

## Chapter Four

Elsbeth had been a late child. Cordelia was into her thirties when, at last, she became pregnant. She wanted children, had wanted them all her life. But fourteen years of marriage brought nothing and she sat in monstrous jealousy as friend after friend announced the birth of one child after another. Each month's rejection hit her physically and she would mourn the sign that almost happily appeared to announce her failure each month.

Finally she sought help from Dr. James Agee, a gynecologist whom she saw weekly at dinners and cocktail parties. His wife was also a bridge partner of Cordelia's, therefore the strain (and embarrassment) was, to say the least, a presence. Month after month she lay on Jimmy's (everyone called him that) twisted and gnarled table, her feet in stirrups as her good friend's husband poked and

examined her insides to the tune of "Serenade in Blue." Jimmy liked muzac and at each appointment "Serenade in Blue" with its haunting lyrics crooned its way through his room of offices.

Afterwards, Cordelia was given medicines and charts on which she drew her temperature daily. When the curve was up she called John Henry at the college and he rushed home as soon as he could and they dutifully performed the act of creation. Frankly, and she had never said this to anyone before, it was all a great shining bore, this performance by command.

All this went on for two years, and then, blessedly, Elspeth was formed. Cordelia was so elated over the fact that she telephoned everyone, fairly singing her news over the airways. The reactions were predictable, but Cordelia did not care. They were feigned reactions, joy and little "ohs". But by that time her friends' children were of school age and in no way could be a companion to an infant. Therefore there was little interest. That Cordelia Newman was experiencing joy was, well, all right of course, but nothing to think twice about.

Cordelia knew all this. It was impossible to experience other people's joy unless the joy had direct bearing on oneself. "I'm happy for you" was a lie. They were not happy. It was just a piece of news that one hoped to be the first to deliver. Cordelia knew life and she knew jealousy. But this time she didn't care. She shouted her news and then

went about preparing a room for this truly blessed event.

She painted the walls of one of the unused bedrooms blue and pink. And she found an old antique crib in the attic upstairs. It was made of cherry and she had a man refinish it, prepare it so that it was completely safe, then returned it to the blue and pink room now exhibiting white ruffles on the long windows and a toy mobil hanging from the ceiling over the crib. She bought clothes, sheets, little bootees, a blanket and toys, toys, toys. She was aware that John Henry objected to a good bit of this. John Henry was like his parents in his Scotsman's penny-pinching ways. But he said little. He, too, was pleased he was soon to be a father, and in no way would he be the cause of some dire mishap.

She was in labor for two and one-half days. The pain was so great she believed she could have had the baby in downtown Ashton and never given it a thought. John Henry was with her part of the time and his face became ashen as her cries increased. Her mouth was dry and her exhaustion was extreme as the long hours continued.

Finally she told John Henry that she could not go on. But at the moment the nurse ordered her sent to the delivery room. Within the half-hour Elspeth entered the world, a loud-crying, complaining creature of this mortal life. The baby was instantly disturbed about <sup>its</sup> ~~this~~ birth and let it be known. It was almost as if it were trying to say she wanted the womb again, where it was warm and safe and dark.

But Cordelia's joy was complete. She looked down the years. The child would be beautiful. She could tell that already. She had a lovely nose, dark eyes and a full mouth. Elspeth Newman would excel in all things, especially marriage. Cordelia saw governors and statesmen in the future. They would come courting to Newman House and in history the house would remain as the house where Elspeth Newman lived, the wife of one of our most renowned presidents.

And for a while all this seemed likely. Elspeth was a star in kindergarten. She could count and spell and even read. John Henry had taught her to read by the time she was four. Cordelia believed she had given birth to a genius. But the kindergarten teacher told Cordelia that whereas Elspeth was bright she was also a disrupting element in the group.

"Just what do you mean?" Cordelia asked. She had never liked the woman anyway. She had an air of prissiness and her S's were too marked in her speech.

"Elspeth likes to correct the other children," smiled the teacher. "We don't like that. When she's admonished she laughs at her elders. We don't like that."

Cordelia was outraged, but she tried to talk to Elspeth. She cautioned that Elspeth should not correct the teacher or even the other children even though she knew they were wrong. But in no way should Elspeth try to copy the other children. She was too smart for that.

"Just be nice and kind, dear."

But Elspeth said she hated kindergarten and she didn't want to go back. She didn't like the teacher and the other children were stupid. Cordelia bowed to the girl's wishes and let her stay at home. Later, she believed she had made a gross mistake. She should have let the child sink or swim, find out what life was all about.

When she entered regular school it was the same thing all over again. Elspeth didn't like the teacher, a sweet dark-haired woman who wouldn't harm a soul. Elspeth considered the teacher "dumb". As for the other children they weren't even considered.

Cordelia went to the principal of the school and asked if Elspeth might skip a grade. She told the principal that Elspeth could already read and write. And that the child was bored with the child-like routines of beginning to read and write. She announced to the principal that Elspeth was a "genius".

She skipped a grade and that was when the pacing began. Elspeth's legs grew before the rest of her. And Cordelia would watch the child, her young legs, pacing the downstairs hall. Nerves. Cordelia recognized the symptoms early on and blamed all of it on John Henry. He should never have pushed the girl, make her read so early. In the third grade she was reading David Copperfield.

Cordelia took the book away from the child, which brought forth hollering and yelling and "I hate you."

Stricken, Cordelia quietly went to her bedroom, shut the door and fell across the bed.

"Sharper than a serpeant's tooth  
To have an ungrateful child."

In her tears she quoted Shakespeare for ~~the first of a~~ <sup>one</sup> hundred <sup>th</sup> times. She had memorized the lines in high school. But now she <sup>knew she</sup> would have to teach Elspeth gratitude. And manners. Lord knows she had spent hours on the latter. Elspeth took some of it in. But her instincts, should she be crossed, were to strike out.

"We must turn the other cheek, Elspeth," Cordelia told her time and time again. Hand in hand they marched to the Sunday School at St. Peter's Episcopal Church. But Elspeth was not fond of coloring Jesus' face or making crosses out of colored paper.

When her Sunday School class stood before the congregation one Sunday to sing "Jesus Loves Me" Elspeth, dressed in a velvet green dress and lace collar, just stood there, arms crossed, singing nothing.

Cordelia took the child to Jimmy, again the family doctor. But not the same Jimmy who was her gynocologist. This Jimmy suggested a psychiatrist. There was one who taught at Ashton State Teacher's College.

Cordelia was outraged. "There's nothing wrong with the girl's mind," she cautioned.

But Jimmy said there was something that was making her rebellious and uncooperative. He wanted all three of them, John Henry, herself and Elspeth to go to the psychiatrist.

In that way the doctor could see the "whole pitcher."

Red neck, Cordelia thought. But she took his advice, and one Friday afternoon John Henry, Elspeth and herself made the mournful drive to the college and spoke with the psychiatrist, a man in rimless glasses and a balding hairline.

The upshot of the whole thing was that Elspeth was in ravishingly good health and that the mother-daughter relationship was often a delicate situation and that Cordelia should know this and not react in an overt manner should the child sometimes rebel.

It was as if the man were saying that the trouble all sprang from Cordelia, that it was she who was crazy and no one else. This was all nonsense. There had never been anything funny in Cordelia's family. On both sides. They had been sane, genteel people made poor by the North. And that was the truth of the matter. She rejected the doctor's summation.

She tried dancing lessons. Elspeth needed grace and dancing lessons would be just the thing. Mr. Laird was the dancing master. A slow, drawling good-humored man, Mr. Laird had studied in New York and had once appeared in a chorus on Broadway. He was not gay and was married to a New Yorker, who steamed around Ashton with the energy of a stevadore.

Cordelia explained to Bill, as he was referred to, all about Elspeth. She told him dancing lessons would give Elspeth "grace".

"You can try," drawled Bill Laird, "but you can't give what God hasn't put there."

Bill Laird was also known for his tactlessness, though there was not a mean bone in his graceful body.

"Well, we'll see," said Cordelia.

And she did. The Bill Laird review was held in an abandoned movie theatre. This was where Bill introduced his pupils to the public and one and all took part.

Bill's wife had made all the <sup>u</sup>costumes, a mammoth undertaking. Elspeth was to wear a thigh-length blue and white ruffled gingham dress and tap shoes.

"What are you going to do with those shoes?" asked Cordelia, cringing.

"Dance," said Elspeth.

And John Henry and Cordelia went to the theatre to see Elspeth in performance. When it was over Cordelia told John Henry she was ready to give up the ghost. Elspeth appeared with nine other girls, the tallest and centered so everyone could see. They tap danced to the jazzy music with Elspeth one beat behind and sometimes not even tapping, just shuffling her feet and frowning as if she were in extreme pain.

Cordelia had expected ballet. Not this rather "cute" exhibit of short ruffled skirts and bouncy behinds. In her mind she had seen Elspeth doing stretches and little runs with her long arms gracefully moving above her head. Perhaps she would have a partner, a young man, who would lift and



guide her through intricate steps.

She suggested some of this to Bill Laird and he said Elspeth had to perform the "basics" first. She must perform at the bar, loosen those tight muscles. "Then we'll see what happens."

Nothing was the answer.

Girl Scouts was next. Elspeth learned to tie knots and get off the floor without using her hands, but she ate all the girl scout cookies and Cordelia had to pay for ten boxes, which Elspeth had intermittently consumed. She stayed one night at the Girl Scouts camp. Her bunk mate wet the bed was her excuse for being driven home.

"Just let her find her way," the Episcopal rector advised. "She's an individual. She may surprise you one day."

Cordelia said she had too many surprises. She didn't want any more.

John Henry kept supplying books. In high school she read while all the other girls went to dances and had dates with the young men in town. Cordelia heard that the girls all thought Elspeth was "peculiar". She wanted to tell Elspeth that so she would change her ways. But she thought better of it. The girl had suffered too much as it was.

Cordelia and John Henry discussed boarding schools.

But the truth of the matter was there just wasn't the money. The elder Newmans had left a disappointing estate. Cordelia had counted on their generosity, but the money was

not there. Only the house. That was the way families went, Cordelia reasoned. The first generation made a name, the second made money, the third entered aesthetics and the next, destitution. Time and time again she had witnessed the scenario.

And so it went. Until now. Cordelia watched as Elspeth brought down her worn luggage to be transported to her new "home". She and Hattie watched together as Elspeth made her final bow at the front door before entering her life of sin. Cordelia turned and fell into Hattie's arms, not able to subdue her tears.

"She'll ma'hy that man," said Hattie. "Now you just hush up that. Make yourself sick, carrying on so."

Cordelia finally composed herself and, handkerchief to her nose, told Hattie that Lt. Browne was nothing but a fortune seeker. She also said that May Beth <sup>Hughes</sup> ~~Allen~~ had heard Lt. Browne had called up the Whitfield girl but that Legare had turned him down. May Beth, her dearest friend, was being herself again, but Cordelia listened anyway.

"You don't know," said Hattie. "You can't believe what folks say. Sorry thangs."

"What if the school finds out?" This was the first time Cordelia had thought of Elspeth's school. "They wouldn't want somebody like that teaching students."

"They don't pay no mind to such things nowadays. World coming to an end."

Cordelia thought she might have to telephone Lt. Browne again. She would ask him to come by the house for a drink, then she would tell him that he was from New York and that a couple living together without benefit of marriage might be all right in New York, but it just was not done in Ashton, Georgia. Among decent people. She might add that Elspeth was poor.

She had his telephone number from the last time, so now she got him right away. He said he would be happy to come by, that he had wanted to talk to Cordelia for a long time now, explain a few things. Cordelia said that yes, she thought he needed to explain. And a long silence followed.

The next afternoon Cordelia descended the stairway and found him in the drawing room examining the Bierstadt again. He's probably thinking the picture will be his one day, thought Cordelia, noting that he had dressed for the occasion, a proper autumn afternoon attire. A grey tweed jacket and black pants.

Cordelia had a fire lighted in the library and asked him to come there. She thought it would be cozier, she said, but what she wanted to do was get a better look at the man. She would sit in the Queen Ann chair and indicate the sofa for him. The closeness would give her a good chance to examine the man's face, his reactions, attitude. If she were nothing she was a good judge of character. Even John Henry had told her that. But then she had chosen him to marry. Naturally he considered her a good judge.

"This is lovely," said Lt. Browne.

"Won't you be seated, Lt. Browne." Cordelia indicated the red leather sofa.

"Please call me Robert."

"But would you like a drink?" Cordelia indicated the silver tray across the room, which now held two glasses, a silver pitcher, a bottle of bourbon and one of sherry. When she had placed the bottles earlier it occurred to her they were symbolic in their way, the hard bourbon and the delicate sherry.

For some reason Robert was smiling all the time. He hadn't stopped since she entered the room. Shame? Or nerves? Cordelia had not decided which. But he said he would indeed like a drink and what would she like?

"Sherry," she said somberly and watched the flames gather in the fireplace. They made odd shadows on the wall behind the sofa. A dark November afternoon.

"Well, now, this is nice," said Robert, sitting with his right leg over his left. His black socks were too short, thereby revealing hairy skin.

Cordelia sipped her sherry. "Now, Robert, we have things to discuss." She tried to sound as business-like as possible. His grin was disturbing as he appeared to examine her face. He was smiling at her as if he were admiring a child, a simple one at that. He did have nice eyes, dark and now teasing. How could someone like this be attracted to Elspeth?

"You are concerned about Els and my arrangement?" He just came right out with it.

Els. She did not like that but said nothing, gazing at the flames in the fireplace again. She nodded, then lifted her head, not regarding the man. "You see, we here in the South, in Georgia, are conservative people. By that, I mean we have a code of ethics and we try to abide by them, you see." She faced him then. His face was sober now.

"There are ethics and there are ethics," he said.

"No." She shook her head. "There is only one, and what you and Elspeth have arranged for yourselves is selfish and sinful." She fairly spit out the words.

Robert looked down at his drink. "I'm sorry you feel that way. I had hoped we could be friends, good friends."

"How in the world could you ever think such a thing?"

He regarded her with softened eyes. "Els is a very fine woman. She's talented, highly creative and...", he looked away, "...I must say a very very unhappy person albeit an attractive one and highly unappreciated."

He was trying to insult her. This man was sitting on her sofa, drinking her whisky and telling her she had made her own daughter unhappy. "Just why do you think that?"

"She's told me, and I'm not blind."

"Elspeth told you that?"

He nodded.

"Elspeth is a genius," said Cordelia sharply and the anger rose as she witnessed the smile that tried to play

about his otherwise firm mouth. "She is. Her principal in grammar school told me that years and years ago. The principal knew it even then."

Robert placed his glass down on the table in front of him. "Look. I'm sorry you don't approve of our living arrangement. I am. But Els is a grown woman now. She has her own life to lead. Just frankly, Mrs. Newman, she doesn't need mothering. She needs to be free. And if you ask me, that is an ethic in itself." He leaned back and put his hand to his forehead. "My god," he said, "this is a first, a real first."

"What first?"

He was smiling again, smiling to himself. Then he suddenly sobered and leaned forward. "Look, Mrs. Newman. This is a conversation you should be having with your daughter, not me."

"Elspeth knows my thinking. I just think I have a right to know your intentions. There is no man here. I have to be both mother and father to my child. I have been for a long time." Rehearsing her situation this way brought a crack to her voice. She did not want to show any emotions in front of this man.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, regarding the fire, which was only simmering now.

The silence was awkward. She too regarded the fire, then rose to check the coals.

"I'll do that," Robert said, rising. He took the poker from her hand.

"Thank you."

She sat as straight as she could in the Queen Ann chair. In order to break the silence she asked him about his editing job.

"It was only for a short while. Copy editing, that's all. A bore. I joined the army." He was kneeling before the fire and as he poked the flames gathered, reflecting on his face, as if his dark hair ~~was~~<sup>were</sup> on fire, his face blazing.

"Couldn't you find something else to do? In New York?"

He said that he didn't want to stay in New York. He had been there all his life and even as a child he had wanted to be in the army. He had tried for West Point but no one in his family had any connections. He replaced the poker and sat down again, taking up his drink.

Cordelia was interested. "What connections?"

"With government. My father didn't know our congressman or senator. There was no way I could get an appointment anywhere." He sipped his drink. "Besides, the peacetime army gives me a chance to write. My first love."

"What does your father do?" She heard the lowered tones in her voice.

"He was a postman." He looked up at the ceiling. "Yep, my old man was a postman. Dead now."

Cordelia said nothing. How had a son of a postman gone to Dartmouth? She could not hide her disappointment, nor the guilt for her snobbery. She was not a snob. Still, it was there: Elspeth was sleeping with the son of a postman when

for years her mother had dreamed of financiers, senators, even presidents. The sudden bursting of a lifetime dream was acid, indeed, and her reaction was ~~visceral~~<sup>physical</sup>. She began to cough, a racking cough.

"Can I help you?"

She shook her head and took the lace handkerchief from her sleeve. "Excuse me," she managed and left the room coughing all the way. Finally in the bathroom the cough subsided. She regarded her face in the bathroom mirror. Her eyes were teary and red as if someone had just announced her daughter's death. Her reflection was ugly in the mirror, uglier than she had ever seen herself. Even her face looked bloated. She opened the cabinet and found her lipstick and compact. She dabbed her nose with the powder puff and streaked her mouth with the blood red lipstick. She looked better, but her hands were shaking. She had to go back to Elspeth's strange lover.

As she walked through the rooms she kept repeating to herself that she had nothing against ~~the~~ postmen as such. It was just that she had thought differently. Still, there were compensations in life. She had to admit that she had come to believe Elspeth would never find a man. Any man. And this Robert was presentable enough. He seemed intelligent and he had gone to Dartmouth. No one would have to know about the postman. And, besides, it was an honest job. He could have had a gangster for a father.

"Well, it seems I'm going to live," she said cheerily



as she entered the library, noting that Robert had finished his drink and was rattling the ice in the glass.

"Do have another," she said. "Let me fix it for you."

"No, I had better go." He placed his glass on the coffee table and stood. "But before I go." He stood with his back to the fireplace. "Please know this. Elspeth is very happy."

Cordelia was standing, too, looking up at the man. The lace handkerchief was wadded in her hand and she squeezed it.

"I'm pleased to hear that, of course. Still, there are morals. And Elspeth has always been taught to be discreet." She squeezed the handkerchief harder. "Are you going to marry Elspeth?"

His black eyebrows shot up into triangles and he looked down at his shoes. "We haven't discussed marriage----yet."

"I see."

He looked up, seemed hurried. "Now I do have to go." Then he bent down and kissed Cordelia on the cheek. It was a gesture so shocking that Cordelia brushed her hand across her cheek.

"I'll see myself out," he said and disappeared.

Cordelia stood there for a long while, her hand resting on her cheek. She was thinking about the town. What would everybody say? What would be the talk? How would she handle it all?

Then there was anger. How could Elspeth do such a thing to her? There was no talking to the girl. Ever. And

tomorrow she had to face everyone. The whole town. There was a cocktail party at the country club, and she had to go.