

Chapter Thirteen

Elspeth sent word through her psychiatrist, Dr. ^{Frank}~~Martin~~ Bodenheimer, that she did not wish to see Cordelia. "For the time being." Dr. Bodenheimer wanted Elspeth to remain in the psychiatric ward for a week or so. She had developed eczema in the hospital and was being medicated for that as well. If the medication did not work he was going to try hypnosis. He also wanted to observe her reactions to the drug lithium. But she was not to see Cordelia.

Dr. Bodenheimer said Elspeth was schizoid. Cordelia sat in the man's cave-dark office and listened as he calmly declared her daughter to be insane. There would be therapy sessions, some of which he wanted Cordelia to attend.

Cordelia was outraged and told the doctor there had never been an insane drop of blood in her family, on both

sides, since the sixteen hundreds. She had it all written up in a book and if the doctor wanted to read the book he was welcomed to do so. She said what Elspeth had come from the Newman side.

The doctor did not appear to be interested in anything Cordelia had to say. The man had dark brooding eyes and Nixon blue jowls. He did not look into Cordelia's eyes. Instead his gaze rested just above her head as if something there interested him more than Cordelia's litany of her family history.

"How much is all this going to cost?" Cordelia asked.

And the man, then, looked straight at her. "Oh, in the range of eighty dollars an hour. That is what we usually charge."

"In the range?"

The doctor nodded solemnly as if something sad had been said.

"Well, I'm sorry. I am at the present unable to pay."

"There are state institutions."

Cordelia gasped. She had a vision. Elspeth, raving mad, screaming and laughing behind bars in some miserable prison of a place. She saw her in a white nightgown, the top of which she was chewing. "No," she said. "No. We can manage somehow."

"I have every reason to believe that in time Elspeth can lead a perfectly normal life. But we want to see how she reacts to the lithium, what the side effects will be."

"How long?"

"That's difficult to determine just now. A half a year. Maybe longer."

"You mean Elspeth is going to have to stay in the hospital for a half a year?"

Dr. Bodenheimer said that would not be necessary. He would see her on an out-patient basis. But he wanted her to stay in the hospital for at least a week at the present time. He said he knew Elspeth was a new mother and needed to be with the young one. With supervision. "Your own," he said.

Dr. Bodenheimer's pronouncements hit Cordelia viscerally, and for the first time in her life she was experiencing an almost overwhelming fear. There usually were answers to events but now there were no answers. She was remembering a program she saw on television, a talk show program, where couples sat mournfully on a stage and the husbands recited how the new mothers had flung babies into rivers or stabbed them in their baths, drowned them. They couldn't help it, the husbands declared.

Would Elspeth one day sit on a stage? But most of all there was the matter of money. As soon as Cordelia left Dr. Bodenheimer's office she returned home and, armed with her bourbon, sat in the library to think. What she would have to do was the most wrenching thing she could possibly think of. She would have to sell the house.

Even the thought, as far in the distance as it might

be, was hard. It was like selling herself or John Henry or the Newmans. The house had been her identity, told what she was, announced to the world that she was a person of distinction, came from distinguished people, who knew beauty when they saw it and cherished the old and the mellow like they cherished old Confederate graves. In a way the house was a grave.

Who would live here? Some foul newcomer with money. The thought was unthinkable. Of course, there was the apartment house. She could sell that instead, but it wouldn't bring as much as the house. Thus it appeared to Cordelia that she had a long and costly trip ahead.

Dr. Bodenheimer believed that Elspeth would want to see Cordelia in time, as soon as the medication brought reasoning back. He said that Elspeth had not suffered "post partum" blues, that that was not the cause of her actions. She was schizophrenic, had been probably since her teen years. True, Elspeth had always been aloof, avoided people when she could and her affair with Robert was as out of character as her tearing up her room that day. All of which were symptoms, Dr. Bodenheimer said.

Cordelia had always thought John Henry's mother was peculiar. She, too, was aloof and had never taken to Cordelia. She knitted wash clothes all day. Cordelia never saw the cloths used, they were merely knitted--long slender cloths. Day after day. Mrs. Newman looked like Franklin Roosevelt and Cordelia always saw him sitting in a parlor knitting wash cloths.

Very peculiar, Cordelia decided long ago. So Elspeth had received the germ of madness from her grandmother. On the other side.

"I knowed there was something wrong with that woman first time I laid eyes on her," declared Belle who was holding little Elspeth as she talked to Cordelia in the library. Cordelia had told her she was drinking a little cider.

"What do you mean?" Cordelia asked. She did not want one soul to know a thing about Elspeth.

"Hattie told me how she mused up her room and gone crazy."

"Hattie is perfectly wrong. She knows nothing about Elspeth. My daughter is merely suffering baby blues."

At the pronouncement the baby began to holler.

"Hush that up now, youngun," said Belle.

It occurred to Cordelia that little Elspeth might learn to talk like Belle. And she couldn't be having that. She guessed she might have to get rid of the woman but just now she was too tired and Belle had learned the routine of the house. Training someone else just now was too much. But the woman was costly as well. As soon as she regained her strength she, Cordelia, would take over the baby.

"Elspeth don't go to no church, does she?"

"My daughter is a member of the Episcopal Church."

"But she don't go. It wouldn't hurt none if she commenced to going to church. Regular."

Cordelia did not want to discuss anything with the woman. "Why don't you take the baby outside? And, also, Belle, I'm going to need you here for longer hours. Until Elspeth is able to return, you know. My health isn't what it used to be."

Belle said that she was able to give more time. She declared that little Elspeth was just like a daughter to her anyway. "Pretty little thang."

Cordelia was pleased. Each day she saw more of herself in the child. Her hair was darkening and her eyes were as blue as the autumn sky. Just like her own. She too was becoming very attached to the child.

When Belle left she relaxed into the Chippendale chair and took up her drink again. She would have to paint the house. In its present condition prospective buyers would be put off by its slightly soiled condition. Other than that, the house was sturdy and still stood in all its purity.

What would the Newmans think if they knew she was selling their souls? For generations they were able to keep the house. But in this instance it was all the fault of John Henry. He just wasn't successful with money. He was the only Newman she knew who had not brought something to the family name. So she wasn't letting anyone down by having to sell the family treasure. It was merely circumstance. And John Henry was the circumstance.

A few years back she had thought of going into business

for herself. Selling antiques. She believed she would have been a success. Everyone knew her and certainly they knew she was knowledgeable about antiques. Just one visit to this house told that. But when she investigated, the plan fell through. It would take too much capital as well as energy. And she had none of either. So she filled up her days with worry instead.

The drink gave her an appetite for lunch and she headed toward the breakfast room, but in doing so she heard the mailman. More bills, she thought for the one thousandth time. She opened the door and the mailman gave her the pile of catalogues and on top a handwritten letter with par avion written on the envelope.

She returned to the library and immediately opened the envelope. A check for two hundred dollars was written in Robert's rather jerky handwriting. Cordelia stared at the check. What in the world did he think she could do with two hundred dollars? Was that all?

She immediately read the note:

"Dear El---"

Cordelia glanced at the envelope again. He had written to Elspeth, not her as she had asked him to do. The check also was made out to Elspeth. So there went all her plans. She had planned everything. The bank would take out an account in her name but she would spend all of it on little Elspeth. Now what?

Dear El, (she read again)

I hope the enclosed check will help you and the baby until I see if the book will take off as the publishers expect it to. Then I'll be able to send more on a regular basis.

I have to be in New York next month and I hope then to make a quick trip to Georgia in order to discuss all of this with you.

My wife now knows everything and is willing to adopt the child if such an arrangement is all right with you. At any rate, we will discuss the details when I see you.

Until then,
Robert

P.S. Will you kindly keep your mother out of my hair. She is helping nothing. Sorry.

It wasn't so much Robert's mention of her that disturbed Cordelia so, it was the fact of taking the baby away. Surely that would never happen, though Elspeth was in no position to argue any case anywhere. It was then, that moment, in reading what he had written, that Cordelia knew her granddaughter was as important to her as Elspeth had always been. The child was her lifeline, her help in need, her own flesh.

That man will never take the child, Cordelia said to herself and gulped a swallow of bourbon. "Over my dead body," she said aloud to the empty room.

Money. If two hundred dollars was all he could send then how could he fly around the world, go to New York, come here? How could he afford the expense? Nobody was going to read his book. He was lying, sending as little money as he possibly could. Just to get by. Maybe his wife had money.

She tore up the letter and went into the kitchen to fix a little lunch. But she wasn't hungry now. She decided to call a real estate company. Testing the waters, she thought, might be a good idea. She wanted to know just how much she could realize from the house.

Anne Cross sold real estate. Anne Cross was an intelligent young widow from a good background. Cordelia had known the Cross family since she had come to Ashton. Lovely people. Anne Cross was in much the same loose ends as she. She had married a man of family but whose weakness, alcohol, had left her penniless.

She decided she would go later to see Anne Cross. In no way did she want anyone to smell the bourbon. So, at four o'clock she put on her best blue suit and drove downtown. Anne Cross was talking on the telephone when Cordelia entered the one story building. But she waved at Cordelia and pointed to a chair.

For some reason Cordelia was nervous. Or was she just saddened? Whatever, she was conscious of her heartbeat that did not show signs of slowing. It made her nerves feel stretched and her stomach queasy. She tightened her fists and prayed to God she would not have a dizzy spell, not now in front of Anne Cross who certainly knew about Elspeth's having a baby.

"Cordelia!" smiled Anne Cross, replacing a gold earring. With all her worries Anne Cross was a pretty woman, even chic. She had straight brown hair which

emphasized her feminine features and lovely green eyes. There was breeding in the face.

Cordelia sighed. "Anne, I hope you can help me."

"Let me try."

Cordelia rested her hands in her lap. "I am very saddened."

Anne Cross's eyebrows arched in surprise. "Why, Cordelia. What's the matter?" She dampened her lips. "Is it Elspeth?"

Cordelia regarded Anne frankly. "Partially."

"You've named the baby Elspeth." A smile softened Anne's face.

"A family name. Six generations." And Cordelia heard the sadness in her own voice.

Anne dampened her lips again. This was awkward, and her gestures showed it to be so, Cordelia noted. She was turning her wedding ring over and over. How does one approach illegitimacy in a business office, she appeared to be asking.

"I have to sell the house." Cordelia had always called it "the house", never "my house." The whole town referred to it as "the house."

"Oh no." Anne appeared relieved the subject had changed. "Cordelia Newman, now you just can't do that. I won't hear of it."

"Yes, Anne. Circumstances have come to this."

"Poor dear," was what Anne Cross called Cordelia.

Cordelia was not certain if she cared for the term. It was all right to be a dear, but to be poor was inexcusable nowadays. She lifted her chin.

"I can't imagine anyone else in the house," said Anne.

"It's difficult for me, too. Only Newmans have lived in it. No one else."

Anne said she knew that and she asked Cordelia if she was sure she wanted to sell.

Cordelia did not want to say she needed the money. "I'm getting on, you know. The house is just getting too much for me. And Elspeth's such an intellectual." She gave a little laugh. "Doesn't really care for housekeeping. She appreciates beautiful things. Don't misunderstand me. But her writing and work at the library keep her so busy and now the---"

"Oh, I know," said Anne. "I have a hard time keeping up my little place." Anne Cross lived in her in-law's carriage house.

"Yes," said Cordelia. "How much do you think the house should go for?" Cordelia had never liked to discuss money. It was embarrassing. All her life she had been timid with money because all her life she had never had any.

"Heavens, I don't know." Anne looked everywhere but at Cordelia. "The market is rather depressed just now. For Sale signs are everywhere. And your house and grounds are so large. She looked at Cordelia then. "Institutional selling would be your best bet, Cordelia."

"Institutional selling. What do you mean?"

"Oh, apartments. Bed and Breakfast, even an Inn."

Cordelia felt the color rise to her face. "Absolutely not!" She was picturing some white trash of a man tearing up the house, taking down walls, ruining the floors and mantels, to make apartments--just like the one Elspeth and Robert lived in.

"It would certainly be a tragedy," said Anne sweetly.

"Indeed."

"Are you sure you want me to look into this?"

Cordelia slapped her gloves across the purse in her lap.

"I don't know. I'm just feeling my way, you know."

Anne rose as if to dismiss. "Well, if you decide to sell, and I hope you don't, jsut give me a call. We'll see what comes up."

On her drive home Cordelia was adamant. She could not sell the house. She wanted little Elspeth to grow up in it. Be somebody. She would sell the apartment house and that would see Elspeth through the beginning of her lessons with Dr. Bodenheimer. She had taken to thinking of Elspeth's sessions with the doctor as "lessons". It sounded better somehow, more in keeping with Elspeth's normal character.

Before she drove up the driveway Cordelia stopped the car and regarded the house in all its sun drenched splendor. The ten Doric columns rose out of the brick piazza like

graceful stamen and she remembered Elspeth's baby carriage there and the Newmans sitting in rockers, ice tea glasses in their hands and the boxwoods tall and full in their first Spring green. No. The house should remain. It was a landmark, not fit for soiled hands.

And inside--- The thought struck her instantly. She could sell what was inside the house. Some of the furniture. The rooms had become cluttered through the years. The furniture would bring money and in turn keep memories of her alive. Those who bought would say: "This is one of the old Newman pieces. Cordelia just didn't have room for it."

The thought was so enhancing she waved joyously at Belle and little Elspeth who were resting under the old oak near the fish pond.

The following week Elspeth returned to the house with a peculiar smile, a secret smile as if she were proud of something; proud that she knew things others would never know, as if she knew destinies, Cordelia's destiny, and she was smiling because of her peculiar knowledge.

Cordelia did not like the smile. It irritated her. Once she almost shouted at Elspeth: "Quit it! Quit it!" But she said nothing. Elspeth was taking her pills and she was almost normal, except for the smile. She was to have two lessons a week with Dr. Bodenheimer. Other than that she was normal Elspeth--aloof, sometimes haughty and other times sweet.

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She wanted to get her old job back, she said. Money was on her mind, too. At least she talked a good bit about it. But Cordelia told her not to worry, they were comfortably situated. She did not mention selling the furniture.

"Do you think you can manage a job, dear?" Cordelia asked.

"The doctor says I can. He wants me to keep a routine, be as active as I can, but he doesn't want me to be under any strain."

"I should think not," Cordelia said, thinking of her own strain, her constant strain. "Strain is a very desolate thing."

Elspeth said she was going to school tomorrow and see about her job. The job was so routine that she could practically do it single-handed.

Cordelia just came out with it. "Dear, do you suppose the school knows about little Elspeth?"

Elspeth's dark eyes suddenly turned fierce. "What difference does it make? My life style is nobody's concern but mine."

"Of course. Of course, dear." Elspeth's eyes were frightening. Cordelia wondered if Elspeth would suddenly appear one day with a knife and plunge it into Cordelia's bosom, all the while her eyes knifing, too. Imagine, she thought, a mother being afraid of her own daughter.

Elspeth turned from her and began to climb the stairs.

Cordelia watched her go. She was still heavy from childbirth and she slumped as she climbed the stairs. Elspeth always had such a straight carriage. She seemed to have aged in the time she had been hospitalized. But her skin was clear and all signs of the eczema had disappeared.

Grief, Cordelia thought. Elspeth was a walking picture of grief. And she thought of Robert, his coming. What then would happen? What would Elspeth do if he tried to take the child? What would she do?

All at once she felt dizzy and she grabbed the newel post. Bowing her head, she knew her blood pressure was rising. Jim Amory had told her not to become overly excited about anything. He wanted her to avoid stress. So here they were two people who were commanded serenity, and all they had was war.

The dizziness passed and Cordelia went outside to see the baby and Belle. Seeing Belle in the distance she wondered again just how long she could afford to have her. Not long. Unless the apartment sold in a hurry--and sold well.

Little Elspeth was becoming prettier and prettier each day. She was now trying to sit up a little and her eyes were Elspeth's eyes, large, except they were blue like her own.

"Elspeth don't want nothing to do with her baby, does she?"

"Why, of course."

Belle said nothing and appeared to be chewing something, the side of her cheek.

"Isn't little Elspeth pretty?" Cordelia smiled at the baby.

"She the spitting image of her daddy."

Cordelia stared at her. "You don't know Robert. How do you know what he looks like?"

"Hattie, she shown me a pitcher."

"From where?"

"In Elspeth's room. She got a pitcher hid in her bureau."

"Hattie has no right! She shouldn't be rummaging through Elspeth's things."

"Said Elspeth herself showed it to her."

"I declare." Cordelia turned and went straight to the house. When Hattie arrived tomorrow she would have to talk to her. But Elspeth should have shown her the picture, not Hattie. She would like to tear it up. To think Elspeth would have that man's picture after the way he treated her.

The important thing, however, was Elspeth was still grieving over the man. Cordelia decided she would have to go ask Dr. Bodenheimer what to do about that. Inside the house she made an appointment for Thursday afternoon. She would ask him how one got over love. If that's what it was.

Dr. Bodenheimer looked just like Jesus. At least he looked like the image on the stain glass window at the Episcopal Church, red-rimmed eyes and all. Large, sad eyes.

Cordelia sat across from him, the glass-topped desk between, and nervously fingered the handkerchief in her hand. The man was intimidating in his way. He appeared to know things about her he had no business knowing. He appeared to look straight through her.

"I know what's wrong with Elspeth," Cordelia heard herself saying.

"Yes?" Dr. Bodenheimer did not have a southern accent. But he did have an accent. A Chicago one, Cordelia thought.

"Elspeth's still in love with that horrible man."

"Yes?"

Cordelia nodded. "And she can't get over it. She keeps his picture in her bottom drawer and every now and then takes it out and looks at it."

"How do you know this?"

"The help told me."

"The help?" Dr. Bodenheimer wrote something on a piece of paper. "I see. Is the help in the habit of witnessing such actions?"

"I don't know. They are peculiar people."

"Has Elspeth ever confided in you--about Robert, that is?"

Cordelia said that Elspeth had never confided in her about anything. She said Elspeth was like her father. Quiet. And intellectual.

"She lives in a cerebral world?"

Cordelia wanted to say that he, Dr. Bodenheimer, should

have found that out himself. She also wanted to say she didn't think Dr. Bodenheimer was very smart.

"How can I help her, Doctor?" Cordelia wadded her handkerchief.

"Oh, I think by letting her work her problems out by herself. A disappointing love affair is much like love itself."

Cordelia stared at the man.

"There are different kinds of love and there are different ways of recovering from it. Recovery takes different paths. The anguish at first, the bitterness, the sadness, hurt and then the lengthening into something concrete. A past event, never quite healed, but a concrete event all the same."

Cordelia had no idea what in the world the man was talking about. He liked to talk, she noted. She had always thought psychiatrists usually said nothing, that they merely listened.

"Elspeth's schizoid condition, however, was not caused by this one event. Or the birth of the baby, though those things might have precipitated the disease."

"What caused it then?" Cordelia looked at him as if to dare him. In no way was she the cause of Elspeth's illness.

"Oh, many things go into making the human condition. The death of her father was a very important event in Elspeth's life and at a very vulnerable age. There are other things."

"Like what?"

Dr. Bodenheimer said he did not believe going into such details at this point in Elspeth's treatment would help things very much. He did hope, though, that Cordelia would take part in some of Elspeth's therapy. He thought that it helped to have members of the family take part in the healing process. Cordelia thought, but did not say, that the man was a fool if he thought she, Cordelia Newman, was going to sit down and tell anybody all her private thoughts.

She rose and bid the man "good evening." It had been a useless venture, much in the same way her interview with Bill Cuthbert, the rector of the church, had been. It had all just taken up her time.

But when she returned home Elspeth was in a white rage, worse than Cordelia had ever seen. Robert had called.