

## CHAPTER 11

Mrs. Shorter buried her mother and rushed back the next day to prepare for Aunt Mary and Grandfather Bickley. She was a "saint," everyone declared. And her actions so "touched" everyone that Hadley found a hidden bottle of bourbon and proceeded to empty it. Josh, respecting his father's disapproval of alcohol, hid all tell-tale signs, even wine glasses.

In recent weeks Hadley had taken to having her drinks in the woods behind the house. There was a clear running stream and the late afternoon sun came through the trees like gilded fingers. But most of

all she was alone to fantasize and remember even the smallest detail of her days and nights with Oliver.

He was disappointed she was unable to come to him tonight on her birthday, he said.

"But you will think of me," Hadley said.

"No."

"Why?"

He said nothing.

Hadley smiled to herself. "Good-bye."

"What?!"

She hung up.

"Good-bye," she repeated aloud to the woods as she replenished her drink into a paper cup.

The afternoon was especially pleasant, not too warm, and the sky was as blue as an October day. The bourbon eased her stomach and she leaned against the trunk of a thick oak. Sometimes she thought these afternoons were actually more pleasant than the events themselves. She was in a state of euphoria. The bourbon, the sky, her wild imaginings, especially the thought of leaving Greenleaf, all of it sent her mind reeling. She would be the envy of everyone she knew. When she and Oliver came back for visits she would be the rich and worldly Mrs. Eubanks. Everyone

else would be married to dull Greenleaf boys: insurance salesmen, country doctors, store clerks. They would have thousands of ugly children. She would have Oliver. Rosanna would truly despise her then. By that time Rosanna would probably be so desperate she would marry one of the rednecks she was always trying to help.

I'm in love, she said to herself and, stretching her arms, settled further back against the tree trunk. She was wondering just what it was about Oliver that attracted women so. The thought made her smile. She liked to think of that. It wasn't his looks so much, though they were all right. Rather it was a combination of things: his absolute confidence, also his kindness (he was that) and the sometimes wit. But mainly she liked the way he looked at women, even his own mother. He looked with such complete attention noting the smallest details: the way one pronounced a certain word, the way she, Hadley, walked, the highlights in her hair: (There's no red in yours, only black, almost oriental.") He saw the lilt of her nose, the length of her neck, arms, legs, waist. She should smile more, he said,

because her teeth were as perfect as the rest of her. He liked her in certain colors--yellows and white. He liked the way she talked, "a civilized drawl." He liked the way she sat--("with surprising elegance.")

He talked very little but when he did he talked well: of books she, Hadley, had never read, of artists she had never seen, of cities and towns she knew nothing of. He talked, too, of the men and women he knew in Europe and for the most part disliked. Hadley was consumed with interest. Were the people very rich? Beautiful? Did they go to parties all the time? Yes, they were rich and went to parties. But they had done too much, seen too many places, knew too many people. They were very dull and they could be very cruel. He had a few real friends, those who lived in only one room and others who didn't even have that.

"They would scare me to death," Hadley told him.

"Who?"

"The rich ones." She was bored by his "real friends."

"You would never see them."

"Why?"

"Because I wouldn't want them to ruin you. They would try--a fresh lovely thing like you. 'They would take from you the very thing they admired you for.' A quote from somebody. That's what they do to everyone."

Hadley sipped her drink and laughed to herself. He didn't know her all that well either. He only knew her terrors and her body. He didn't know her loathing for other women. No one would take anything from Hadley Bickley. Ever.

"Better not get loose out chere."

Her heart turned over and she stood up, spilling the drink on her blouse. Isaiah, his hands clapping together, was bent over laughing. He liked to scare people. "I spied you when you went out. Can't get loose when Reverend comes."

Loose was Isaiah's word for drunk.

"Oh my god, it's you. You scared me to death."

Fear was enormously funny to Isaiah. She remembered when she was younger and she and some of her friends used to go to criminal court hearings, because there was nothing else to do. If one of Isaiah's friends entered the courtroom as a defendant

he would shout with laughter, as did all his friends, a reaction Hadley had never understood.

She wiped off her drenched blouse with a paper napkin. "Here," she said handing him a cup. "Come on. Have a drink."

He took the cup without hesitation. "I don't wanta get loose out here neither and have the Reverend talking back at me." He giggled.

"Want any water with it?"

"Naw. I takes it clean, then I takes the water."

Hadley giggled, too. "Isn't this fun? Wouldn't Josh simply roar if he could see us?"

"He don't 'low nothin like this here. I'd be on my way to glory he'd carry on so. With a gun."

"Josh would never shoot anybody, especially you. He might me, though."

"Sometime it look lak he might-- He can be a mean somebody."

"He's never mean, just angry, hurt is really what he is. Josh is the most hurt man I know, except for one other person." She was feeling the whisky quite a bit. She could hear her own words and her attempt to speak distinctly.

"Your sister she been asking me ever question anybody ever thought up."

Hadley groaned. "About being black, I suppose."

"Uh huh."

"I bet you lied."

Isaiah giggled. "You a sight."

"What an evil little bore Rosanna is. I think I actually despise her. As a matter of fact, I know I do. She goes around with rednecks and all that--so-so liberal about it all--- It's all a pose and then she comes home and gets furious because the silver hasn't been polished. Money. And buying things is all she really cares about. Avarice and greed." Hadley stared into her cup. "At least we're honest. You and I. We both want money and we don't make any bones about it." She looked up at Isaiah. "Right?"

"Thas right. I wished I had a pile. Revrund Ike. You know him?"

"Uh huh."

"He say you gotta thank big, man. Big. Green big."

"Makes sense, I guess. Want another jigger?"

"Uh huh."

She handed him the bottle. "Grandfather hasn't come yet, has he?"

"Aint due till six."

Hadley took the bottle from him and poured more into her cup. "I've got to drink to get through it. Aunt Mary and all. You wants know something, Isaiah?"

"Uh huh."

"I'm in love. I'm going to marry very, very soon and leave here, go to Europe to live."

"Naw?" His eyes were wide.

Hadley looked away. The sun was still filtering through the green leaves like spun gold.

"You mustn't tell."

"I aint gone tell nobody nothin."

"You know who it is?"

"Naw. Who?"

"Oliver Eubanks."

"Him? My Jeezus! He an old man. He bout near Mr. Josh's age. Aint he?"

Hadley was furious. "For godsakes, Isaiah. Can't you see? Josh is in his sixties. Oliver's



barely into his forties. Josh's age. Sometimes I think you haven't got a bit of sense."

"Me neither."

Hadley laughed. With it all she loved Isaiah. She really did. He could make her laugh. No one scarcely could do that.

"I----saaiah!" It was Mrs. Shorter shouting her redneck head off.

"Oh my god," Hadley said. "Don't let her come out here."

"I better git." And half loping Isaiah made his way crouching through the woods.

"Where do you go all the time?" Hadley heard Mrs. Shorter question. "I never saw anybody who could disappear as quick as you. I need some help in here. My own mother just buried and not one single hand to help. Now, come on here."

Aunt Mary, tall and dressed in a very hot looking black dress, walked in front of Grandfather Bickley as the two made their way to the house. Hadley, dressed for the occasion in white pants and a faint blue blouse, was drunk and began to giggle at the sight of Aunt Mary.

Josh, rocking backward on his heels, straightened and gazed at Hadley curiously. Aunt Mary looked like a general in the army, leading her straight tiny father into her brother's house. She had a very demanding presence. Julia began to visibly shrink backward into the hallway.

Jealousy was always the first emotion to emerge on Aunt Julia's visits to her brother Josh's house. She envied his comparative affluence and the two ageing siblings had enormous fights, insulting each other's most vulnerable weaknesses.

Families were terrible institutions, Hadley had begun to believe. And they were just that, institutions. In the first place everyone knew each other too well. No one should know anyone else that well. All the faults glared, diminishing even the faintest virtue. She was certain she and Oliver would never have children. But if they did she would never hover over them, pretending, faking. And she would never thrust her own view of the world on them. She would set them free early to develop as they would. Whether weed or flower.

"Hello, Josh," said Aunt Mary, looking beyond him

to Julia. She went immediately to Julia, avoiding Hadley and Rosanna standing like two patient statues.

"Stand up straight, Julia. Don't lean back like that. Honestly, how did you and Josh get such posture? Hello, Rosanna."

Hadley giggled again and went straight into the arms of Grandfather Bickley. She had put mouthwash, perfume and everything she could think of in her mouth. His body felt breakable like a frail old cat's as she received his weak embrace.

Grandfather Bickley lifted her face as he always did. "Happy Birthday, dear child."

Dear child. The words and the very look of him, so innocent of her, brought guilt again. She had betrayed him, betrayed everything he believed, his faith in her, love, Josh's faith. She turned away, avoiding his holy Welch eyes. The guilt hurt. Was that why people wanted to leave their beginnings, she wondered. To escape? Their not loving? Their ingratitude? Their sins? Must one be grateful forever? Holy God, her whisky-wet mind shouted: I can't sit here forever listening to them drone on and on about "Jer-e-miah." Every Sunday,

every cold sunny January Sunday: "Now Jer-e-mi-ah..."

At dinner, her birthday party, she was asked by Josh to say the blessing. She giggled nervously and five pairs of steel-harsh eyes stared at her.

"I don't know one. I really don't."

Grandfather Bickley bowed his head.

"Faw-thaw," he said, "we bless this food which we are about to receive and give gratitude for the health and lives of those about us. Especially on this day we are grateful for our dearly beloved Hadley, whose young birthday we celebrate tonight. May she continue to grow in spiritual and bodily health, ever mindful of her God from Whom all blessings flow."

During the prayer Hadley looked up once at Rosanna, who was staring straight ahead, unbowed and wide-eyed. The rite of dinner blessings had always irritated Rosanna. "So sentimental." Josh usually mumbled a very short staccato one, which Hadley, at least, went along with. But Grandfather Bickley's prayers were more like sermons, admonishments. It was as if he were addressing some invisible friend who possibly just might respond in some incredibly

terrible way, shocking all asundry out of their red and grey striped chairs.

Still somehow, now, Hadley was touched by her grandfather's words. It wasn't so much the words, it was his trust, saying things for this granddaughter he knew not at all. There was, too, the fact she would be leaving this table soon, leaving all the prayers, the bickering, the food, going to another life far more sophisticated than this good middle-class family had ever known, or, when she thought of it, cared to know. It was sad to leave and the word "forever" was a very large word.

Julia let out one of her nervous laughs. "I sure-ly do appreciate it, Grandfather," she said.

"Appreciate what?" Aunt Mary asked, regarding the girl as if she had made an obscene sound.

"I thought that was a nice prayer," said Julia. And she laughed again, the sucking-in laugh as she sweepingly viewed the others at the table. The laugh sounded like a distempered beagle.

"Hush that," said Aunt Mary.

Mrs. Shorter brought in the platter of fried chicken garnished with cantelope and parsley, a

heaping plate, which she and Isaiah would mainly eat. She stood by Josh as he carefully served the Canton plates, given by Grandfather Bickley to Josh when he was married.

"In Atlanta," said Grandfather Bickley, "they never serve the necks and the backs." He was examining his own plate, which indeed contained one neck.

Mrs. Shorter immediately took up the plate and Josh replaced the unwanted portion. Afterward Mrs. Shorter continued to circle the table, her mouth set for grieving as she breathed noisily through her snub nose.

Hadley was still thinking of Grandfather Bickley's prayer. She wondered if ever again anyone would pray for her. It was the last thing Oliver would ever do. Josh might mumble something, of course, but this was her last birthday with Josh. The only other person was Rosanna. But Rosanna hated her so she would probably curse rather than pray. Oddly now, looking at Rosanna with her heart-shaped face, more etched in pregnancy than normally, Hadley felt no irritation or even dislike for her. For the first time she believed she actually could tolerate, even understand the

unhappy nature of Rosanna. Her "liberalism" or radicalism, whatever she called it, was only a pathetic masque, trying not to be what she most assuredly was, a small town Southern girl. Nothing more.

"You should live the way you talk," Hadley had told her once. "If you're so concerned with the poor whites and blacks and Indians, stop buying all that stuff you buy and give the money to the poor. You're a gigantic phony, my dear."

Rosanna said buying didn't have anything to do with the poor. "I just want an equal choice."

"Egalitarianism should begin at home," said Hadley. "And, sister, yours is a soft pad."

She's lonely, Hadley thought now, seeing Rosanna from her own happy understanding height, and for a moment, a very short moment, she thought she felt a genuine fondness for Rosanna. There were no chords in Rosanna's future. None at all. Only scales, in a minor key.

Hadley surveyed the table. It was good to be protected, surrounded by a father, grandfather, cousin, sister, aunt. She would never be so protected again. No one in the room, with the

exception of Rosanna and Aunt Mary, had ever had the slightest ill thought toward her. She was safe, unchallenged, and it would be the same all the days of their lives.

Still, with it all, she would give up everything to spend only one night, if need be, with Oliver. Vaguely she wondered if he would do the same for her, abandon all. Men were so different. Their fears were different. She knew Oliver's: his queer fear of an unlived life, the wasted life.

"But everyone's life is wasted to some degree," Hadley had said.

"But never totally."

"Not if you love."

And he did love her. Only the night before he had used the word, forgetting in his ardor all the intellectual reasons for never using the word. When he said he loved her, her face was resting on his chest listening again to the beat of his heart. And that small manifestation of life was so touching, telling her once more of his innocent vulnerability. She would take care of him.



"Stove's gone off and there aren't no rice. It aren't done," said Mrs. Shorter.

Everyone gazed at the woman and then Aunt Mary took over. "Is everything else prepared?"

"Ever-thang but the rice," said Mrs. Shorter.

"That's a shame," said Julia.

"We eat too much anyway," said Rosanna.

Hadley desperately wanted some wine. The affect of the bourbon was leaving and the sight of the greasy fried chicken, cauliflower and Bing cherry salad, the latter a horror Mrs. Shorter considered her "supreme" recipe, was causing a queasy feeling in her stomach. Afterward there would be a cake and since Mrs. Shorter had made it in the face of her great grief Hadley would have to eat it.

"Well, Josh," said Grandfather Bickley. "What does the Greenleaf paper have to say about Mr. Nixon?"

"We don't care for him very much."

"It's a tragedy," said Aunt Mary. "A man who's done so much for the country." She put her glass goblet down with a vengeance. "The press ought to be horse-whipped. That's what I think."

Hadley could see Josh was annoyed more than

irritated. He began tightening and untightening his lips, a sure sign of coming rage.

"I think," said Josh, and he sipped his water, carefully placing it back on the table. "I think our President is a foul-mouthed liar, and there is no tragedy in either."

"Most stupid thing I've ever heard," said Aunt Mary. "You've never been overly bright about Government, Josh, but really I can't sit here and listen to such vulgar talk about our President."

"Then why don't you leave?" asked Josh.

Wham! The full open plump palm fell flat upon the table. The water spilled on the table and Aunt Julia was standing, yelling, "...Yes, I'll leave. I wouldn't want to sit at the table with such trash. Come, Julia."

"But it's Hadley's birthday."

"Who cares?"

"I do," said Julia.

"Then you can just sit there, be the creeping little coward you've always been. You don't appreciate one thing I've done for you. Nothing. None of you appreciate anything. Not even---Pappa."

She was in the hall, sobbing. Then up the stairs, pursued by Julia. A door slammed above the dining room and the chandelier swung above the stunned table.

Silence.

Grandfather Bickley shook his head, then lowered it. "We must pray for Mary. It isn't easy being someone like her."

"It isn't easy being her daughter either," said Hadley.

For the first time she saw a frown of disapproval on her grandfather's face.

"You should never interrupt prayer," he said.

Hadley hung her head. What the hell, she said to herself. She didn't care if they prayed all night. She was getting out of here soon anyway. Still there were the other feelings. Hate-love. Disgust-approval. Was everyone that way? Always confused?

"...And we forgive our beloved Mary as Ye have taught us to do. Forgiveness is one of the greater lessons we have had to learn. May we never forget but continue ever mindful that man is lower than the angel and is filled with sin. We thank Thee for Thou bountiful blessings."

Josh cleared his throat and pushed back his chair. "Well, now--" he said puffing his cheeks and exhaling the air. "I think our birthday girl has..."

"Hap-py Buthday to you. Hap-py Buth-day, de-ah Hayad-ley. Hap-py Buth-day to you." Mrs. Shorter was shouting her head off.

Hadley turned to the dining room door. Mrs. Shorter was holding a silver tray upon which sat Mrs. Shorter's creation, a chocolate cake with lemon icing. It was everyone's horror but no one had the nerve to tell the woman so. On the cake were eighteen candles.

All were grinning at Hadley, even Rosanna. Rosanna did have a bad smile. Even in the moment Hadley took note of the fact. She should never smile. Besides, her teeth had a yellow cast to them.

Hadley glanced at Josh and giggled. They had often shared their repulsion for Mrs. Shorter's cakes. Josh returned the giggle with a very broad smile. It was good to see Josh smile. And it was good to be eighteen, to be in love and have all your family about you, knowing you would never be lonely or harmed or unwanted because there were these people who would love you no matter what.

"Well, you're a young lady now," said Mrs. Shorter. "Spose I'm gone have to take to calling you Miss Hadley now."

"That will be the day," Hadley said and closing her eyes and wishing with all her strength that her marriage would be soon she blew the candles. She clasped her hands together and looked at Josh. She tossed her head back:

"I'm so happy."

They were all smiling at her.

Happy, happy, happy day!