

Chapter Seven

Christmas. Ashton was an orgy of joy. The radio played carols constantly, television was a vision of Santa Clauses, the newspaper ran ad after ad announcing "gifts", advent had arrived at church, houses were decorated with wreaths and lights. The world was bathed in "happiness".

It was the first Christmas Cordelia was to be alone. Less than a week before the day and not one soul had invited her anywhere. Since John Henry died Elspeth and she managed to make the best of Christmases. They decorated a tree. Cordelia put a wreath on the door and on Christmas Eve she and Elspeth exchanged gifts. (Cordelia opened her friends' presents upstairs since Elspeth had no friends to either give or receive presents.)

Hattie usually came later in the day to fix a festive dinner, and after that it was all over.

Cordelia decided to be brave. Certainly she didn't want pity. She and Hattie decorated a little tree and placed it on a card table in the library. She fixed a boxwood wreath and hung it on the outside door. Hattie, remembering tradition, weaved smilax up the hall stairway. Holly was everywhere.

Cordelia wrapped presents for Elspeth and Robert and placed them beneath the tree. Surely, they would come to see her, bring her something. She was firm in her decision not to invite them. They should invite her. She told Hattie as much.

"It always has to come from my side," she explained.

"She gone axed you. May not be nothing, but they gone axed you for something."

"I don't want to go to that horrid place. Not on Christmas."

Hattie asked why she didn't just break down and ask them to come over for dinner. She said Hattie would fix everything "nice".

Cordelia sighed. "I don't know. I don't know." And she didn't. Long ago she had decided that if Elspeth married she would never interfere in her married life. She had suffered too much of in-laws in her own marriage. Until her in-laws died she and Elspeth and John Henry spent every Christmas, boring ones, at the elder Newman house, sadly exchanging presents and getting rid of wrappings as soon as they were discarded. Mrs. Newman was pathologically neat.

Actually, she thought one of her friends might ask her for dinner or something. Then she could refuse Elspeth, just casually say their presents were underneath the tree and they could come and get them since she was still shaky about driving, which she was not, but she would say so anyway. In no way did she want them to think she was waiting for an invitation.

But none of her friends called. Most likely they had merely forgotten. Christmas was such an hysterical time with family and friends coming and going. It was easy to think everyone was as busy and comfortable as they. Loneliness was a foreign sound at Christmas.

What she would do, she decided, was pretend it was just another day. A Sunday. She would go to church, which she thought (piously now) everybody in the whole town ought to be doing. They ought to be praying instead of greedily exchanging presents and drinking champagne and loving each other. They ought to love OUR LORD. That was what Christmas was all about. She talked herself into the knowledge that her friends were nothing but pagans.

She thought this way throughout the week, listening to sacred music over the "quality music" radio station, paying attention to television sermons which ordinarily she would have shut out and sniffing at all the comings and goings over red-cheeked Christmas shoppers. She was far and above such nonsense.

But on Christmas Eve afternoon Elspeth called and invited her for dinner and "a little celebration." Elspeth added that Robert especially wanted her to come. Cordelia hedged, saying she just didn't know; her dizzy spells had come again and she just wasn't up to Christmas this year.

Elspeth was adamant. Robert would pick her up. Elspeth would be expecting her at six o'clock. And it was like water ^{evaporating into air +} ~~draining from her body~~. She was cleansed, included, a new woman, healthy and happy and needed. She was beloved, warmed. She inspected her festive house. Cheer warmed her. Church was forgotten. She had a family.

For the occasion she wore a red wool dress and Robert, she saw immediately, had donned a red sweater for the occasion. They were like two gnomes leaving the house, carrying bundles of presents. The stars were clear and the scene was the prettiest Hallmark card she could possibly have divined.

Elspeth was wearing a green and red apron with little bells on it. So wherever she went she tinkled. Pace. Pace. Tinkle. Tinkle. Into the kitchen, out again, placing presents beneath an odd Christmas tree. The tree was skinny and had nothing but blue and red balls on it. Elspeth was not creative about festive occasions.

Cordelia's disappointment was extreme when she saw the eggnog. Purposely she drank nothing before she left the house, expecting, of course, she would have her usual bourbon before dinner. She noted Robert did not drink the eggnog.

He had his bourbon. Elspeth just gave her the cup of eggnog and took one for herself.

Cordelia let it pass. This was Christmas Eve and she was celebrating. She didn't need bourbon. The eggnog was sweet but warming. Underneath the tree, she immediately noted the sparsity of presents. If she counted correctly there were only six presents beneath the tree, not including her own.

"Well, here's to Christmas!" said Robert. "Not exactly Tiny Tim and all that but it's something."

Elspeth raised her cup, too. She looked radiant, her dark eyes sparkling. But Cordelia noticed she had not got over her habit. She was picking at her stockings again. Sitting there, picking at her stockings. Odd how she could smile so doing that. Cordelia long ago had concluded the habit was completely unconscious.

Nonetheless Elspeth had decorated the apartment for the occasion. There was a wreath, of sorts, hanging from the mantelpiece. It was fake and decorated with cones and a gold ribbon. Over the kitchen door hung a piece of mistletoe. That, she was certain, was Robert's touch. Elspeth probably had never heard of the tradition and for a while Cordelia's mind went rampant, picturing things she had no business picturing: Robert and Elspeth kissing beneath the mistletoe, then retiring to the bedroom and to the swayback bed.

It did not seem like Christmas at all. She felt she was

an outsider, an intruder onto an ordinary scene. Even Robert and Elspeth seemed ordinary to her. Their talk was ordinary. Robert was explaining how he got off duty. He was supposed to be on duty because he was just about the only bachelor in his company. Obviously his company commander did not know about Elspeth. It was a sordid subject for a festive occasion.

Dinner was cramped. The little table placed in the corner was clearly meant for two, not three. And they huddled together sipping Elspeth's canned mushroom soup. ("Robert just loves mushrooms. Of any sort.") Cordelia was thinking of her own dinners--turkey and hams, oyster casseroles, rolls, plum pudding and brandy sauce. Had things come to this?

All at once she was filled with an almost haunting nostalgia. She was in Tennessee. It was Christmas and the whole world smelled of cedar trees. Her tall distinguished grandfather was standing at the head of the table. He was reading from the Bible:

"...and the word went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world would be taxed...."

And her grandfather pausing at the word "taxed", sniffing at it, hating the word as if it were a poison. And after the reading, ^{came} the mystery of Christmas. Her mother loved beauty and the house was filled with Christmas roses and boxwoods and holly and smilax. After dinner they all walked, canes in hand, along the rolling hills and there was a special aura in the air. Mýsty and long ago.

"Yeah," Robert was saying, "Christmas was the one day of the year we all got loaded. Even my father. All year he never touched a drop, but Christmas---man---my uncles would come over and laughing---you talk about laughing---everybody got smashed!"

Elsbeth was laughing artificially, Cordelia noted. The girl saw the difference. There it was in black and white. Robert's background and Elspeth's. Cordelia had another vision. She saw Elspeth years hence in some dark apartment in New York with a bunch of drunken men and in her hand was one pure perfect Christmas rose. Tears were flowing down her cheeks.

"So---," said Robert. "Let's see what Santa has brought us."

Cordelia placed her dessert spoon on her plate. She could not eat the ice cream. It was bought and the eggnog had been too filling. A sense of nausea, a fullness permeated her body. She smiled with effort and she knew she was grinning instead.

Elsbeth decided they should open their presents according to age. Therefore Cordelia was first. She was handed two presents. It went through her mind that this was the fewest presents she had ever received.

"My, my," she muttered and she could not erase the idea that she was grinning. She put her hand to her bosom and took a deep breath. Thus composed, she forced a soft smile, her head lifted in appreciation.

The first present, in fact both of them were from Elspeth. Robert probably was not accustomed to presents. Cordelia unwrapped the white tissue paper and red ribbon and practically a half roll of scotch tape. It all spelled haste, thought Cordelia, pulling at the tape.

"What could this possibly be?" She glanced up teasingly at Elspeth.

A lavender shawl was revealed at last. She would never wear it. It was for a person eighty years old, at least. But she noticed it was hand-knitted.

"Did you?" she asked Elspeth in astonishment.

"Oh, no," said Elspeth, almost laughing aloud, a sucking-in laugh, at the joy of her present. "A teacher at school. She knits those every year to get a little extra money. Isn't it beautiful? Try it on."

Cordelia had never seen Elspeth so excited. She tossed the shawl about her shoulder and sat taller, modeling, moving her shoulders in a gesture of tease. "Don't I look grand?"

"You certainly do," said Robert, smiling too.

His demeanor seemed genuine. There was a sweetness about his face. Regarding him Cordelia was pleased she had spent the extra money on the sweater for him. It was a cashmere, even though she knew the expense was excessive just now. She had bought the sweater when Elspeth called. She just got in the car and bought it. Earlier she had bought only a tie.

Her own second present, wrapped in the same awkward

tissue paper, was a box of handkerchiefs.

"Well, you can certainly use these," she said, remembering the drawer-full of handkerchiefs resting at home, some from Elspeth at past Christmases. "You can never have enough." She smiled shyly at Elspeth. "Thank you, Elspeth." She regarded Robert. "Robert." She removed the tissue in her lap.

There was a slight ~~by~~ byplay between Elspeth and Robert following the removal of the tissue paper.

"You go ahead," Robert said. They were giggling, the two of them.

Cordelia understood immediately. Elspeth was older than Robert. Cordelia glowered at him, examining his face for age.

"Only one month," said Robert as if answering her glance.

"That doesn't count, then," Cordelia said. She was anxious for Elspeth to open the present she had wrapped that afternoon, moments before Robert arrived.

"No," said Elspeth. "You go first, Robert. We have to be honest about these things."

Robert leaned back. "All---right."

The sweater was too small. Cordelia saw that as he held it up in front of him. She would have to return it, go to all that trouble and the store probably didn't have his size. They would have to order. But the dark blue was becoming to him, and he seemed pleased.

"I always wanted one in high school. A friend of mine had one. Same color, too."

"And now you have one," said Elspeth.

Cordelia said she would exchange it on Monday. She didn't mind at all.

"You must have seen a thinner me," said Robert, patting his stomach. He was not fat. As a matter of fact, he had a very trim physique, one of his more attractive assets.

Elspeth gave him a follard robe, reds and blues, and tan bedroom slippers. It was the intimacy of it all that struck Cordelia, as if they were man and wife, bonded together in this intimacy. She did not dare look at Elspeth but she couldn't avoid it when Robert rose and kissed her on the cheek.

"Now," interrupted Cordelia. "It's your time, Elspeth."

"Yes," said Robert. "Old Elspeth." And the two of them giggled again.

For the life of her Cordelia had never seen Elspeth carrying on so. Giggling. Like a school girl. Even at a young age Elspeth had never giggled. She had carried the weight of the world with her mostly in gloom. Life, even then, was a serious affair, never to be taken lightly. But now, this moment, in the glow of her life, the world was taking her ^{ATV} into a rush of light-heartedness and she responded in kind.

"Open that one," said Cordelia. "It's just a little nothing." She wanted to save the real present for the last.

Elsbeth unwrapped the leather driving gloves, all the while expounding how cold she was driving to school. The heater in her car wasn't working and the gloves would "save her life."

"Well, I'm sure they won't exactly do that," said Cordelia, "but I thought you could use them. Open the other present."

Cordelia sat as if in suspension. At the last moment she decided on the gift. She went to her dresser and in a burst of generosity which filled her whole body she took the precious things and placed them in an old "Cartier" box she had saved for years.

"To my dear daughter," she wrote and the magnanimity of it all brought tears to her eyes. If only John Henry were here. Surely he would have approved.

Elsbeth saw the box. "What in the world?" her voice rose an octave. Slowly she lifted the lid and then the cotton placed just so. "Mother!" she exclaimed. And the Asian pearls held high gleamed in the sordid room. The Newman pearls and all they represented shone there like a person, glory, beauty and glamour, speaking of things unknown in this small room. "You can't," said Elspeth.

Cordelia turned to Robert, who was frowning at the pearls. "Those are the Newman pearls, true pearls from Japan. The Newmans bought them years ago. Very rare, you know."

"I can't take these from you," said Elspeth. "You've

loved them all your life." She replaced the pearls in the box, slowly replacing the cotton and then the lid.

"No, now," Cordelia was standing. "Put them on." Her body was fairly tingling.

Cordelia opened the box again and took out the pearls. They were long enough to go over Elspeth's head. "See the clasp," Cordelia said. "A lovely diamond." She glanced at Robert. He seemed out of place, wrong in the room. The man no doubt had never seen real pearls before. He was unable to appreciate such rarity.

Elspeth looked down at the pearls hanging against her green dress.

"They go with your coloring," said Cordelia. She clasped her hands together. "Well, what do you have to say?"

Elspeth said nothing as she fingered the strand. "I don't know," she mumbled.

"You look lovely," said Cordelia.

Elspeth looked up at her smiling mother. "You should keep these. I really don't have any place to wear them. Robert and I---"

"Of course you can wear them," said Cordelia. "New Years. I'm giving a New Years party. You and Robert are invited." She had not planned to give a party of any sort, but now she would have to. It would be small, she decided in the moment.

Elspeth slowly placed the empty box on the table which held the Christmas tree, then she regarded Cordelia. "Thank

you. Thank you." She closed her eyes for a moment, and Cordelia knew she had done the right thing. Elspeth was truly moved. For the first time in my life, Cordelia said to herself, I've done the right thing.

"They are beautiful," Robert mumbled.

The moment was over. Elspeth picked up an elaborately wrapped present from Robert. Cordelia relaxed in her chair, savoring the memory of the pearls and the warmth of her own love and goodness. Robert's present was undoubtedly wrapped by a salesperson. He was smiling broadly in anticipation. Cordelia was more than curious.

"You shouldn't have," said Elspeth, timidly pulling at a red ribbon. "The paper is so pretty I really should save it."

Cordelia didn't think it was a bit prettier than her own. She noted the lighted candles on a red background. Tacky. Her own had smart stripes. Elspeth had said nothing about her paper.

Out came a white cardboard box with large lettering in bold black print.

That's nothing, thought Cordelia, but she was viscerally stunned when she observed the large, cheap alarm clock Elspeth was holding, her mouth agape. And then laughter. The two of them laughing at a private joke.

"You didn't!" exclaimed Elspeth.

"I did."

Elspeth bent over the clock. "The alarm," she tried to say.

"Yes, dear. That will get you up. Believe me. The sales girl turned it on at the commissary and the entire place was almost evacuated."

Cordelia tried to smile. She saw nothing amusing. And again she was the outsider, the visitor, the odd person.

Elsbeth leaned back in her chair, hugging the clock as if it were a baby.

"I see there's another one," Cordelia said, pointing to the last present. She did not care for these private musings.

Elsbeth put the clock aside on the table, almost knocking over the pearls.

"Watch out!" Cordelia said.

Elsbeth moved the clock back and picked up the last present.

Cordelia began tapping her foot. She wanted a drink. A real drink. She wanted to sit in a comfortable chair, not this straight chair that seemed too hard. She wanted to sit and savor Elsbeth's reactions to the pearls. She wanted to do that with a drink. The room was cold.

Elsbeth began to unwrap her second present, all the time giving Robert little coy glances. It was so out of character that Cordelia stared at her daughter. For a moment she wondered ^{again} if Elsbeth were having a nervous breakdown. She looked so silly. Elsbeth had never looked silly before, but here she was oggling and carrying on. Their sin fairly permeated the ^{musty} room. "A dictionary!" pronounced Elsbeth.

Robert sat smugly, eyeing the Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, as Elspeth flipped through the pages as if she could discover something there. Something ^{of} now. Some word, perhaps of praise. None came. She rose from the chair and kissed Robert on the cheek. "Thank you. You know how I need this."

Need it, Cordelia thought to herself. Elspeth had come from a house filled with dictionaries. They were all still there. John Henry even had a standing dictionary in his bathroom. An enormous book, Cordelia was never allowed to move it. Why he wanted a dictionary in his bathroom John Henry never explained.

A clock and a dictionary. Cordelia all but shook her head. Those were no gifts from a lover. Where was the jewelry, the perfume, the lingerie, flowers? John Henry had always been generous at Christmas, showering her with presents he sometimes could ill afford. John Henry was a romanticist with all his Presbyterian pecuniary slights.

"Well," said Cordelia. "As they used to say--- 'Christmas done come and gone.' Robert, will you drive me home?"

Robert rose too rapidly, Cordelia thought. He wanted to get rid of her. Cordelia bent to pick up her shawl and handkerchiefs.

"So lovely," she said, as she straightened and received her coat held out by Robert. She was seeing the pearls on the table. They gleamed there like something obsolete. She would miss them. "This has been such a sweet evening."

Elsbeth smiled at her. "Good-night, Mother. And thanks again for everything."

Cordelia said nothing. She went through the opened door Robert was holding for her. Outside, the stars looked almost unreal, but the air was clear and cleansing. Cordelia breath^{ed}~~ly~~ heavily of the night.