

CHAPTER 10

"Gotcha a good un this time." It was Death's voice.

But not even the vulgar voice of the funeral director could touch Hadley's total happiness. When she entered the newsroom that morning she spoke to each reporter: "Good morn-ing! Good morning! Good morning to you."

She sat at her desk, her hand covering her lips so that no one could see the smile. Her joy was total. She had never known such happiness. Earlier, as she lay in her own bed, she relived the night's events, going over and over each detail. She watched

the night until the dawn came, and all the while her body throbbed with the love she had so recently received. Even her lips felt possessed by some wild foreign pulse, and her cheeks were chafed and hot to the touch.

She lay thinking, remembering how he had held her. Even her curiosity about the act itself was sublimated to the will to have him closer. She wanted to dissolve into him, be him, so that he could never leave her, ever.

Afterward he stroked her hair and kissed her damp forehead. It was such a gentle gesture it could only have been one of love. And now the thought of it sent ripples of excitement through her. She would go to him again tonight, they had decided. He would have dinner waiting for her. She would make her appearance at Josh's table, then leave.

But Josh worried him, he said. And Hadley had laughed. "Your terrible guilt--deflowering so virgin a girl. Shame."

He was not amused. For a moment she thought he was angry.

She traced his lips with her finger. "You do have a cruel mouth."

But he ignored her and began saying all the things she did not want to hear: that Josh was correct, he was too old, Hadley was too young, one had to have some sense; one just didn't go around raping young girls.

"Was I raped?" Hadley asked innocently.

He looked at her and smiled his young smile. Hadley was grateful for the smile. She told him so. She told him she never wanted to hear talk of Josh again. She didn't want him to think of Josh. Josh was very old-fashioned. She adored him, of course, but he was really a puritan. Yes, she adored him, but he was very antique and Oliver should know that. Besides, Oliver was like Josh:

"Always so proper. That's why you drink. Because you're not free."

"A wise head in so young a lass."

"But you really are. You're a lot like Josh."

"Josh Bickley?" They were lying in bed and he lifted his head to look at her in astonishment.

"Not in looks, or even personality. But there's something. I feel safe with both of you. Do you understand?" She traced his lips with her finger

again. "But I'm easier with you than with Josh." Her fingers dropped to his chest and brushed the greying hair. There she lay her head, listening to the vulnerable sound of his heart beat.

"Josh really doesn't know me. I think I embarrass him. I do."

"You don't know me either. To know me--" He kissed the inside of her palm and rose from the bed. "--you must know Tuscany."

"Tuscany?" She didn't want to talk about Tuscany. She liked the leanness of his body, the taut buttocks.

"There's no laughter in Tuscany. Ah, now, but Florence, the mad Florentine laughter." He put on a bathrobe and lit a cigarette. He was enjoying his talk. "The Florentines are the ones who laugh. The Tuscan art is greater, of course. But there is no laughter, only a kind of madness. And I like a little madness in my life."

She felt her body tense and as if he sensed it he came back to the bed, sat beside her stroking her hair.

"Don't," she said.

"What?"

"Nothing." But her body was still tense and she felt a pain in her back.

"You're such a lost little creature."

"We're alike," she said. And then she felt her body suddenly drench itself in cold sweat. He didn't love her. Love? What was love for a woman? Or a man? Love? Hideous word. Foul word.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Think of Leonardo laughing his Florentine laugh."

"Uh, huh."

"What an odd child you are."

"You will take me away."

"Of course. Of course. To dying Italy. Or to the holy wars. Would you like that? Would you like to go to a holy war?"

"No."

But the teletypes were tapping. The Western World was dying, they said. Somebody had won, was winning, said the reporters. Somebody. She didn't care.

She was obsessed by the hideous word love.

It was as if she had woven a web around herself, this obsession, living there, only half hearing the voices about her or seeing the faces. There was only one face, one voice, one mind. She dreamed of Florence, read about it, dreamed their life together there. They would laugh like Florentines, think like Tuscans. She dreamed on and on.

The Eubanks returned from the funeral in New Orleans. Hadley had half hoped for an accident, but they returned on schedule, at noon, one lovely warm day. Oliver invented the excuse he was painting her portrait. She came to the ~~garçonnière~~ every day at noon and went home at six, returning as often as possible in the evenings. She saw Josh and Rosanna only at dinner. Josh wanted to know why she appeared so preoccupied.

But she hadn't heard the question. He asked her again.

"Oh, am I?" And she put her fingers to her lips so they wouldn't see her smile. She tried to harden the look in her eyes. Her eyes had become so odd,

the pupils overly large. No longer did she have the sparkling brittle girl-like look of virginity. She was a woman, warmly fertile and deeply and everlastingly committed to the love of a man. What else was a woman for, she asked herself. She didn't give a damn about Rosanna and her woman's liberation. A woman was meant to love and receive love, nothing else. When she thought of it all, thought long, she knew she was trying to excuse something puritan in her, taught long ago by Josh and Grandfather Bickley.

Because there was guilt. There was no denying it. Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery. She saw the words as if they came shouting at her from the Prayer Book. She wondered if every woman felt the same. Or was she alone? Was it the town that had shaped her? She looked up the word adultery in her high school dictionary. With relief she read the word involved only people who were married. So it was all right, she tried to tell herself. But the guilt was real, no matter how she tried to argue it away.

She thought constantly of Oliver, analyzing him, mainly in relation to her. He was selfish, critical, all the traits she knew in herself. He was lazy,

sensitive, artistic. He drank too much. His life was mainly cerebral. He liked women better than men, he said. And that was part of his charm. He made her feel more feminine.

Hadley asked him about his wife, his divorce. He left his Montgomery bride, he said, because she was an "idiot." She was very pretty and vapid. Small town social life was her entire world. He took her to Tuscany and she cried for one solid year. When they returned to Montgomery she gave a party for herself and he took the next plane back for Florence and never saw her again.

"I presume she's still down there, giving parties, playing bridge in the afternoons and married to a man just like her. I think of them sometimes when I'm alone and I always see them at football games, roaring their pagan heads off and fighting together in Holiday Inns. Not a very pretty picture."

Hadley could never hear enough about the woman. She wanted to know the smallest details, how she wore her hair, what the sound of her voice was like, did she whine, was she, Hadley, prettier? How was she in

bed? Was she frigid? Did she believe in God? How blond was her hair? Was it truly blond? How did she dress? Did she live in a big house with columns and have rich parents? "Didn't you want children?"

No, the Montgomery wife did not believe in God. She only believed in dinners and parties and the bridge table and herself. "The complete hedonist." They had never really planned for children. She moaned constantly to everyone about not having them. She played a little game. Actually she would never have spent time with a child. She was too restless. There was always someone in the house, some guest to be fed or entertained. Or they were going somewhere. They were never alone. They were never at home. He loathed every minute of their life together which was two years and one day. Yes, Hadley was better in bed and her parents were rich.

"I don't like parties. I don't like bridge."

He said he really did want to do her portrait. But not her beauty. He would paint her from the inside out, her deepest feelings. "The real you." And when it was done it made no sense whatsoever--there were wild colors with touches of yellow like stars streaking

across a starry night. There was also grey. Nothing there, just grey. An empty grey place on the canvas.

"Then paint you," she said.

He did a self portrait. On a large canvas he painted what appeared to be a shadow or cloud and in the center was a yellow-green eye, half closed in a wink. The eye was filled with red veins. Hadley looked at it in anger. He was laughing at her. Her first reaction was to scream. But she merely put her hand to her throat and no sound came. A terror had seized her.

She had seen the eye before. Last year. An old man smelling of bay rum and his own filth approached her downtown, tipping his hat and bowing elaborately before her. He wanted money. But when he looked into her eyes he took hold of her hand, scratching the palm. His right eye winked suggestively. She often dreamed of the man as she had the black boy in Atlanta.

Oliver laughed. "That," he said, "is your lover."

She turned from him. "Is it a joke?"

He placed his arms about her waist. "My poor

romantic Hadley. I've frightened you, haven't I? It's only a small joke, a commentary, one only I would understand."

Then he sat in one of the two wicker chairs. Whenever she thought of him she always thought of him in that chair, the sleeves of his shirt rolled just below his elbows, his hand partially covering his face, regarding her as he always did with half amusement, half seriousness. She had not made him happy. She said as much.

"Happy? A thin word. But I've forgotten so much these past days. All my thoughts are filled with one very beautiful young woman. Is that happiness?"

She turned and smiled broadly. "You do have yellow eyes, cat's eyes."

"Only woman have cat's eyes. Mostly southern women."

Hadley hugged her arms to herself. "I've never been so happy. I like the word. It's a fat word. Marry me. Marry me soon."

He said nothing.

And she turned again, her throat almost closing from the sudden desire to cry and the struggle not to.

"Who are you? What person is in your head? You feel, you laugh, but who are you? You're not like the Senator or--your mother. Are you like your mother? You're not. You're very sweet and then--"

"My father's a politician and so is my mother."

"And you?"

He turned to the two canvases, surveying them, calculating them, as if he had heard nothing. "One never sees oneself as others do. My perspectives-- on life, that is--are rather odd, I would say."

"You can have any woman you want. Any woman would want you."

"I don't want just any woman."

Hadley tossed her hair from her face.

"Confident little bitch, aren't you?"

"Yes." She looked beyond him to the picture again, the weird yellow eye laughing at her. "Let's have a drink. Tell me everything, everything there is about you, what you were like when you were two, the first girl you ever kissed. Your fears. Are you afraid of death?"

He took one last look at the portrait. "Dear girl, let's drive. Let's take my car and drive in

this balmy Alabama night. We'll beat death. Is that a challenge? You and me, driving through the night, beating death?

She said it was a challenge and they left to enter the night.

"Just laid up there and passed." Mrs. Shorter was lying on her bed, shouting her grief. Her mother was dead. She had received a telephone call.

Hadley, Rosanna and Josh stood near the bed looking down at the grieving, screaming woman. "She set up and sang 'Amazin Grace,' then dropped off and passed. Aint gone sing nor say nothing never again."

Hadley was staring at the woman but she was thinking of the night, how she and Oliver had opened all the windows to the car and while she held onto his arm he drove and they both knew they had beaten death. She had rested her head on his shoulder and they said nothing as they made their trip. Now, today, this moment, she was not afraid of Mrs. Shorter, or her swollen face, or the thought of the emaciated body lying at the funeral home dressed in purple taffeta underwear.

Rosanna was holding a wash cloth and every now and then she patted the woman's face. When that was done she held the woman's stubby hand, saying that everything was going to be all right. Josh tried to tell of his own mother's death, how he had felt, but Mrs. Shorter wouldn't listen.

"She weren't none of yours," she shouted in reference to her own mother. "You don't know her. She was the sweetest thang ever borned. Now she's up there shouting round the throne."

Josh cleared his throat and Hadley turned. She was afraid she was going to laugh. The thought of Mrs. Shorter's mother in her bra and pants shouting and stomping around a throne anywhere was too much. She could see Josh was amused, too; if not amused, bemused. He kept adjusting his glasses and clearing his throat. Rosanna found nothing amusing. But then she never did.

Actually, Hadley never laughed at people, even Mrs. Shorter. She felt their pain too much. This was merely nerves. She felt everything more keenly now, even laughter. The highs were so very high and the lows so low. Love was, as they say, a disease. Whoever said so was correct.

"I'll be back for Dr. Bickley," said Mrs. Shorter. She was looking at Josh.

"Of course not," said Josh. "He will be very sorry to hear your news."

"No, I'll be back."

Hadley's heart quickened. She stared at Josh. Was Grandfather Bickley coming here? Now? She wouldn't be able to leave the house. And she had promised Oliver to be at his place early tomorrow night. It was her birthday. He had bought a present.

Josh glanced at her. "It's nice of your Aunt Mary and your grandfather to come for your birthday, isn't it? You went to his, so now he comes to yours. He is giving you one of his Chinese vases."

Hadley dampened her lips and stared at Josh.

"She don't need no vase," shouted Mrs. Shorter.

"Now, now," said Rosanna. "Let's be calm. Your mother wouldn't want you to be so upset." She glanced at Josh. "Why's he giving her a vase?"

Tears began to flow down Hadley's cheeks.

"Don't mind what I say," said Mrs. Shorter, recovering from her hysteria. "I'm just upset, Hadley honey. You don't have no mama to lose. But

when you been with one long as I have you just don't give her up that easy. Don't cry, Hadley hon."

Josh began blowing air out of his cheeks and rocking backward on his feet. Hadley hastily brushed away the tears. She would call Oliver immediately, tell him she couldn't get away. It occurred to her that it might be a smart move anyway. She was all too aware what an easy prize she had been. She had told him as much several times. But he said he didn't care for games and he didn't like women who played them, that one of the things he liked most about Hadley was her forthrightness.

But she was uneasy. Once when she was telling him about her trip to Boston to see her mother's father, she noticed his gaze resting on a nearby magazine. It was an art magazine. She knew he would rather be reading than hearing about her dull trip. In bed after their wild passions he never said anything as she cried out her child-like love.

"Child-like" was his own word. He had said she was not childish but child-like. It was a very appealing quality, he thought. He wanted to take care of her, protect her as he would a defenseless

child. It had hurt her feelings. She told him so. She wanted to be a woman. "Make me a woman. Oh, do."

Mrs. Shorter wiped her face with her open palm. "Well, I guess I'd better get my mind together, go on down to the funeral home. Can't do anything just laying up here."

From the television set came the voice of a news reporter:

"By a vote of eight to nothing today the United States Supreme Court ruled that President Nixon must provide tapes and documents of 64 conversations subpoenaed by..."

Hadley did not listen. She was dialing the telephone.

Be there. Be there, she was saying to herself.

"My God, this world," said Rosanna.

"Mama's gone to God."