

W I L L I A M S A R O Y A N

The Human Comedy

I L L U S T R A T E D B Y D O N F R E E M A N



CLEVELAND AND NEW YORK

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THE HUMAN COMEDY

By William Saroyan

Novel

THE HUMAN COMEDY

Stories

MY NAME IS ARAM

SAROYAN'S FABLES

PEACE, IT'S WONDERFUL

THE TROUBLE WITH TIGERS

LOVE, HERE IS MY HAT

LITTLE CHILDREN

THREE TIMES THREE

INHALE AND EXHALE

THE DARING YOUNG MAN ON THE FLYING TRAPEZE

Plays

RAZZLE-DAZZLE

THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

Sweeney in the Trees

Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning

THREE PLAYS

My Heart's in the Highlands •

The Time of Your Life •

Love's Old Sweet Song
•

This Story is for
TAKOOHI SAROYAN

I have taken all this time to write a story especially for you because I have wanted it to be an especially good story, the very best I might ever be able to write, and now at last, a little pressed for time, I have tried. I might have waited longer still, but as there is no telling what's next or what skill or inclination will be left after everything else, I have hurried a little and taken a chance on my present skill and inclination. Soon, I hope, someone wonderful will translate the story into Armenian, so that it will be in print you know well. In translation the story may read better than it does in English, and, as you have done before, maybe you will want to read some of it to me, even though I wrote the stuff in the first place. If so, I promise to listen, and to marvel at the beauty of our language, so little known by others and so much less appreciated by anyone than by you. As you cannot read and enjoy English as well as you read and enjoy Armenian, and as I cannot read or write Armenian at all, we can only hope for a good translator. One way or another, though, this story is for you: I hope you like it. I have written it as simply as possible, with that blending of the severe and the light-hearted which is especially yours, and our family's. The story is not enough, I know, but what of that? It will surely seem enough to you, since your son wrote it and meant so well.

W. S.



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CHAPTER 1

ULYSSES

The little boy named Ulysses Macauley one day stood over the new gopher hole in the backyard of his house on Santa Clara Avenue in Ithaca, California. The gopher of this hole pushed up fresh moist dirt and peeked out at the boy, who was certainly a stranger but perhaps not an enemy. Before this miracle had been fully enjoyed by the boy, one of the birds of Ithaca flew into the old walnut tree in the backyard and after settling itself on a branch broke into rapture, moving the boy's fascination from the earth to the tree. Next, best of all, a freight train puffed and roared far away. The boy listened,

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and felt the earth beneath him tremble with the moving of the train. Then he broke into running, moving (it seemed to him) swifter than any life in the world.

When he reached the crossing he was just in time to see the passing of the whole train, from locomotive to caboose. He waved to the engineer, but the engineer did not wave back to him. He waved to five others who were with the train, but not one of them waved back. They might have done so, but they didn't. At last a Negro appeared leaning over the side of a gondola. Above the clatter of the train, Ulysses heard the man singing:

“Weep no more, my lady, O weep no more today
We will sing one song for the old Kentucky home
For the old Kentucky home far away”

Ulysses waved to the Negro too, and then a wondrous and unexpected thing happened. *This* man, black and different from all the others, waved back to Ulysses, shouting: “Going homè, boy—going back where I belong!”

The small boy and the Negro waved to one another until the train was almost out of sight.

Then Ulysses looked around. There it was, all around him, funny and lonely—the world of his life. The strange, weed-infested, junky, wonderful, senseless yet beautiful world. Walking down the track came an old man with a rolled bundle on his back. Ulysses waved to this man too, but the man

Ulysses

was too old and too tired to be pleased with a small boy's friendliness. The old man glanced at Ulysses as if both he and the boy were already dead.

The little boy turned slowly and started for home. As he moved, he still listened to the passing of the train, the singing of the Negro, and the joyous words: "Going home, boy—going back where I belong!" He stopped to think of all this, loitering beside a china-ball tree and kicking at the yellow, smelly, fallen fruit of it. After a moment he smiled the smile of the Macauley people—the gentle, wise, secret smile which said *Yes* to all things.

When he turned the corner and saw the Macauley house, Ulysses began to skip, kicking up a heel. He tripped and fell because of this merriment, but got to his feet and went on.

His mother was in the yard, throwing feed to the chickens. She watched the boy trip and fall and get up and skip again. He came quickly and quietly and stood beside her, then went to the hen nest to look for eggs. He found one. He looked at it a moment, picked it up, brought it to his mother and very carefully handed it to her, by which he meant what no man can guess and no child can remember to tell.



CHAPTER 2

HOMER

His brother Homer sat on the seat of a second-hand bicycle which struggled bravely with the dirt of a country road. Homer Macauley wore a telegraph messenger's coat which was far too big and a cap which was not quite big enough. The sun was going down in a somnolence of evening peace deeply cherished by the people of Ithaca. All about the messenger orchards and vineyards rested in the old, old earth of California. Even though he was moving along swiftly, Homer was not missing any of the charm of the region. Look at that! he kept saying to himself of earth and tree, sun and grass and cloud.

Homer

Look at that, will you? He began to make decorations with the movements of his bike and, to accompany these ornaments of movement, he burst out with a shouting of music—simple, lyrical and ridiculous. The theme of this opera was taken over in his mind by the strings of an orchestra, then supplemented by the harp of his mother and the piano of his sister Bess. And finally, to bring the whole family together, an accordion came into the group, saying the music with a smiling and somber sweetness, as Homer remembered his brother Marcus.

Homer's music fled before the hurrying clatter of three incredible objects moving across the sky. The messenger looked up at these objects, and promptly rode into a small dry ditch. Airplanes, Homer said to himself. A farmer's dog came swiftly and with great importance, barking like a man with a message. Homer ignored the message, turning only once to spoof the animal by saying "Arp, Arp!" He seated himself on the bicycle again and rode on.

When he reached the beginning of the residential district of the city, he passed a sign without reading it:

ITHACA, CALIFORNIA

EAST, WEST—HOME IS BEST

WELCOME, STRANGER

He stopped at the next corner to behold a long line of Army trucks full of soldiers roll by. He

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saluted the men, just as his brother Ulysses had waved to the engineer and the hoboes. A great many soldiers returned the messenger's salute. Why not? What did they know about anything?