

Chapter Five

She dressed for the party and admired the way the blue dress matched her eyes. Fleetinglly the thought went through her mind, as it had many times in the past, if she could ever find another husband. She was still handsome and tonight especially so. But as her thoughts dallied with such insouciance she spied Elspeth's room, the door ajar, and all thoughts of her future were dismissed.

She crossed over to the room and turned on the lights. It was like entering a dead person's room. Everything was covered with sheets. Elspeth had taken everything, even the messy papers on her desk. The room shouted loneliness. Cordelia's own.

In a way she had come to the room for strength, hoping somehow she might find instructions, instructions how to appear tonight, how to respond to questions, what she would

tell all those people about Elspeth. Her heartbeat grew rapid, making her stomach feel queazy.

To quiet her nerves she decided to have a drink, but she thought again. Bourbon had become her companion these days, her constant one. But only she had knowledge of this. Even Hattie didn't know. She always waited until Hattie left before she poured her "little something," as she referred to her habit.

After Hattie left she would sit alone in the library, listening to the bonging of the clock and sip her drink, several drinks now. Her thoughts mainly were of herself, how she had no one to talk to, no one to cry to, no one to rejoice to. She was bone lonely and frightened as well. Noises, odd noises, made her start, and she often thought of dying, lying in the ground, no longer witnessing seasons, leaves turning and returning, her roses in May and suddenly, like a surprise, the first camelia in November. She would never see any of it again.

She had thought too much of death in recent years. But now her blue dress had a swishing sound as she made her way to the kitchen. There she poured herself a two jigger drink of bourbon, added a small amount of branch water and with both hands brought the glass into the drawing room. She was going to the cocktail party alone so she wouldn't have to contend with anyone's coming for her, surprising her by looking through the glass panes on either side of the door. Often they looked straight in. Knowing this, she drank elsewhere.

When John Henry died her friends began taking her to parties. But as time went on this custom disappeared, and she made her way by herself. She was careful that the car doors were locked and all the lights were on in the house. It was the returning to the house she didn't like. But she never said anything. She had a reputation for being independent--and outspoken. The latter she didn't especially like but why not say what you think? That was her little adage, which she often repeated to others with a little laugh.

Halfway through her drink a thought came that suddenly made everything better. She always had these good thoughts while drinking. Drink seemed to make her more creative somehow. What she would do, she decided, was pay a call on Elspeth. After all, any mother would do the same. Besides, it might become a habit, visiting this way, one that Elspeth might adjust to, even enjoy. It was silly anyway, the two of them having this silent war. She saw herself walking up to the run-down house, calling card in hand, and surprising Elspeth. Surely, the child had missed her mother as much as she had missed her daughter. "Bitterly missed her," she muttered aloud. Tomorrow. She would go tomorrow afternoon when Elspeth got off from work. She would leave before Robert returned.

But now was now, and the cocktail party loomed ahead. She tip-toed back to the kitchen and rinsed out her glass. Then she tip-toed to the coat closet and suddenly realized

she was tip-toeing. Just why she was doing that she did not know. There wasn't a soul about to hear her steps. She was tip-toeing for ghosts, not wanting them to see her drink in hand. Silly, silly, she said to herself as she locked the front door and made her way to her ageing automobile.

The Country Club was lit up like a carnival. Cordelia glared at it. A Greek revival affair, it was almost a carbon copy of the outside of her own house, though the club house was new, built in the twenties sometime. People now had taken to entertaining at the club instead of ^{in their} houses since really good help was hard to come by. Hattie and Amos were some of the last. A few of her friends had started hiring white help. But it didn't look right for some reason. They were usually crackers and had no charm. Blacks all had charm of a sort.

The first person she saw when she entered the party was Amos, shakily carrying a silver tray with various drinks. She would have to watch herself. Amos had a keen eye for sin. She would order a very, very light drink and have another when she got home.

She handed her coat to the doorman and started toward the powder room to touch up her hair a bit. But as she approached the door she heard laughter and she thought she heard the name "Elspeth". There was a chair and a telephone outside the door and she sat, pretending she was telephoning. She knew exactly who was inside: Sarah Ann Adams and Virginia Latham, young matrons.

"Just walked out of the house, I heard."

"Never had a date in her life and now this mad affair with some soldier."

"Crazy. I always thought the gull was crazy."

"Whatdaya suppose Cordelia thinks?"

"Probably screaming her head off."

"Or---maybe she's glad."

"Poor thing. Elspeth's always been sort of pretty. But a mad affair. It's like the second coming."

Laughter.

Cordelia stopped listening. She had a good mind to walk right in that room and give them a piece of her mind. She would tell them that Elspeth was too ~~pride~~^{broad} for Ashton. That the simple-minded people here couldn't appreciate someone with a mind like Elspeth's. A genius. But she remained seated. For a while. Then all at once she knew she could not face these people. Anybody. Everyone knew. The whole town knew.

She told Amos to tell the hostess that she was feeling faint and had to leave.

"You allin?" Amos asked.

"I just feel a little faint, that's all." What she said was the truth. "Just tell her, please."

"Yes'm."

She drove as if blinded, so deep was the rage. She had never liked Ashton anyway. She had never sat down and analyzed exactly why. But it was inferior to her town in

Tennessee. Calhoun, Tennessee. The shadows of Nashville had washed into Calhoun and the families there were truly old and aristocratic. As were her own.

Tennessee was beautiful, too. The cedars grew wild and in the autumn the reds and yellows all mingled with the green of the cedars and there was a sadness in the rolling countryside. Ashton was flat and there was too much new money, shades of Atlanta with its ugly glass and mortar skyline.

She gripped the wheel with her anger. The people were mean, mean-spirited. Elspeth was head and shoulders above the entire town. And even Robert was better. There was not one red-neck note in his mellow New York voice. What the two of them should do is---move! The idea struck as she drove into the driveway.

But as she entered the house she heard the telephone ringing. Right away she knew who it was. She could hear the sounds of the party in the background, everyone talking at once. And somewhere there was music.

"Cordelia?"

It was Aileen Haywood, the hostess.

"Yes, Aileen?"

"Are you all right? Do you want Harry to come by? We'll get a doctor. You're so alone."

It was the last ("you're so alone") that touched a chord in Cordelia's already seething body.

"I'm all right, Aileen. Something happened and I had

to leave." She would not tell her, of course.

"What is it? What happened?"

"Nothing I care to speak of."

Silence. Then, "I hope it isn't anything I've done.
Or Harry."

"No. No. I'm all right. Thank you for calling."

She hung up, leaving the woman in suspension. Aileen Hayward was a nice enough person, but she was curious. And she probably had guessed what had happened. Cordelia fully believed Elspeth was the entire topic of conversation at the party.

Well, it was a new day. If anybody said anything to her about it she would tell them that it was a new day. She had always bent with the wind. She would tell them that, too. You can't just stand there when the wind is blowing; you break that way.

All the television talk shows were about living together before marriage. People in the North did that sort of thing all the time. It just hadn't reached Ashton yet. Baptists. The town was full of Baptists, not up on the times at all.

She tip-toed back into the kitchen and poured herself a generous helping of bourbon. She really had to stop doing this, she told herself. But she would never be able to sleep, thinking about all the gossip and Elspeth. Tomorrow she would mention to Elspeth that there was talk and probably she would be better off in another town. They could move to Reynolds or Butler. The towns were nearby and no one in

either town knew Elspeth, though the name Newman was known all about.

The next afternoon Cordelia drove to Elspeth's apartment. The house was worse than she had remembered. Gingerbread in style, it definitely had seen its day. A wire fence enclosed the short grassless yard and one wooden step, painted gray, was near collapse.

Cordelia remembered when the house was a gleaming white. But now it was covered with yellowed siding that obviously had never been washed. To think of Elspeth living here! Elspeth, who had always been surrounded with beauty, charm and breeding, living in a hovel. A sign near the front door read "Apartments for Rent".

The front door was locked, so Cordelia rang the bell. The neighborhood no doubt was riddled with crime. Elspeth might even get raped coming and going around these parts. Cordelia made a mental note that she should be sure to warn Elspeth about such things. The child had led such a sheltered life. She knew nothing of the world.

At last a woman in a flowered house coat halfway opened the door and stuck her blue-grey hair through the opening.

"We don't want any," she said regarding the calling card in Cordelia's hand.

"I'm here to see my daughter," said Cordelia.

The woman inspected Cordelia from foot to head, then opened the door wider. "I thought you was one of them Avon ladies."

"No," Cordelia said and put on her impressive accent. She had two accents. The impressive one and the normal one. She did not care to be called an Avon lady. Anybody could tell she was a Newman, a woman of style. "No, I'm merely here to call on my daughter."

"What's her name?"

"Newman. Elspeth Newman."

"No such person by that name here."

Cordelia regarded the peeling paint on the ceiling of the porch.

"Browne? Is there a Lt. Browne residing here?"

"Soldier?"

"Yes."

The woman leaned on the opened door. "He gimme a pay check last week."

Cordelia did not want to say her daughter was living with the man. "His cousin is my daughter," she said.

"The black-headed one?"

Cordelia merely nodded and lifted her head.

"She may be up there. I don't pay much mind to what all goes on with the renters."

"Yes," said Cordelia, entering the dark hallway. The house had the odor of years of cooking.

"Upstairs. First door to the right."

"Thank you."

Cordelia was conscious of the woman staring at her as she ascended the wide stairs, the only sign that decency had

once lived here. It crossed her mind that Lt. Browne certainly had more money than to live in a place like this. He could have rented one of the new smart apartments in town. She wondered if Elspeth helped with the rent. Who bought the food? She would have to ask. There were so many questions; she hoped she could remember them all.

A smiling Elspeth opened the door. But the smile quickly vanished. Cordelia examined the face and also the plastic apron Elspeth had tied round her waist.

"You could have been a debutante," Cordelia said. And it was true. She was thinking this as she ascended the stairs. One of the Atlanta Newmans long ago had asked Elspeth to bow at the Piedmont Driving Club. Of course, Elspeth refused.

"What are you talking about?" Elspeth said, frowning down at her short mother.

"Aren't you going to ask your mother in?" It was as if the girl were trying to block the doorway. Her hands were braced against each side of the entrance.

"Do you think we need this?" Elspeth asked. "Robert told me about your little conversation. Don't you think one is enough?"

"No, I do not." Cordelia made her way into the apartment in spite of the barrier. The place was surprisingly nice. One large living room with bookcases along two walls. There was a desk with neatly piled papers. And to the left a bedroom. It was the bedroom, the bed

itself, that spelled evil. A touch of soil, rank with peculiar passion. It was brass and swayed in the middle. Cordelia quickly looked away.

Obviously Elspeth had been cooking. In a small nook was a round table with a checkered cloth, candlesticks, and place settings for two. Wine glasses rested beside the plates. This bit of romance struck Cordelia more than anything else in the place, as a blow especially for her. Elspeth was leading the life of romance and love and warmth, whereas she, Cordelia, was alone and cold and silent.

Mentally she had never pictured the scene she was now witnessing. She had rather pictured a room filled with fading wallpaper, papers everywhere and red mahogany furniture, scratched. Instead, she was witnessing a cozy scene, interesting and lovingly shared.

"Well," she said, inspecting Elspeth's apron again. "So you're trying to cook."

"I'm not trying. I am." Elspeth went into the spacious kitchen and Cordelia followed. She watched as Elspeth stirred sauce on the stove.

"When does he get here?"

"Five or so. If he doesn't have to stay on base."

"It's too early to be making the sauce then."

Elspeth placed the wooden spoon aside and turned to Cordelia. "Just what do you want? Why are you here?"

"Can't a mother visit her daughter?"

"I feel a lecture coming on."

"Everyone's talking. The whole town knows."

Elspeth removed the apron and put the sauce on a back burner. "All right. Have your way. What do you want?"

Cordelia followed Elspeth into the living room and watched as Elspeth flopped into an oversized armchair and put her feet on a round footstool. She was wearing khaki pants and a black sweater. She looked almost smart, as she sat there staring at her mother, all dressed up in a dark blue suit with a white fake flower placed above her left breast.

Cordelia sat primly in the one upright chair in the room.

Suddenly Cordelia felt the familiar timidity. There was something threatening about the whole apartment. Two against one. Youth against age. And Elspeth suddenly chic and in complete command. She surveyed all the books and the thought that she might like living here was disturbing. The two of them, Robert and Elspeth, would never want her here. She was an outsider, not a mother. Her time was over. It was their time. Youth's time.

"Everything looks nice," she said.

"Thank you. We like it."

It was the "we", emphasized as it was, that caused Cordelia to lift her head and turn her gaze from Elspeth.

"Now, as I said, the whole town is talking about you. I went to the country club---"

"We don't give a damn," said Elspeth, crossing and recrossing her feet on the footstool.

"You've also learned to curse, I see," said Cordelia. She had never heard Elspeth say "damn" before. With it all, Elspeth had always had refinement.

"Why is it their business anyway? Those lazy, hedonistic people have nothing more to do than busy themselves with somebody else's life." She began drumming her fingers on the arm of the chair.

Suddenly Cordelia felt warm. The room seemed to sway and a dizziness caused her to put her fingers to her forehead. She had never experienced such a loss of control. Her legs felt like water and her heartbeat ~~accelerated~~ ^{was used}

"What's the matter?" asked Elspeth. "Is something wrong?"

"A drink, Elspeth. I---"

Elspeth fairly ran to the kitchen. But the room was spinning and Cordelia held on to the sides of the chair as if to control it.

"Here," said Elspeth. The bourbon was without ice or water.

"Sip it. Just sip it slowly."

"The room is spinning."

"No, you're all right."

Her whole body was drenched in perspiration. Her face, underarms, bosom. The pure bourbon burned her throat but its warmth gradually brought healing. She regarded Elspeth's frowning face. "I don't know what happened. Just suddenly." Elspeth was kneeling before her, examining her face. Her

genuine concern was so moving that two large tears rolled down Cordelia's face. She quickly brushed them away.

"Did you drive over?" asked Elspeth.

Cordelia nodded.

"A doctor. I think I should take you to a doctor."

Cordelia shook her head. She hadn't been to a doctor in ten years. And she wasn't about to go to one now. Besides, she couldn't afford it. Once you got mixed up with doctors the end was nigh. She knew that from John Henry's illness.

"I'll be all right," she muttered. And she truly believed what she said. The bourbon had cured her like the true friend it was.

Elspeth followed Cordelia to her car, insisting that she drive.

"No," said Cordelia. "I'm fine. You don't have a way back."

"I can walk."

"No, now you just go on with your cooking."

"Let us know," Elspeth said.

Cordelia said that she would, but the girl's concern was an unexpected balm Cordelia could never have foreseen. Again it reaffirmed her love for her daughter. But halfway home the dizziness returned and the blur before her was so intense she parked her car. She was on a busy thoroughfare where parking was prohibited. She leaned her head on the wheel and tried to take a satisfying breath. But the breaths were

short and quick. She was having a ---

"Are you all right, lady?"

Cordelia turned her head and saw a patrolman in a blue uniform.

"I'm having ---"

"Can you make it out of the car?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Take you to the mergency room."

Cordelia tried to open the door. The policeman opened it instead and Cordelia, leaning heavily on the young man, made it to the patrol car behind.

"I think I'm having a heart attack," she said as the two drove to the hospital.

"Maybe you're not. Sometimes it's nothin but gas."

Even in her distress Cordelia shook her head. She did not like the word "gas" and especially discussing such things with a stranger, and a man at that.

Cordelia had never seen the emergency room of the Ashton Memorial Hospital. Before her, inside, was a blur as she made her way to a window behind which sat a fiftyish-looking woman, not in uniform.

"How old are you?" asked the nurse.

Cordelia had never told anyone how old she was.

"Have you got your medicare card?"

"I don't have one." Surely that would indicate she was not sixty-five.

"This lady needs some attention. Right away. Just sunk

over the wheel when I found her." The patrolman had more sense than this busy stenographer, asking dumb questions while she was suffering a heart attack. She could die standing here, telling how old she was.

The stenographer punched a button and finally a harrassed haze of white starch arrived and led Cordelia to an outer room where a twisted blue table covered with crinkly paper dominated.

"Just take your clothes off and lie down," said the nurse. "Can I hep?"

"I can manage," said Cordelia, though she was not happy with the thought of lying there buck naked in front of the world. She could see people filing in and out of the halls in the corridor.

The nurse pulled a black curtain and Cordelia and the nurse were ensconced in darkness. A dark tomb. The nurse left and turned on a ceiling light. She handed Cordelia a short white gown whose sides were split.

"Just put this on and then we'll see how our blood pressure is."

"Don't you think I should see my doctor?"

"Let's don't talk just now." The nurse proceeded to wrap Cordelia's naked arm.

The dizziness had left her, but her body was a melee of stretched nerves and her heartbeat was so heavy she wondered if the nurse could hear it.

"High," said the nurse. "Blood pressure high. Who did

you say your doctor was?"

"Jim. Dr. Jim Amory."

The nurse left the room, leaving Cordelia on the cold table, entombed in the black curtain. She wondered if she were going to die. She squinted up at the bare light bulb above. Elspeth. She would have the nurse call Elspeth. And she would tell Elspeth she wanted to see her rector. She would tell him her plans for her funeral. And then the tears came. What would the world be without her? She had been brave, fighting the world alone since John Henry died.

Finally she forgot her sorrow when she saw the doctor's face. He looked almost happy.

"Cordelia, what in the wuld?" Jim Amory had the happiest nature of any man Cordelia had ever known. Here she was at the point of death and he was smiling his everlasting smile.

"I got dizzy at Elspeth's."

"At Elspeth's? Doesn't she live at home anymore?"

There it was! The knife to the heart. He didn't know. Or care. She regarded his smiling face again.

"She's found a little place of her own," she said quietly.

The face suddenly sobered. "Well, now, Cordelia, your blood pressure is very high. I think you should arrange to stay in the hospital and undergo a series of tests."

"What kind of tests?" She probably had cancer. She didn't want to stay in the hospital. She did not want to

undergo little humiliating tests.

"Oh, just some things we can think up." Joke.

Cordelia did not laugh. She wanted him to be serious. She did not like the smiling and little jokes. He was thinking more of his bedside manner than he was of her health.

Within the hour she gave her age, family background, diseases, medications she was under (none), her hospital insurance, and afterward she lay in a private hospital room that had green walls and one wide velour blind. Death was imminent and there was no one here. She hadn't had time to tell the nurse to call Elspeth, and the nurse on duty said she didn't have time to call anybody. She was short-handed and couldn't do everything.

Which was no way to treat the ill and dying, thought Cordelia, and began to cry again. She had heard of mean nurses but she never believed she would actually encounter one. After all, she was a Newman and everybody, even nurses, knew the name. Newmans were just not treated like just anybody.

The next morning she missed the rector's call because she was undergoing tests. She did not have a heart attack, Jim informed her, smiling happily. "But we want to find out why the elevation of yo pressure." He added darkly that he had other suspicions.

After being photographed and punched from every angle possible, Cordelia was returned to her room and put under

"observation". But the nice thing, the only nice thing, was a telephone had been placed by her bedside. Now she could call Elspeth.

Still, it seemed strange that Elspeth had not called home. Certainly she would have wondered why there was no answer. The answer came when the operator said there was no listing for a Lt. Browne, or a Miss Elspeth Newman. Elspeth did not have a telephone.

"Peculiar people," muttered Cordelia.

She called Hattie.

"Lawd, where is you?"

She told her about her experience and that she would be in the hospital for a couple of days. She asked Hattie to inform Elspeth of her situation and to bring gowns and a robe to the hospital.

"I'll be all right. They're just trying to find out some things."

"I've been looking all over the place. Got scared. Thought somebody had died."

"I'm alive," said Cordelia.

"Thank Jesus."

"Yes. Call Elspeth."

Hattie arrived at the hospital in a flurry of excitement. Hospitals for some reason were a ~~reason~~^{Time} for cheer to Hattie. She brought six gowns, three robes and two pairs of slippers, all packed in an old suitcase belonging to John Henry.

"I'm just going to be here for a day or so."

Hattie seemed disappointed. Her momentary cheer vanished. "I thought you might like to choose."

"Did you get in touch with Elspeth?"

"She at school. You want me to go to the school?"

Cordelia said that it would be a good idea because, after all, "this is an emergency."

"Sho is." Hattie smiled a flower-like smile, unusual since her customary demeanor was usually one of misery. "You looking just like yourself."

"Well, thank you. I---I had some terrible tests."

"Did?"

"Something about my colon."

"Is?"

"I'm all right, though. I'll be all right." She told her about the dizziness and the policeman. But she didn't feel like discussing further. She asked Hattie to hang the gowns and fetch Elspeth.

"The child would never forgive me if I didn't let her know," she added.

"That's the truth." Hattie, all smiles, then said good-bye and Cordelia was left to her own mind. When Elspeth came she ~~believed she would~~ ^{decided to} appear sicker than she actually was. After all, it wouldn't be a charade because, in truth, she had no idea what was the matter.

But that afternoon she found out and went into a rage such as she had not done in years. She decided to find another doctor. Jim Amory was a fake.