

Stay as is - have crossed out part as is -
~~NO WHITE~~

Chapter Two

~~But~~ the day and the excitement caught up with her. She was exhausted. Reluctantly ~~she~~ ^{she} went up to her room. Before long she was asleep. But at eleven-thirty she jolted upright in bed. She turned on the bed lamp and looked at her watch. Everything was silent. Gradually the knowledge came ~~that~~ ^{that} what had awakened her were fumes.

The pungent odor of bourbon whisky wafted its way up the winding stairs and ghost-like into the nostrils of Cordelia. Elspeth and that man were downstairs drinking whisky. Or somebody was. Elspeth rarely drank anything. A little wine now and then but never bourbon. Cordelia kept the bourbon in the house for her dinner parties. The men liked it.

She immediately put on her robe and removed the white cap she wore at night to protect her hair. Elspeth knew better than to be wallering around with strangers, drinking and the

Lord knows what. She heard the tinkle of ice against a glass. From the landing upstairs she was completely protected. She could stand in the alcove and through the air vent hear every word spoken in both the drawing room and the library. She had discovered this before her in-laws moved out of the house. They would sit in the library and discuss their future in the former parsonage. They really didn't want to move, but they thought it was their duty to let John Henry rise to a higher station. It was tradition. Their parents and grandparents had done the same years before.

Cordelia had listened to ^{almost} ~~about~~ everything they said. And now she was listening to Elspeth. The two were talking about Ibsen, Henrik Ibsen and the play "Hedda Gabler" they had just seen. Lt. Browne was laughing.

"It was like a comedy---all those accents. Norwegians talking like rednecks."

Elspeth, too, thought it was funny.

A little heat rose to Cordelia's face. Elspeth knew better than to let a northerner sit there and laugh at the very people Elspeth had grown up with and had admired all her life.

"I'm gone take the manuscript and teeah it into a thousand pieces and thow it in the FORD!" Surely, said Lt. Browne, half-laughing, the director must have known the word was fjord---pronounced with a Y. The director, he thought, must have stock in General Motors.

"He doesn't know any better. He's from around here, too," said Elspeth.

"Who was the dame who played Hedda?"

"I don't know," Elspeth said. "I don't have much to do with these people."

How true, thought Cordelia.

Silence. Then: "Why don't you move?" asked Lt. Browne. "Get out of here, see the world! Do something. You're too intelligent for this corny place."

"I don't know. There's Mother and---"

Cordelia stopped listening. She started to go downstairs and tell Elspeth she could go anywhere she wanted. The idea of her telling utter strangers that her mother was keeping her in this house like a prisoner. It was a blasphemy. And saying Ashton was corny. She began to listen again.

"She seems like somebody who can take care of herself."

"She can do that all right."

She certainly can, Cordelia repeated to herself. And she was going to tell Elspeth that this very night. She would also tell her that ^{she} ~~her daughter~~ was not much company anyway, that she was always criticizing. If not actually criticizing then indicating. Cordelia was also thinking how long she had borne the girl's silences, her secretiveness, her scorn. Too long now. She would just tell her that as well.

"Would you like another drink?" Elspeth asked.

The perfect hostess, mocked Cordelia.

"I guess I had better be going. But what a delightful evening. That god^dawful play that I'll never forget, the drink, this house and you."

"I had a wonderful time." Elspeth's deep voice drawled up through the vent.

"We'll do it again. I'll call. We'll be on maneuvers in Louisiana for a couple of weeks."

"Oh?"

"I'll call you when I return. All right?"

There was a silence. And Cordelia wondered what THAT meant. Elspeth had never kissed a man in her entire life. Cordelia wondered if she even knew what to do. She had never discussed sex of any kind with Elspeth. If she had had a different sort of daughter she might have. She wouldn't actually discuss it, of course, but she would give her a book or something. Elspeth just wasn't the kind of person ~~with~~ ^{with} whom one discussed the ways of nature ~~with~~ ^{with}.

The silence was too long. Elspeth might be so starved for affection she might ~~overdo~~ ^{commit} the unspeakable with this energetic New York yankee. The man had a lot of babies in him, Cordelia knew. She could always tell such a thing by regarding a man's rear end. And this man was muscular and firm and walked with an athletic air that said "babies."

Finally, Cordelia heard the heavy front door close. She went to the upstairs banister. Elspeth was standing in front of the door, leaning on it actually and she was smiling so radiantly that the sight almost brought tears to Cordelia's eyes. She had never seen her unhappy daughter with such joy. It was as if the girl were having a religious experience, so total was her glowing face.

Cordelia hurried to her room and waited. Finally she heard Elspeth's slow steps mounting the stairs. Cordelia replaced her white cap on her head and turned on her bed light. Elspeth was going straight to her room. So like her. Elspeth wasn't a thing like she had been. Cordelia remembered when she was a young girl how she would go to her mother's room, have long discussions about the evening, about her own feelings. Cordelia and her mother were very close. Cordelia was used to that. But not Elspeth. Perhaps the girl needed encouragement. Cordelia went to the door.

"Elspeth, is that you?"

Cordelia thought she heard a sigh.

"Is it?"

"Who else?"

"I went to sleep."

"Good-night," came the voice from the hall.

"Don't you want to come in?" Cordelia could hear her voice, almost a whine, a hurt voice.

"What for?"

"Have a little talk."

"Too late."

"I liked your young man," Cordelia said.

Elspeth paused, then turned. "Oh, all right." She entered the room, inspected the ridiculous white hat and yawned.

Cordelia stood there, feeling awkward. "Yes. Come in," she said nonsensically.

Elspeth slouched in the chintz-covered chair facing Cordelia's matching chaise-lounge. She yawned again.

"I hope you offered the Lieutenant something to drink. You know everything in this house is yours as well."

"We had a couple of drinks. Thank you."

"You did?"

Elspeth merely nodded.

"My, my. I never knew you to drink hard whisky."

"I'm thirty years old. I know my limits."

Cordelia wondered just how she knew her limits. She had never had experience with whisky. At least, as far as she knew. Maybe when she stayed in her room that was what she was doing. Drinking. The thought attacked Cordelia ~~frantically.~~ ^{viscerally.} Was Elspeth an alcoholic? Secretly drinking by herself? For years? The television blared out hints daily. It said parents often were the last to know. But the television was mainly talking about drugs. Elspeth was too old for drugs and she was white and comfortably situated besides.

Cordelia then regarded Elspeth with squinted eyes. She did not look like an alcoholic. Her face was not puffy, nor her nose red. Her features were sharply defined and in the soft light where she sat Cordelia could still see the remnants of the glow she witnessed earlier.

"I like Jews," Cordelia said.

Elspeth just stared at her, examining her mother's face.

"I mean there are so many lovely Jewish families in Ashton."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just that," Cordelia snapped. She did not like her train of thought to be interrupted. Besides, she was flattering the girl and her young man also.

Elsbeth glanced at her watch. "I have to go to work in the morning. And you're in here talking about lovely Jewish families. I don't get it. I just don't."

"Well, isn't he Jewish?"

"Who?"

"Browne. Lt. Browne?"

Elsbeth began to laugh. The sound was similar to what she had heard downstairs when the two of them were laughing at the play. "You're too much," Elsbeth managed. And then she regarded her mother soberly. "No. Bob is not Jewish. Not even remotely so. His father is English. ~~From England.~~ And his mother has roots in France."

"Don't they have Jews in France?"

Elsbeth stood. "This is crazy."

"Now don't. Don't go getting all angry."

"It's too silly. Of course, there are Jews in France. They're in England. They're everywhere. Good-night."

"There's nothing wrong with being Jewish. I don't even think about the people here. I mean whether they're Jewish or not."

"Well, good for you."

"There's no point in being sarcastic, Elsbeth. That's not one of your more charming traits."

"Charming or not. I've got to go to work tomorrow. Good-night." She reached for the door knob.

"What does he do then?" Cordelia asked. She wouldn't be able to sleep now. She would never get back to sleep.

"Is he going to stay in the army forever?"

"He's an editor."

"What kind of editor?"

"Books. He edits books, and he thinks I can write."

Cordelia sat up in the chaise longue, ~~her mouth a round~~

"Yes, he actually thinks poor Elspeth can write."

"How does he know?"

"He's read some of my things. Poetry and short stories."

Just like John Henry. She had reared a writer instead of a belle. Elspeth would be an old-maid writer, a southern one. That man wasn't interested in Elspeth herself. He was interested in God knows what.

"Sorry," said Elspeth as if she had looked straight through her mother, read her thoughts.

"For what?"

"I don't know. Good-night." And Elspeth shut the door with more force than necessary.

But the days became weeks and Lt. Browne did not call. Elspeth began her pacing again. Up the hall, down the hall. Upstairs, downstairs. Cordelia watched until finally her

nerves became so taut she escaped to the garden outside. The dogwoods were ablaze with color and the world was green and red and yellow. The autumns were long in Georgia, lasting almost into December, and for now the glory of it all was Cordelia's only solace.

Oddly, Elspeth wanted to talk about Lt. Browne. Robert, as she called him. All this was at the dinner table, which was the only time she and Cordelia had very much to say to each other. Robert, she said, also had ambitions to become a writer. That was the partial reason he was in the army now. He wanted to experience everything, and he was especially taken with the South. A native New Yorker, he said he knew very little about the South except what was written about it. He had no idea there were intelligent, sane people living here. His thoughts of the South, albeit rare, all sprang from reading William Faulkner. He thought everyone in this part of the country was like Faulkner characters.

"How stupid," said Cordelia, who had never read a book by William Faulkner. But somehow she had the knowledge that Mr. Faulkner's characters were all "funny people", rednecks with a few nice people thrown in.

"New Yorkers are very regional," said Elspeth.
"Actually, Robert is quite naive in some respects."

"Where is he?" asked Cordelia. She thought she would just come out with it.

"Still in Louisiana, I guess." And Elspeth looked up at the ceiling.

"For a whole month or more. Is that what they do in the army? Maneuvers. That long?"

Elspeth said she didn't know. "I caught a young boy stealing a book today." She continued eating.

Changing the subject. The girl didn't want to admit the young man had dumped her. The thought caused Cordelia's throat to constrict. She was thinking of the future. What would happen to Elspeth after she was gone? Certainly she couldn't live here. Not by herself. She would have to sell the house and live in some funny place somewhere. Probably in the run-down apartment building. There would be little money. Elspeth's salary at the school was barely enough to support the essentials of life.

She contributed now to the household. Occasionally she bought groceries and she always paid for her dry cleaning. But she had bought a car, a simple black Ford, and she had those payments to make. Rarely did she buy clothes. Elspeth usually had no thoughts about her appearance. She had only three dresses. She just didn't seem to care.

Cordelia wondered if Elspeth was depressed. Seriously so. She had read that troubled people took little care of their personal appearance. But she had looked nice the night Lt. Browne took her to the play.

Depressed people stared all the time, just sat there staring. Elspeth did that sometimes, Cordelia noted. But that was just her way. It had been John Henry's way, also. That was the way writers did, Cordelia concluded. They were

thinking. Elspeth thought all the time.

The next day Elspeth continued her pacing and if Cordelia's eyes weren't deceiving she actually believed she saw tears in the girl's eyes. They were red and blurry. The sight struck Cordelia in her throat and she gently placed her hand there. Elspeth was suffering! If only she could get her hands on that Lt. Browne, leading Elspeth on and then dropping her like dirt. Yankees. That was the way they did, had no sensitivity to anything. And no wonder, living up there with all that rabble, crowded together like rats. They hadn't changed since the War Between the States. None of them. Never heard of morals.

She regarded Elspeth. Was she going to do this all morning? Pace? It was Saturday and therefore no school. Cordelia went into the library and closed the doors. The library was always where she went when she wanted to think. It was quiet and there was the smell of old tobaccos and mildewing books. She sat in her father-in-law's red leather chair. And just as she did a thought struck her so positively that she leaned forward with the delight of it.

She would call up Lt. Browne. Have a dinner party. She wouldn't invite anyone else until she found out if he would come. But she was sure he would. The only trouble was how to get Elspeth to come. Not once had she joined any of Cordelia's entertaining. Not once since she was thirteen. After that she stayed in her room.

Naturally, she wouldn't tell Elspeth that she had called

~~up~~ Lt. Browne. Not beforehand. It would be just a little surprise and the girl would be so happy seeing him she would forget all about being angry.

"Mind your own business," was Elspeth's favorite expression. She didn't want anyone to know what she was about. Cordelia had never read anything Elspeth had written. She knew she used to piddle around with writing poems when she was small. But she had no idea the girl took it seriously, actually writing long things.

When Elspeth drove off for the grocery store, Cordelia seized the day. She dialed the number of the Fort. A man's voice answered.

"Yes," said Cordelia. "This is Mrs. John Henry Newman. I'm in town, you know. And I would like to speak to Lt. Robert Browne. He's from New York, New York."

Pause. Then: "Lady, there must be fifty Robert Brownes stationed here. What company is he in?"

"Company?"

"Fraid I can't help you, ma'am. You'll need an address."

Rude. The man had been rude. Cordelia didn't even say thank you. She banged the phone down. Now what was she going to do? Elspeth. Perhaps Elspeth had an address.

The thought brought tinges of guilt. She had never rummaged around in Elspeth's room or her things. She had been tempted, of course, as any mother would who had a daughter like Elspeth. Perhaps by discovering little things she might discover larger things.

But she was not a sneak. She might be many other things. Pride, she felt, was her worst vice. But she praised herself for her honesty, her fairness, her energy. Besides, just finding an address to help your daughter wasn't sneaking. It was charity, plain old fashioned charity. It was love.

The purity of her thoughts accelerated her steps and she climbed the stairs with renewed purpose.

Elsbeth was not a neat person. Her desk was piled high with papers, books, odd magazines that nobody in their right mind would ever want to read. All of it, trash, must have been an accumulation of years. How could anybody clean in here? No wonder Hattie was always complaining, "Can't nobody do nothin with Elsbeth's room. She won't allow nobody to touch nothin."

Immediately Cordelia's eye caught a neat stack of papers folded in a manilla envelope. It was the neatest thing in the room.

EMPTY VICTORIES
a novel in progress
by
Robert Browne

And on the left upper corner of the page was an address:

Lt. Robert Browne
Company C; Fourth Division
Fort McCloud, Georgia

He had given the manuscript to Elspeth to read, no doubt. Cordelia wondered who in the world would want to read something named "Empty Victories". She certainly wouldn't.

Life was hard enough without filling your brain with empty things. She liked people who won. She liked Scarlet O'Hara, people like that. I must remember to tell Elspeth that, she thought. Elspeth should write about folks people could care about, nice people, people who were normal.

She hurriedly copied down the address. She had no reason to believe Elspeth would catch her in this act. Elspeth was so slow she would probably be in the grocery store for the rest of the morning.

After calling fifty thousand different numbers (and almost giving up) Cordelia finally reached Lt. Browne. His voice was deep and just the sound of it sent a slight chill through Cordelia's being. She felt suddenly timid.

"Oh, hello there," she said. Sometimes she believed she could have been an actress. When she was down she could sound up. When she was afraid she could sound brave. "This is Cordelia Newman. Elspeth's mother. I've had the worst time trying to reach you."

"Oh, hello." He sounded genuinely pleased to hear her voice.

"Well, now that I've got you, I certainly hope you can join us for dinner next Thursday. Just a small group."

"Why---"

She interrupted. His pause ^{was} ~~had been~~ too long. "I thought you might want to meet some other young people in town. Believe it or not, there are some who are interested

In broad things. They are Elspeth's friends."

"How nice of you. I'll have to check with my company commander. Can I get back to you?"

"Of course. I do hope you can come."

"So nice of you."

Cordelia placed the phone down thoughtfully. What if the man called when Elspeth was here? For the last few weeks Elspeth had been racing to the phone, a thing she had never done before. Usually she never answered the phone. The only people who called anyway were the librarians and teachers at the high school. But since Lt. Browne had come into her life she practically skidded to the phone. The calls were always for Cordelia.

"It's for you," was her ever pitiful cry.

The reason Lt. Browne hadn't accepted right away, Cordelia was sure, was because he might have to be on duty. That was the way it was with her other contacts at the Fort through the years. None of them, not even generals, accepted right off.

Now who was she going to have with the man? She went into the library to think. She knew so few of the young nowadays. They were all divorcing and on drugs or something, it seemed. What she had to find was somebody "interesting", some couple who read things and traveled about.

There was the Boccock boy. Horace. He had graduated from Brown University with honors. And the Boccocks were such nice people. Horace worked with his father in the Boccock

mills. A few years younger than Elspeth, Horace had always risen in Cordelia's mind as a proper suiter for Elspeth. But nothing ever came of it.

Horace, too, was still living with his parents---in the garconiere behind the big house. It seemed to Cordelia that someone had said Horace was seeing the young Whitfield girl. Legare Whitfield. Or they had broken up. Or something. She would ask him to bring a date anyway.

Chrysanthemums. They were in full bloom in her cutting garden. In her mind she saw the entire evening. The chandelier in the dining room shining down on four beautiful young people (with her at the head). The table gleamed with silver and china and a slight breeze from the French doors flickered the candles.

Lieutenant Browne would be impressed. It would be straight out of the Old South. Hattie would serve and she would get Amos to serve the drinks. Amos was Hattie's husband. He had a job at the bank but often served at parties. She would talk all this out with Hattie when she came on Monday.

She would have a quail and wild rice. Thank the Lord for George Hutto. He was always thinking of her, bringing her quails and such. George Hutto had been one of John Henry's closest friends, and he remembered Cordelia in little ways like quails. She loved George Hutto.

But how to announce all this to Elspeth. Naturally, she would have to wait to hear from Lieutenant Browne.

She heard that night. After dinner she sat in the library by the telephone. Elspeth went straight to her room. She had no telephone in her room. The upstairs telephone was in the hall. Cordelia would answer the phone on the first ring.

And when the ring came it was like a thunderbolt in the quiet room. Cordelia's heartbeat accelerated so she thought she might be unable to speak.

"Yes?" The sound was normal.

"Mrs. Newman?"

"Yes."

"Lt. Browne here. Everything's fine for Thursday. All clear."

"Lovely," said Cordelia. "We will see you then." She put down the phone without even saying 'good-bye' so afraid was she that Elspeth would pick up the phone.

She immediately called Horace Boccock. He would be pleased to come and would bring Legare Whitfield, a pretty young thing who would add a touch of light to the evening. Legare had recently spent a summer at the University of Oslo in Norway. They could talk about that and books and---

Elspeth was standing in the doorway, her eyes squinted into two mean points and her mouth pinched. For all the world Elspeth had the demeanor of a murderer. She held her pencil like a plunging knife.

"What in the world?" asked Cordelia.

"What in the world is correct! What do you think you're doing?"

Cordelia drummed her fingers on the chair arm.

"I heard you! I heard the whole thing!"

Cordelia told the girl to sit down, be calm. She had no idea what had got her so riled up, she said. She added, too, that Elspeth had no right to other people's conversations. "That sort of thing just isn't done in polite society."

Elspeth did not sit down. She wanted to know what right Cordelia had calling Lt. Browne. Lt Browne was her friend, not Cordelia's.

"He's a nice enough young man," Cordelia said. "I've been wanting to have young Boccock for some time and the Whitfield girl is just a lovely addition."

She explained that she told Horace Boccock that Lt. Browne was a brilliant writer and editor and someone Elspeth thought a great deal of. She added that Elspeth was never without a book in her hand. "So bright. So deep." That's exactly what I said. What's so wrong with that?"

"Well, let me tell you this. You'll have to entertain those people by yourself. I won't be there. The idea of your---"

"Now Elspeth. Don't go getting funny again. Lt. Browne wants to come. He said he did. He wants to see you again. He could easily have refused."

"If he wanted to see me he could have called me."

"He's been busy. He said so himself."

"Have a nice dinner," she said and fled the room. The room had all the aftermath of a hurricane. Cordelia leaned back in the chair and sighed. Soon the tears came. She had worked too long, tried too hard. And she was as lonely as this house. ~~Oh~~ "Sharper than a serpent's tooth to have an ungrateful child." That was one sentence from Shakespeare she had memorized and said over and over and over. For that was what she had. An ungrateful child. Shakespeare knew. He certainly did.

On Wednesday Cordelia with the help of Hattie began setting the table. She would use the old Crown Derby plates. The colors would go well with the lavender chrysanthemums. Hattie had polished the Newman candelabra, showing the nice patina from years of polishing and rubbing.

Then a fine idea struck her. She would seat Lt. Browne at the opposite end of the table and place Elspeth at his right. There was no doubt in her mind that Elspeth would not come. Of course she would. The Whitfield girl would sit next to Cordelia. She didn't want her too close to Lt. Browne. She was just too pretty and would take away from Elspeth's distinguishing qualities.

"She aint coming," said Hattie as Cordelia placed the fifth plate on the table.

"Who isn't coming?" Cordelia looked up into Hattie's satisfied face.

"Els-buth"

"Of course she's coming."

"She say she aren't."

Hattie had her fist at her waist and looked everywhere in the room except at Cordelia.

"She told you that?"

Hattie nodded. "She say you ^{asked} asked that man without her permission."

Cordelia sighed. "Do I have to ask that girl every thing I do? I'm the mother here."

"Sho is," said Hattie. Hattie usually agreed with most things Cordelia said.

"Well, we'll see." Cordelia folded a napkin and placed it. "Oh yes, while I'm thinking about it. Be sure to fold the rolls, Hattie."

"Yes'm." Hattie was bored. She wanted to continue the conversation about Elspeth. Rolls and details of the dinner were not interesting.

"Anybody who doesn't like this dinner---well, I just don't know." Cordelia prided herself on her cooking. She was a great cook. With the help of Hattie and the Charleston cookbook Charleston Receipts no one in Ashton could surpass one of her dinners.

She liked to cook. There were shelves and shelves of her own preserves and pickles and peaches. Often she gave them as gifts. She would have to remember to give a jar or two to Lt. Browne. That would be a nice thing to do. He

could pass them around to his mates.

But Elspeth. She sat down with the weight of the name. Elspeth had eavesdropped. Sneaky. Not a strange action, really. For her. Elspeth was sneaky anyway. She could sneak up on you anywhere. When you didn't think she was even in the house she would suddenly appear from nowhere, scaring Cordelia half to death. Elspeth was light footed. She was always scaring Hattie. "Lawd, ~~awful~~^{quill}," Hattie said a hundred times a week.

Tonight she would have to sit Elspeth down and talk rationally. She would wear her glasses, Cordelia decided. Glasses made her look more important somehow, more authoritative, intelligent. Come to think of it, Cordelia told herself, she hadn't had a really good talk with Elspeth since the girl's teens. A serious talk, that is. But tonight she would have it. She would ask Elspeth just where she thought she was going in life. Cordelia would add that she wouldn't always be here and Elspeth should think of THAT. But the thought of her no longer being here brought a sudden rush of tears to her eyes. Here she was sitting in the dining room weeping her life away. Through the blue^m she saw the Crown Derby china, the silver, the chrysanthemums and her charity, her love for her daughter, and all of it caused the tears to rush further.

"Is you ailing?" Hattie appeared from nowhere.

Cordelia could not speak. She merely shook her head.

"Lord don't put more on you than you can take."

Cordelia nodded.

"Els-buth aint just right down mean."

Cordelia took the handkerchief from underneath her sleeve and wiped her eyes.

"She's an intellectual," she managed.

"That's right. Got sweet ways, too. When she wants to."

"Talk to her, Hattie," Cordelia said. "Tell her she has to come to the dinner. Tell her she should marry, have children. She needs to find a place in this world."

"That's right. Everbody got to find a place."

"Talk to her."

"All right."

Cordelia was wondering what she would ever do without Hattie. When she thought of it Hattie was the closest person in the world to her now. Her only real friend. When she was a child she had uncles and aunts and cousins, a mother and a father, grandparents. They adored her. All. Now there was no one.

"I'm the last leaf on the tree," she said to Hattie.

"But you're still hanging on," said Hattie and began to hum. Endings and dire events brought on the humming. Always.

For dinner that night Cordelia dressed up a bit. She put on her black dress, the one with the satin cuffs. And for an effect she put on the pearls John Henry had given her one Christmas. They were his mother's pearls, got from Asia

years ago when the Newmans were on a trip to China.

She also put on her glasses, which made seeing difficult. The glasses were for reading only. Everything was blurred, and she almost fell going down the stairs. It occurred to her that Elspeth would probably not notice anything, the dress or the pearls. Probably not even the glasses.

But after coffee Cordelia announced she wanted to "have a little visit" with Elspeth.

"We've already had it," said Elspeth.

"No. There's something important---something I want to talk to you about."

"If it's about Robert Browne you can forget it."

"No." Cordelia closed her eyes and shook her head.

Elspeth glowered at her, studying the solemn face as if she were trying to memorize it, keep it with her like an old yellowed letter.

"All right," Elspeth said. "Let us be on with it." She strode into the library. Elspeth never sat in the drawing room. She hadn't sat there since she was a child. She had nothing but disdain for that beautiful room, each chair, each sofa, painting--a jewel from the past. Elspeth HATED the room.

Cordelia sauntered ^{yes} after her, gathering her thoughts. She would speak of life and death. And the surge of emotions was so great she prayed not to shed one tear. Not one. Elspeth would only take it as self pity. When in truth it was STRENGTH she was to put forth.

Elspeth sat on the red leather sofa, hugging one of the needlepoint pillows to her stomach. Cordelia sat as gracefully as she could in the rosewood chair. She adjusted her glasses, though in truth she wanted to remove them. It was difficult to judge Elspeth's reactions in such a blur.

"I have been thinking," she said deliberately.

"That's a new wrinkle," said Elspeth.

Cordelia frowned. "I am very serious." And then she stopped short. Was Elspeth yawning? How could she possibly yawn at such a time? "Now, I want you to listen." She paused, fighting back the emotion her coming words were sure to bring. "When I'm gone," she managed.

"Where are you going?" asked Elspeth, sitting straighter on the sofa.

Cordelia cleared her throat. "When I'm dead, Elspeth. Dead.) Instead of tears, she was feeling anger. "You'll be here. Alone. Without anybody." She lifted her head. "That worries me, Elspeth."

For a moment Elspeth said nothing. Then:

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"What I'm talking about is--- I want to die knowing you have a place in the world. That's what tomorrow is all about. I want you to have friends, be included, find your place."

"In the dining room?"

"Now, Elspeth. Be serious. You liked that young man. I know you did. And when you like someone you have to go after him. Not just sit back and dream. Surprisingly she

gave a little laugh. "A girl has to flirt a bit, let the man know a little how you feel." For all the world she sounded like the belle she once had been.

"My god. My god. My good god," said Elspeth, leaning forward, examining her mother's face again. She was looking as if she were witnessing a small stroke, a mistake in the brain. An accident.

Cordelia removed the glasses. "When did you take to saying god all the time?"

Elspeth leaned back again. "The strength has to come from somewhere."

Cordelia twirled the glasses. "Now: I want you to be at ~~the~~ table tomorrow. The young people are expecting you."

"Is this what all this is about? A dinner party?"

Cordelia nodded. "Partially."

"Death, divorce and cancer. Loneliness and God. What do you want me to think? I thought you were telling me you were dying. And here it's nothing but a silly dinner."

Cordelia felt the hurt come to her throat again. "Is that the way you feel about me, Elspeth?" She was determined not to shed one single tear.

"Well, you've got to admit it's difficult sometimes reading you. But if it's all that important to you I'll be there. But let's get one thing straight right now."

"Oh, Elspeth! I knew you wouldn't let me down. You've always been a sweet child. Just like John Henry."

"For starters, listen. I do not want you interfering

in my life again. Not in any way. Don't call my friends. Don't invite them over here. Don't read my---

"I've never read a thing of yours in all my life. Just that address, that's all."

"You replaced Robert's manuscript upside down. I knew it was you rambling. Curious. He wouldn't like that. He wouldn't like it at all. Nor do I!"

"'Empty Victories'," said Cordelia. "I'm disappointed."

"About what?"

"I like people who are winners, genuine winners. I thought Lt. Browne was one of those. Nobody wants to hear about empty lives."

Surprisingly Elspeth laughed. She had a nice laugh usually, but Cordelia drummed her fingers on the arm chair again. Elspeth was laughing at her.

"I don't see anything so funny," she said.

"Robert would. I wish he were here."

Cordelia wanted to say Elspeth probably would never have seen the man again if it hadn't been for her, her own mother who she dismissed with a laugh. It suddenly occurred to Cordelia that Elspeth was one of those people on the Phil Donohue show, not the freak kind, but someone who didn't get along with her mother. In her mind she was seeing Elspeth and herself sitting on a stage with other mothers and daughters who didn't get along and Phil Donohue was adjusting his glasses and leaning forward saying: "Now just bear with me. We want to understand this." And she and Elspeth were

sitting there arguing with each other for all the world to see.

Cordelia was given to visions anyway. Therefore she often put herself in the roles of talk show guests. Not the freak kind. But the normal ones.

Elspeth rose from the sofa. "Gotta go. Have work to do."

"Yes, well, you just run along." She watched her go. Elspeth strode. She was always in a hurry and her stride was like a runner's. Nerves.

"Oh, Elspeth," Cordelia called.

Elspeth paused and Cordelia thought she heard a sigh.

"Thank you," she said calmly and managed a smile. She sounded like Bette Davis. And she lifted one eyebrow.

"For what?"

"For tomorrow. For coming to the little dinner."

"Oh, that. See you in the morning."

But Cordelia didn't mind the sarcasm this time. Her relief was extreme. What in the world would she have done with those people if Elspeth hadn't shown up? She would tell them Elspeth was sick, ill. No, she wouldn't say that. Men didn't like sickly women. Lt. Browne was the type who could take to a healthy Southern woman who wrote and helped him with his manuscripts.

She hoped Lt. Browne would shave before he came to dinner. His shadowy face and his height were the first two features Cordelia had noted about the man. But he had nice

eyes, dark eyes that had lights in them. Kind eyes actually. She wanted to impress Horace Boccock and the Whitfield girl.

Cordelia regarded the grandfather clock in the corner of the room. Nine o'clock. The bong was loud in the hollow room. It occurred to Cordelia that she and the clock had shared their lives together. She noted the slight scar on the clock's face where she had turned the key to give the fast time in the summer and then in the winter slow time. Throughout the years the clock had bonged the events and moments of her life. She rose from the chair and actually patted the tall mahogany body of the timepiece.

I'm going crazy, she said to herself. And immediately left the room. She had to be cheery and witty for tomorrow night. And that took rest and sleep. Elspeth's whole future was tomorrow.