

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Sunday night dinner with the Eubanks became a regular occurrence. Once a week at the Eubanks and the next at Thea and Oliver's. It was Mrs. Eubanks' idea. At table one night she raised her wine glass: "A toast to making our little dinners a habit." She gave a small laugh at the word "habit," her own cleverness.

This was not to Thea's particular liking. She never wanted her life to be regulated. But as Oliver said, "No one ever crosses the Eubanks."

"I don't believe you said that," Thea said. "It isn't like you."

"My sarcasm has again failed to reach you, my dear."

Thea said nothing. She didn't want to complain, but she was not feeling well these days. She was so large and clumsy and only to Velvet did she admit that she would be relieved when the child was finally delivered. Silently, and for a reason she could not explain, she was embarrassed to appear so ugly in front of the ever-quixotic

Jackson Eubanks. He still remained a mystery. Sometimes he would miss the Sunday dinners and three weeks later or so he would appear. What he did and where he went was never questioned. By anyone. Later in the Spring one day he arrived unannounced at Thea's house. He was carrying six full-blooming red geraniums. He deposited them on the front entrance.

"Saw these on the highway. Thought of you," was all he said and immediately was on his way.

Thea was in the far garden talking to Amos, the black gardener and a cousin of Velvet's. She was becoming impatient with the man because he was so slow and couldn't or wouldn't do the weeding necessary for the full-blown Spring. She was feeling hot and breathless. Then, suddenly there was Jackson Eubanks and the geraniums reminding her of Europe. She said just that.

"Yes. The Europeans. They admire geraniums." He was studying Amos and his various non-actions. "Well, must be off. Just thought you might enjoy these."

"How kind," said Thea. "So thoughtful. They are lovely."

He waved good-bye.

Thea no longer felt like dealing with the yard man. "Just plant these on the front, Amos. I'm so tired."

"Yes'm." And his red-eyed gaze studied Thea as if he were saying: you're about to deliver. And, alarmingly, Thea thought so herself. Every breath was an effort. She made her way into the house. "Velvet," she started to say, but then the first pain, though mild, made its entrance. She felt of her stomach. It was the beginning.

"You wants me to call Mr. Oliver?" Velvet asked, standing her distance from Thea and wringing both hands.

The woman's obvious nervousness oddly brought calm to Thea. "Not just now. There's time."

"You goin to the horspital?"

"Uh huh." Thea sat at her dresser and picked up her hand mirror. Her face was puffy and marked with brown splotches she had never noticed before. But it had been a while since she had given herself so close an examination. Actually, she avoided mirrors, hating to see herself in this half-grotesque condition. She never understood why men, especially, said women were more beautiful when they were pregnant. It was a lie. No woman was beautiful carrying a child. And the men knew it. Perhaps it was their way of erasing guilt. Oliver never said such a thing. He just kept his distance staying later and later in the library each night reading The New York Times and The Herald Tribune---all after carefully examining the Atlanta Journal and other periodicals. Thea thought she understood and even welcomed his absence. As a rule he came to her bedroom to chat or say good-night, knowing that she, too, read long into the night. But her usual sleeplessness vanished with pregnancy.

By noon the pains became harder and Thea called to Velvet:

"I think maybe you'd better call now."

"You wants me to call Mr. Oliver?"

"Yes."

"Lawd. Lawd. Ain't one thing it's another," muttered Velvet to herself. Then: "Mr.

Oliver, you best come on home. Miss Thea she 'bout to give buth."

"No. No, Velvet." Thea took the phone from Velvet. "I'm just having pains closer now. That's all."

"Be right there," Oliver said and banged the phone down.

Velvet looked at Thea as if she were stricken.

"I'm sorry, Velvet. But there'll be a long while yet."

"I believe I'll have mine at home where my Mama is."

"You're not---!"

Velvet laughed, clapping her hands together and turning from Thea. "No'm. I ain't got no baby yet awhile. No ma'm!"

Thea spied the piece of luggage she packed last week in preparation for this moment. She forgot her bed jacket. She bent to fetch the jacket when she was suddenly seized by a piercing jab. "Oh!" she half-shouted and through the haze she saw Velve't eyes cast downward, standing transfixed. Thea, too, looked downward. Water was soaking the rug, her legs, underwear, all---

They stared at each other, Velvet's mouth wide open. "You done broke yo'water, Miz Thea."

"Quick, Velvet. Take the suitcase. I'll go down and wait for Oliver."

"You aint goin to no horspital looking like that er, is you?"

"I don't care. I don't care about anything."

Oliver arrived within minutes, it seemed to Thea. She walked to the car. Velvet was behind carrying the suitcase. Oliver took the suitcase and placed it in the back of

the car.

Velvet seemed loathe to let go of the case. "Dry buth," she muttered. "She gone have a dry buth."

Thea heard the ominous tones, but concentrated more on the road ahead. They drove in silence and Thea was reminded of the time when they took little Chris to the hospital and how Oliver's face was as sober as it is now---tight lips, the deep frown and his small eyes half-shut as he drove in deep concentration.

"It's going to be all right," Thea said. "It's easier the second time. Everyone says that."

"This is the last," Oliver said, glancing at her. "You won't ever have to go through this again."

Thea didn't answer. She was thinking of Astrid now and how all women should have their mothers present when birth occurred. But Astrid was nowhere. Thea wrote her only last week, telling her that her time was nigh. Perhaps Astrid was thinking of her now. Thea pictured her mother's bedroom. It was night now in Oslo. She saw the plain birch bed, the dresser, the lace curtains and outside the window geraniums, red geraniums everywhere. There was no sadness in the room, or apprehension. Only happiness surrounding a brooding woman.

"Oh," Thea gave a little cry. It was the thought of Astrid, not physical pain that caused the cry.

As the pains grew harder, Thea wished again she was at home. The black mid-

wife and helpers were so much more pleasant than the nurses here. Stern of look and attitude, the main nurse who attended Thea reminded her of the nurse in Minnesota, though she was not as intelligent or as kind. Miss Pate was her name and her gray crinkly hair and white cap adorned a fat pale face that exhibited one very large mole.

"It's good your water did break," she said to Thea after one especially difficult pain. "Sometimes we have to break it ourselves with a needle and the spoilt mamas just holler and carry on."

Thea did not answer. She looked at the other nurse who stayed with her constantly. A younger woman, rather pretty, addressed Thea repeatedly as "hon." ". . . press down now, hon." "I know it hurts, hon. But just try for little Thea's sake. What a pretty name. I never heard that name before. You German, hon? . . ."

There was something nauseatingly sickening in the young woman's voice---so sweet, so ripe. Once, Thea felt like striking the woman. It was so hot in the room and her body and bed were drenched in her own sweat.

"Let's just put some cool water on your face, hon. We're mighty hot, aren't we?" And the wash cloth felt cool as she stroked her face. "I bet this baby gone be the belle of the South. She got a mighty purdy mama."

Again the urge to strike. "Purdy" was the last thing Thea felt. "Oliver," she muttered. "I need my husband."

"They don't 'low that, hon. Hospital don't 'low husbands near the mamas when they burthin."

Thea decided to think of little Chris. How happy he would be with a new brother

or sister. He was the most excited one in the entire house. He was fascinated by the fact that the baby was in "Thea's stomach."

"How kin it get out?" he asked, staring at Thea, his head at a tilt wonderingly.

"He is delivered. By the doctor." Thea saw no reason to hide the facts of nature from a child. In Norway this was taught practically at birth. She herself had never felt a sense of wonder or shame concerning her body or anyone else's body. It was entirely different in this country.

But even her child, her beloved Chris, could not take away the grinding pain. She told herself this was all very natural. It wasn't as if she were experiencing some unknown disease. There were birth pains and that was that. But she was so tired now. It was such a long labor and she had thought this time---and the doctor also informed her---that this birth would not be near the length of the other.

"The doctor? Dr. Albright? I--- I think I need to see the doctor."

The nurse pushed a buzzer at the head of the bed, and Miss Pate arrived without the doctor.

"Now what's all this?" She examined Thea. "I think she's ready for Delivery. Get her ready, nurse." And she vanished.

Thea felt a moment of panic. This was not going well.

"What's wrong?" she asked the nurse.

"Nothin, hon. You're doin just fine."

Just fine, Thea thought. She wanted to see Oliver. Someone. Astrid, Or Martha. She thought of Sarah. Surely Sarah would be with Oliver.

My sister-in-law. Mrs. Whitfield? Is she about the---" But another pain seized her and without knowing she let out a cry, which she tried to stifle with both hands. She had to be brave. She had to be in control. A Viking. A---

The lights above were blinding bright as two doctors worked with her.

"Push. Push."

Thirst. She needed water.

"Push. Fine. You doin just fi---ine."

"When?" she tried to ask.

"Now one big push."

There was partial darkness and flashes of light and--- A baby's crying. And healing. It was over.

They named her Astrid Viola Aaker Whitfield. Both mothers would live on in this perfect specimen of a child — years and years carrying their genes and then again in the child's child. Forever. Until the line wore out and disappeared from the world. Forgotten.

All her life Thea heard of maternal love. As soon as the baby was placed in her arms there would be instant love, or so she was told. This was not so. She felt nothing. Perhaps curiosity. But she felt no overwhelming tenderness toward this infant daughter. It was the same with Chris. The love, of course, came in time. She wondered if it were so with other women.

Nevertheless, she saw at once that the infant she held now would one day be a beautiful girl. It showed in bone structure and the size of the eyes when she first opened them. She would be fair, very fair. And then the words formed in her mind. Albino. And again---Albino? She asked the doctor. No, he said. He was fairly certain of this.

"She's just a healthy little gull."

She was not to be spoiled. Thea decided that as she nursed the baby, watching it greedily suckling nourishment. Beauty sometimes nurtured sorrow. The lives of many beautiful women took uncharted paths. Astrid's life certainly was a marked one. And others she knew in Scandinavia, where beauty reigned so spaciouly. Beauty appeared to bring anguish and grief to the wearer.

Whatever, Oliver was ecstatic, bringing flowers and toys to the hospital room. A girl and a boy now made up this half of the Whitfield family. He hoped the girl would be a poet and Chris a newspaperman. Thea laughed. "What astounding plans. A poet?"

"You said your mother was a poet."

"Oh, not seriously. I want her to marry some lovely man and have lovely children."

"Just like you."

These are precious days, Thea thought. She would remember them as long as she lived.

One day Oliver said, "What do you say about Jackson Eubanks as a godfather? He just came by, bought a beautifully engraved silver cup." He appeared to notice

something in Thea's face. "He's lonely, Thea. Let's be his friend."

"He's so odd," Thea said. Not once had she spoken these words aloud. But she thought them often enough. She wanted to divorce herself as far as she could from the illness of melancholia. She wanted only joy. She thought of Astrid. Only Astrid would be permitted near this child. Suddenly, then, she ached to see her mother. How proud she would be to introduce her to her two grandchildren. Chris, she knew, would immediately seize her heart and the beautiful child now in her arms would fill her whole being with gladness. All suffering would flee.

"Why the tears?" Oliver asked. "Don't you want to see the cup?"

Thea wiped her eyes and smiled. "Yes."

"Jackson said this was a copy of a cup given to the royal family of England. An exact copy."

It was touching, Thea felt, this silent bragging on the present from his friend. Pretense was something Oliver avoided, but when he wanted Thea to accept something he wasn't above gilding the moment. She usually gave in.

The cup was handsome, very plain with the hallmark clearly written on the base of the cup. The name would come later, Oliver explained. Thea held the heavy piece of silver, holding it up, imagining little Viola sipping from the lovely container. Or, later, she would use it for flowers---violets. "How lovely," she said aloud.

In ten days Thea left the hospital with little Astrid and Velvet and Oliver carrying pots filled with plants and flowers and myriads of presents, other cups, blankets, little

sweaters, rattlers, spoons and forks, baby dresses.. It was a joyous time, and when they drove up the driveway toward the house, little Chris came running to the car. Only now was he allowed to see his little sister. The hospital had rules that small children were not allowed in the hospital without special permission — only to see a dying relative. It was a stupid rule, Thea thought, but the nurses said it was so easy for the children to contact viruses or to carry them.

“Be careful, Oliver,” Thea said, watching as Chris nearly ran in front of the car.

Velvet opened the back door. “Come heah, Chris. See your baby sister.”

Chris stood on the gravel driveway, suddenly timid, even afraid as he looked at the baby. Thea folded back the blanket a little so that he could see the baby’s face.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Thea asked.

“Uh huh.”

“Don’t you like yo sister?” Velvet asked.

“Uh huh.” His white eyelashes shone in the sunlight.

“You can teach her to walk and talk,” Thea said. “Won’t that be nice?”

Chris looked away. “Come on inside.” He turned to Thea. “Come on. I wanta show you what I done.”

“Did,” corrected Oliver.

Velvet closed the door.

“I don’t think he likes the baby,” Thea said as they drove to the front door.

“He jealous,” explained Velvet.

“How silly,” Thea said. “How perfectly silly.”

When they got inside the house, Velvet and Thea placed the baby in the crib in a room next to Thea's. It was a small room, formerly a sewing room, which Thea used constantly. But now it was little Astrid's room with pink and white striped wallpaper and children's pictures drawn by the artist who long ago illustrated for Dickens. These were pictures owned by Viola Whitfield and given to Thea.

Chris showed Thea a picture of a train locomotive he traced off a magazine. Thea then spent much time praising the boy's handiwork. She knew now she must spend more time with Chris than with the baby. He was a sensitive youngster and he had missed his mother. Thea saw that immediately.

"I drewed that while you were in the hospital."

"It's so fine. Maybe we can frame it? Do you think?"

"Uh huh. Listen maa-maa, that baby she aint gone be able to play nothin for years and years. Is she? How long fore she'll be real?"

"Real?" Thea asked.

"Uh huh." Chris solemnly stared at Thea.

"She's real now. You mean before she can talk and walk?"

"Uh huh."

"Soon. Babies grow so quickly. Maybe this year."

Chris brightened.

"But we must be sweet while she's a baby. Everything is so new to her."

"Uh huh. Poor thing."

"Not poor thing. No. She's just innocent. You know so much of the world. But

she's just beginning."

"She don't know nothin."

"She doesn't know anything. Chris, you must be careful of your grammar."

He said nothing and after giving the baby a cursory glance he left the room.

Later that day Thea wrote Astrid:

. . . Our little family is growing. I wish you could see the baby. She's so beautiful. She will be a beautiful girl and woman one day. Chris is really quite shy about her. Everyone, the household help and all who see little Viola Astrid, make such a to do over her that I fear for Chris. No one says such things to Chris and he senses this, I think. He is certainly not a handsome child by any means. But he has such winning ways and is so funny and brave. I think the children in school have now taken to him. He had a very hard time in the beginning. But his teacher tells me he is very popular, which is a good thing for a future newspaperman.

I did not have as hard a time with this baby as I did the last time. But I do wish for you and did during my labors. I feel very well now and Oliver is so proud of his family. We only wish the times were better. There is so much suffering in the Southern states. We pray for help. We have been so fortunate with material things. I work with the church and give as much as I can to help the people.

Thea broke off the letter. The baby needed nursing. Three months, the doctor said. She had to nurse for three months. Then the child could be put on a bottle.

Sarah had been such a help. She came over daily, bringing little Arthur Whitfield with her. He was an amusing child, but Sarah was concerned by the fact he too stumbled so much, falling down. Freedonia, who was still in Whitfield House, suggested that the boy could not see, that that was the reason he stumbled so. Sarah

immediately took him to the optometrist, and it was discovered he had only ten percent vision and would have to wear glasses.

“Just like little Chris,” she said and broke into tears.

Thea’s first reaction was furor, as if it were a disgrace to be like Chris. Then she understood, remembering her own sadness when Chris was first told he had to wear glasses.

“It doesn’t take anything away from a child---not in the long run,” she said to Sarah.

“But the glasses look bigger than he is.” Sarah said through her sobs. “It’s the Whitfields. That’s where they get such eyes.”

But Thea reminded her that only Oliver had to wear reading glasses and not all the time for that either. Not yet. Allison did not wear glasses. She said nothing about Bert, whose eyes missed nothing, even the unseen. Just the thought of him as she looked at his little nephew Arthur brought acute pain. Would she ever recover from the loss? How proud she would be to show him her little girl. By now their strain would have disappeared and at times would be normal between them again.