

This Is for Jamie, Truman Capote

This Is for Jamie

I

Almost every morning, except Sundays, Miss Julie took Teddy to play in the park. Teddy loved these daily trips. He would take along his bike or some plaything and amuse himself while Miss Julie, glad to be rid of him, gossiped with the other nurses and flirted with the officers. Teddy liked the park best in the morning when the sun was warm and the water spurted out of the fountains in a crystal spray.

"It looks just like gold, doesn't it, Miss Julie?" he would ask the white-garbed, carefully made-up nurse.

"I wish it were!" Miss Julie would grumble.

The night before the day Teddy met Jamie's mother it had rained, and in the morning the park was fresh and green. Although it was toward the end of September, it seemed more like a spring morning. Teddy ran along the paved paths of the park with a wild exuberance. He was an Indian, a detective, a robber-baron, a fairy-tale Prince, he was an angel, he was going to escape from the thieves through the bush—and most of all he was happy and he had two whole hours to himself.

He was playing with his cowboy rope when he saw her. She came along the path and sat down on one of the vacant benches. It was the dog she had with her that first attracted his attention. He loved dogs, he was crazy to have one, but Papa had said no, because he didn't want to have to housebreak a puppy and if you got a full-grown dog it wouldn't be the same. The woman's dog was just what he had always wanted. It was a wire haired terrier, hardly more than a puppy.

He walked slowly up, a little embarrassed, and patted the dog on the head.

"That's a fella," "Atta Boy." That's what they said in the movies and the adventure stories Miss Julie read him.

The woman looked up. Teddy thought she was about as old as his mother, but his mother didn't have such pretty hair. This was like gold and it was wavy and soft looking.

"He's an awfully nice dog. I wish I had one like him."

The woman smiled, and it was then that he thought she was very pretty.

"He's not mine," she said. "He's my little boy's." Her voice was nice, too.

Immediately Teddy's eyes lit up. "Have you got a little boy like me?"

"Oh, he's a little bit older than you. He's nine."

Eagerly Teddy exclaimed, "I'm eight, or almost." He looked younger. He was small for his age and very dark. He was not a handsome child, but he had a friendly face and a disarming manner.

"What's your little boy's name?"

"Jamie-Jamie." She seemed happy, saying the name.

Teddy got up on the bench beside her. The dog was still in a playful mood and continued to jump on Teddy and scratch his legs.

"Sit down, Frisky," the woman commanded.

"Is that his name?" Teddy asked. "That's an awful cute name. He's such a nice dog. I wish I had a dog, and I could bring him to the park every day

and we could play, and then at night he could sit in my room and I could talk to him instead of to Miss Julie, cause Frisky wouldn't care what I talked about—would'ja?"

The woman laughed a deep, somehow sad laugh. "I guess maybe that's the reason Jamie's so crazy about Frisky."

Teddy cuddled the dog up against his leg.

"Does Jamie run with him in the park, and play Indians and things?"

The woman stopped smiling. She turned her gaze away toward the reservoir. For a moment he thought she was angry with him.

"No," she answered, "no, he doesn't run with Frisky. He just plays with him on the floor, he can't go outside. That's the reason I take Frisky for walks. Jamie's never been in the park—he's sick."

"Oh, I didn't know." Teddy's face flushed. Suddenly he saw Miss Julie coming up the path and he knew she would be angry if she saw him talking to a stranger.

"I hope I see you again," he said, "tell Jamie hello for me. I've got to go now, but maybe you'll be here tomorrow, huh?"

The woman smiled; he thought again how nice and pretty she was. He rushed down the path toward Miss Julie, who was feeding crumbs to the pigeons. He looked back and called, "Goodbye, Frisky," The woman's wavy hair shone in the sun.

II

That night he kept thinking of the woman and of the little boy, Jamie. He must be very sick if he couldn't go outside. And, while Teddy lay in bed, he saw Frisky over and over. He hoped that the woman would be there the next day.

In the morning Miss Julie awakened him with a shake and a sharp command. "Come on, you lazy bones! Get out of that bed this minute or you won't go to the park."

Immediately he jumped out of bed and ran to the window. It was clear and cool and with the fresh smell of early morning. It would be beautiful in the park today!

"Yippee, yippee," he yelled and ran wildly into the bathroom.

"Now what do you suppose has got into that child?" Miss Julie said, looking after the flashing Teddy in utter bewilderment.

When they reached the park, Teddy slipped away from Miss Julie while she stood talking with two other nursemaids. The long curving pathways of the park were almost deserted. He felt completely free and alone. He dodged through some underbrush and came out by the reservoir and there, just ahead of him, he saw the woman and the dog.

She looked up when the dog started to bark at Teddy.

"Hello, Teddy," she greeted him warmly.

He was pleased that she remembered him. How kind she was! "Hello, hello, Frisky." He sat down on the bench and the dog jumped on him, licking his hand and nudging against his ribs.

"Ouch," Teddy squealed. "That tickles."

"I've been waiting for you almost ten minutes," the woman said.

"Waiting for me?" he said, startled and sick with joy.

"Yes," she laughed. "I have to get back to Jamie sometime before the day's over."

"Yes," Teddy said hurriedly, happily. "Yes, you do, don't you? I'll bet he misses Frisky while he's out here in the park. I know I'd never let him out of my sight if he was mine."

"But Jamie isn't as lucky as you," she said. "He can't run and play." Teddy fondled the dog; he pressed its cold nose to his warm cheek. He had heard that if their noses were cold, dogs were healthy. "What's Jamie sick with?"

"Oh," she answered vaguely, "something like a cough, a bad cough."

"Then he can't be very sick," Teddy said brightly. "I've had plenty of coughs, and I've never stayed in bed more than two or three days."

She smiled a little. They sat in silence. Teddy cuddled the dog in his lap and wished he could jump up and run with him across the great green lawns marked "KEEP OFF THE GRASS."

Presently she got up and gathered the dog's leash in her hand. "I must go now," she said.

"You aren't leaving, are you?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I'll have to. I promised Jamie I'd be right back. I was just supposed to go down to the cigar store and get him some comic magazines. He'll be calling the police if I don't hurry up!"

"Oh," he said eagerly, "I have lots of comic magazines at home. I'll bring some tomorrow for Jamie!"

"Good," the woman said. "I'll tell him. He loves magazines." She started off down the path.

"I'll meet you here tomorrow and I'll bring the magazines. I'll bring lots of them!" he called after her.

"All right," she called back, "tomorrow." And as he stood watching her disappear he thought how wonderful it must be to have a mother like that and a dog like Frisky. Oh, Jamie was really such a lucky boy, he thought. Then he heard Miss Julie's sharp voice calling him.

"Teddy, Oh-yoo-hoo! Teddy come here this instant. Miss Julie's been looking everywhere for you. You are a naughty boy and Miss Julie's angry with you."

He turned laughing and ran toward her, and suddenly, running as fast as he could, he felt like a young sapling bending in the wind.

That night, after he had finished his supper and had had his bath, he set to work to gather up all his comic magazines. They were stuffed helter-skelter in his closet, cedar box, and bookshelf. Except for the brightly covered magazines, his bookshelf was a picture in solemn literature—The Child's Book of Knowledge, The Child's Garden of Verse, and Books Every Child Should Know.

He managed to gather thirty fairly recent issues together before his mother and father came to say good night. His mother was dressed in a long flowery evening gown and she had flowers and perfume in her hair. He loved the smell of gardenias, so pungently sweet. His father was in his tuxedo and carried his tall silk hat.

"What are all these magazines for?" his mother asked him.

"For a friend," said Teddy, hoping she wouldn't ask any more. It would not be quite as secretive, quite as exciting, if his mother knew about it.

"Come on, Ellen," his father said impatiently. "The curtain goes up at eight-thirty, and I'm tired of getting to shows right in the middle."

"Good night, darling!"

"Good night, Son."

He threw them a kiss as they closed the door behind them. Then, quickly, he turned back to his magazines. He got the sheet of wrapping paper his new suit had come in, and awkwardly wrapped them in it. It made a big package. He tied it up with thick, coarse string. Then he stepped back and looked at it. Something was wrong, he thought. It wasn't fancy enough; it didn't look like a gift.

He went to his desk, delved around inside and came up with a box of crayons. With alternating red and green letters, he printed, "THIS IS," then shifted to blue and red, "FOR JAMIE-FROM TEDDY." Satisfied, he put the package away before Miss Julie came in to turn off his light and open the window. The next morning before they started to the park, he got out his Red Sky Chief Wagon, put his package in and covered it with playthings.

When they reached the park, Teddy could tell it was going to be an easy matter to get away from Miss Julie. She had on her best dress. She was all excited and had on more lipstick than usual. Teddy knew that she was expecting to meet Officer O'Flaherty in the park. Officer O'Flaherty was Miss Julie's fiancée, at least as far as Miss Julie was concerned. "Now, Teddy, you just run on and have a good time, but mind now, Miss Julie will meet you at the playground."

He ran as quickly as he could toward the reservoir. He couldn't take any short cuts with the wagon; it bumped along behind him. He saw Frisky and the woman sitting on the bench. "Well, here on time, I see," she laughed when she saw him.

He rolled the wagon up beside the bench, threw off his playthings and proudly exhibited his big parcel of magazines. "Oh," she cried, "what a big package! Why, Jamie will never finish reading all these. He will love them, Teddy. Come here; let me kiss you." He blushed slightly as she kissed him on his cheek. "You're a sweet child," she said softly as she stood up and gathered her coat about her. "We had to take Jamie to the hospital last night."

"Won't he be able to read the comics?" Teddy asked anxiously. "Yes," she smiled, "yes, of course-it'll keep him busy. The only thing I'm worrying about is whether I'll be able to carry them all." She lifted the big package and sighed wearily. Frisky jumped around, pulling at the leash and almost making her drop them. "Stop that, Frisky," Teddy cried.

"Well, thanks again, Teddy. I can't stay today." She waved her hand and started down the path. Frisky pulled back toward Teddy. "Will you be here tomorrow?" Teddy called. "I don't know-maybe," she called back; then she turned a bend and disappeared. He wanted to run after her, to go with her to the hospital and see Jamie, and to play with Frisky and have the woman kiss him on the cheek again and tell him that he was a sweet child. Instead he went to the playground where he met Miss Julie and went home.

The next day he came to the park and went directly to the bench, but there was no one there. He waited for an hour and a half, and then, with a sudden sick knowledge, he knew that she wasn't coming-that she would never be back and that he would never see her again, nor Frisky. He wanted to cry, but he wouldn't let himself.

The next day was Sunday and he couldn't go to the park. In the morning he went to church. Then his grandmother came to visit, and she mooned over him all afternoon.

"If you ask me, Ellen, that child's sick! He's been acting strange all afternoon. Why, I gave him money to go get a soda and he said he didn't want one. He said he wanted a dog, a wire haired dog that he could call Frisky. Now if that isn't the strangest thing!"

And that night his father tried to pry it out of him.

"Son, aren't you feeling well? You can tell me if there's anything wrong?"

Teddy pursed his small mouth. "Well, Papa, it's a dog, a little dog called Frisky—a sick boy's mother—Jamie—he—"

His mother came to the door. "Bill, if we're going to the Abbotts' you'd better hurry. They expect us for cocktails at seven."

His father got up, looked at his watch and said, "I'll see you about this some other time, Son." Then he went out, and shortly afterward Teddy heard the apartment door slam.

He was lying stretched out across his bed crying when Miss Julie came in. She was very excited and her face was all flushed. She took him in her arms, and patted his head. It was the first time he had ever known her to comfort anyone. For a moment he almost liked her.

"Guess what, Teddy! Oh you just never will guess! Guess what?"

He looked up and stopped crying. "I don't want to guess. I don't feel like guessing. My mother and father don't love me—no one loves me—leastwise no one you know."

Miss Julie scoffed.

"Oh what a little ninnie you are, Teddy. Silly boy—oh well, I suppose we all go through this age."

Miss Julie and her ages!

"But you haven't guessed yet. Oh, well, I'll tell you. Mr. O'Flaherty has asked me to marry him!" Her face was wreathed in smile.

"Are you going to?" he asked.

She held out her hand and exhibited a silver ring with an amethyst stone, which Teddy took for an engagement ring.

Then she got up and hurried into her room. She did not come in to put him to bed that night nor to open the window.

The next morning he awoke very early. No one was up, not even Miss Julie, and no sound came from his parents' bed room, nor the maid's. Cautiously and quietly he dressed. Then he stole out of the apartment and down the long corridor toward the stairs. He did not dare ring for the elevator.

In the park it was chilly but beautiful. There was no one there except one man asleep on a bench. He was all huddled up and looked so cold and hungry and ugly that Teddy raced past him without daring to look a second time.

He went to the reservoir and sat down on the same old bench. He made up his mind he was going to sit there until Frisky and Jamie's mother came, even if it was all day.

The water was beautiful. He imagined it was some great ocean and he was sailing a ship across it, while musicians played in the background, just like at the movies.

He had been sitting a long while before he saw the first horseback rider. He knew it must be getting late if the riders were coming out. After that first one, they came thick and fast. He counted them as they passed. He had seen many celebrities riding in the park, but without Miss Julie to identify them he could not tell them from ordinary people.

Then the carriages and nurses began to arrive. It was nearly ten o'clock. The sun had risen full and bright in the sky. In the drowsy warmth of its rays, he felt himself falling asleep. Suddenly he heard a yelp and a bark. A little wire haired terrier jumped up on the bench beside him.

"Frisky-Frisky—" he cried. "It's you!"

A tall thin man was attached to the other end of the leash. Teddy gazed up at him bewilderedly.

"What's your name, Son?" the stranger asked.

"Teddy," he answered in a small, frightened voice.

The man handed him an envelope. "Then I guess this is for you."

Teddy tore it open anxiously. It was written in a long, graceful hand. He had a hard time reading it.

Dear Teddy,

Frisky is for you. Jamie would have wanted you to have him.

It was unsigned. Teddy stared at it for a long time until he couldn't see it anymore. He grasped the dog to him and squeezed him as hard as he could. He could explain to Mama and Papa somehow.

Then he remembered the man. He looked up. He looked all around him but the man had gone and all he could see was the pathway and the trees and the grass and the reservoir gleaming in the morning sun.

The End