

CHAPTER 12

Aunt Mary, with Julia, left the house that night. She never wanted to see Josh again, she declared. Julia, standing behind her holding onto a worn suitcase shaped like a rhinoceros head, grinned as if by so doing she could righten the situation. Josh, declared Aunt Mary, was not only rude, he was a moron. It was then that Julia let forth her last ill-timed laugh.

"You can get Papa home yourself since he is so determined not to see your utter stupidity," said Aunt Mary to Josh.

Josh said Isaiah would drive him to Atlanta or perhaps Hadley would.

"And that's another thing. You'd better keep an eye on that girl. She was positively reeking with whisky this afternoon." She looked darkly at Hadley. "The perfume didn't cover up anything. Mrs. Shorter seems to think she's up to some other things, too." She looked away.

"And a happy birthday to you, too, Aunt Mary," Hadley said.

"That's enough, Hadley," said Josh.

Grandfather Bickley had retired earlier. He was in sorrow, he said, that his two children could not get along.

"A saint couldn't get along with Mary," Josh told him.

"You're a man, Josh," said his father. "Mary is a very sensitive woman, alone in the world. You should understand that, appreciate it, overlook her outbursts."

"I suppose you're correct," said Josh. "But she is difficult."

"You just better be careful," warned Aunt Mary before she left the house.

Mrs. Shorter was clearing the table in the

dining room. Yet all the while she had one steel gray eye cocked toward the hall.

"Thank you, Mrs. Shorter," said Aunt Mary.

"You're the only person in the entire household here who has been decent."

Mrs. Shorter said she always tried to be that, decent. She just wanted to do right by "ever-body."

Hadley wanted to laugh. She knew Mrs. Shorter didn't like Aunt Mary any more than she did Julia. The main reason she didn't like Aunt Mary was that she never tipped. She came to visit at least eight times a year and never left Mrs. Shorter so much as a dime. Other guests always tipped or they brought presents.

Julia turned to Mrs. Shorter, too. "I sure-ly do appreciate it," she said. Then: "Good-bye, Hadley," and she began her sucking-in laugh again.

"Come on here," said Aunt Mary, taking hold of Julia's arm. The two, mother half dragging daughter, made their bitter way out of the house. There was a final slammed door.

"She'll be back in two weeks," yawned Rosanna.

"What a bitch."

Josh started to say something about Rosanna's "language," but the television was on in the library. Impeachment proceedings were underway on behalf of Richard Nixon. Josh and Rosanna were drawn to the sound like flies to light. Half the night they sat: Josh in his red leather chair and Rosanna with her enormous stomach seated in the straight-backed arm chair staring transfixed at the screen as if it were a babbling uncle.

Occasionally the dreary scene was interrupted for local news: crime was on the rise as were food prices. A local check out girl at an all-night variety store was found knife-slashed and raped in a nearby ditch. The only clue to the whereabouts of the doomed victim was a bottle of milk on the counter. It was still cold.

Josh reminded Hadley again that it was dangerous for her to drive at night.

"I don't go out at night," Hadley said. "I mean hardly ever."

"Just every night," said Rosanna.

Hadley gazed at Rosanna. She wished she had never told Rosanna about Oliver.

"It really does look as if they're going to impeach Nixon, doesn't it?" said Hadley. She was thinking she should be grateful for the man. At least he was entertaining Josh and Rosanna, half-way keeping them out of her hair.

"What do you mean every night?" Josh asked Hadley.

"Ask Rosanna. She seems to know everything."

Josh turned to Rosanna. Rosanna yawned.

"You have gorgeous tonsils," said Hadley, trying to distract Josh.

Rosanna threw a wadded handkerchief at Hadley.

"Ye Gods," said Hadley, "I can't take another scene. You do get more like Aunt Mary, Rosanna. Every day in every way."

"Come now," said Josh. "Your grandfather was correct. Mary has not had a pleasant life."

"I guess," said Hadley, grateful that the conversation had taken another turn.

Rosanna turned up the volume on the television set and Josh beckoned to Hadley. He wanted to "speak" to her.

"What for?" And she was instantly conscious of

her heart beat. She didn't like the look on Josh's face. There was to be a lecture. She could see it. He was looking straight at her. Usually he didn't. Most of the time it was as if he were bored with her presence, too preoccupied by more important things. Only when he was angry, it seemed, did his small little eyes meet hers. She followed him into the dining room.

"We can sit here," he said, sitting at the head of the table, his head and shoulders rocking to the left and right as he adjusted to the seat. It was as if he were listening to some beat of music no one else could hear.

Hadley sat where she had earlier. "Yes?" she said, resting her chin on her hands. "I'm all ears. What has thou to say? Something profound for my eighteenth birthday?" She was trying to be clever but it was difficult with the odd look on his face and the magnified green eyes appearing to look through her as if they were searching for something, some truth from this errant daughter he neither understood nor could.

"What's the matter? Why're you looking like that?"

"I want to know. Now tell me the truth. You're not seeing Oliver Eubanks, are you?"

Hadley could feel the thud hit her stomach.

"Sometimes. I see him sometimes." She lifted her shoulders up and down. "He's painting my portrait. Very odd. Very modern. You'd never understand it. I don't." She was chatting, saying anything, trying to avoid the piercing eyes. She should tell him, she was thinking. He was her father. Why was it she couldn't tell him? She would have to be drunk to tell him. She was afraid to tell him, afraid of his disappointment, afraid to hurt him, this lonely man she called father.

"Hadley?"

"Don't look at me like that."

"I don't want you to see that man again."

"You don't want him to finish the portrait?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because he's--well--- He drinks too much, and he's too old for you to see in a--in a social way."

Social way. Josh was really too old fashioned to be believed. She tossed her head back and slowly

brought her fingers to the back of her neck. "I'm his model. He thinks I'm beautiful." She quickly looked at Josh then straight into his eyes. "He really does---think I'm beautiful."

"Will you promise me you will not see the man again?"

For a long while, it seemed, they looked at each other, father and daughter. In the library were the voices of men in Washington searching their "souls," pruning like peacocks before the cameras, searching.

Then Hadley said:

"No."

Josh's eyes instantly became the color of two tiny pieces of clashing steel. "Then I suggest you go upstairs, pack your belongings and leave this house."

Hadley stood there, wondering why his eyes weren't green now. Her senses were jarred and her sight, too. Only one thought was clear: He really hates me. Josh, my father, hates me. The tears flowed and she stood in silence, watching Josh as he rose from the chair and leaning sideways walked into the library closing the doors behind him.

Hadley ran upstairs, sobbing. She found Mrs. Shorter and fell into her arms.

"Child, child," repeated Mrs. Shorter, as she patted Hadley on the back. "Whatever is to become of you?"

Hadley looked up into her eyes. Yesterday's grief was still there and a kindness Hadley had never seen before. "I've got to leave you, Mrs. Shorter. I'll never see you again."

Hadley could feel the stiffening of the older woman's body. Then she stepped back from Hadley to get a better view. "You hasn't done wrong thangs, have you, gull? You hasn't had no nature or anythang, got yourself with no baby?"

The kindness was vermillion, changing and changing. It was now cold, then curiosity. Sweet curiosity, gossip, mankind's joy.

"No, no, no, no." Hadley could hear the overtones of hysteria in her voice. For a moment she wondered if she could be pregnant. Neither had taken caution. "He hates me. My own father."

"You're always thinking somebody's hating you. If it isn't your father or Rosanna then it's some

gull in school. Your father don't hate you or anybody else. But, hon, you causes him a mess of trouble. It's cause you hasn't ever had no mama. Mrs. Shorter's tried but she isn't no mama and there isn't anything in the wull like a---" And she let forth a sob that oddly sounded like one of Julia's laughs.

Hadley turned from her. She couldn't worry about Mrs. Shorter and her mother now. She had to think. She could go to Josh, tell him she and Oliver were to be married. But she had never got Oliver to agree to that. He had intimated marriage in practically everything he said. He spoke about their living in Florence, what he would show her, what a delight it would be to show her Europe. Still, she couldn't say to Josh it was a fact. The only reason she had told Isaiah was because she was half drunk.

She would just tell Josh she was in love. But in the back of her mind was what Rosanna had said: "Love is a woman's word. Men are never hurt by an affair like a woman." Women are dev^astated. Hadley would be dev^astated if Oliver left her now. Nothing, not even Josh, could stand in her way.

The tears were still falling down her face and she wiped them away with her open palm. As she looked at her hand she realized, as reason sometimes comes, suddenly, that she was crying not because of Josh but because of Oliver. Josh's words had hurt but she knew in the depths of her he loved her. But Oliver? What of him? He was right, she guessed. She really didn't know him. She had never seem him angry as she had Josh, not even anxious. All she knew were his eyes that said more than his words. And his body. Perhaps that was all a woman ever knew, a man's body, not his mind. Yet she knew his heartbeat, the way it slackened, the way it quickened during the fever of passion, all so quickly over. But it was that, this feverless man who lay beside her, she did not know and whose actions she could never predict. Did anyone ever know a person wholly? Even oneself?

Who was he? A collector of art. He spoke of his "Collection" in Florence as if they were children. His children.

"All collectors are manic," he once said.

Hadley had laughed. "Mad Oliver. You see, you

see, I can say the word now and it doesn't frighten me at all."

"Say it again."

"Mad. Mad Hadley."

"Mad world."

"You sound like Rosanna."

But she wondered now: was she part of his collection too, something beautiful to look at until it was broken? Were all men the same? No.

Mrs. Shorter took out a wadded handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "I sure hope Dr. Bickley hasn't been woke up by all you yelling and carrying on."

"Nothing could wake him," Hadley said.

"Old people don't need a whole lotta sleep. Jesus made it that way, so as they can take in as much as they can fore they go on."

I'll go to Oliver now, Hadley was thinking. She would slam the front door to convince Josh she had really left. He would worry all night, probably call the police. She would park the car behind the garçonnière and stay all night with Oliver. In the morning she would cook his breakfast as she had always wanted to do. She would not go to the newspaper. To hell with the dead.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Shorter. I'm leaving the house. Probably forever. Maybe I'll see you one day again." The drama of it all was delicious.

Mrs. Shorter sounded one hysterical cry. "Lord God, child, you know your daddy didn't mean nothing." She shot a glance straight into Hadley's eyes as if some great wisdom had come upon her. "Where you thank you going?" The eyes narrowed.

"There are places."

"Evil places."

"No. Joyful."

"Dirty folks with dope and beards lookin at each other while they're having nature. Sin. Sin." Mrs. Shorter raised her head. "He'll smite you, Hadley Bickley, with his right hand. You wasn't raised up to go against Bible."

Hadley dropped her car keys into her purse. "Good-bye, dear Mrs. Shorter. Tell them all good-bye. Isaiah, Rosanna. Even Josh. Say---" She sighed heavily. "Tell them I've loved them. I---" She began to believe her own words, the drama of departure, and a sob caught in her throat.

Mrs. Shorter came to her and caught her with clawed hands.

"Just like my own. Raised you up and I aren't gone let you go out into that sinful wull and ruin yourself. You need to go to college like the rest of the gulls, get yourself some more learning, then marry some nice boy and have chirrum of your own, be a mama."

The woman's hands were hurting Hadley's arms. She tried to free herself.

"Let me go," she finally said, realizing as soon as she had she had hurt the woman. "I'm sorry. But I've been asked to leave here, and I'm leaving." She realized now even more how she wanted to get away from the woman, get away from the whole house. She walked to the door.

"You can come back here. You can come back. Jesus will find a way."

Hadley giggled and ran from the room. "Tell them all good-bye," she called after her. "You can't catch me, Mrs. Shorter. No one can. I'm mad Hadley."

But she ran straight into Josh, who stood blocking the front door of the house.

She dangled the keys in front of him. "I'm leaving. All packed and all that. Off into the black night."

Josh was rocking on his heels, practically doing a back bend, his neck upright and stiff. It was a remarkable feat, Hadley was thinking even in her anxiety.

"You're not going anywhere," he said surprisingly softly. "Now we'll just go into the parlor and talk about this."

"But I've got to go." She was thinking of Oliver.

"When we've finished talking. If you want to go then you may."

Hadley groaned. "Oh, all right. But listen. I don't want any more lectures. I've had it with that. Everyone lecturing me, telling me how bad I am, that I haven't found Jeeeeee-zus. You know?"

Josh said nothing but made his way into the "parlor." Hadley hated the room. No one ever went into it. It was stiff, filled with antiques, oriental rugs, chair legs meeting bare dark floors. On the walls were portraits of people she had never known,

dead relatives, some that Josh had never known. There was one of a man holding a knife upright between his legs. Hadley and Rosanna had always giggled over that one. Oddly now, entering the room she regarded the picture instantly. There was something of her own face in his. But why the knife?

Josh turned on a standing floor lamp. In the semi-darkness Josh began to talk. He had reasons, he said, for his not wanting Hadley to see Oliver Eubanks again and he wanted to tell those reasons to Hadley. Hadley flopped onto the stiff settee and Josh sat in the wing chair.

There was, as he had said and said, the matter of age. But more than that the man was a "weakling," he stood for nothing, he overindulged in everything, especially alcohol, he had no principles.

"Do you realize, Hadley, the man has never had a job in his life? Never."

Hadley said he didn't have to have a job. He had all the money he needed and more.

"Yes, and the Senator agrees that is exactly his problem, too much money. Now, don't interrupt. Yes, the Senator and I have often discussed Oliver.

He's exceedingly disappointed in his son. I would use the word 'effete' when I hear his name. Yes, the Senator is very disappointed in his son."

"And you're disappointed in me."

"Not always."

Hadley looked at her father with a level gaze. "I love him, Josh. You don't understand artists. They're different from you and me." She was trying to remember what Oliver had told her. "They drink too much and smoke too much, probably do everything too much because their lives are mainly cerebral. Don't you see? The tension has to be relieved."

"Everyone has tensions. Artists have no special priority on that."

"You don't understand, do you?" Hadley slapped one of the small silk pillows to her stomach and hugged it. "I knew you wouldn't. We don't have anything to talk about."

"How serious is this affair of yours?"

"We're going to be married. That's how serious."

Josh stood and began walking the floor, up and down the oriental rug. Hadley had seen him do that often, his head lowered, his hands behind his back.

Mainly when he was trying to think out some problem at the newspaper.

"I'd rather see you dead," he said quietly.

Hadley let go of the pillow. She said nothing.

"I want you to see a doctor, Hadley, a psychiatrist. I've put this off as long as possible. But now I think it's necessary." He sat in the wing chair again and the two gazed at one another.

But terror had taken hold of Hadley. She wanted to run to Oliver, tell him what her father had suggested. Only he could protect her from her terrors. It was he who had helped her this summer, not Josh, not Rosanna or anybody else. Only Oliver. He had made her laugh at her fears, not give in to them. She didn't hear the voices any more either, especially the voice that said "mad." And there were no more hallucinations to break into the dark night.

"You see," Josh was saying, "Oliver Eubanks is really just a state of mind. You see in him some glamorous figment of your imagination, when in reality he is neither glamorous nor anything else. He's cheap, Hadley."

Cheap. That was a Josh word Hadley had never

completely understood. It was a word she might have applied, if she used such a word, to Mrs. Eubanks but not to Oliver. He loved life, art, the world outside Greenleaf. He was like her. He could never adjust to life in a town like Greenleaf. She said as much to Josh. Or rather she thought she said that. Perhaps she was merely babbling.

"Greenleaf is like anywhere else. The people who live here are like people everywhere. It's a miniature of the world. Your glamorous world doesn't exist, Hadley. It just isn't there. Except up here." He pointed to his head.

The mere gesture caused Hadley to put her hand over her mouth. Josh, who never lied, who never exaggerated, who believed in all moderations, he, her father, Josh, was saying she was mad, that she needed a mental doctor, perhaps needed to be locked up. And deep down she knew it, too.

"Why?" she muttered. "Just because of love. Is it crazy to love?"

"No." He spoke the word very softly.

"Then why? You think I'm crazy. Josh. Josh." She was almost begging.

"No, I just think you need a little help from someone who knows more about these things."

She could stand it no more. She stood, flinging the small black silk pillow behind her. She ran to the door. "Good-bye," she called in the black night. "Good-bye."