

One

Bad News



Sometimes at night when the rain is beating against the windows of my room, I think about that summer on the farm. It has been five years, but when I close my eyes I am once again by the creek watching the black fox come leaping over the green, green grass. She is as light and free as the wind, exactly as she was the first time I saw her.

Or sometimes it is that last terrible night, and I am standing beneath the oak tree with the rain beating against me. The lightning flashes, the world is turned white for a moment, and I see everything as it was – the broken lock, the empty cage, the small tracks disappearing into the rain. Then it seems to me that I can hear, as plainly as I heard it that August night, above the rain, beyond the years, the high, clear bark of the midnight fox.

To begin with, I did not want to go to the farm. I was perfectly happy at home. I remember I was sitting at the desk in my room and I had a brand-new \$1.98 Cessna 180 model. I was just taking off the cellophane when my mom came in. I was feeling good because I had the model, and all evening to work on it, and then my mom told me in an excited way that I was going to Aunt Millie's

farm for two whole months. I felt terrible.

‘I don’t want to go to any farm for two months,’
I said.

‘But, Tommy, why not?’

‘Because I just don’t want to.’

‘Maybe you don’t *now*,’ my mom said, ‘but after you think about it for a bit, you will. It’s just that I’ve taken you by surprise. I probably shouldn’t have come bursting in like –’

‘I will never want to go.’

She looked at me with a puzzled shrug. ‘I thought you would be so pleased.’

‘Well, I’m not.’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘There’s nothing wrong. I would just hate to stay on a farm, that’s all.’

‘How do you know? You can’t even remember Aunt Millie’s farm. You don’t know whether you’d like it now or not.’

‘I know. I knew I wasn’t going to like camp, and I didn’t. I knew I wasn’t going to like figs, and I don’t. I knew I wasn’t –’

‘The trouble with you, Tommy, is that you don’t *try* to like new things.’

‘You shouldn’t have to *try* to like things. You should just very easily, without even thinking about it all, *like* them.’

‘All right,’ she said, and her upper lip was beginning to get tight. ‘When I first saw this farm, I very easily, without thinking about it at all, *loved* it. It is the prettiest farm I ever saw. It’s in the hills and there are great big apple trees to climb and there are cows and horses and –’

‘Animals hate me.’

‘Tom, I have never heard anything so silly in my life. Animals do not hate you.’

‘They do. How about that dog that came running up at about a hundred miles an hour and bit me

for no reason? I suppose that dog loved me!’

‘The lady explained that. The dog had a little ham bone and you stepped on it and the dog thought you were going to take it. Anyway,’ she continued quickly, ‘just wait till you see the baby lambs. There is nothing dearer in the world. They are —’

‘I’ll probably be the only kid in the world to be stampeded to death by a bunch of baby lambs.’

‘Tom!’

‘I tell you, animals don’t like me. Perfectly strange animals come charging at me all the time.’

My mom ignored this and went on about the fun I would have in the garden, and especially gathering eggs. There was, according to her, no such fun in the world as going out to the henhouse, sticking your hand under some strange hen, grabbing an egg, and running back to the house with it for breakfast. I could picture that. I would

be running to the house with my egg, see, having all this fun, and then there would be a noise like a freight train behind me. A terrible noise growing louder and louder, and I would look around and there would come about two hundred chickens running me down. CHAROOOOOM! Me flattened on the ground while the lead hen snatches the egg from my crushed hand and returns in triumph to the coop.

My mom could see I wasn't listening to her, so she stopped talking about the fun and said, 'I should think, Tom, that even if you do not particularly want to go to the farm –'

'I don't want to go at all.'

'– even if you do not *particularly* want to go to the farm,' she continued patiently, 'you would realise how much this trip means to your father and me. It is the only chance we will ever have to go to Europe. The only chance.'

My mom and dad were going to Europe with about fifty other very athletic people, and they were going to bicycle through five countries and sleep in fields and barns. You can see that parents who would do that could never understand someone not wanting to go to the farm. I could not understand it myself completely. I just knew that I did not want to go, that I would never want to go, and that if I had to go, I would hate, loathe, and despise every minute of it.

‘Don’t you want your father and me to have this trip?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re not acting like it.’

‘I *want* you to have the trip. I want you to have a hundred trips if you want them, just as long as I don’t have to go to any crummy farm.’

‘You make it sound like a punishment.’

‘Why can’t I stay here?’

‘Because there’s no one for you to stay with,’ she said.

‘There’s Mrs Albergotti.’ This shows how desperate I was. Mrs Albergotti was the kind of sitter who would come in the room where I was sleeping to see if I was still breathing.

‘Mrs Albergotti cannot stay with you for two months.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because she has a family of her own. Now, Tom, will you be reasonable? You are not a baby any more. You are almost ten years old.’

‘I am being reasonable.’

My mother looked at me for a long time without saying anything. I lifted the lid off my model box. Usually this was a great moment for me. It was usually so great that trumpets should have blown – TA-DAAAAAAA! This time I looked down at the grey plastic pieces and they were just grey plastic pieces.

‘Your father will talk to you when he gets home,’ she said, and left the room. I could hear her cross the hall into her room and shut the door. My mom cried easily. The week before we had been watching a TV show about an old elephant who couldn’t do his circus routine any more, and suddenly I heard a terrible sob, and I looked over and it was my mom crying about the old elephant. Well, we all laughed, and she laughed too, only it was not so funny to hear my mom crying now, not because of an old elephant, but because of me.

That evening my father came in and talked to me. My dad is a high-school coach who likes to tell about things like the Lehigh-Central basketball game, when he won the game in the last two seconds with a free throw. If anything, I knew that he would be less understanding than my mom. He had not understood, for example, why I did not want to be in Little League even after he had

watched me strike out seventeen times straight.

‘This is a wonderful opportunity,’ my dad said enthusiastically. ‘Wonderful! There’s a pond there – did you know that? You can go swimming every day if you like.’

‘I’m not much of a swimmer,’ I reminded him. This was the understatement of the year. Having a body that would not float would be a great handicap to anybody.

‘Well, you can learn! That is why this is such a wonderful opportunity.’ Then he said earnestly, ‘If you go to the farm with the right attitude, Tom, that’s the main thing. With the right attitude, two months on a farm can make a world of difference in you both mentally and physically.’

‘I like myself the way I am.’ I continued working on my model, which was what I had been doing when this conversation started.

‘Put down the model, son.’