

CHAPTER 4

"Nixon! Nixon! Nixon! The whole world's gone mad," shouted Rosanna in one of her black pregnancy moods.

"Mother and child," Hadley said and smiled a mock sentimental smile. "What a lovely picture: you raging around with your hormonal imbalance."

Actually Rosanna looked like an enraged farm hand. Her face was turnip red and she had lost weight making the growth inside her look like a bizarre mistake. Which it was.

She had filed divorce proceedings against her husband. He had beaten her in a fit of temper in

front of four of their black friends. When Rosanna told Josh he roared like a molting lion, fisting his hands like a boxer, awkwardly moving about the room shouting and striking into the air. "I'll kill him if he comes here. I will."

"Windmills, Josh," said Rosanna. She was huddled on the library sofa, her eyes red from crying. Actually she was crying more about being pregnant than being beaten. The doctor had confirmed the pregnancy. She was about seven months late for an abortion, a performance Rosanna firmly and dedicatedly believed in.

"It just messes up everything," she wailed, "my writing. Everything."

"Oh, well, maybe it'll comfort you in your old age," Hadley said. "Think of it that way. Besides, you can be like the rest of the young matrons now. Car pools and bridge every afternoon. Fun. Fun."

In the garden room Walter Cronkite was mouthing the latest Watergate news. Not even that stopped Josh. "What did you ever see in him?" he was asking Rosanna. "How could you have married someone like that? Thank God the sixties are over. Thank God."

"And now we have Richard Nixon," said Rosanna.
"Really, the world has gone mad."

Hadley was in no temper to listen to Rosanna. Nor Josh either. She had her own troubles. Josh had heard about her exhibition (or non-exhibition, however one looked at it) at the swimming pool and declared that her entire summer would be spent in the newsroom of the Greenleaf Times-Democrat.

"Doing what?" Hadley asked, staring at him in half-shock.

"Learning how to be a reporter, how to support yourself." He went off on a diatribe about man's fate. Cursed was he with two unmanageable daughters. It was worse than Lear. Worse than Job.

"A disgrace," he said speaking of Hadley's performance at the club. He was pacing up and down the center of the library.

"It was dark," Hadley said.

"Were you drunk? Do you take drugs, too?"

She didn't answer him. She was thinking of the summer. All her plans. Oliver Eubanks. Everything ruined.

"I asked you a question," he shouted.

"Huh. Oh. No drugs."

"You do drink, however."

Hadley nodded.

"Stay away from both, Hadley. You're too young."

He stopped pacing.

"I can't promise anything. I really can't."

She always kept her promises. Even Mrs. Shorter said that was one of her better traits. She never let anybody down if she made a promise.

He pointed a finger at Hadley, his face red and his whole arm shaking. "Get to work! That's where you can put your kinetic energies."

"In the newsroom of the Greenleaf Times-Democrat?" She was mocking, wagging her head from side to side.

"Yes. The newsroom of the Greenleaf Times-Democrat--if they don't fire you. You're too intelligent to be idle. Nobody should be idle. Or lazy!"

"But, Josh--" Sometimes when she pleaded she could win him over.

"No."

"Hadley Bickley, Star Reporter," said Rosanna and laughed.

Hadley turned from them in fury. The whole summer would be a disaster. She had to meet Oliver Eubanks again. He had returned. He would be here until autumn. He had liked her that day in the library. She saw it in his eyes. She had to meet him again. She asked Senator Eubanks where he was, and the man looked at her with eyes so blue it was as if she were inquiring about someone who had recently died. He said nothing.

Hadley had begun going to church, an act that bemused Josh. She went there to pray for Oliver Eubanks. To be hers. She never listened to the rector. She just sat there saying the same thing over and over:

"God, make him see me somewhere. Soon." She thought he might come to church. His mother was there, always sitting in the same pew, a cold woman with silver hair, dark eyes and eyebrows. The woman never recognized Hadley.

"Please, God." Once she prayed so hard she believed she might even be able to believe in Grandfather Bickley's God. More than ever now she wanted to believe. "When two or three or more are gathered

together in Thy name, He will grant thy request---"

Mrs. Shorter was as suspicious as Josh.

"How come you taken to going to church so much?" she asked Hadley one day.

Hadley was leaning so far out the window the question almost made her fall. She surveyed the drop below and gave a little cry. She would have fallen right onto the Lady Banksia roses. She eased herself back into the room so that her toes tipped the floor.

Mrs. Shorter was sewing, making purple underpants for her dying mother to be buried in. She had already made the bra. Everytime Mrs. Shorter exhibited them Hadley envisioned the dead woman in her casket, the frail, stiff body swathed in the foul underwear. It was Mrs. Shorter's last act of love, she explained.

"I was named for her. Nellie Dell. I was Nellie Dell Pates fore I become a Shorter." She shook her head in pride.

"I don't seem to be able to do anything right around here," Hadley said. "If I go to church everybody's suspicious. If I don't I'm damned and a sinner. Which, Mrs. Shorter?"

"Some day you gonna get your head busted," was

all Mrs. Shorter said. "You better quit leaning out the winder like at."

"It's too hot in here," Hadley said and leaned further out. She frowned and oddly then, almost like the wind changes, she felt the weeping inside her again. Late afternoon had come upon the fields. They lay stretched June-green before her, broken only by a gnarled tree here and there. Her view traveled past the cypresses, over the meadows, over the stretches of soy beans to the hills beyond filled now with rosebud and dogwood and hickory trees, all in full leaf.

She loved the view from the house. It was sad, sad as love, sadder than desire, sadder than losing love, losing Oliver Eubanks. Why hadn't she seen him anywhere? Her body ached with wanting. Did everyone feel as she did? There was such confusion in her. The weeping and wanting and the summer air and late afternoon. A breeze brushed her face and she turned from the window as if in defeat.

She gave a bright satanic glance at Mrs. Shorter. The woman could even ruin a Christmas tree just by standing by it. The warm feeling of only a moment ago

was instantly replaced. She felt a kind of frenetic nervousness and the "meanness," as Rosanna called it, surfaced.

"You really believe in God and all that, don't you, Mrs. Shorter? When people die you believe they fly up to heaven with white robes and purple underwear to meet your Jesus. You really believe that, don't you?"

Mrs. Shorter raised her chin. "Ever word of it. Believe in hell, too." She shot a dark glance at Hadley.

"Purple Jesus," Hadley laughed, "that's the name of a drink."

She turned completely around. "What if when you die you're just a dead thing out there, like an autumn leaf? Look, Mrs. Shorter. What if, after all, there isn't a Jesus or a God or anything? What if there's just something like a void, nothing?"

"How come you studying all that for?" Mrs. Shorter put down her sewing. "I'll tell you one thing, if ever there was a soul in heaven it's your mother. She's up there. Is that what you're studying about?"

"My mother." Hadley pushed back both sides of

her hair, a quick unconscious gesture. She was interested now. She really wanted to know about her mother's dying. It didn't have anything to do with Oliver Eubanks. Not directly. Indirectly maybe. But death, especially her mother's, had always fascinated her. She remembered Josh coming to her in the middle of the night sobbing (and the fright of that, Josh sobbing) saying her mother had gone to heaven, that she was with God now and Rosanna crying out she wasn't anywhere, that her mother was nowhere and crying for days and months but saying she was nowhere.

"What I mean is---where do you think your husband is? Right this minute?"

"R. D. Shorter's setting right up there with Jesus, on the right side. That's where R. D. Shorter's at."

"But how do you know?" Hadley narrowed her eyes and regarded the woman's own beetle ones. Her eyes had returned to normal again, focusing just above Hadley's eyebrows. "Counta the Bible. And you know what else the Bible says? Says, says, you oughtta not use the Bible for no false purposes."

"I'm not using it for false purposes." Her voice sounded almost sweet.

"It also says, says you ought not to study too much about things. You oughtta just believe what Jesus tell you. He isn't no liar and does all the work, too. All you gotta do is set right here and be quiet about things and believe what He tells you. You don't have to go round wondering where folks is at." She took up her sewing again. "Folks thats dead just go away like shadows and when that er happens Jesus takes over."

Hadley turned back to the window. The shadows were lengthening on the west meadow. The odor of roses wafted upward. She felt the warmth again. What would it be like to die? To die or be in love. Which? She was in love. But to die?

"I hope Rosanna's baby has two heads." She turned as if to dare Mrs. Shorter. The woman put down her sewing.

Hadley dared her further: "It'll probably look like Richard Nixon."

Downstairs the television set in Rosanna's room was still blaring out the Watergate news. Every day. Madness. War and madness. Rumors of war.

"If you was my sister and said such a thing

about me like at, I'd think you was crazy. Two heads. Sometimes you act like it. Crazy. There isn't a thing wrong with that poor Nixon except lying communist newspapers."

Hadley bent down and pushed her face square up to Mrs. Shorter's. "I am, Mrs. Shorter. I am crazy." She circled about the room hitting the pieces of furniture, the sewing machine, chairs, the bed, desk. "Mad. Mad. Mad." She sang as she continued to circle.

She went downstairs looking for Josh. She had to talk him out of his silly scheme. If she had a job she'd never meet Oliver Eubanks again. She had heard somewhere that he played golf every day. She had planned to take lessons this summer. Just by chance she would run into him on the golf course. Maybe she would get hit by a golf ball and she would lie there in the grass and then--- No, it would not be that way.

She opened the library doors. There was no one. The glass doors leading to the outside were slightly ajar. The room smelled of tobacco and whisky. Hadley

went over to the brass cart. The sweet fumes of scotch came to her. She picked up the one glass, dumped the ice cubes, added others and poured the usual two jiggers of bourbon. She was drinking more than ever this summer and adored every moment of it.

Holding the glass she went slowly about the room, feeling the soft leather of the sofa and chairs, gazing at her mother's portrait, wondering. Why did she look so sad, her eyes cast downward, her hand resting in her lap? What did the artist know that she, Hadley, could never know. Then she looked at Grandfather Bickley's portrait. "Christ," she said aloud for no particular reason.

She sipped the bourbon and the warmth of it soothed the turbulence in her. Whisky was one of the greatest discoveries she had ever made. With it everything was possible. Oliver Eubanks was possible. Her escape to New England or Atlanta was possible. She had tried pot. Once. She felt nothing. Whisky worked instantly.

Her eye caught the title on the left bookcase:

The Kasîdah
of Hâjî
Abdû El-Yezdî

She took it down and read the inscription. It was to Josh written in wispy ink with slanted letters and long ys and gs. "For Joshua Lathrop Bickley from his uncle, Walker Posteswaite Bickley."

Almost automatically the book opened to one of the back pages where passages were marked, not by the man who wrote the inscription, but by a bolder, younger hand. She read:

Theories for truths, fable for fact: system for
 science vex the thought
 Life's one great lesson you despise---to know that
 all we know is nought.

...Well, didn't thou say, Athen's noblest son,
 The most we know is nothing can be known?

...Essence and substance, sequence, cause,
 beginning, ending, space and time,
 These be the toys of manhood's mind, at once
 ridiculous and sublime.

Hadley stared at the bold markings on the page. Why did Josh like that? She closed the book and sat in the chair facing the open doors in case he or Mrs. Shorter should enter. All she had to do was ease the glass under the chair if she saw anyone coming. The chair was slip-covered, a perfect place for a hidden glass.

Yesterday she had hidden the glass when Mrs. Shorter burst into the room sniffing around. It was

pleasant sitting thus. From the chair she had a clear view of the cypress trees and somewhere, high, came the shrill timbre of a whippoorwill.

This was her favorite hour here, twilight, especially now that she had the addition of whisky. The bourbon was making her vision hazy. Or was the night coming on? She took another large swallow. She hoped she would get drunk. For an entire week she had been bored out of her mind. She wished she could just go to the Eubanks' house, announce herself: "Well, here I am, Oliver. I've come."

She giggled to herself.

"What is that you're drinking?"

Hadley immediately stood up and the Kasidah fell to the floor. She spun around. Josh had entered the door from the hall. His arms were filled with folded newspapers: the New York Times, the Christian Science Monitor, the Atlanta Constitution. His work for the night. He had caught her just as Oliver Eubanks had.

She almost offered the glass to his hands so preoccupied was she by his face, trying to see anger there, wondering how angry he could really get

with her. He was frowning, staring at her with his small magnified green eyes as if she had hurt him physically.

In her nervousness she half gasped, then giggled. She was always tense with him anyway. It was as if they never knew what to say to each other. They forced conversation.

"What is that?" he asked.

She looked into her glass. "Bourbon." Then she raised her eyes. "I told you I drink sometimes." She would try to charm him, but she heard her voice fading. He was still frowning, staring at the glass.

"Do you mind?"

He took the glass from her hand. "I mind very much." His eyes flashed excitedly. "Where is Mrs. Shorter?"

Hadley turned from him and began walking about the room hitting the furniture again.

"I asked you a question."

She paused behind the Hepplewhite chair. It was her mother's chair. ("Your mother was very dainty, you know, for a New England woman.") In the back of Hadley's mind was the faint notion the chair

would protect her. "Josh, are you angry?" She was thinking, too: I'll get by with this, just as I always have. "Please don't be angry. I've had these terrible headaches and I can't sleep." She looked toward the French doors leading outside.

"I came down here and thought I'd read the Kasidah. I know you think it's stupid now, but you didn't when you were younger. Anyway, then I got sort of dizzy or something and my heart felt funny---" She glanced at him sideways. "Your mother died of heart failure." She had been told that. "So---" she sighed heavily, "I decided to just try a little bourbon. Isn't that what Mr. Ewing who died used to do?"

"There is nothing wrong with your heart, and you know it." Josh closed the French doors with more force than necessary. He was angry. Hadley watched him as he picked up the Kasidah, sat in the black leather chair. He sat awkwardly slowly turning the pages. Josh was a very slow reader.

"This was given to me by my uncle Walter. I loved that man."

Hadley relaxed. Poor dead Uncle Walter had saved her. Josh wasn't angry anymore. But she didn't want to

talk about Uncle Walter. The bourbon was still hot in her and she tossed back her head. "He died young, didn't he? He drowned."

"Yes." And Josh looked past her, out toward the hills. Josh's eyes were so poor, his vision so slight, Hadley wondered sometimes if it hurt him to look where there was light. Sometimes it appeared so. She went to sit on the footstool before him. "Are you still angry, Josh?"

"Not angry. Disappointed, I think, would be a better word. It's just one thing after another with you, isn't it? I am very disappointed in you, Hadley."

"Why?" She thought she might cry.

He was speaking softly. It was better when he roared. "You mustn't ruin your young healthy brain," he said.

"You've always liked Rosanna the best, haven't you?" She was hurt and she wanted to lash back. She knew Josh was the least liked in his own family. There was a picture that haunted her, of Josh with his brothers and sisters when they were children. An ancient picture. Josh couldn't have been more than eight. All the brothers and sisters were handsome.

Only Josh was not. He was thin, with small sloping shoulders, thin blond hair and thick rimless round glasses. He looked a very unhappy child.

"Why do you ask such a thing?" He was frowning at her.

"Because it's true. You and Rosanna are always talking. She's more like you. The intellectual. I'm---" she cocked her head sideways--- "God knows what I am. Mad, I guess."

"You're our actress, I think." His eyes now were twinkling. The anger had gone. It always went quickly, like tempests that leveled cities in a matter of minutes and vanished in silence. "So much a woman and still such a child."

Hadley brushed the hair back from her face. "There's something in that book---" She took the book from him and turned the pages. "There's this:

"'Life, whatever its consequences, is built upon a basis of sorrow.'

"I believe that," she said eagerly, even nodding her head. She wanted to please him. She wanted desperately to please him. She wondered if he really did like Rosanna better than her.

"At your age sorrow is pleasant."

"I don't think so." The remark irritated her.

"You've never known sorrow, at least not to my knowledge."

"My mother---"

"You were too young and now you're only dramatizing. Ah yes, it's pleasant to talk about sorrow when one is seventeen." He looked at her as if in sudden recognition. "You have a birthday soon. You'll be eighteen and before you know it you won't even be a tax write-off."

"Yes, I'm getting old. My neck is becoming wrinkled." She drew her fingers down her long neck.

He cocked his head. "'After so many a summer dies the swan?'"

"Whatever made you think of that?"

"Who knows?"

"We're all bitched, Josh. All of us."

He shook his head. "That's not attractive in a woman."

"What?"

"Your language."

She said it was a good Anglo-Saxon word. "We

are bitched. What else would you call it? Doomed?
All right. We're doomed."

He puffed his cheeks and quickly exhaled.

"Hadley. Hadley. Hadley. Why? Why should a young pretty girl be talking about doom? These are your best years. The very best. It's the beginning of summer. A new day. Nineteen hundred and seventy-four. You should be free as the wind."

Hadley looked away. "I don't know. Everyone else seems happy. I don't know what's wrong with me." She wanted to tell him about her fears, the cold terrors that came in the night. She believed she could tell Oliver Eubanks. She started to say something about him.

"If it's the summer job--that should be good for you, as I said, 'keep your mind occupied.'"

Hadley met his weak gaze. "Damn Rosanna." She spat out the words. "Damn her forever."

She saw the lift to his face, but it hastily disappeared into concern. "Your sister?"

It all welled up then and two large tears rolled down her cheeks. She did not bother to brush them away. Christ God Almighty, she was alone. They

didn't like her at school and she was a stranger even to her father.

"Now that isn't necessary, is it?"

"Yes," she fairly shouted at him. "Yes, damn it. It is. I'm like an orphan. Nobody cares whether I live or die. Not even you---I grew up like a weed." And she wiped her eyes. "All you care about is politics. I'm tired of politics. I'm tired of Richard Nixon. I'm tired of the whole world." And she was then crying like a child, holding onto Josh, saying, "Help me, Josh. There's something wrong."

He shook her. Only one other time had he shaken her. That was when she kicked Mrs. Shorter. Kicked her in the stomach. But he was still shaking her. "Calm yourself. Now get hold here."

"I can't. I can't."

His hands dropped from her shoulders and the voice came out more gently. "It's time you grew out of these bouts of hysteria."

She kept wiping her eyes staring at him. She wondered if he were going to die. What would happen to her then? She kept regarding him saying nothing.

"Now, let's talk about the Kasidah."

Her breath was coming in short jerks, but she felt cleansed from the crying. The bourbon had begun to leave her and now she was left with a feeling of shame. She had never said such things to Josh before. She had carried everything inside, crying them to no one except the outbursts to Mrs. Shorter.

"I think I am antiChrist," she said. "If I'm not Mrs. Shorter's going to make one out of me. God, Josh, that woman. You don't know. You don't have to listen to her. She's a horrible bore. She's the greatest bore in the world. You--" She tossed back her head again and slowly raised it regarding him with level eyes. "Am I mad, Josh? Will I turn into a mad woman?"

He rose from the chair. "I never want to hear you say that again. I never want to hear you say that--" He strode out of the room, awkwardly closing the door behind him.

"But what about Oliver Eubanks," she called after him. "You haven't told me. . . ."

But the cry met only the television reporter's voice and was drowned in his sound.

"The Middle East," began the voice.