

## Chapter Fifteen

Empty Victories was indeed no victory. The book sold little more than five hundred copies. Or, at least, that is what Robert told Elspeth, explaining the two hundred dollar check instead of the promised five hundred. He added that Abigale would like to contribute "and she is more than able to do just that" but he felt he could not ask her to mend his own "mistakes."

"Is that what he calls his child? A mistake?" asked Cordelia

Elspeth said nothing. She was unable to renew her employment at the high school library. So she took a job at the county library where, as Cordelia noted, they kept her hidden from sight. She worked in a dark basement, ordering books, mending books, typing lists of tapes and records for the blind. But it paid a little salary.

The first thing Cordelia sold was the Chippendale desk in the library. John Henry's grandmother had bought the desk years ago in England. It was hand-carved of cherry wood and now its patina was as smooth as mellow wine. The decision to sell was hard won. But taxes on the house and doctor bills for both big and little Elspeth had increased immeasurably. Duty, indeed, was the sublimest word in the English language. Cordelia saw it that way. It was her "duty" to sell the desk.

The parents of a young newly-wed bought the desk for the young bride, who was beginning to furnish her new bungalow. The girl, a flighty pretty blond, danced and clapped her hands in Cordelia's library as she observed the desk.

"You're actually gone sell it, Miz Newman?"

The girl and her mother, similar in looks with the difference of age separating their appearance, observed Cordelia as if she were a mere clerk somewhere.

"Yes," said Cordelia. "I have wanted to simplify my life for some time now. At my age things don't mean anything to me anymore."

Which was one of the larger embellishments of the truth Cordelia had said in some time. She loved that desk. For years she had lovingly polished it, rubbing bees wax over it, dusting it, carressing it. Its drawers contained few things, some old letters and abandoned check receipts. The desk was for appearance sake only.

There was a secret drawer, which Cordelia pointed out to the young girl, who immediately went into an exercise of joy, clapping her hands. "Imagine! I can put all my jewelry there and nobody'll even know. I luv it. I just luv it." She hugged Cordelia.

The next day Cordelia watched as two men with tattoos on their arms heaved the desk and carried it out the house. It was like a coffin being removed, a beloved body never to be seen again. So life had come to this. She was selling her very soul.

Yet it was an act of love, Cordelia reasoned. She and Elspeth and her granddaughter had to survive and at the same time exhibit dignity to the world. Little Elspeth had to be brought up in the proper atmosphere, learn the finer things of life, appreciate beauty and goodness. Keeping the house would help all this.

If, indeed, Cordelia had to sell her soul (truly) she would see to it that her granddaughter would have everything necessary to find a comfortable place in this world. Cordelia had come to place every hope she ever had for Elspeth now on her granddaughter.

And she saw success there. The child was altogether charming. She was a happy child, the very opposite of Elspeth. At first she feared doom, but now the child's features were set and her ways along with them. Both pretty.

She was discovering the world, crawling everywhere and

finding the earth a happy place in which to dwell. Even Elspeth's outlook appeared to improve, especially when she was with the baby. Cordelia saw the glow on Elspeth's face. Everything she once felt for Robert was now concentrated on this lively baby.

The Chippendale chair was the next thing to go. That was worse than the desk. It was like selling her mother. Cordelia remembered bringing it home from Tennessee after her mother died. She saw it sitting inside the truck when the movers brought it and numerous other things from her past. It looked so stately in the dark dirty truck, and once inside the house it blended beautifully with all the Newman pieces.

Sarah Whitfield bought the chair. She wanted it for her guest room. Cordelia knew it would find a home with Sarah Whitfield's Charleston furniture. It was a signed piece, therefore Cordelia asked three thousand dollars for it. She knew she should have asked more but Sarah Whitfield had been such a close friend through the years and Cordelia truly admired the family. The Whitfields were similar to her in their background; they both had fine connections elsewhere.

So her bank account was rising. The desk went for five thousand and now with the chair she had something at least to count on. The word got out that she was simplifying her life and her telephone jingled happily as the days came on.

Elspeth, noting the brown wicker furniture replacing

the old familiar pieces, wanted to know just what Cordelia was up to.

"You love those things," Elspeth announced. "They're your whole life."

"I'm tired of them!" Cordelia feigned a slight anger. "They're too much trouble. And I'm getting on, you know."

"I never thought you'd get that old," Elspeth said.

"Well, you don't know everything. Besides, the house is too cluttered."

Cordelia told herself she would never let Elspeth know her pain. Elspeth had suffered enough and she, Cordelia, was not about to add to it. For surely it would add to Elspeth's concern to know her mother's deep hurt. Cordelia was as sure of that as she was of the paltriness of the wicker furniture.

The wicker was good as wicker goes. She and John Henry had bought it when they were first married, and it adorned the library when the Newman's moved out. Later, they acquired the red leather sofa, the chairs and tables, all from Cordelia's side.

Well, life was changing everywhere. Cordelia had lost most of her fine furniture. It graced houses all over Ashton, the better houses, and they were reminders of her. When she was gone the new owners would say: "That was Cordelia Newman's. She was a member of one of Ashton's finest families."

This legacy pleased her enormously. Also Elspeth's

health was improving. Her courtship and pregnancy was an old story now. Remembered, yes. But it was so planted in the town that it became almost normal, accepted. The excitement of the scandal had long died and boredom replaced it like an oft-told tale.

Elsbeth went to her dark job each day and returned to her ever growing child each night. The child was a true beauty with naturally curly dark hair and sky blue eyes, a laughing child that comforted the echoing rooms. For Cordelia had also sold the Persian rugs, causing odd echoes. She replaced them with a few throw rugs she found in the attic. Actually the bareness of the wide floor boards was attractive. At least she told herself that.

So: she had a laughing child and money in the bank. She began to go out more. She entertained the garden club and the members were so enchanted with what remained in the house they forgot weeds and dogwood blight. There was not one member who didn't ask about the Ming vases:

"Now, Cordelia, when you get ready to rid yourself of the vases don't forget me. And the silver. Isn't that Hester Bateman bowl in the dining room <sup>from</sup> the old Newman collection?"

Cordelia said she wanted to keep some things for little Elspeth. She just wanted to get rid of some of the larger pieces. Still, she was thinking she might sell the bowl because at the last counting she had twenty-five thousand dollars sitting <sup>in</sup> ~~at~~ the bank bringing interest. That plus

the apartment house and a few other things would see her though her old age and leave a little something for the two Elspeths. She planned to stay in the house should her mind go. She had told Elspeth that under no circumstances would she go to a nursing home. She wanted Hattie to stay on and take care of her various needs.

"Hattie will probably be in a nursing home long before you," said Elspeth. "Then what?"

"You'll just have to find someone else. I don't want Belle, though. I want someone refined."

Of course she was as aware as anything else that none of this would happen. When her time came she would just go away in her sleep, a beautiful death that would cause all and sundry to comment on. "How wonderful," they all would say.

But into this relative peace came an alarming event. Little Elspeth began to walk. Her legs were her mother's legs, long and thin. She was into everything, and Cordelia took up objets d'art about the house and put them out of sight. Everything went into the child's mouth.

It was a late September day when Cordelia was stricken to her very heart. She remembered it was September twenty-ninth because it was big Elspeth's birthday. She was sitting in the drawing room, wishing that she could re-upholster the cushions on the wicker chairs. They were beyond genteel poverty now; they were welfare time--torn and worn.

Then something, something familiar but dreaded, caught the corner of her eye. Little Elspeth was in the hall-- PACING. Cordelia stared at the child and placed her hand to her breast. For all the world it could have been big Elspeth there, pacing away, worrying about the Lord knows what.

The child even had big Elspeth's expression, tight-lipped and staring ahead. Pace. Pace. Pace. Cordelia rose from the wicker rocker and went out into the hall. "Why are you doing that?" she demanded of the child.

There was no answer. Just like big Elspeth. Aloof, secret. Pacing.

"Why are you doing that?" Cordelia asked again.

"Doing what?" came the small voice.

"Pacing like that?"

The child jerked her shoulders and continued the pacing.

"That will make you nervous when you grow up," Cordelia said, staring at the small figure.

Silence.

"Nice people don't walk that way, Elspeth," Cordelia continued. "Only awkward people. You don't want to be awkward, do you?"

"What's awkward?" The child did not stop.

"Clumsy. Not pretty."

The child stopped and humped her shoulders over. Her body began to shake. She was crying.



Cordelia knelt and took the child in her arms. "What's the matter, dear? Come to grandmother. You mustn't cry. There's nothing to cry about."

"You said I wasn't pretty."

"No. No. You are pretty, the prettiest child I ever saw."

The child began to calm.

"But pretty is as pretty does." She would have to teach this child, Cordelia was thinking. In no way did she want to repeat the mistakes she had made with big Elspeth. She didn't want another intellectual or odd person. Just personally she didn't think she could take another Elspeth.

"Mah mah?" The child looked up at Cordelia, who was now standing. Her arthritic knees were hurting from kneeling.

"Yes?" Cordelia said.

"Were you ever pretty?"

Cordelia tried to smile. But she did not. She merely twitched. Just that morning she had praised herself in the mirror for looking especially well. She wasn't showing her age at all. She was the same Cordelia she had always been.

"They said I was," Cordelia said. "Don't you think Grandmother's pretty now?" She beamed at her grand-progeny.

The child nodded but began pacing again.

That night Cordelia had a little talk with big Elspeth. They were clearing the dishes from the table and putting them in the dish washer.

"I'm afraid little Elspeth is taking up some of your habits," Cordelia announced when she had put the last spoon in the washer.

"What habits?"

"Oh, you know." Cordelia tried to make her voice sound teasing. "When you pace about like a caged animal. Little things like that."

"I don't do that."

Cordelia suddenly relaxed her face and in a deep voice said: "Yes, Elspeth. You do."

"Well, I'm surely not aware of it."

"And you pick at your stockings sometimes. You don't realize it. But I think you should be careful that little Elspeth doesn't start doing that. She's been pacing back and forth all morning."

Elspeth laughed. She actually laughed. "How funn--eee."

Cordelia was not amused. "It's nerves, Elspeth. You don't want that for your child. She's copying you."

Elspeth said that was certainly a harmless thing, a child imitating its mother.

Cordelia wanted to say the pacing was indicative of other things, but she did not want Elspeth to dwell on her psychiatric disorders. The girl had improved so in recent months. She was still taking her lithium but Dr. Bodenheimer had lessened her visits to him and his bills. She did not pursue the subject further.

But the pacings continued with both mother and daughter. And the performances so irritated Cordelia that she actually got into her car and drove about the town just to avoid the daily exhibitions in the hallways. She also developed headaches, which had never troubled her before.

She scrutinized little Elspeth. Were there tendencies toward madness in the child? She was full of energy and laughter, running here and there when she wasn't pacing up and down. The mad only sat and stared.

Belle was no longer with them and Hattie said she couldn't manage the child any longer. "I'm just getting too old," Hattie said. "Uh huh."

Cordelia tried to keep up with the child but she was unable. Therefore the child had free reign, the sound of her feet echoing throughout the house.

"Don't you know someone?" Cordelia asked Hattie. "Don't you have a young niece or somebody who could watch over the child in the morning and until Elspeth returns in the afternoon?"

Hattie said she would "aksed" around.

And what appeared was a pregnant fifteen-year-old grinning high school drop-out. She was not Hattie's niece. But she was the daughter of a "friend-lady." The "friend-lady" was furious with the daughter for getting pregnant and the eight dollars a day Cordelia was willing to pay would go toward buying clothes and necessities for the coming baby.

Robert would pay for this bit of necessity. Cordelia would write him of their situation: two old women trying to care for a nervously-oriented child. He might as well know the latter, she reasoned.

Robert increased his payments by fifty dollars. So the young nurse named Truly remained. Truly, too, was a "happy" personality in spite of her accidental pregnancy. Truly's and little Elspeth's mingled laughter was heard throughout the house. And the pacings as well. Truly imitated little Elspeth in their play and sometimes later was joined by big Elspeth. Cordelia sometimes thought she had an army of sound marching in the house. All of it pierced her nerves uninvitingly. Also the headaches. She thought of tranquilizers, but she feared addiction and so she drove about the town like one obsessed. The familiar streets became boring and she noted every "for sale" sign in town, anything to distract her thoughts.

"Nerves can kill you," Hattie had said again the other day. And Cordelia believed it was so. She had taken to weeping a good bit lately. Over nothing at all. A parade downtown brought tears. Soap opera characters moved her immensely, as if they were friends, these actors and actresses. Even the sight of little Elspeth seized her emotions. The child had no idea what was ahead of her in life. Pain, suffering, misery, loneliness.

She tried to think of flowers. In the past her garden had always healed her. When John Henry died she spent hours

in the garden, noting the changing of the seasons, the great roses in May, the white and blue flox, the gardenias, magnolias blooming in June, then the autumn colors. God had given us this glory to live in. Misery was a sin, she learned in her garden.

So now she took to staying in the garden, but Truly's and little Elspeth's high voices interrupted her tranquility. The two were everywhere. Cordelia decided to take things in hand.

"Truly," she said, when she and little Elspeth had had a more than lengthy time marching in the hall. "I don't want little Elspeth to pace in the hallway anymore."

"Don't?" The girl was still smiling from the thrill of play.

"No," Cordelia said. "It isn't good for a child to do that. It will drive her crazy."

Truly stood with her mouth open, the whites wide in her dark lovely eyes.

"Yes. It's true. Such actions are bad for the nerves. I knew a young woman once who did that and had a nervous breakdown. She had to be incarcerated in the hospital."

"I never heard tell of that," said Truly, handling one of her pigtails.

"And I don't think it's good for your own baby--not just now."

"Doctor, he say be active. Told me to walk, do

everthang I've always done. He say don't be still all the time. He say do what you've always did."

"How far did you go in high school, Truly?"

"I was gone be in the tenth, but this thang came on."

Cordelia had heard that the schools in south Georgia did not compare with the rest of the nation. And now she believed the statistic. Truly spoke a language that at times was almost unintelligible. Hattie spoke well, at least compared to Truly. It just went to show that the segregated schools were better teachers than what appeared now. Even though segregation wasn't Christian. What was better? To be dumb or Christian? She would have to ask somebody that.

"That lady you talking about that went crazy walkin up and down the hall---she die?" Truly was fascinated by Cordelia's tale of woe.

"No, but she had to see a psychiatrist and take pills."

"I don't want to take no pills. What's a psyctrist?"

"Mind doctor. A psychiatrist is interested in your mind---when it's sick."

Little Elspeth began to pace again.

"Stop that er," said Truly. "Gone go crazy and have to take pills."

Cordelia left the twosome. She had been successful. A little drink was what she needed. It would be in the way of a celebration. With a drink she could bear the noise.

She sat in the wicker rocker in the library and was

grieved when she saw it. She missed her mother's Chippendale chair that now graced Sarah Whitfield's guest room. The house was so changed, so bare. She had sold all her glass pieces and statuary. The next thing to go was the Bierstadt. But she would not mind selling it. She would even give it away, though the money it would bring was not to be ignored.

Since the painting was original she thought she could get at least three hundred dollars for it. The only serious collectors in town were the Ewings. They went to New York and bought paintings. She would call Bob Ewing.

The whisky was soothing, which brought on the thought of courage. On a talk show recently a whole row of women on a stage had been congratulated by the show's host for having courage. One woman had triumphed over the fact that her daughter had tried to kill her with an ashtray. The police wouldn't do anything about it because they thought it was just a mother-daughter situation that they shouldn't enter into. Now the woman went all over the country talking about age-abuse. She got money talking that way. Cordelia wondered if she went about the country talking about Elspeth and her sometime sarcasm if she too could get money. It was just a thought. She would never do such a thing, expose her private life for the whole world to hear. She wondered why people did that? Were they paid to tell all about their rapes and incest? The hosts usually thanked the people and said they were helping "others" by detailing their various horrors.

But courage certainly was a good thing. She had courage. That crazy psychiatrist Dr. Bodenheimer told her she had courage. "It takes courage," he said, "to grow old gracefully." And he looked straight at her. She thanked him and took heart at the compliment. Her mother had had courage and now she was having-----

Little Elspeth came screaming into the library. Cordelia put aside her drink.

"What is it, Elspeth?"

"Truly-----she say I'm cwazy."

Elspeth was talking exactly like Truly. She would have to talk to big Elspeth about that. But the child would not stop crying.

"Truly didn't mean that," said Cordelia. "She's just teasing you. Hush now. It's all right."

"I aint cwazy."

"You certainly are not."

The sobbing subsided.

"Now you run on and play with Truly. She's a sweet young woman."

"No, she aint."

"Don't say 'aint', Elspeth."

"What you spose to say?"

"Isn't. We say: 'No, she isn't.'"

The child stared at Cordelia and said nothing.

"Now, run along. Truly is a very nice young woman."

Elspeth frowned.



"Run along." Cordelia eyed her drink.

Reluctantly the child left and Cordelia heard her telling Truly that she should not say "aint". "You're suppose to say 'isn't'."

Cordelia smiled to herself. The child was intelligent, but then without warning the glass in her hand fell to the floor and her head appeared to explode with pain. There was no feeling in her right hand or arm and the explosion in her head and eyes was unceasing. Stroke. I'm having a stroke, she tried to say aloud.

And there came an image. Of little Elspeth. Pacing. Pacing. Pacing.

She leaned back in the wicker chair. God help us, she tried to say. Pacing. Pacing. Pacing. And then there was a flash of red and afterward total blackness.