

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The call came early in the evening. Oliver was at home and he and Thea were finishing their coffee as they sat on the back lawn, enjoying the cooler air, which had come after a short rain.

Velvet announced the call:

"You, Mr. Oliver. Telephone."

Oliver groaned. "I wish they'd never invented the thing."

"It's always something," Thea said, half irritated.

"Somebody wants something."

Thea said nothing. Oliver always answered the telephone — at dinner, lunch — even if they had guests. It was the polite thing to do, he explained.

The fireflies were just beginning to rise from the ground. Soon the entire lawn would be alight with them. Evening here was Thea's favorite time of day, especially in

summer when dusk brought the fireflies and then the evening star, the same star that shone over Norway, she always thought, but never said.

Thea's thoughts rested on Chris. She missed him and wondered how he was getting along on his "over-night" hike. He had built up such an image of what it would be like that she feared he might be disappointed. He liked most of the young boys who were all in his confirmation class. The young man who taught the class was good with children. And the house in the country was lovely, offering everything a young boy would like: a lake, a barn filled with hay, wooded trails, all surrounded by hillsides.

All at once the garden was filled with the blinking lights of the fireflies. Where did they come from? And where did they go when true darkness arrived? She must remember to ask Oliver about this. But where was he? Surely he didn't go back to the office. Some crisis. It seemed there was always a crisis nowadays. Europe and Hitler were coming closer and the activities at the nearby army camp were suddenly busy with life and young men in uniform. ^{page 40} The Forty-second Division from New York had arrived only a few weeks ago and Oliver and she were amused by the letters that were written to the Chamber of Commerce: Could they possibly rent a plantation? Was there running water in Georgia? Would their children be safe? Were there schools? The absolute ignorance of the insular New Yorkers amazed Thea. Even she, a foreigner, knew better than they. But their arrival helped the town and county economically as well as socially, bringing newer viewpoints to the county. Most of the younger townspeople thought little now of the War Between the States and graciously welcomed the young men. Or so it appeared to Thea. She had never been able, successfully, to

become a Southerner, to think as they did, try as she might. But where was Oliver? She rose from her chair and leaving her cup and saucer on the chair went to the house. It wasn't like Oliver to leave without saying something.

When she entered the hall she saw Velvet, her hands wringing, and deep moans; "Lawd. Lawd. Lawdy mercy." And Oliver was holding on to a chair, his head lowered.

"Oliver," Thea half whispered. She went to him and he remained as he was.

"Look at me," Thea shouted then.

He glanced back at her, his face scarlet and streaked with tears.

"He dead," Velvet muttered. "Yes'm. Miss Thea. He dead."

"Who?" And then she saw an image of young Chris. He was furiously packing.

"Nooooo."

"Yes'm." Velvet was shaking her head.

Oliver then lifted his head and went to Thea. "His heart just stopped. Just stopped." He buried his face in her hair.

"No. No." She felt herself falling. It was as if she fell a great distance and there was only darkness and voices excited and alive, faraway.

When she awoke she scarcely made out the faces of Oliver and Bill, her doctor and Dr. Laird, their new rector at the church. All of them were staring at her as if she were a mystery needed to be explained.

"Oliver," she tried to say. "Chris."

"She needs a sedative," said Bill. He was holding a needle. There was darkness again.

And so, as Thea said later, the house died. Little Chris was her life and there was only the slow moving of time. The sun and the moon and in between nothing. Chris had died, leaving her with odd fears and utter loss.

The newspaper gave only sketchy details. ". . . The child, along with other campers, was climbing a hill, where the group were to pitch tents and sleep through the night. It was there that young Whitfield, who had suffered from a heart condition throughout his life, succumbed. The coroner. . . ."

Thea never read any further. In the daze that followed she remembered what seemed to her hundreds of people coming to the house, both adults and children. Afterward there was a funeral and burial where his small grave appeared next to Bert's. She held on to Trila's small hand. ^{the child} ~~She~~ looked only shy and curious. There were no tears. Later, Thea wondered why. She only knew her own loss was greater than tears. There was only enormous pain in her breast and throat and the fatigue that lasted and lasted. She was completely and absolutely changed.

She was reminded over and over that Trila needed her attention. Intellectually she knew it was so. But the will was not there. Over and over she went over Chris's life, even the days in the Minnesota town when she was so afraid someone would discover her pregnancy. In her mind she saw the Lutheran doctor and nurse, so firm in their unspoken disapproval. And then she saw Chris climbing the chinaberry tree in the back

garden, so proud of himself, so eager. And at last the tears came. They came almost hourly in the months that followed. She took solitary walks and thoughts of suicide entered her imagining.

Oliver suggested psychiatry. But she shunned the notion, remembering her background, which was to have strength in face of pain: “. . . Bear all things. Suffer all things.” Almost stoically she removed Chris’s clothes and books from his room, giving them all to Velvet, whose nephew was the same age as Chris.

“He don’t mind wearing dead folks’ clothes,” Velvet said, revealing her own fear, of course, which Thea merely dismissed. Velvet was a comfort in so many other ways. She continuously reminded Thea that Trila should see no tears, that the child was beginning to talk and was always asking where “Kiss” was. Velvet told the child that Chris had gone on a trip. “A long, long, trip.” Which appeared to satisfy the child. She never asked about him again.

Thea wondered at her own lack of interest in the child. Was it possible she didn’t love her little daughter? Could it be? Her golden child? She could not answer. And there was Oliver, also. Sometimes she thought he was trying to blame her for Chris’s death. She shouldn’t have let him go on the over-night trip, he said one night.

“We,” she said. “We shouldn’t have let him go.”

“It was your idea,” he volunteered.

And she burst into tears, anger now replacing grief. For a moment she thought she despised her husband, who she knew was suffering as much as she. But Oliver had his work to fall back on. She had nothing, she felt now. Once she tried to write her

mother. But she could not. Her throat closed and the tears fell in splotches on the paper. She could not bring herself to write the word “dead.”

The rector at the church, who readily came to call, since neither Oliver nor she could bring themselves to go to church, wanting to hide their grief in private, tried to give answers:

“We miss the ones we do the most for,” he said one afternoon.

Perhaps it was true. She had done for Chris, in her heart. She suffered for him, was joyous for him, in its way lived his life. In the last year he was finally coming to terms with his difference from other children. And they, in turn, accepted him for the most part. Still, she could not stand rudeness, those who stared at the child in the grocery store or pointed him out in crowds. All of it angered Thea more than it did the child.

But what did it matter? He was dead. And she said the word “dead” — never “gone” or “passed” or whatever the townspeople called death. In the late afternoon she watched the sun set and she wondered if Chris, too, were seeing it. Did one actually live after death? Would she see him again? Would she see her father? She longed for belief. But her mortality hindered the idea of miracles. At night she dreamed of her son. In dreams she was always laughing or deadly serious, wondering. Then she would awake. And the day ahead was so long.

“You’ve got to think of Trila,” Oliver said. “She needs you.”

It was then he told her that he had written Martha and her mother about Chris.

“You did what?” She stared at him in disbelief. “That was for me to do. You don’t

even know them.”

“They had to know,” Oliver said.

“You’ll never hear from my mother. She hates you.”

Oliver put both hands to his face as if he were rubbing it. “Thea, we’ve got to stop this.”

“What?”

“This constant bickering. It’s no good for anything.”

It was true, she guessed. They were at constant odds, she and Oliver. Strange, she had always thought that tragedy or loss would bring husbands and wives closer in their shared grief. But now, here, she and Oliver seemed to be separate in their sorrow. There was no sharing. “We’re selfish,” she said to herself. But she was too tired now to help anyone else.

She took to staying in bed. She told Velvet that she was “not feeling well.” And she was left alone, sometimes reading, trying to read. She was completely unable to concentrate. The books and newspapers lay beside her and she began to think how she would plant the grave where Chris lay. She decided to order granite from Norway. It was dark and had lovely lights in its patina. It would be simple — entirely different from the lambs and angels and prayer books that loomed so heavily throughout the cemetery. She would plant daffodils, lilies of the valley and nearby a Norwegian pine. In her mind she saw it all blooming. In April, when life returned.

At first Sarah came daily. She thought of things to do without anyone’s telling her. She went about these tasks mostly in silence. Sometimes she would sit with Thea

and they talked constantly of Chris. Others who came seemed to avoid the name, never mentioning him. It was a comfort for Thea to talk to Sarah. But one morning she began to weep, uncontrollably, and Sarah stopped coming. Everyone stopped coming. And when Oliver returned at night the "bickering," as he described their differences, would begin.

Velvet mostly took care of Trila, who daily grew more lovely, but the sight of her brought Chris back more keenly. The two, Chris and Trila, had been so close, always happy and laughing together. She wanted Trila to remember Chris and she constantly showed pictures of him. The child would smile and point her finger to the smiling boy. But then she appeared to become bored with the game and refused to look at the pictures. Therefore, Chris had died again in Thea's mind, lost from his sister forever.

Velvet took to bringing her niece to the house. Freedonia was a year older than Trila, a beautiful child as well, who embraced all of life, laughing and dancing and turning cartwheels — all to the delight of Trila, who in her stumbling young years tried to copy the girl as Chris had his young superior, who taught him how to climb trees, which, inevitably, brought him to his death.

Thea found some forgetfulness in watching Trila and Freedonia play. She sat in one of the garden chairs and stared at the children, seldom saying anything either to the children or to Velvet, who applauded Freedonia's antics with clapping of hands and exclamations of praise: "Youze a sight, Free. Sho can dance!" On and on.

Whatever, the process of watching the children brought some strength to Thea and one morning found herself actually writing a letter to Martha. Heretofore she would

make a start and then place the pen down. But now she saw she had finished almost a whole page.

Oh, Martha, if you had only been here. Oliver is acting so odd. I think he blames me for Chris's death. How could he? I would have died myself for the child. I know how Oliver grieves. He loved his son, too, and maybe blaming me is his way of grieving. I don't know.

I wish you could have known my yong son. He was so eager about everything and had a sensible approach to life. He never complained and was kind to other children. They learned to like him very much. His friends come to call and death is a wondrous thing to them. They are so silent but their little eyes try to understand the enormity of death. I sometimes think children have more wisdom than adults.

Little Trila (named by you) has already forgotten her brother, which makes me even sadder. They were so fond of each other. She is so beautiful. I can see something of Mother in her looks---the expression or something. She's going to be quite tall.

Oh, Martha. My world has died, half of it anyway. I do love what is left: Trila and Oliver. Oliver says he has written you and Mother, also. I wonder if Mother will even write me now. She lost her first child at birth— if you remember. So she must know what it is when a child dies.

I can write no longer. My first letter is to you. Answer me this: How could a loving God do such a thing? Our rector merely says; "God has plans for every person." One day, maybe, I'll know the answer.

Love,
Thea

She stared at her name and then the tears came, flowing tears as she tried to hold them back. All the way to China. Perhaps when Martha receives the letter, she,

Thea, would have found a recovery. Hope. The rector said all Christians have hope. She searched for it. It would not come. Was there retribution? Hers and Oliver's sin? She did not know but wondered.

They received a telegram from Jackson Eubanks. "I am so very sorry" was all it said. What else could he say? He was fond of little Chris, too. But Thea could not bring herself to answer him. She could not bring herself to answer any of the small graces people had so kindly given. Just the thought of thanking these very good people brought the reality of death so whole. Once she overheard Oliver telling someone on the telephone that she, Thea, was "in shock." Was she? She did not think so. The little grave she visited daily was there as were the wild flowers she placed beside the little mound of grass. The grey-black granite from Norway was being inscribed and soon would cover the mound. What would Chris think of it all? She constantly asked herself that. He had so many curious fears.

Lucille Houghton and her mother came for a visit. It was mid-afternoon and Thea was still in bed. Velvet came upstairs and delivered the calling card, one edge of the card turned down to show the visitors had presented the card themselves. Therefore, Thea knew she must get dressed, go down and listen to their pretended sympathies. At least Lucille's was this, she knew. Her mother was still the stronger character.

It always surprised Thea that Lucille never married. There were announcements and then telephone calls to say that the engagement or parties had been canceled. Lucille's status as the village maiden-lady had done something to her looks. Loneliness

and humiliation had indeed made her a kinder person, but her once lovely face was bloated now and tired. Only in her mid-thirties, she was decidedly the matron lady.

Thea noted all this as she sat in the library, the tea tray beside her. Mrs. Houghton and Lucille sat opposite, Lucille dressed in a white blouse and a long, dark skirt with an uneven hem. Mrs. Houghton in contrast was ablaze in pink — pink cotton dress, shoes and hat. Thea always considered it slightly humorous the way the women in the small town dressed so formally. They even wore hats and gloves when they were downtown shopping. Mrs. Houghton also displayed a summer tan which heightened her color. They had just returned from Ponte Vedra, Florida, she was telling Thea.

“I heard the news down there,” she said. “And I wanted to rush home to you. It’s all so saaayad.”

Lucille, pale, said nothing. She had been nowhere. Her traveling days appeared to be over. Thea wondered what she did all day. There were no more friends coming from distant places as there used to be. Indeed, there were few friends anywhere. She still lived in the Houghton house with her ageing parents. Perhaps she helped with the running of the house, giving orders to the same black people Thea had known since first coming here.

“I don’t like the new rector,” announced Mrs. Houghton. “He ought never to have let the child go out to such a place anyway.”

Was she implying something, Thea wondered. Was she trying to say that she, Thea, was responsible, not the rector.

“He didn’t know,” she said. “I must say I do like Henry. He’s been such a help

here.”

“Do you call him ‘Henry’?”

“He asked me to call him that. He’s been so fine to come. Sometimes every day.”

Lucille shifted her position in the chair and remained silent.

“I can’t imagine a child’s dying first,” said Mrs. Houghton, glancing at Lucille, her only “child.”

Suddenly the urge to weep was almost over-powering and Thea, holding her breath, smiled at the two, unable to say anything.

“How is Oliver taking all this?” asked Mrs. Houghton.

Thea merely nodded.

Mrs. Houghton flipped her gloves into her purse, a thinking gesture. “It’s all so saaayad.”

Thea’s eyes filled with tears. She remained seated, glaring first at Mrs. Houghton, then at Lucille. She raised both hands, palms upward, in a helpless gesture. She could not speak. Then the two of them, Mrs. Houghton and Lucille, rushed toward her, almost knocking over the tea table. Thea had not even offered tea. Mrs. Houghton was hugging her and Lucille was kneeling beside her. “Don’t cry,” she heard Mrs. Houghton. Then she was sobbing. Briefly she saw Velvet and beside her, almost afraid, was Trila.

The tears stopped. “Come, Velvet,” she managed. “Let the ladies see Trila.” But the child clung to Velvet. She was afraid of Thea. Thea rose from the chair, went to the child, “Trila, these are dear friends of mine. Come.”

But the child turned and clutched Velvet in fear.

"That yo mamma, Tri," Velvet said.

The humiliation was too much. Thea straightened. She could imagine Lucille and Mrs. Houghton: ". . . and that pretty daughter is terrified of Thea, won't have a thing to do with her. One just wonders what does go on behind closed doors. . . ."

"We must be going," Mrs. Houghton said. She patted Thea on the shoulder. "The young girl is a beauty."

"She's so confused," Thea said. "I think somehow she knows Chris will never come back."

Lucille hugged her.

"Thank you. Both. Please come again. I promise I'll be in better form"

"It's good to cry," Mrs. Houghton said.

"Yes." Thea opened the door, wanting to hurry them out. She must return to her daughter. She had to spend more time with Trila. But she was so tired. All the time. Where her energy went she did not know. She had never felt so tired in all her life.

She forced herself out of bed in the morning and after breakfast she fell back on the bed, blackening out the day, the world. She could hear her Mother:

"Stop that, Thea. You are feeling sorry for yourself. You know better."

And she did, but she had not counted on the fatigue.

The next day Thea gave Velvet the afternoon off. She had made a promise to herself that she would spend more time with Trila. She would force herself, run after the

child, feed her, read the little stories she could only look at now. She would even try to make her laugh.

"You sure you can mind her yourself?" Velvet asked. "She'll getaway fore you knows it. That gull like a rabbit. Gets away fore you knows it." The repetition was bringing her point, Thea observed.

"Don't worry. I'll watch her carefully."

"You still wore out?"

Thea smiled. "I'm better now. You've been so sweet, Velvet. I can't imagine a better friend."

Velvet thought about this. Then:

"Them Houghton women they's mean, aint they?"

"Why would you say such a thing?"

"I heard them talking outside. They says you're broke down."

Energy was returning. The energy of anger. "They said that?"

"Sho did. Uh huh."

Thea looked away. Was she broken? She had never heard the expression before. She wondered if it were original with Velvet and not the Houghtons. Broken? It was apt. Yes, she was broken. "I'll be all right," was all she said.

At mid-afternoon Thea looked in on Trila. She was still asleep, holding fast to her ragged doll, her one favorite toy she took with her everywhere. It was nice, the two of them, alone. Thea sat in the library. She would awaken Trila at the half-hour. In the quiet she listened to the ticking of the hall clock. It was Viola's clock, given to Thea and

Oliver before she died. Trila liked the chimes and would stand before the instrument, her hands behind her back, smiling at the sound of the bells.

And just as the thought of Trila came she heard the chiming of the front door bell. She sighed heavily. Another sympathy caller, she said to herself. And she wanted to be only with Trila. She decided not to answer it. No one would know she was here. But the bell became more insistent. Half in anger she went to the front hall. "I come," she said, trying to smother her anger. She thrust open the door. And ---gray hair, almost white. A suitcase. A woman standing there.

"Thea?"

"Oh!" Thea put her fingers to her mouth. All her emotions seemed to come forth at once. "Mother!"

Astrid's great eyes were filled with tears and her face fairly shone with joy. "Dätter," she said as she had said all the years of Thea's life and was saying it now when it was needed most.

"All this way--- You've come."

To comfort me, Thea thought. And she knew it would be so. Finally and forever.