

CHAPTER TWENTY

When it was all over — all but the long healing — Oliver and Thea brought Chris home. Only when the child was so sick did Thea realize the depth of love Oliver had for his child. Before, he played with him as any father would. But while he was sick Oliver never left the hospital. He received telephone calls from the newspaper but mainly he sat by Chris, holding his hand, talking to him, telling him old stories about war and victory — and loss. Thea, too, stayed in the sick room, but it was Oliver the boy seemed to prefer. And Thea listened to the stories as well, caught up in them as if she, too, were a child. Even the nurses and doctors remarked on Oliver's unusually loving care.

Thea's endless worry for her husband and for her child began to show in her physical appearance. The long pier mirror in her bedroom no longer reflected the slender young woman she had first seen in that mirror. That was before she moved the

mirror from the Whitfield house into this room. There, at her mother-in-law's house, she appeared girlish, albeit frightened. Now she could laugh at the frightened creature she had been.

The lost frightened-deer she once displayed had now given way to confidence, an almost matronly confidence. Yet, she was still slender, not as slender as she once was, and there were no notable wrinkles or other signs of ageing — perhaps a slight expansion at her waist and her face was not as marked by structure as it once was. She still had the high cheekbones and defined jaw. But, like it or not, there was a slight puffiness about her face. Only slight, but it was there, the eyelids and cheeks.

She had begun to use a little makeup, something she swore she would never do. In Norway married women never made themselves up like American women did, even very old women with their roughed faces and eye shadows. Rouge was still out of the question for Thea, but a little powder seemed to improve her face. That and a little lipstick helped the winter pallor. In the summer she still wore no makeup. Her tanned face and body seemed to bring back youth.

Looking now at her face she laughed aloud. After all, she wasn't about to die. She was only thirty. She placed a finger over the puffy eyelids. She would have to start dieting, she said to herself. But the people here served such heavy fare and she was always taught to eat everything she was served. Otherwise, it was unseemly, rude.

She taught Velvet to serve minimal meals without greases and sugars. She despised turnip greens, the great dish of the South. It took all she had to even look at the vegetable when it was cooking. Great hunks of fat-back were thrown in the pot to

make the dish more palatable somehow. Oliver was never served the dish in this house, much to his wonderment. For the life of her she could not understand how her refined mother-in-law Viola had taken to such dishes. She never had them in Maryland, she told Thea.

She turned from the mirror thinking she was being selfish and silly really, thinking of her own looks this way. All her concentration should be on Oliver and little Chris. She heard the children outside. Chris and the gardener's son were playing again — always at the Chinaberry tree. She thought she should check on Chris. Yesterday he had played too much and was visibly tired for so young a child.

Thea stood at a distance watching the two boys. "Chris," she called out. "Be careful. Remember, you've been sick."

"Hey, Miz Whitfield," called the other boy. He was an appealing child with a face full of freckles and blond hair, almost as light as Chris' hair.

"Did you climb that far?" asked Thea, forcing herself to be intensely interested in the antics of the young.

"I can go to the whole top."

Chris as usual stared up at him in admiration, glasses flashing.

Thea walked slowly to the tree. Surely this bit of boys' play couldn't hurt the child. The doctor's words came back to her like the deep hurt it was: "it's his heart. . ."

"Be careful, boys," Thea said and walked back to the house. But as she walked almost without warning a familiar sickness seemed to flow through her body and she was thinking Minnesota, Astrid and train rides. It was mixed together, the sickening

nausea, all confused with her mother and time seemingly flowing backward.

Once inside she climbed the steps and then ran to her bathroom and vomited, heaving as if all the contents of her body would leave her. She felt faint and then alarmed as she made her way back to her bed.

Velvet was dusting with a red and green plumed duster. She stared at Thea, the duster held high, her mouth in deep concentration, open.

"You can go, Velvet. I feel ill."

"You be sick?" Velvet asked, not moving.

Thea lifted her head.

"You been studying about Mr. Oliver and Chris again. They gone be all right."

Thea heard the gentle caring in her voice.

Gradually Thea sat up. "I believe, Velvet...I must be---pregnant. This is the way I did with little Chris — while I was carrying him."

Velvet pressed her hands together, still holding on to her plumes. "We gone have us another Chris---somebody new?"

"I don't know, but I was sick the entire time with Chris."

"Theys something they gives you for that now."

"Really?"

"Yes'm. My auntee she gets that carryin babies and they gives her something and she be just as cheer-ful."

The next morning Thea sat in the library. She had said nothing to Oliver last

night and she dreaded telling him, adding to his already obsessive worries. But there was no doubt in her own mind — the tenderness of her breasts and the slight weight gain that she previously thought was ageing. Her own thoughts were mixed. Little Chris, she knew, needed a brother or sister. Later in life he would have need of someone---should he live into middle age. Never, even in her thoughts, did she believe what the doctor said: that he might live only into his teens. That thought she dismissed, willed it away. Actually, if this was to be, pregnancy, she hoped for a girl child. But the male gene was powerful in the Whitfield family, weak in her own.

Later that morning she dressed and drove to Dr. Butler's office. It all brought back the Minnesota doctor's waiting room again and her feelings of despair and shame. Now, though, this waiting room was cheerful with happy pictures hung here and there. And among the patients was the sound of Southerners' mannerly drawl in their slow nonchalance toward healing.

She didn't have to wait long in the room and after a half-hour's time she heard the verdict:

"Miz Whitfield, you and Oliver gone have an addition!" His voice rose at the happy word "addition," as if they had been denied such and were now successful. The red face before her literally beamed, accentuating the white hair. Thea tried to meet this happy announcement, smile for smile, joy for joy.

"These are such hard times," she said instead. And, indeed, these were her first thoughts as she saw Oliver's worried image before her.

"All times are hard," said the doctor. "Folks been bringing me beans and beets

and I don't know what all to pay bills."

"We may have to do the same," said Thea. "Oliver worries so."

"Oliver's worried all his life," said the doctor, his slender face comically frowning as if Oliver's worries were nothing to take seriously. "He's just like his Daddy — worrying over everything and nothing. Known Bill Whitfield all my life."

"When?" Thea asked.

"When?"

"The baby. How long?"

"As we discussed. You missed yo period almost two months. February. We ought to be seeing something round October. Nice and cool." He looked at Thea over his glasses to make sure she caught his humor. She would have to carry this baby through all the hot summer months. He knew she was not accustomed to the heat. Joke. She left.

But she waited until later that night to tell Oliver the news. After dinner he went back to his office for an hour or so and when he returned she told him. She watched his reactions. He was seated in the red leather chair alongside the left bookcases. He was reading the Atlanta Journal and as he lowered the newspaper to catch her words his reading glasses began to reflect the light from the lamp. He said nothing.

"Uh huh," Thea said. "I saw Dr. Butler this morning."

"Jimmy?" He was speaking of the doctor.

She nodded still looking at the flashing glasses. "I guess I'm sorry."

He rose from the chair, then came toward her, and removing his glasses put his

arms around her. "There's never a perfect time. Either to die or to be born." He held her from him. "When?"

She told him, looking into his eyes. He was smiling but still frowning. "With all your worries."

He was looking at the fire in the fireplace behind her. "Chris needs a companion," he mumbled.

"What if it's a girl?"

He said nothing but continued looking at the burning coal. Then all at once his mood appeared to lighten. "How are you?" His energy seemed to return. "Are you all right? What did Jimmy say?"

"He said it was cool in October. For the birthing.":

"Is that all?"

Thea nodded and they both laughed — for the first time, it seemed to Thea, in months.

The next day she wrote two letters: one to Oslo (no longer Kristiania) and the other to China. The letter to Martha, her sister, was longer than the one to Astrid. To the latter she wrote only:

Dear Mother:

I continue to write to you even though you persist in your silence.

Oliver and I are to have another child, probably next October. We both are happy with this event. Chris needs a brother or sister. His health remains precarious, but he laughs and plays with other children as if nothing were particularly wrong. We watch him carefully. But, oh Mother, I worry so. Do, won't you, write to me?

Oliver is so concerned over the Depression here in America. He fears he may lose the newspaper and so we try to live as carefully as we can.

Has the sixth snow come to Norway yet? I miss it and you.

Love always,

Thea.

In her letter to Martha, Thea poured out her heart: she couldn't imagine, she wrote again, treating a child of hers the way Astrid was treating her. She asked about Astrid's health, if the signs of melancholia had overtaken her as they had Aunt Tanja, her sister. ". . . I can't help but wonder. Do write me what you know. I long for letters, though I am generally in harmony with the life here."

She paused in her writing. She wanted to tell Martha about Bert since she knew and admired him so. But she dared not put that in writing. Actually, she found herself thinking more and more about Bert, once dreaming about him: they were walking home from the tennis courts, carrying their rackets, laughing and talking, and Bert began to recite tennis scores — each one ending in "love." And then his face became sober and the skies became crimson with sunset: "Love, my dear. So much love." And she awakened, staring at the darkness. In the room next to hers she heard Oliver typing. He was still awake, writing an editorial, and she was dreaming of his brother. She turned over. She mustn't think of any of that again. She wished Bert had just left, never said anything.

Write me, Martha. I do need family. My own. Sarah has just had a boy-child, Arthur. She is so happy and all her family are here. I long for family and Norway as it used to be with all of us there and Father so full of life and joy. We will never have that time again. Will we? There is a hymn we

sing in the church here.

*. . . And time like an ever-flowing stream
bears all our sons away. . .*

We go to church every Sunday. Everyone dresses up for it.

She held her pen up. She was thinking of Astrid. Was her mother mad? What was her secret? When the family was together everyone seemed to be happy. Yet Astrid would suddenly break into tears for no reason Thea could possibly see. But she, Thea, was so young then. Now, she found herself sometimes out of temper with many things here. Someone might wonder why she herself would suddenly break into tears. "For no reason whatsoever." And, indeed, she knew no reason. I must keep my sanity, she said to herself. I must. For Oliver's sake, for Chris' sake and for the unknown.

Oliver typed away in the adjoining room. The sound brought sleep and a beautiful new day. Still, the question remained. What is to become of us?