

## CHAPTER 2

When they finally reached Grandfather Bickley's apartment Hadley took one look, cringed inwardly and resigned herself. Nothing had changed. The same cars were parked outside, the same people were inside, even Grandfather Bickley was standing on the front porch, waiting. Only Rosanna had not arrived. She's going to try to get out of it, Hadley said to herself. Just because she's married she thinks she's free.

Grandfather Bickley's apartment was a duplex, a onetime house, brick with white columns and high ceilings. He stood razor straight and had more of a military bearing than a missionary's, which he

formerly was. He was a short man with a brush mustache, goatee, merry blue eyes straight out of Wales and a head full of white hair. Josh had inherited nothing from his father. Perhaps the merry eyes. Perhaps.

As long as Hadley could remember Grandfather Bickley had greeted them from a front porch. And he always wore a frown of concern because of their lateness. A parent to the last. It amazed Hadley to see Josh with his father. He was a different person. A son. At home Josh dominated, slamming doors, roaring with rage whenever he was crossed, doing surprising acts of kindness. Everything focused on him, dinner hours, conversation, the telephones. He disliked being interrupted when he was speaking. He ruled, though he was unaware he did.

But in the Atlanta apartment he was almost subdued, politely answering his father's questions, never initiating them, and listening with an almost timid respect. Here Grandfather Bickley ruled. He sat in his high backed chair, his issues facing him in a semi-circle, and he was king. From the chair he received his birthday presents one at a time, opening them with great care and stern appreciation. It was

a tedious and lengthy ceremony, performed in hushed silence except at the crescendos when the contents were revealed.

Grandfather Bickley was known to be a "saint." At the age of forty, from his own admission, God spoke to him and called him to the mission field. He said he knelt down in his bedroom and vowed, as a medical doctor, he would give his life to God and the spreading of His word.

The town of Greenleaf went into shock. Dr. Bickley was good, they thought, but not that good. Nevertheless within the year he was on his way to the interior of China. He had six children and a wife who some believed was the true saint. In spite of illness, she followed him, leaving behind two of her children, one of whom was Josh. Her letters spoke of her longing for "home" and worry over "my boys."

Grandfather Bickley was given many awards and medals during his stay in China. There was a portrait of him, which Josh now owned, wearing three of the medals. And there was a statue placed in his honor in Hwanghsien, China. As late as 1971 it still stood because there was written on it that the doctor was

"good to the rich and the poor alike." The communists approved.

After twenty years the good doctor and his wife left China by invitation of the same communists. They returned to Atlanta to make their new home and celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Grandfather Bickley forgot it. He was speaking to the "women of Gawww-gia" who had supported his work. While he was speaking Grandmother Bickley sat before a tremendous six-tiered cake with "fifty" written on it and said nothing. She died shortly thereafter.

Grandfather Bickley did not mean to forget his wedding date. It just skipped his mind. Hadley was present to see Grandmother Bickley in her humiliation and she remembered Josh's gallant efforts to cover up, going so far as to sing "Sweet Adeline" in Chinese (with his own inimitable Alabama accent).

Now Grandfather Bickley had sold his house and was living in his quaint duplex surrounded by one of the rarest collections of Chinese porcelains ever assembled in the United States. It was not his fault, the collection. He often told how it came about. When he treated a patient he refused money, so the

patients instead made him a gift of a plate or a vase, sometimes jade. It would have been unthinkable to refuse the gifts because in the minds of the Chinese, then, a refusal of a gift was an insult.

Nevertheless, there he sat in his high-backed chair with all his memories glazing out at him. An old maid niece named simply Annie (no one ever mentioned her last name) took care of him. Annie admired him as a kind of church-celebrity and since church was her only world outside of work Grandfather Bickley led that world. She attended to his every wish.

Annie also worked in a downtown office as a file clerk. She worked five days a week and each afternoon returned to cook dinner for Uncle Finny, as she called him. After dinner she retired to her room with an armful of ladies magazines, which she studied as thoroughly as Grandfather Bickley studied his Bible. The magazines were stacked in her room, the leaves loose with inspection and the room musty with loneliness.

She never went anywhere, and no one ever came to see her. She was a branch of Uncle Finny and thus was fed from his roots. People came from all over to see

him and he greeted them with warm gusto. He disapproved of drinking, therefore as soon as a guest arrived Annie would disappear into the kitchen and return carrying a heavy, overloaded tray containing tea, cookies, whatever she had made the weekend before. No one ever offered to help her with her heavy load, and Grandfather Bickley ignored her as if she were some pale robot who moved in and out the rooms of his life.

He had not a cent to his name. Josh supported him. When he went to China he sold all his property, including the newspaper, even the house which had been his father's before him. When Rosanna and Hadley were small children Josh lectured them on the difficulties he, Josh, had had as a young man. He had worked, he declared. Worked all his life to get back the newspaper, to save the house. And now it was his pleasure to be able to support his father.

The whole set-up bored Hadley enormously. She guessed there was something nice about Josh's loyalties. But the birthdays were horrors. They attracted assorted aunts, uncles and cousins. The aunts loathed Hadley and so did the cousins, at least the ones who

came. The ones she liked never came. But Josh insisted she and Rosanna be present. In time they would be grateful, he said. "Your grandfather is the last of something very fine," he said. "Some day you'll know that."

"Well, well," Grandfather Bickley said now, smiling warmly from the porch as Hadley and Josh, followed by Mrs. Shorter and Isaiah, in single file, made their way up the steps to the front porch. His hands were pressed together, palms upward. He opened his arms to receive Hadley. She knew she was his favorite grandchild and she liked flaunting the fact in front of the cousins and aunts. She was the prettiest, the brightest, and she knew that, too. It was because of this the aunts hated her.

"Oh Grandfather!" she said, giving a little giggle of happiness as she received his frail embrace. It was a forced emotion on her side, not because she disliked Grandfather Bickley. She didn't love him either. She didn't think she did. Yet she never said that to herself. He was just a fact in her life. He was a fact in all their lives, perhaps too much so. Actually what she disliked was the whole scene here,

the undercurrents, the aunts, the bickering, the feel of middle age, the dreary interests, all focused upon themselves, "the family." The boring "fam-i-ly."

"Let me see," said Grandfather Bickley, lifting her face to his. "Yes," he said. "As beautiful as the flower in your hair. A beautiful child."

Hadley was wearing a gardenia tucked into her dark hair. She was pleased, very pleased by the remark and turned to regard Mrs. Shorter. She wanted to see her reaction. Mrs. Shorter had never admitted to the fact of Hadley's good looks. "It's sweet ways that counts," Mrs. Shorter said. Mrs. Shorter believed Rosanna had "sweet ways." But Mrs. Shorter did not know Rosanna. Rosanna never let anybody know her. But Hadley knew her. She was the only one who really knew Rosanna.

"How you, Dr. Bickley?" Mrs. Shorter said, ignoring Hadley. Mrs. Shorter had enormous respect for Grandfather Bickley because of the church. When Hadley told her about his missing the fiftieth anniversary Mrs. Shorter said it was because his mind was occupied with higher things. "There's no cake in the wull as important as what's up yonder."



"I'm well," Grandfather Bickley said to Mrs. Shorter. "And you look fine, Mrs. Shorter."

"Yessir, I'm fine, just fine," stammered Mrs. Shorter. "Had a bout with my gall bladder last week but it passed. Just passed." She giggled hysterically, spewing a bit of saliva into the air. She was always trying to get free medical advice on these trips.

Grandfather Bickley nodded and shook hands with Josh as if he were a stranger. Then he shook Isaiah's hand.

"Isaiah," he said. "Such a good name. Your mother knew her Bible, didn't she?"

"Yessuh, Revrund," said Isaiah. He always called Grandfather Bickley "Revrund," which seemed a higher order somehow.

Inside the dark apartment the semi-circle had already formed. All faces turned to Hadley as she entered. No one spoke. They looked as if they had been sitting forever, worn by the effort of once more being together. The room was large and amply able to carry the various antiques and artifacts. The glaze of the Chinese porcelains shone out from the darkness like cats' eyes, catching the light here and there.

And on the mantle the aged clock ticked on, tolling its half hours as a grim reminder.

Each year the relatives took note of the things in the room, hinting, admiring, suggesting. The day would not be long when distribution would be at hand. That was the unsaid fact. Greed slithered in the room. Aunt Mary, whose life had been everything but successful and who therefore was perennially enraged, two years ago ruined the birthday by blurting out in no uncertain terms that the twelve ming dinner plates were to go to her daughter Julia. She had decided that. The remark fell like a dead thud.

Until one of the other aunts spoke up:

"What in the wull would Julia do with twelve ming plates?" And she smiled at her own maliciousness. Whereupon the daughter Julia let out a loud nervous laugh and then frowned trying to cover up.

Poor Julia. Thirty-two now, her life too had never breathed a single happy moment. She had got the worst from both her parents, plus something of Josh's looks. She rocked on her heels like Josh and she had his straight legs and thick ankles. But the first thing one noticed were her enormous breasts.

They hung bell-like almost to her stomach and when she walked she bent backward as if she could better manipulate the load.

Above was a nervous face from which emitted laughs too loud and scratching sounds, nerves stretched almost to a scream, trying in her way to please. She wanted desperately to please, but the desperation was only an irritant. Relaxed, she might have had a rather pretty face. Her eyes were dark, her features regular and her skin was as innocent as a new leaf.

But she had a past. When she was five she read aloud all of Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities. Her father had taught her, pushed her and died. After that her stepfather threw the book away. He didn't want to hear her read it or anything else, he said. The man loathed her and Julia lived in terror of him, calling him Mr. Green and hiding whenever she could. Once he demanded that she, instead of the servants, fill the water glasses at dinner. She emptied the entire pitcher on the table, staring in horror at Mr. Green and then dissolving in loud sobs which only compounded the problem.

"Get out! Get out!" the man shouted, his heavy blue jowls shaking like a field of heather.

Hadley witnessed the scene herself and never forgot it because as Julia was being abandoned to the back pantries where the two servants giggled away at her mishap, the stepfather smiled at Hadley as if the two of them were in on some elaborate scheme. Afterward he gave her a silver dollar "because you're such a beautiful little gull." She still had the dollar.

Last year, amazingly and shockingly, Julia married. ("He's just interested in those huge bosoms," Rosanna remarked after deep thought when informed of the matter.) She married a man who was divorced and jobless. Hadley met him at the birthday party, a large balding man with a whorley eye who claimed he was a "writer" and who kept eyeing Josh. Finally he came right out with it and asked Josh for a job. Josh said he didn't have an opening just then, which was true, in a way.

Future letters from the aunts, however, kept them informed. The bride and groom were living in the house with Aunt Mary, and Julia was pregnant.

Aunt Mary was terrified of the husband. He had tried to kill her, she said, chasing her around the dining room table with a knife. But Julia would not divorce him, even after that. Finally he deserted both Aunt Mary and Julia. He was a criminal, Aunt Mary was convinced, and she lay awake every night, she said, wondering what Julia's child would be like. But then Aunt Mary had always exaggerated. Bluntly, she lied.

So, it was not generally thought that Julia would inherit the ming plates. Mainly because Grandfather Bickley had not liked the fact she had married in a hotel instead of the church. He took a very dim view of that and showed it.

Now here she was again at the birthday party with a pucking dirty baby who looked exactly like the husband bouncing on her knee. She had got fatter and her heavy load, incredibly, had grown larger. She kept saying to Grandfather Bickley that the baby looked just like him. "Everybody says so, Grandfather." But Grandfather merely pinched his lips and shook his head.

"Well," he said then, dismissing Julia, his hands prayer-like again and gently touching his lips, "I

wonder---" He looked about the room. "Where is Rosanna? Where is she?" He looked at Josh as if he had done something disapproving.

Nonsensically all heads turned toward the street as if Rosanna must be out there somewhere. That was how the family viewed Rosanna's marriage. She had to be in the streets somewhere. It was her way, marching for this or that, giving strident speeches. The family was going to the dogs. First Julia's horrible marriage and now Rosanna married to a communist who only wanted Negroes in his house. Shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves.

"Rosanna's always late," said Hadley. "Like the rest of us."

Grandfather Bickley shook his head in disapproval. "A bad habit, a very bad habit." He looked sternly at Aunt Mary. "We shall proceed without her."

Aunt Mary rose to her full five feet, nine inches. With it all, one had to admit she was a stunning looking woman. She had Grandfather Bickley's blue eyes, now crowned by magnificent white hair which she arranged in wide waves drawn to a bun at the back of her head. Aunt Mary had social ambitions, and had it not been for the myriad of obstacles--Julia, a

dull husband who could not make money, and a second marriage (with money) which ended in divorce--she might have been a success. As it was, her life began to sour at the age of twenty-nine and by sixty-four she was merely bitter.

"Julia's got a little something for you, Pappa," said Aunt Mary, looking down on mother and child.

Julia gave a strained smile, mouth wide open, and rising handed the baby to her mother. Her stockings were wrinkled on her straight legs and the dark-patterned dress looked hot for June.

"Here, Grandfather, I---I bought you these."

Julia handed over the two awkwardly-wrapped presents, and Grandfather Bickley frowned at them.

"Hah, hah, hah, hah," came Julia's nervous laugh. "One is from me and the other is from Edmund."

Edmund was the abandoned baby, named after his father.

Christ God Almighty, Hadley was saying to herself. How much longer was this going on. She wondered where Rosanna was. She looked down at the small package in her lap. Inside was a silver picture frame containing a picture of herself. She was faintly smiling, the epitome of innocence and sweetness. It was the way she liked to think of herself.

"Ahhhh," was the unison response as Grandfather Bickley opened an elaborately prepared bottle of shaving lotion, the very elaborateness of the box spelling "cheap." He would never use it. The second present was a picture of the baby Edmund all dressed up in a sailor suit and exhibiting the same whorley eye as his father. "Thank you, Julia," said Grandfather Bickley, not looking at Julia.

Julia blurted out her laugh. "I thought you'd like those, Grandfather." And she laughed again, trippingly this time as if she were at a Spring rite, a belle with many suitors.

"They're nice," Hadley said. "The presents."

She didn't mean it, of course, but she liked Julia, could sense the hurt in her and, besides, the girl had never harmed anyone. She hadn't asked to have Aunt Mary for a mother. Actually Julia was a sweet person, genuinely so. She had been hurt so long she could never bear to hurt anyone else. Hadley recognized her pain for what it was. She was closer to Julia than anyone might guess.

"We think Edmund looks like you, Grandfather," said Julia again. But the room fell silent and



Hadley along with the rest of the room turned toward the arched entrance. There stood Rosanna, tall and thin, her dirty hair falling chin length. She was a female Josh, not ugly as he but brushed with his looks. She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. Hadley wanted to laugh. Rosanna had the biggest shiner she had ever seen. Her right eye was swollen and bruised purple as a violet. She looked like a cracker waitress at a Georgia truck stop. Which, Hadley mused, was probably just the way she wanted to look.

"Well, hello, Rosanna dear," said Aunt Mary.

Rosanna dear. Aunt Mary was delighted to see her as she was. "Isn't your nice husband coming?"

Rosanna gazed at the woman with level eyes, then she said:

"No, he's not coming. He'll never be coming." She turned to Josh. "I'll be going home with you. Permanently!"

And the excitement was loud in the hushed room. The birthday party was on its way.