

CHAPTER 7

"Josh! Josh!" Hadley called. He was going into the house, his right arm filled with the usual night's "work": New York Times, Christian Science Monitor, Birmingham News, Post Herald, Atlanta Constitution, Louisville Courier Journal.

He turned, using his whole body. Everything he did he did with difficulty, even reading. He was a slow reader. It took him all night and into the early morning to complete the reading of the newspapers and magazines. He rarely looked at television except for football.

Football was a passion with him. He was the University of Alabama's most enthusiastic supporter,

even though he had not gone to school there. He had no formal college education whatsoever. He educated himself by memorizing poetry and reading history. He was an educated man.

Hadley waved from the driveway. "Wait," she called.

He stood at the door obediently, smiling as she approached. "Well, Liza Jane," he said. When he was in a good humor he always called her "Liza Jane." Otherwise he never called her anything except when he was angry. Then the voice boomed over the hills, "Haad-ly!"

"Guess what?" she said, grinning up at him.

"I can't imagine."

"Guess who I had lunch with? Just guess?"

"The Queen of England." Sometimes Josh's humor was not the most original.

"No, really."

"I don't know." He started to open the front door. He was not interested.

"Oliver Eubanks."

He turned quickly, facing her with his green tiny eyes flashing angrily.

"He asked me."

"What for?"

"Why, Josh, to seduce me, of course. An old man like that and me just this---" His eyes narrowed, and she leaned sideways placing her hand palm outward on her forehead. "The Perils of Pauline," she said and laughed nervously.

He turned from her and entered the house, leaving her in her mock gesture.

"I like him," she said.

"I don't," was all he said and slammed the front door.

Hadley followed him and then stood still in the hall as he made his slow walk up the stairway. "He likes you," she said quietly. "He told me so." She waited for him to slam the bedroom door upstairs. She remembered his telling her once she should never slam doors. No well brought up person slams doors, he said. But she didn't care whether she was well brought up or not. Besides, it was inconsistent for Josh to make such a remark. There was a touch of snobbery in him. He believed in doing the "right thing," conforming. And it wasn't conforming for

a seventeen year old girl to have lunch or anything else with a forty-one year old man.

Time, she was saying to herself. In time he'll like Oliver. Mainly because Josh liked everyone. He sincerely did, even though he constantly ranted about the hypocrites in town (more than half of Greenleaf). After reflection, however, he dismissed their error as only ignorance, faults not completely of their own doing, and his fondness for all prevailed. Hadley often thought it too bad the emotion was not returned. Josh had true enemies, who saw his political beliefs as thievery plotted by melancholy socialists who would take away their "way of living," their bank accounts, the food out of their very mouths.

"Socialism for the rich and free enterprise for the poor," wrote Josh sardonically, and the heathens roared their hatred.

No matter, Hadley knew Josh would come to like Oliver. After all, he had made a valiant try to see the good in Rosanna's hapless alliance. But Oliver Eubanks was different, different from anyone any of them had ever known. Just the thought of him caused such high excitement in her she whirled about in the

hall as if by doing so she could relieve some of the tension that filled every nerve in her body.

She left the hall in search of Rosanna or Mrs. Shorter or even poor Julia. How kind she was feeling toward everyone, even Mrs. Shorter. Mrs. Shorter's mother two days ago had slipped on the bathroom floor at her house and broken her hip. Mrs. Shorter moaned for two straight days and nights. Hadley had said nothing to her at the time. But now she regretted her lack of sympathy and was willing to spend all afternoon if necessary to "help" the woman.

But the only one in the house, other than Josh, was Rosanna. Her mistake appeared to be growing larger by the hour. She was seated in front of the television set, weeping. Senator Sam ^EArvin was quoting again:

"Had I but loved my God more than my king...."
He was admonishing a young Brooks Brothers-clad man whose kewpie doll wife stoically looked on from behind.

Hadley turned off the set. "What's the matter?" she asked Rosanna. "For all the world you look like Cinderella by the ashes."

"Such a beautiful man," Rosanna said. "Everything's

so wrong. The world. This poor baby who has to come into such madness." She pointed toward the blank television screen. "That--that man is the only sane human being alive in the world."

"You do rave on, Rosanna."

Rosanna blew her nose loudly. Hadley sat on the foot stool in front of her. Rosanna had absolutely the greenest eyes she had ever seen. The tears appeared to make them greener. She said so.

"Who cares?"

"Just an observation. Besides, the world isn't as bad as you think." Hadley was purposely speaking very softly. She could hear the "sweetness" fairly dripping from her mouth. "Try to look for the good things. They're all around." She lifted both hands and sat up straighter. "Really. If you'll only look."

Rosanna stared at Hadley. "What's wrong with you? You sound like that woman who writes that nauseating column for the paper---'golden oldies, don't despair, make the world a little better place in which to live, take care of the old and the sick, don't be bored, do things for others. Visit the lonely.' Golden hearts. Christ. I'll bet she's

the biggest bitch in the world." She stared again.

"You're up to something. What is it?"

"For godsakes, Rosanna. I'll be glad when you have that baby. I'm only trying to help you."

"Oh, now I know," said Rosanna.

"Know what?"

She continued with her little knowing smile.

"Know what?" Hadley repeated.

"The lover spoke to you today. He finally spoke, didn't he, the dear old man." She forced a laugh. "Do you suppose he's a dirty old man, too?"

Hadley felt the beginnings of rage. It always began somewhere in her stomach and travelled upward, accelerating her heart and leaving her face and neck crimson with heat. Rosanna would do anything to put Oliver Eubanks down. She was jealous. But this time the anger left easily. She was so happy she didn't care what Rosanna or anybody else had to say.

"He's so wonderful, Rosanna." She was almost whispering and for a moment she thought she might even hug her weeping miserable sister. She leaned nearer to her. "He is wonderful."

Rosanna merely glanced at her, the edges of her lips turned downward.

"We had lunch."

"You?"

Hadley nodded, her face smiling expectantly.

"My god, he's worse than I thought--a child molester."

Hadley leaned back then and tucked her legs underneath her. "Don't, Rosanna. Really, don't. It's very serious. You must love who I love. Won't you? Don't be mean. Please don't."

"Serious? About what?"

Hadley said nothing, and Rosanna looked away almost in desperation:

"He's too damn old for you, Hadley." She shook her head and for a moment Hadley saw something of Grandfather Bickley in Rosanna's gesture of disapproval. "He's---he's----"

"Wonderful."

Rosanna smiled a hurt little smile.

"I'm going to marry him. I am."

"I'll wait for the golden event."

"We're having dinner tomorrow."

"Does Josh know that?" Rosanna's lips were pinched and her voice was lowered as if she were in on some despicable plot. "Does he?"

"You know what, Rosanna?" Hadley yawned. "Sometimes you look exactly like this country school teacher I had in high school. You have the same look on your face: 'Did you do that, Hadley Bickley? Did you?'" Hadley took up one of the thin cigars Rosanna had begun to smoke lately. "Every time anything happened in school she always accused me. She sucked lemons in class. Sat right up there at her desk sucking lemons."

"Oliver," said Rosanna. "That name. Typical WASP. He's a typical wasp, unexciting, boring."

"I've always known the word is redundant. WASP. Even childish. I should think you with all your education would know better."

Rosanna yawned. She always yawned when she was incorrect.

"Besides, he's not dull. He's very funny, as a matter of fact." Hadley looked beyond Rosanna.

"Sometimes."

"He doesn't do anything, stand for anything."

"He paints." She looked back at Rosanna. "He thinks like you. He does."

"He thinks---" Hadley was trying to invent

something Rosanna couldn't possibly refute. It would make her all the more jealous. Actually, Hadley had no idea what Oliver's more serious thoughts were. She didn't even know whether he was a democrat or a republican or a communist. And she didn't care. "He thinks the western world, I guess, for all purposes is over and we're just waiting--for an end. Just waiting---" Hadley was looking at the blue cedar outside the window. It looked very blue. It usually didn't. "Just waiting," she repeated. "Isn't that the way you think?"

"No. I think it should have been over years ago. And Oliver Eubanks doesn't think like I do at all. His type actually mourns the dying of the old, but I celebrate. Give the others a chance. Give all the world a chance to become rich and soft and rot like we're doing."

Hadley half-listening looked back at her. She was thinking that when she married Oliver one of the dividends would be not hearing Rosanna lecture any more. No wonder Rosanna never had many friends. She bored them all to death.

"Here we are," she went on. "The only country

in the world founded on an idea and we've forgotten what the idea ever was. Yep, we lost our idea. We certainly did."

"You don't look bad pregnant," said Hadley.

"In a way you look better."

"Pearls before swine. So innocent. You have no idea what's going to happen to you in your smug little world."

Hadley sighed. "What are you talking about, Rosanna?"

"Talking to you is like talking to a blank wall. You'd never understand in a thousand years."

Rosanna's face was red as she spat out her words.

Hadley leaned forward and smiled. "Won't it be fun to have a baby in the house?"

Rosanna's eyes widened. "That man has done something to you. Hasn't he?" Her eyes were now mocking. "So many little compliments all the time. Happy days are here again."

And then on impulse Hadley bent over and kissed Rosanna on the cheek. "Dear Rosanna, you be happy. Try to be." And she left the room in search of Julia. On the drive to work that morning she had promised to

help Julia style her limp fine hair. Now she wanted to very much. She loved her. She loved everyone.

But all she found was Mrs. Shorter. She was hemming her mother's death underwear, tackling the task with grim dedication.

Almost reluctantly Hadley asked her how her mother was.

The woman removed a strand of purple thread from her mouth. "She's setting up. Hasn't had a minute's pain."

"Really? How wonderful. Then you won't need---" Hadley glanced at the purple panties.

"Been hearing death bells all day." She examined Hadley from head to feet. "What you been up to?"

"Nothing."

"I can tell it isn't no count whatever it is. You got that er look."

"What look?"

"Like you been into something. You haven't been fooling round with none of them boys again? Half a dozen of em was out there looking for you about an hour ago."

"Tell them I've moved away. Tell them I died, drowned in a creek with rosebuds all over me. I don't want to see any of them."

Mrs. Shorter gazed at her blackly. "You up to something. I can tell."

Hadley smiled. "The underwear is lovely, Mrs. Shorter." She fairly ran from the room.

But amidst all the joy there came an event which momentarily interrupted her euphoria. The funeral home director called in an obituary that jolted Hadley more than anything had in recent years.

"Lt. Morris Bradley Seabury, 19."

"Who? What?" Hadley cried.

"Ah huh--- He's the Seabury boy. Joined up with the arm forces. Went over yonder and stead of getting kilt the proper way, he fallen off his jeep and died straightaway."

Hadley took the information for the obituary and afterward slowly put the phone down. She was smelling the June of two summers ago: gardenias, honeysuckle and cut grass. Morris Seabury had been "in love" with her. He was "in love" with her when

he died. He had written her only recently. He had never been able to forget her, he wrote. She never answered the letter.

The summer night was so vivid in her mind. It was a dreary party, one she would never have attended had not Josh forced her. The party was at a farm owned by the rector of the Episcopal Church. The rector was having a picnic for "the young people." Morris Seabury, a seventeen-year-old snub nosed youth with glasses, followed her everywhere.

The farm was a working farm, stocked with cows, chickens, horses and mad peacocks that screeched their displeasure morning and night. There was a barn with a hayloft and it had been fun summersaulting down the hay, surveying the fields through a barely visible loft window.

Hadley remembered she ate seven hot dogs. The poor rector. How innocent he was. He didn't know. Behind the barn the pot was glowing constantly. The energy was not mere youth.

Morris Seabury ate nothing but stood staring at Hadley, lovingly approving each mouthful she downed. She knew he was watching and she liked the attention,

even though she said Morris was not her type. She wanted every boy in the entire school to be in love with her. She made lists. Eighteen were in love with her. Ten she wasn't sure of. And the others she didn't care about.

That night there was a pairing of couples and since Hadley had chosen alcohol over pot Morris was the victor. He had brought a bottle of bourbon. He had told Hadley earlier. Actually she hadn't begun to drink then. But she thought it would be fun to try.

"Let's," she said to Morris and they left the others, walking out into the meadow. Secretly, she hoped to lose Morris and escape back to the farm house. She wasn't really sure about the whisky, what it would do to her.

But when they got to the stile they sat and Morris presented the half pint of bottlegged bourbon. He had got it at a motel, he said. It didn't matter that he was only seventeen. He would have gotten more, he said, if he had had more money.

Hadley was impressed:

"Oh Morris, how thoughtful. Really. Hasn't this been dreary? What a dear you are. I think

I just might fall in love with you."

"Here," said Morris, handing her the bottle.

"You first."

"Don't you put something with it?" Hadley asked. She was thinking of Josh and how he mixed drinks for guests.

"You don't have to. Most people don't. You gotta just sip it. You can't drink it like a coke or anything."

Hadley took a swallow from the bottle and the warm feel of it as it coursed through her body was delightful. It was a new sensation and one she intended to practise often in the future. After awhile every nerve in her body was relaxed and all her worries about people at school, the girls who kept her out of their clubs and parties, seemed to disappear instantly. She had not a care.

She began to giggle. "You and me sitting on the minister's stile getting drunk." She was also feeling very amorous toward this young man who had initiated her into this world of whisky and magic. Even the scrubby farm looked beautiful. She said so and kissed Morris on the cheek.

Within minutes they were on the grass, the pint of bourbon abandoned and Hadley half nude with Morris lying on top of her trying desperately to enter her legs. When he was partially successful Hadley jumped up, quickly dressed, and seeing him spent there on the grass, drenched in his own semen, she laughed and left him. She refused ever to see him again.

And now she was writing his death notice. She closed her eyes against her own cruelty. He had truly loved her. In the letter he had written only a few short weeks ago he said he was coming home on leave. He wanted to see her. He hoped with all his heart she would see him.

"I've grown up a lot," he wrote, "but even now in this German city I can not erase what I've always felt for you. I've never met another girl like you, so full of life and love and beauty..."

Hadley knew everyone in the newsroom was looking at her. The tears were falling down her cheeks. She was putting herself in his place, the way it was that summer night. What if Oliver Eubanks treated her the way she had treated poor Morris? She would go mad, or kill herself. Poor Morris. Poor dead boy.