Why can't Daddy glue it back together?" and her mother's voice answering, but the words were too soft to hear.

"Twenty-seven," said his father triumphantly.

"That's a lot of bones," said Tommy but he was disappointed. He'd been expecting his father to say hundreds.

"Mother said it could be fixed," he added.

"Well, it can," said his father cheerfully.

"And if it's fixed before the war is over, will you go back?"

His father said, "Oh, the war won't go on much longer."

Tommy was awed. His father had been right in the center of things. He knew when D-Day was going to be. Tommy felt as though he had been sprinkled with the fine gold dust of his father's heroism. Now he wanted to kneel before his father, holding his shield, handing him his sword. He would lay down the red carpet to welcome home the hero.

"You know when D-Day is, then?" he said quietly, soberly. (You couldn't shout a thing like that from the rooftops -- though he wanted to.)

But his father shook his head. "Oh no, hardly anybody knows that -- except Ike of course. I just know what I read in the papers, same as you."

The gold dust too was a fraud.

But his father said, "To get back to your question: why do you think I went?"

Tommy hesitated. It wasn't fair, turning the tables like that. But he was ready. He'd been ready a long time. "Can I quote something?" he said.

"Please," said his father.

Tommy said, "As life is action and passion, a man must take part in the passion and action at peril of being judged not to have lived." There, that was it. He'd been thinking that about his father all day long -- all year long -- and now he'd laid it out for his father to see. He'd finally said it. Now it was up to his father to say if he was or if he wasn't that kind of man.

Upstairs Emma was splashing around in the tub, and her mother was cleaning up the broken glass and singing at the same time. She sang, "Mairzie doats and dozy doats and liddle lambsie dievy. . . " She had not sung that or anything except "Happy Birthday" and Christmas carols in a very long time. His father was smiling at the sound of her singing and wasn't thinking about the quote at all.

"Well, is that why you went?" said Tommy impatiently. In fact he said it much louder than he had intended. He practically hollered it.

His father looked him straight in the eye and said, "I went because everybody else was going. That's the only reason, Tommy, and it's not a very good reason but it's not a very bad one either. I went because I knew I'd have to go sooner or later and I couldn't find a reason not to.

Believe me, I tried."

Tommy sat back in his chair, speechless. There was no quote nor words of his own to meet the situation. His father was not a hero and there was nothing else to say.

His father went on drinking beer as if nothing had happened.

* * *

Now the nightlight with the pink horses was broken, thought Emma, as her mother helped her put on the blue nightgown. Even though her mother had said and said over again that she would look everywhere for a nightlight just like it, Emma knew she wouldn't find one. It was a one of a kind nightlight. And her mother had thrown the pink horses in the wastebasket -- the pink horses that Tommy said were the filament. The pink horses themselves weren't broken. It was just the light bulb around them that was broken. But her mother wouldn't let Emma keep the horses because they might have tiny slivers of broken glass which Emma couldn't see.

Oh, it wasn't fair.

And downstairs was her father who was a stranger and though she thought he was nice, though she thought she liked him, he was not the person she remembered. Sometimes she thought she remembered him but most of the time she didn't.

He didn't look at all like Tommy, and he was shorter than she'd thought he would be, and his foot was hurt. He had crutches. He couldn't throw her up in the air and catch her. He called Tommy "T.J.," not because he thought that was Tommy's real name (it was <u>not</u>) but because Tommy wanted him to. Emma didn't like that. Suppose she had decided she wanted to be called "Fishcakes." No one would have called her that. So why should her father call Tommy "T.J." when he knew his name was Tommy? At least her mother called him sometimes one and sometimes the other, depending on how she felt.

The flower surprise had wilted and even though he had been very sweet about it and had hugged her and sat in the swing with her, that didn't make up for the flower surprise wilting.

Now her mother brushed her hair a bit so the curly parts lay a little flatter, and she said "You can stay up for awhile because today's a special day" and they went downstairs together.

"Look at that," said Emma, and she held up her hand. She had cut herself four places on the pink horses and she had four bandaids on her hand. The cuts didn't hurt except when she bent her fingers and then they only hurt a little.

Her father said "Oh, poor Emma" but Tommy wouldn't even look. Even when she held her hand in front of his face, he wouldn't look. He was mad because now he couldn't sit in the red leather chair anymore.

But it was Daddy's red leather chair. It had always been his. Nobody else had ever sat in it till he went away. Suddenly Emma remembered. Emma remembered everything. How her father sat in the red leather chair and she sat on his lap and he read that book with the colored pictures in it, the book with the long poem with the words that went back and forth like a hammock gently swinging, back and forth, back and forth.

Yes, she remembered, she remembered it all, how he would read, his voice going back and forth, back and forth with the words, and the poem was in the book with the green cover and it had colored pictures in it, and the poem was about . . . it was about Indians. And there was also a poem about a little girl with blond hair who sat on the steps laughing like Emma sometimes did, only Emma had brown hair. That's where the book was. If you sat on the steps you could see it there in the bookcase behind the red leather chair. Emma went up the stairs. Yes, it was still there. She reached through the banisters and took the book out. It

was dusty because nobody had read it since her father left. That was a whole year.

She remembered him reading it.

Would he -- ?

He would. And she climbed up into his lap. Was she too big? No, no, of course not, only sit this way -- and he made a little face and moved her so she sat on the leg that didn't have the bad foot on the end of it. Now he'd read. Was everybody comfortable?

"Yes," said Emma loudly, in case anyone should disagree. Read, read, she thought. Everything would be all right again if only he would read.

But Tommy was getting up. Tommy was going to go upstairs. Tommy was going to spoil everything.

Her father said, "Oh, Tommy, don't go." And he said it like it really mattered whether Tommy went upstairs or not.

And her father opened the book with the green cover and read:

> On the Mountains of the Prairie,
> On the great Red Pipe-stone Quarry,
> Gitche Manito, the mighty,
> He the Master of Life, descending,
> On the red crags of the quarry
> Stood erect and called the nations,
> Called the tribes of men together.

Tommy sat down again. He sat down on the couch next to Emma's mother. He stopped looking mad. Tommy remembers too, thought Emma, settling into her father's lap. Tommy remembers what it was like when we were little.

* * *

Tommy didn't think very highly of Hiawatha -- it was too sing-songy to be quotable and the hypnotic rhythm made it hard to listen to the words -- but he couldn't help knowing it well after all those years of hearing it read. So Tommy knew that his father hadn't chosen that particular section of Hiawatha at random. It was true that his father had always liked that part, with its catalog of tribes.

(His father was reading:

> Down the rivers, o'er the prairies,
> Came the warriors of the nations,
> Came the Delawares and Mohawks,
> Came the Choctaws and Camanches,
> Came the Shoshonies and Blackfeet,
> Came the Pawnees and Omahas,
> Came the Mandans and Dacotahs,
> Came the Hurons and Ojibways, . . .)

But his father was systematic. It was not his way to start somewhere other than the beginning. He always began at the beginning and read clear through to the end, section by section, night after night. But tonight he had not, and Tommy knew why. He knew what was coming and, while it was

not exactly an answer to his question, it was something and more than that you could not expect. Besides, wasn't it enough that his father was home and head of the house again and that he, Tommy, (or T.J. when he felt like it) was free to live his own life again? That they all were?

For his father was right. If the war wasn't over yet, their part of it, the Corbrey part of it, was. They couldn't forget it but they could go on beyond it. That was not the same as going backward. They could not, after all, go back to the halcyon days. The halcyon days were gone and gone forever. His parents would never be perfect as he had thought them once. They were human, full of flaws and weaknesses, but with that slight tinge of heroism that made them bearable, that made them out of the ordinary, that made them almost wonderful in spite of themselves.

And so Tommy, sitting so close to his mother that he could feel the warmth of her leg next to his, gave himself up to the rhythmic words and his father's familiar reading of them.

After awhile his father paused and looked up to make sure they were all listening (they were spellbound except for Emma who was asleep). Then he read what Gitchie Manito said to the Indian warriors:

"I am weary of your quarrels,
Weary of your wars and bloodshed,
Weary of your prayers for vengeance,
Of your wranglings and dissensions;
All your strength is in your union,
All your danger is in discord;
Therefore be at peace henceforward,
And as brothers live together."

It had been a long and terrible year, Tommy thought, but now it was over and done with. It was time to let it go.

And so he did.