

CHAPTER I

"Now!" cried Josh to the Negro driver Isaiah.

"You can get around there! Pass it. Now!"

He was leaning forward seated as he always was, awkwardly, head and shoulders tilted to the left as if it were he who was driving, determined to pass, to win, succeed. It was also the way he had lived his life, each sixty-one years of it. Therefore, it was of no consequence to his seventeen-year-old daughter Hadley. She had been through it all before.

But Mrs. Shorter was hysterical. "Lord God," she said from the back seat as she braced her bird legs for whatever was to happen.

Hadley sighed in disgust. In the first place she despised Mrs. Shorter and in the second place the trip ahead was to be a great fat bore.

"Now," demanded Josh again. "It's a Georgia car anyway." Mainly, it was new, a seventy-four Pontiac. Their own was older since Josh believed each year brought a diminishing return. Anything older was bound to be better.

"Can't let Georgia beat us!" Josh was leaning so far to the left he was almost touching Isaiah's shoulder. They were alongside the other car and Josh turned his whole body to examine his competitors. Two round faces, obviously a man and wife, looked back at him with tired heavy lids. In the back a small boy with glasses and the same lids thumbed his nose.

Josh turned back to Isaiah and the task ahead. "Alabama's still ahead!" he cried in triumph.

"Yessuh!" said Isaiah. Isaiah always said "yessuh," ~~some~~ relic of manners from his grandmother but emphasized more emphatically when he was nervous, which was most of the time. He said "yessuh" and went right on doing whatever he pleased. Hadley

liked him for that. Isaiah was a truly liberated man.

"One of these days your father's gone have us all kilt," rasped Mrs. Shorter, clawing her left flat breast with her right hand and holding her hat with the other. Why she was holding the hat Hadley had no idea. Because it was new, she reasoned vaguely. And hideous, white with a scratchy looking green veil. Presumably it would be saved should the holocaust come. Hadley gazed out the window in gloom. But the terror on the woman's face almost made the trip worthwhile. Almost.

They passed the car, narrowly missing an oncoming one, and Josh straightened, relaxed, his duty done. He sat like an obedient child, his immaculately manicured hands folded in his lap. But should the next crisis present itself he would be there, ready to pitch in, do his all. For Alabama, for pride, for the success of those within. Who knew? Who truly knew what Josh was about?

They were on their way to Atlanta from their home in Greenleaf, Alabama. Ostensibly they were going to celebrate Grandfather Bickley's eighty-seventh

birthday. Every June they went to celebrate Grandfather Bickley's boring birthday. That was their official reason for going. But the main reason this time, and Hadley knew it, was to check on her sister Rosanna. Rosanna had recently married, and badly.

Josh had roared like God when Rosanna announced her intentions. Hadley had come back from swimming and she heard Josh in the library: He had spent all that money to send Rosanna to Vassar, he declared, to give her a decent education and what did she do--quit, two months before graduation, threw everything to the winds just because of a punk who looked more like a girl than a man.

Rosanna protested that Seli Abolonski was the most honest man she had ever known. He dressed like he did because he was honest. He was brilliant and the only man who had ever shown her the truth about herself. She wanted to be Mrs. Seli Abolonski. She was proud to have the name. She was tired of being Rosanna Bickley, tired of playing a game, tired of living a lie. At last she had found the difference between good and evil. Seli Abolonski was good. She did not say who was evil.

The people in Greenleaf called Rosanna a communist. They also called Josh one. But Josh answered if he was a communist then he was the only one he had ever heard of who belonged to a Rotary Club. Nobody saw the humor in the remark. They saw nothing humorous in any of Josh's remarks when it came to politics.

Josh was president and publisher of the Greenleaf Daily News (circulation 22,000) and as such published his views in fighting editorials, most of which ran contrary to the views of the town as well as most of the South. The white South that summer of nineteen hundred and seventy-four was still Nixon-Wallace country in spite of everything.

"And dull," Hadley had added in one of her mumbling remarks while reading one of Josh's editorials. Though recently she wasn't so sure about the dullness. She had met a man. He was old enough to be her father. But that didn't matter. He was the most attractive man she had ever met. He had become almost an obsession and, unbeknown to himself, he was to be her summer project. Usually she got her way. But about this man she wasn't sure.

"Mercy," said Mrs. Shorter as the back wheels of the car skidded off the road. Isaiah wasn't the world's best driver and he wouldn't be driving at all if Josh wasn't the world's worst. When Hadley was ten Josh had driven all the way to Birmingham, seventy miles, in second gear, going eighty-five miles an hour. Hadley's protests went unheard. He was thinking out an editorial, he said. They spent the rest of the day at a service station.

Everyone said there had to be a god somewhere because Josh Bickley was still alive. Whatever, Isaiah was better as a yard man, which he was, than a driver.

Hadley looked away from Mrs. Shorter. She was now clawing at the seat. The trip wouldn't be so bad if Rosanna would start acting halfway sane. All she did was sit around with a bunch of loons, blacks and whites, talking for hours about the "system" and how they were going to turn the South around. They didn't have to. It was already turned around-- and without their help. Atlanta was a "northern city," people said. It was a "cosmopolitan city," not at all like the rest of the South. Atlanta didn't count in the scheme of things.

Perhaps. But it was also brimful of country people, Hadley had observed. They came from all over the South, slicked-up salesmen dressed in the latest fashion all talking exactly like Herman Talmadge. The city proper was practically all black. The last time Hadley had been to visit Rosanna she had got caught downtown at five o'clock, trying to find her car. She walked along the streets, the only white almost.

A young black teen-ager with an Afro haircut came up to her. "Hey, cool-looking white gull. Where you think you going?" He brushed his hand up and down her arm and Hadley ran in panic, the black laughter ringing in her ears. Atlanta was burning with crime.

Rosanna said she would never have paid any attention to anything like that. It was harmless and besides she, Rosanna, never noticed whether anyone was black or white. But Hadley said she wasn't color blind and it was terrifying. It would have been the same if the boy had been white and she knew damn well Rosanna would have "noticed" that.

Rosanna wanted to be a writer. She kept sending manuscripts to New York. They were stories about life in Southern ghettos. Every one of the stories

had been returned and each time they came back Rosanna would go into dark rages. Hadley told her she didn't know anything about ghettos and she ought to write about what she was: a mixed-up middle class spooky white girl.

When it came right down to it Hadley knew blacks better than Rosanna. Rosanna had been in private schools all her life, since kindergarten. Hadley had gone to the public grammar schools and for two years to Greenleaf High School. Then Josh took her out because the school was so bad. Teachers passed anyone, mainly to get rid of them. Josh said they were teaching to the lowest level, while the brighter students "suffered."

He wrote an editorial about it. It was the only editorial the white people in Greenleaf liked. At least on the race issue. Mostly they liked his editorials about dead people.

When high school fizzled Hadley was sent to Greenleaf Academy, a cement-block place with pretentions. It was started when integration of the schools was on the horizon. Everyone hated her there, not the boys, but the girls. The girls had a stupid

little club which had only twenty-four members. Hadley had never been asked to join. She said she wouldn't have joined if she had been forced to. But she would have. Deep down she knew she would have.

Mrs. Shorter began scratching at the seat again. Why Josh insisted Mrs. Shorter had to go everywhere with them was beyond reasoning. Hadley looked sideways at her and she could see the mole at close range now. It was on her left lower cheek near the nose. A long black hair grew out of it. The sight of it never failed to initiate anger. She could have got rid of it. Any doctor could have removed it. But she kept it, it was a defiance, Hadley told Rosanna, her special curse to the world.

If only the woman would go away, move, find another job. But that was unlikely now. She had been with them for ten years. She had come the day Hadley's mother died. Her mother died in the morning, on an early March day when the daffodils were in full bloom. That afternoon Mrs. Shorter arrived, a middle-aged country woman, replacing everything: spring, beauty, the New Englandness of the house. Her mother was originally from Boston. She had never adjusted to

the South. That was what her aunts said, the aunts on Josh's side, the Southern aunts.

"I'm your mama now," Mrs. Shorter told Hadley and Rosanna that night at dinner. Rosanna merely stared at the woman. But Hadley remembered running and shouting to Josh, pulling at his sleeve, protesting. Her hysteria was scarcely noticed.

Later Josh's answers were always stock: Mrs. Shorter was the best he could find. She ran a good house and took care of her and Rosanna, cooked their meals. He didn't want another sort in the house. Mrs. Shorter was a good woman, a good, church-going woman. Hadley and Rosanna could learn a great deal from Mrs. Shorter.

But Josh didn't know her. She wasn't a good anything. She was a shrewd, spying, suspicious, lazy bitch. Practically all she did was sit in the sewing room pumping away on the sewing machine. Hadley avoided the room as much as possible. Mrs. Shorter kept it one hundred and ten degrees hot by keeping an electric heater going all winter and even into summer. She sat there humped over her machine with fifteen thousand pins in her mouth. Hadley waited

for the day when one would slip down the gullet.

Hadley reached over to the front seat to fetch the road map. She wanted to see how much further they had to go. It seemed as if they had been riding forever. Josh was calmed now. He was sitting upright, his thick thumbs twirling at his belly, a Josh gesture, also a Grandfather Bickley gesture. It went along with his mental gymnastics, he said, his ponderings. Josh had many such gestures, frequently imitated by both friend and foe.

Josh was Greenleaf's, if not Alabama's, most outstanding "character." He was known to be an ugly man, a knowledge initiated by himself and repeated by others. Hadley never saw him that way. His best features were his mouth, hands and good chin. The mouth was firm, masculine and, oddly, rarely tense. His hands were warm, strong hands with a peculiar grace as he methodically moved objects from place to place, such as a comb or a brush or a piece of paper. These were careful gestures. He was very neat.

But he was bald with a head shaped like a hickory nut. He wore thick glasses, which magnified his small green eyes. His nose was long and showed

the aftermath of three horrendous breaks. His cheekbones were prominent and his coloring florid. There was strength in the face and once one saw it he rarely forgot it. He was six foot two and shaped like a pear with small shoulders, larger stomach and long straight legs, which were very white with prominent veins. He moved awkwardly. When he turned his head, he turned his entire body in a sort of jerking gesture. He had a custom of standing on his heels and swaying backward so far people were afraid he would fall. He never did. But he moved with vigor despite his awkwardness, and his energy and humor were contagious. He had a great temper and great kindness. Hadley feared and adored him.

"Did you ever find out about the bathroom man?" Josh asked Isaiah.

"Haven't found out nothing. Isn't nothing to find out." Isaiah was speaking of the bathroom equipment he had had installed in his house. Formerly he owned an outhouse and he wished he still had it. "Lawyer say that man the meanest man he ever heard tell of."

Josh said nothing but puffed his cheeks and slowly exhaled the air through thinned lips, another

sign he was pondering. Isaiah and several others in his neighborhood had been the victims of a bathroom artist from Jacksonville, Florida. In Isaiah's house the man installed a blue toilet, a blue wash basin, shower, even blue plumbing "because they plastic," the man from Jacksonville told Isaiah.

But nothing worked. No water, no flushing, nothing. The man disappeared with Isaiah's and the neighbors' deposits, each month collecting payments through another source. Josh told them about a lawyer he knew who was especially apt in such cases. But the judge ruled in favor of the bathroom man because there had been no written contract. The lawyer appealed.

"You'll get him yet," Josh said.

"One lady she already dead. She never gone see no bathroom."

Josh blew from his cheeks again.

They were reaching the outskirts of Atlanta. The city sprawled like an oil spill. In the distance were the buildings of downtown Atlanta, contained like a couple of blocks of Fifth Avenue. Outside were units and units of apartments and shopping

centers, some showing decline brought on by recessions. The apartments were modeled after English villages, Swiss chalets, German townships, and many Taras.

Isaiah wanted to move to Atlanta.

"How come you don't want to move to Lanta?"

he asked Josh.

"Too many people," said Josh.

"Thas right," Isaiah agreed. Isaiah agreed with everything. His charm. "Bathroom man the meanest man I ever heard tell of."

Isaiah also had a habit of repeating conversations, going back to them after they had been buried. Not his charm. But he caught the signal of silence, and that was a virtue.

Hadley secretly loved Atlanta and envied her sister for living here now. Sometimes Hadley thought she would do anything to leave Greenleaf. She hated it, hated the tree-lined streets where old maids walked on cracked sidewalks and wandered through their afternoons that yawned into everlasting nights.

Atlanta with all its pretensions and crime had an up-town, high feel about it. She liked the stores, the streets and the people she had met who had traveled

the world and come home again still loving "their city." It was nice.

She never told Rosanna any of this, of course. She always complained about the city in front of Rosanna, saying she was terrified of the place, that it was too crowded, that she needed space to breathe, space and---

Immediately her heart accelerated and she tossed her hair away from her face. She had made up her mind she wasn't going to think about last night again. But here it was again, and her heart was wild. What would Josh do if he heard what she had done? Only the week before he had lectured to her: "People have been speaking to me about you," he said.

Speaking. "Oh really?" She tried to sound casual. She wasn't. She knew what he was talking about. She smoked and she drank and every boy in town was in love with her. The latter she knew for a fact. That was why none of the girls liked her. The girls were the ones who started the rumors. She had never done anything wrong. Really wrong.

But last night. If Josh heard about it. If one of those boys told on her she would never speak

to any of them again. She said as much. But more than that she had been frightened, the strangeness of it all, and she hadn't slept all night, thinking, imagining. And she was still frightened.

It had been fun at first. She and four boys had climbed over the fence at the country club to go swimming. It was past ten thirty and all the lights were out, even on the tennis courts. Taylor Wiggin dared her. He wanted to see her dive off the roof of the pool house. It was fairly near the pool, but it was higher than the high dive and it was black dark.

It wasn't anything she hadn't done before, but in the dark the water looked bottomless and she wasn't sure of the distance from the roof to the water. Without a word she began the climb up the wisteria vine, the chorus of four in the water cheering her on. Then, standing there on the tip of the building, she began to throw her clothes into the water: T-shirt, jeans, all. There was wild applause. Finally she stood completely nude. It was exhilarating and she looked up at the sky. It was filled with stars and a slit of a moon fell into West Greenleaf

where all the blacks lived. The feeling was glorious. The velvet night enclosed her. She dove and as she did she heard Taylor Wiggin say: "My God, she's mad. She's really mad!" In the ascent she began to laugh, almost strangling. But the word "mad" kept ringing in her ears. Afterward she hung onto the side of the pool, panting for breath. She had a vision. Of herself. A woman gone mad, laughing, raging, terrified. She had had the vision before. But this time she was more frightened than she had ever been.

She dressed in the wet clothes while she watched the others dive. In the car going home she was silent, sullen. When Newton Welborne suggested they find a bottle she became petulant and said they were acting like children. She wanted to go home immediately. At the house she slammed the car door and said nothing to any of them.

Two years ago Josh had used the same word. "You're mad," he said. That was when she had sent fire trucks, ambulances, police and sixteen boxes of kotex to Mrs. Englund's house. Mrs. Englund was the mother of a girl she hated. Hadley talked a couple of other girls into joining her in the prank. But the

police didn't consider it a "prank." They put them in a cell at the city jail.

All the parents came to get the others. They were, without exception, solemn-faced and middle-aged, raving about their shame. Their shame, and talking about praying to God. One girl stretched up her arms and said, "I'm a tree!" and everybody laughed, even the cops. But the mother started weeping into her handkerchief and muttering, "My daughter, my daughter, on drugs." But they hadn't smoked anything, not even a cigarette.

When the police called Josh he shouted over the phone: "Keep her down there!" And hung up. Finally a nice policeman drove her home, and Josh and Mrs. Shorter met them at the door. Josh thanked the policeman and said nothing to Hadley. Mrs. Shorter kept murmuring: "Lard. Lard. . . ."

When Josh shut the front door he turned to Hadley. "You're mad! You have no respect for God nor man." And Hadley remembered climbing the stairway, terrified, and all night wondering if she were mad and seeing herself shut up in some locked house, wild with fright.

The next day Josh ran the story on the front page of the newspaper, and all the parents were furious. They told Josh they never wanted Hadley Bickley in their houses again. Hadley said she didn't give a damn. But she did. She really did.

"I could have sworn you turned off at the Spring Street exit," said Josh.

"Me too," said Isaiah, agreeing, though he had not turned off at the Spring Street exit.

They were lost. Hadley sighed again. Next year she wasn't going on this trip. If Grandfather Bickley was one hundred she wasn't going. They always got lost. Josh had no sense of direction. Isaiah was almost as bad.

God knows where they were. Isaiah had turned off at the Cain Street exit. They were downtown going the wrong way on a one-way street. Cars were honking and people were shouting. They crept through the street like lepers, the unclean, country people come to the city.

"Shit," said Hadley. And Mrs. Shorter stared at her, her mouth one round O like a dead sparrow's.