

## Chapter Eight

Something happened in January that Cordelia could not ease from her mind. It was a discovery, a terrible discovery really and in its way made everything clear, at least clearer than it had ever been before. Cordelia discovered her daughter.

It was one of those tricky January days in Georgia that made one think Spring had come. The daffodils were pushing through the ground and all of Cordelia's Christmas and Lenten roses were in full flower. She had picked a few and was arranging them in the kitchen when Hattie held up a yellowed piece of paper:

"This here any count?" Hattie asked, ready to crumple the already crumpled piece of paper. "I come on it in Elspeth's springs, neath her bed."

Cordelia dried her hands and spread the paper neatly before her. She could see nothing, so she put on her glasses and read:

My father is dead. Like the sparrow I saw on the curb yesterday. I am alone. I think of Kierkegaard:

"What is happiness? A ghost which is only when it has been...What is memory? A burdensome consoler, a knave who wounds from behind, a shadow one can not sell even if somebody would buy it...What is truth? A secret the dying take with them. What is expectation? A flying arrow which does not take off. What is fulfillment? An arrow which misses the mark...."

"There is nothing. Days and nights. Nothing."

Suddenly Cordelia realized she was reading aloud.

"Elspeth write all that?" asked Hattie.

Cordelia said nothing. She read and re-read the words twice, then she stared blankly at Hattie.

"I never knew," she muttered.

Hattie sniffed. "Elspeth can come up with the most peculiarist things."

"I never knew she missed her father so."

"Bound to," said Hattie.

"There is nothing. Days and nights. Nothing."

Cordelia re-read Elspeth's thoughts.

"She got you," said Hattie.

Cordelia turned from her. "I'm not enough."

"Naw'm. But we can't always have what we wants. Child don't never forget its mama."

Cordelia turned sharply to face Hattie. "That man's a thief!" She fairly spat out the latter word.

"What man?"

"That Robert. He's a thief and a liar."

"How come?"

"Tricking Elspeth."

"Do say? I declare."

Cordelia took the paper and went straight to the library. She sat in the red leather chair and stared at the paper, not seeing it really. She knew Elspeth was not a happy child. But she had never realized the depths of her discontent. Naturally the girl missed her father. They were alike in so many ways, and Elspeth had been in her difficult teens when John Henry died. But Cordelia had never known the enormity of her grief.

Suddenly she wondered if Elspeth might commit suicide. Cordelia stood in alarm at the thought, walked around the coffee table and sat down again. Certainly she would not do such a thing now in her delirium. For delirium is how Cordelia perceived Elspeth's state of mind. There were no thoughts of death and arrows in the girl's mind now. There was only Robert.

It occurred to Cordelia sitting there pondering her child's fate that she had not seen Elspeth but once since Christmas. Not even a phone call. But <sup>then</sup> ~~that~~ she, Cordelia, had been busy <sup>too</sup> during the month. There had been the Garden Club and she had committed herself to co-chairing the rummage sale at the church, marking all those clothes, pricing them, and, of course, listening to the latest gossip.

No one, not one soul, ever mentioned Elspeth's name. They were being Christian, Cordelia surmised, being kind to a mother who was bound to be in torment over her child's wanton display of vulgarity. Better to ignore such things and call it a "blessing" the poor thing had something to take her mind off it all. Cordelia could hear them talking.

But the main thing was, Cordelia had concluded at Christmastime, that Robert cared little for Elspeth. His presents to her spoke more than any of his intimate gestures. Of course, the two did have their writing and authors and whatnot in common. But anybody in the world can tell when a man's in love. When a man's in love he is THERE. He doesn't give his beloved a dictionary, or, God forbid, an alarm clock.

What did the man see in Elspeth? Cordelia pondered these things, but she also wondered what would happen to her if Robert should leave? Army officers were always being transferred. Would he take Elspeth with him? Away from her? Then she would be truly alone. This way, at least, she knew Elspeth was only a drive away, a breathing person, her daughter and HERE.

But should she move away, then what? Cordelia's heart began to accelerate. Never in her entire life did she ever think she would be truly and honestly alone, with no one to see about her. She would have to have sitters, strangers who *would* come in her house to see about her. Sitters always stole.

She was reminded of what May Beth Hughes told her about

Mrs. Allison down the way. Mrs. Allison had to have sitters and one of the sitters told May Beth that the cook and the butler were stealing all of Mrs. Allison's silver and chinaware. The sitter told May Beth that she, the sitter, decided to take things, too. She said, after all, if the cook and butler were getting rich she might as well help herself, too.

Now, Cordelia thought. I might as well start now. "When my mind is right." She would pack up all her nicer things and take them to the attic. She would leave just enough for entertaining. Later, if she noticed things were going awry, her own mind for instance, she would instruct Hattie and Elspeth to pack the rest of the things, too. She wanted Elspeth to have her finer things. But what if Elspeth died, then they would all go to Robert. If they were married.

She would have to add something to her will: In case of Elspeth's death the house and all its furnishings would become a museum to be named the John Henry and Cordelia Newman Museum. It could be an historical house for people interested in such things to walk through and think about her and the past. She would remind her attorneys that ropes would have to be installed to protect the rooms.

There was so much to do. She took up the paper with Elspeth's writing on it again. Who was this Kierkegaard? Elspeth was always reading books written by people with funny names. Whoever he was the man had a mind just like

Elsbeth's. He could have been her blood brother.

All at once Hattie appeared in the library. She wanted to tell her May Beth Hughes was getting out of the car. "You told me you didn't never want her sneaking up."

At once Cordelia's reverie was snapped. The world was to enter her library, her sanctuary. For May Beth Hughes was the world; her mind was cluttered with thoughts of incest, divorce and the unfaithful. Obviously, she had something to say. Why else would she drive over on a simple Tuesday morning?

As usual May Beth was dressed for the occasion, for Cordelia saw instantly that it was to be just that, an occasion. She had on a light-colored suit with a pink camellia, her own no doubt, pinned on her left collar. She was wearing light stockings to match the suit and, Cordelia noted, her hair. May Beth 's once blond hair was now platinum, an occurrence that was the envy of most of their blue-haired friends. May Beth was better looking in age than she had been in younger years. Her lips shone with pink lipstick. So you saw that: the mouth and the hair, not the ~~few~~ wrinkles.

"What in the world?" Cordelia said, rising from the red leather chair.

May Beth came forward and placed both hands on Cordelia's upper arms. "I came right over. I just only now heard."

At once Cordelia felt the tingling in her body.

Elspeth! Something had happened to Elspeth.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

May Beth stepped back. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you knew."

"Knew what?" This time Cordelia took hold of May Beth's arms. She squeezed them and May Beth raised her shoulders and retreated.

"I guess I'll have to tell you. I thought you knew."

Cordelia stared at the woman, hatred gathering inside her.

The heat struck her face first. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

May Beth put both hands to her hair. "Now, Cordelia. You know I'm your friend. If I were in the same position I know you would come to me. I just thought you knew."

Cordelia could only stare. She knew she would never go to May Beth Hughes if there were gossip about her. She would wait and let May Beth come to her. Then, and only then, would she offer sympathy, care.

"That man has left her, and it seems Elspeth has taken to her bed and won't eat a thing. The woman at the boarding house called the school and all those teachers and people have been bringing food over there, trying to make Elspeth eat something. Now she's locked her door."

"Oh, my goodness." Cordelia looked about her and her eyes fell on the slip of paper. She picked it up and put it in her pocket. She didn't know what she was looking for.

Her keys. The keys to her car. Her child was in trouble. She had to go to her.

"Hattie," she fairly shouted.

"No, now. Sit down, Cordelia," said May Beth. "I've alarmed you with this. But--" and she looked everywhere except at Cordelia. "He's been calling the Whitfield girl and she won't have anything to do with him. He's too old, anyway. For her." May Beth then frankly looked at Cordelia. "Can I get you something? A little sherry or something? I know this has been a shock."

Cordelia obeyed and sat in the red leather chair, her hand to her heart. She realized her mouth was wide open and she closed it. The weakness, the familiar weakness, had come to her body. She needed a drink. "Yes," she said. "Sherry. Maybe bourbon, even. I feel faint, you know. Hattie can drive me over." She was chattering. She realized it.

May Beth vanished from the room and Cordelia could hear her running feet. Gradually the anger mounted like a low moan. That man! Elspeth had been a fool. Then a vision came. Elspeth was lying on the swayback bed, starved. On the night table was an alarm clock, ticking time away, and somewhere a shadow of a man <sup>was</sup> speaking French.

"Here, now, you just drink this." May Beth had brought a jelly glass filled with dark liquid. Cordelia spied it and with relief saw that it was bourbon, not sherry. She sipped from the glass and felt the familiar warmth. The shaking inside her subsided and she looked up to see Hattie, her



mouth turned down almost in contempt, staring at her. Hattie did not like strong drink, for any occasion.

"It's all right, Hattie," Cordelia managed. "This is an emergency."

"What ails Elsbuth?"

"Nothing," said May Beth, waving Hattie away. "Let's just be quiet now. We need to be quiet."

"Hattie," Cordelia called. "I want you to drive me over to Miss Elspeth's place."

"Lemme know when you're ready," Hattie called coolly. Hattie did not like to be dismissed. Especially by May Beth. Hattie saw straight through the woman. She had never taken to May Beth.

"I could just kiyill that man," said May Beth. "What was he like?"

Cordelia continued to sip the bourbon. "Yes, well, we don't know everything. Do we?"

"And they were going to be married and everything."

Cordelia turned her gaze. Out the library window she saw the flaming camellia bush and, with the sun on it, it could have been a burning bush--a flame of glory. She put the bourbon glass aside and pushed herself up from the chair with both hands. "I have to go to my child," she said with authority.

"Don't you want me to take you over?" asked May Beth. Cordelia could detect a slight disappointment in the woman's voice. Her part in it was all over. And she would not be

here to witness the crisis. The last thing Cordelia wanted was for May Beth Hughes to see Elspeth's apartment and Elspeth in it, lying there, hungry with grief.

"We can manage," Cordelia said quietly.

When May Beth left Cordelia instructed Hattie to get out the picnic basket. "We're going to take Elspeth a little picnic. She's not feeling well."

"She low?"

"Just a cold or something. Let's make some little sandwiches and put some tea in a thermos. Maybe an apple or so."

On the ride over in Hattie's ancient buick Hattie volunteered that the garbage men no longer liked to pick up "strong drink" bottles. "They wants you to separate thangs. Strong drink bottles can't be crushed up no more."

It was an admission, of course. Hattie was informing her that she knew she drank too much and that there was something more than <sup>dizzy spells</sup> ~~Elspeth's cold~~ that caused her to need bourbon at 10 o'clock in the morning.

Cordelia ignored the <sup>talk of</sup> garbage men and the bottles and said she needed the "little drink" this morning because she was feeling dizzy again.

"You need to <sup>asked</sup> ~~asked~~ your doctor about that er." Hattie turned the corner and all the hanging things, a coon's tail, a Jesus and a buck-eye swayed on the dash board. Cordelia had always seen Hattie as superior, someone who would never

have such things in her car. It just went to show that no one knew anybody else. Not really. Not even one's own daughter. It took a crumpled piece of paper to explain some things.

"Lawd," said Hattie swaying with the turn, "Elsbuth's gone kill all of us one of these days. She gone bury all of us."

"She's just got a cold. That's all."

Hattie said nothing but came to a startling stop in front of the boarding house. Hattie had never completely managed brakes.

The two of them marched up the stairway to Elspeth's apartment, single-file. Hattie carried the thermos bottle and Cordelia the wicker basket filled with ham and cheese sandwiches.

Cordelia placed the basket on the floor by her side and rapped on the door.

"Elspeth, dear. It's Mother."

No answer.

Another rap

Silence.

"Maybe she done got up. Gone on to school," said Hattie, her mouth in its customary sneer, but her eyes shining, eagerly waiting for what might appear behind the door.

"She's probably sleeping," Cordelia said. She hit the door with her open palm, a noise that guaranteed the waking of even a drunk.

Finally:

"Go away!"

Hattie and Cordelia stared at each other. The voice was guttural, loud--unlike anything similar to Elspeth's voice, which Cordelia had always heard ~~as a~~ <sup>as</sup> refined ~~voice~~ <sup>vowel</sup>, even lilting. Elspeth had a cultured southern accent, not a ~~hint~~ of red in it.

"It's Mother," Cordelia said again.

"It's Hattie, too." Hattie offered a hint of a smile, as if certainly her presence would assure an open door.

"I don't want to see anybody."

"We got sandwiches," Hattie said. "A homemade cake. Mine. Baked it yesterday."

The door jerked open. Elspeth, without a robe, was standing barefoot in the doorway wearing a white nightgown. Her hair was matted to her head and her face appeared swollen and pale. "What now?" she said.

For a moment neither Hattie nor Cordelia could say anything. But Cordelia who had faced tougher obstacles in life, deaths mainly, picked up the basket and announced that they had come to "heal" Elspeth. She marched straight into the kitchen and placed the basket on the table. Hattie followed with the thermos.

"You want me to heat the tea?" Hattie asked, ignoring Elspeth.

"Yes, please." Cordelia, too, ignored the girl, who was now leaning against the kitchen doorway. "Put on some

clothes, Elspeth. You look crazy, hair all messed up. Where is Robert?"

Elspeth crossed her arms and bent over, hugging her body.

"What's the matter with you?" Cordelia stared at the girl, then glanced at Hattie, who was wide-eyed, holding a tea kettle.

Elspeth ran barefoot to the bathroom. And Cordelia and Hattie stood silent in the kitchen. Finally Cordelia said:

"She's having a nervous breakdown."

"Sho is," Hattie said.

Cordelia began to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"That aint gone help nothing."

They both watched as Elspeth, a wash cloth in her hand, fell on the swayback bed, her face to the wall. A grinning picture of Robert was placed near the alarm clock on the night table. Cordelia wanted to take the picture and smash it against the wall.

Hattie went over to the bed. "Here now." She took the wash cloth and wiped Elspeth's forehead. "Now you just let Hattie fix you something to eat and you'll be feeling better in no time."

"Yes," Cordelia said. She decided not to mention Robert's name again. "And we're going to take you home. You need---"

Elspeth jerked the wash cloth from Hattie's hand and turned further to the wall. "Just go home," she half shouted.

"Now Elspeth. You get up from there. You're being silly. I thought you had more sense." Cordelia decided the girl didn't need kindness. What she needed was practicality and firmness.

Elspeth turned and lay staring at the ceiling as if she were reading something there. "He's gone," she said quietly.

"Who?" Cordelia asked, though she knew very well who had gone.

"Robert." Elspeth was practically whispering. "He thought we were rich. He thought you were rich."

Of course, Cordelia said to herself. I knew it all along. But aloud she said: "Who told him?" She genuinely wanted to know.

"I did, I guess."

"And he just went?"

As far as Cordelia could discern Robert, shortly after Christmas, had taken to staying more and more at the fort, giving excuses, making only short visits to the apartment and then, finally, disappearing altogether. He left a note, saying he had been transferred to a post near New York. He knew that Elspeth would never adjust to the North, nor he to the South. He hoped they would correspond and he especially wanted to know how Elspeth's writing progressed. While she was at school he took all his things and paid the landlady one month's rent in advance.

"Nobody wants no man <sup>that</sup> ~~what~~ don't want them," Hattie blurted out.

But nobody listened. Cordelia's sharp eye was seeing more than grief in the body that lay in the bed. And when she assured herself of the fact a panic took hold of her. Her legs weakened. Her heart accelerated and her whole body broke out in sweat. She lifted her hands and her fingers trembled before her.

"Lawd, we don't want two sick folks," Hattie said, retreating to the kitchen. She returned with a glass of ice water.

"Bourbon," said Cordelia.

"Hep yourself," Hattie said. "I hasn't touched strong drink since I found Jeeezus."

"It's in the kitchen cabinet," Elspeth managed, her hand resting on her forehead.

For a second Cordelia wondered if Elspeth knew how much she liked her "little drink." She wondered if the doctor had told her. But it didn't matter now. She rushed to the kitchen, poured out the water in her glass and filled it with the strong bourbon. She stood there, holding onto the sink and breathing heavily. Just the idea of the bourbon seemed to calm her. But she sipped from the glass anyway.

What on earth was she going to do? There was no mistaking what she had seen: Elspeth's enlarged breasts and stomach. The girl was pregnant. The entire scenario whirled in front of her: The town talking, Elspeth's having no job, no money, a baby in the house hollering through the enormous empty halls. They were descending into white trash. Not

descending. Racing. All her dreams were over.

"You all right?" Hattie asked, suddenly appearing in the kitchen.

Cordelia nodded. She sipped from the glass again, then turned to Hattie.

"Hattie?"

"Yes'm."

"We can't tell anyone can we?"

"No'm. Sure can't."

"Elspeth's pregnant."

Hattie smacked her mouth with her open palm. "Hush your mouth!"

"Yes," whispered Cordelia.

"Lawd Jeeeeezeus. She tell you that?"

Cordelia shook her head.

"That's how come she so sick. Aint no cold."

Cordelia nodded. Solemnly.