Homecoming

EARL GUY

He watched the car turn and dip away through a wide stretch of houses that crowded a smudge of far smoke streaming above a slow-fading curve of tall factory chimneys. To the left the downtown heights towered, remote and faint, over the smoke-pennoned river. The city trembled before him like a creation out of his memory. And as he recognized it, as he viewed the cloud-fragile pile, thrust and sweep of its splendor, as he fitted each angle, each involution, each roof, tower and spire in familiar pattern etching the heavens, a strange sorrow, a strange mingling of longing and hope and defeat filled him so that home still seemed remote, forever beyond the chance of attainment. He gazed at the house standing small and alone on a corner where the slope dropped sharply away. He walked toward it slowly, and he climbed the rear steps to see his father seated next to the window; he saw his mother near the stove getting supper; and he knocked, watching her turn, pale and dark-haired: her eyes seemed to burn out of shadow and thin puckers of flesh cornered her mouth. He opened the door.

"Hello, Mother," he said, and smiled slowly, as she stood with her hands raised and recognition lighting her face.

"Why!" She hesitated. "Why, Clay!" She reached for him. "Why, Clay!" He kissed her cheek, and patted her shoulder, greeting his father.

"I'm glad to see you, Dad," he said.

"Well, boy." Tom Merrill got to his feet, a large man whose cleft cheeks, mild eyes, and grey hair confirmed the weary set of his mouth. He groped for Clay's hand, and Clay gripped his fingers, his left arm taut about his mother's thin shoulders.

He moved away then, and gazed out the window until his eyes cleared and the grey housetops fell endlessly away toward the wind-torn smoke and the incredible frailness of the faraway towers. The sky, angry and cruel, dropped behind the factories and the river beyond. A row of blast furnaces flamed on a far eastward hill, against the shadow of evening. He sank down on a chair, not sure of himself, not sure of the room and its warmth, not sure of the shabbiness even.
“You stayed away awful long.”
“I should say so,” Mrs. Merrill agreed. “Why did you?”
“I don’t know.” Clay stared at the walls: the picture of the moose by a pine-bordered lake hung over the stove; the sink still crowded the corner; the chairs, the table set for three people, the towel rack were all in their places. Everything was the same, yet there was a strangeness, and he didn’t know. He didn’t know. “I guess I just didn’t get around to this part of the country.”
“Did you get along all right?”
“Fair.”
“Well, you look pretty good, anyhow,” Tom said.
“Why, he does not!” Mrs. Merrill accused. “He’s as thin as a rail. Look at his face.”
“All right. All right,” Tom said. “I just thought he looked all right.” He shifted his glance to the window, and Mrs. Merrill faced Clay.
“You look half starved,” she said. A ridge divided her eyes; the lines at her mouth cut deeper into her cheeks and brought her nostrils out to a flare. “Are you well?”
“I’m all right. Just kind of tired and dirty.” He looked up at her, with the skin growing hot over his cheek bones. She shook her head.
“You’re awfully thin.” She went back to the stove. “I’m afraid you’ve had a hard time. I’m afraid—” she broke off.
“I’m back again anyhow.” He turned partly away.
“Yes, you’re back,” she said. “But I don’t know. . . . I’m afraid. . . . Home isn’t much anymore.”
“It looks good enough to me.” Clay smiled, not knowing why, with the knowledge that there was no certainty, that no wanderings ended.
“But you don’t know. We’ve nothing. We can’t even buy clothes for Helen so she can continue at school.” Mrs. Merrill paused, breathing audibly. “I don’t know what we’ll do,” she said. Clay studied her profile, seeing the gray in her hair. He was impressed again by her tiredness. He felt his mind whirling toward a kind of disintegration that pressed on his consciousness.
“Maybe I can help,” he suggested slowly, aware that he was snatching at the hope he offered to them. “I ought to be able to get hold of some kind of job.”
“Well, I hope you can. Somebody has to do something, and
your father’s not accomplishing much.” Mrs. Merrill’s lips folded into the lines at their corners, and Tom swung his head.

“Dad’s all right,” Clay defended quickly.

“Don’t mind your mother.” Tom shaded his eyes. “She’s kind of upset these days.”

“No, don’t mind me.” Mrs. Merrill set a pan down with a clatter.

“Now, Mother.” Clay looked at the table with its three plates, and he thought of the lines he had stood in, of the freights he had ridden, and the tracks that cut afar on an earth flattened by prairies, folded by hills, gutted by rivers, torn and bloated and cragged by the wild upheaval of mountains. Was all of that in the past? He asked: “Is there any work to be had at all?”

“Just relief work,” Tom said.

“Just relief work,” Clay repeated. “What are the chances to get on it?”

“I don’t know,” Tom said. “I’ve had my application in for a long time, but nothing has come of it yet. I guess it takes pretty long.”

“I guess so.” Clay studied the frayed ends of his shoe laces: he only wanted the peace of four walls, the security of a meal now and then, a rest from the faces of strangers. “I don’t suppose they pay anything anyhow.”

“Not much,” Tom said. “But it’s better than starving.”

“Probably,” Clay said. Poverty stood forth in the room, dismal, desolate, like the interior. He watched his mother’s preparations for supper. She said:

“We’d certainly be glad to get it.”

“It’d help all right.” Tom rubbed his nose. “It’d be more than we have now, anyway.”

“Yes?” Clay questioned.

“Yes.” Tom plucked at the table oilcloth, and his mouth seemed set in permanent weariness. “All we have now is a grocery order once in a while and what we can sell. But we ain’t got anything much to sell any more. All we got is a couple of beds and what you see here.” He waved at the few sticks of furniture left in the kitchen.

Clay looked at the blast furnaces, at the scattered houses behind them that sprawled over the hill, lonely and bleak, like forgotten homes in a forsaken world. Beyond lay the distance, the railroads and highways, the jungles, and the bulls shagging men
down the tracks. He turned away quickly. There was a scuffling on the back porch, and Helen came in, pretty, pulling her hat off morosely.

“See that.” She pointed to a new run in her stocking.

“Well,” Mrs. Merrill said helplessly.

“You’ve got—” Helen stopped, sensing Clay’s presence, turning slowly, with her blue eyes questioning, brilliant, and with her ears pale in the wave of her hair that framed her face and brought out its delicate hollows.

“Hello, Helen.” Clay tried to grin.

“Why!” Helen smiled, twisting her slenderness out of her coat. “You’re getting prettier.” Clay cracked his lips wider. He watched his parents, who had their eyes fastened on Helen inspecting her stockings. He said tentatively:

“What have you been doing with yourself?”

“Oh, going to school and fooling around.” She didn’t raise her eyes from her legs. “Moms,” she said earnestly, “you’ve got, you’ve simply got to let me have money for my stockings. I can’t wait any longer.”

“I don’t know now,” Mrs. Merrill sank into a chair.

“But you promised,” Helen protested.

“I know,” Mrs. Merrill said, wiping her face on her apron. She rested her head on her hand. “I know,” she repeated. “But I’m afraid we can’t manage now.” She gave Clay a quick look.

And it seemed to carry her feeling over to him; it seemed to render her life up to him: the struggle, the poverty, the worry of another to keep. He sought his chair again tiredly. “Can’t you manage to get her some, some way?”

“I don’t see how now.”

“But, gee!” Helen dragged a finger over the oilcloth, with the light on her cheek bones painting deeper the hollows and pushing her face into the depths of her hair. “Surely you can spare that much. They won’t cost much.”

“A little means a whole lot to us,” Mrs. Merrill said.

“I don’t care.” Helen’s eyes seemed afloat suddenly. She closed her hands passionately. “I got to have those stockings.”

“I can’t help it, Helen.” Mrs. Merrill twisted the hem of her apron, and Clay counted the three plates on the table: it seemed to him that there would never be room for another. He couldn’t say anything.
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“Don’t you think you better wait awhile,” Tom offered, “till we see if me or Clay don’t get a job?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Merrill said. “You can wait a week or so surely.”

“But I have waited!” Helen wailed.

“Well.” Mrs. Merrill resumed her preparations for supper. “Talk to your father. He’s the provider around here.” She slammed the oven door shut, and Clay felt his skin shrink, glancing at Tom who reddened and moistened his lips.

“I’m the provider all right,” he said. “Sure, I’m the provider.”

“Yes, you are, Tom Merrill!” Mrs. Merrill faced about, holding a spoon thrust before her.

“All right!” Tom flared. “Maybe you can tell me how to do it then.”

“Yes, I can!” Mrs. Merrill still held the spoon. Her eyes were wide, bright in their hollows. “You can get a job and go to work.”

“Yes, I can get a job and go to work!” Tom cried bitterly. “Sure, I can go to work. I can go to work when I’ve already worn the soles off my shoes hunting a job. Yes!” he shouted and got to his feet. He pointed a finger, then dropped his arm, and a kind of parchedness came over his face, drawing the lines deeper, aging it, so that the cleft cheeks, the tired mouth, the blue questioning of the lined eyes, mild toward the future, seemed to sink into themselves, seemed to point the way to the flesh, and the whole face, like an eroded field, like a scarred hill, seemed wasting down through its gulleys under the grief, the turmoil, the harshness of the torrented years. He was already old.

“Yes.” He paused briefly, looking at nothing, looking at the world through the past. “Yes,” he repeated, “I can go to work. I’ve worked all my life. And what has it got me? What has it got me?” he cried, remembering suddenly, seeing his blood and his bone drying in sweat. He stared at his hands as if to read the work-riven scars of the past, as if the toil, the struggle and suffering imbedded there held the answer. “What has it got me?” The words were like an echo drifting back from the mills, and he sat silent, without lifting his eyes from his hands, while outside the evening deepened, the dusk rolled out of the east, inexorable, somber, oppressive, coloring the river, draping the factories and feathering the narrow alleys and passages. “Whatever I do I get blamed. I get blamed for everything.”

“Oh, you make me tired, Tom Merrill,” Mrs. Merrill said.

“For God’s sake,” Clay pleaded, “don’t quarrel. That won’t help matters any.”

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“But what are we going to do?” Mrs. Merrill cried, and flung the spoon from her, then leaned sobbing against the door jamb. “What can we do?”

“Don’t cry,” Tom said, closing his hands.

“Oh, Moms!” Helen crossed to her mother, hiding her own tears, and Clay traced a design on the table. He lifted his eyes to look at them both, and it seemed to him that their despair grew like a cloud, filling the room and spreading over the district, over the housetops. He felt it enter his blood, devouring his hope, and the memory of waking alone by cold jungle fires brought again the old pain, the old longing and sorrow. He rose and walked over to them.

“Don’t cry,” he said. “Everything will be all right.” They wept against his shoulder a moment, then stepped away.

“I don’t know,” his mother said.

“Sure it will,” he insisted. “Hasn’t it always? Haven’t we always managed to get by some way or other?” The words sounded like sly repetitions repeated by rote, as though a whole people used them and he repeated them now, knowing their mockery.

“But this is different. We’ve never been in such a bad way.”

“No matter. This is no different. Just a little tougher is all. We’ll get by. Don’t you worry.”

“We’ll make out all right,” Tom echoed, crumpling the oil-cloth.

“I can wait for my stockings.” Helen moved away by herself, staring down at the floor. Far off, the lights of downtown burgeoned and laced their intricate fires across the edge of the night, into the loft of the sky. The river was a flame of ferries and bridges. Clay shut the sight out with his palm. The sound of a whistle shrilled in his brain. The gleaming strand of a passenger wove through the yards.

“Now, Helen,” Mrs. Merrill pleaded, “don’t feel badly. Please. Probably we can manage.”

“We’ll manage,” Tom said. “You can have your stockings.”

“No.” Helen went out toward the bathroom, and Clay bent his head. Mrs. Merrill pleated her dress with thin nervous fingers, catching her breath in short gasps, her face fixed in the twist of a sob. She sat thus a moment, bent, as though her life burdened her shoulders, as though the picture of many such lives shattered her thought. “I wonder what will become of you both.”
"That's one thing you don't need to do," Clay said. "Worry about me. I'll get along."
"I don't know."
"It's hard." Tom looked at his hands as though they had betrayed him.
"But I will!" Clay's voice seemed to come from a burning within him. He had to convince them. He watched his mother's arms fall with a sensation of panic. He looked hurriedly into her shadow-sunk eyes, then glanced at his father's lined face, and he was struck again by their bewilderment and patient despair, by their fatigue and their sorrow, and suddenly he felt like a stranger, like one who meets a face in the street to pass by, remembering it briefly. The moment was vivid with pain, closed and lived, feeding the living that grew toward the future. "But I will!" he shouted again, and the words sounded harsh and irrelevant, without meaning, without promise, without any conviction, yet they made him realize how his parents had become part of him, how he would recall them, how they would rest in his thoughts. He snatched at his coat.
"Why, Clay!" Mrs. Merrill cried. "Where are you going?"
"Down to the corner." Clay kissed her quickly. He laid his hand on Tom's shoulder and stared an instant at the door through which Helen had gone, then turned and went out where the ugly houses and mills stretched away and away, where the great blast furnaces flung immense waves of flame at the night, and where a dog yelped and fled, its whimpers diminishing, giving voice somehow to all he remembered, to all that lay in the future. He felt as if he were hearing himself in the darkness, as if his fears, his longings and sorrows had given tongue and were lamenting the cruelty and scorn of the earth.
He looked back from the foot of the hill to see his mother silhouetted in the open doorway, and faintly, far off like a sob from a world he would never visit again, he seemed to hear her crying, "Come back, come back."