

CHAPTER 14

The next morning Hadley rose at dawn. The night had passed and she was as alive as the morning. She ran to the window barefoot and watched as the sun rose. For a moment she recalled last night but it was years ago, the way one recalls a storm, howling and dark, yes, but without true texture.

Now this, this good gold day, was hers. She stretched her arms to the fiery sun as it came over the mountain. And she watched as the shadows traveled over the dew. Then abruptly she sat on the windowsill. Something was whispering in the corners of her mind: she would miss this scene.

She would remember it, of course, come back to it often in her mind. But it, she, would never be the same.

It was to be a mild day, not too hot. August seventh. She ran from the window and began to pack-- her white nightgowns first, then the yellow dresses, white slacks, striped T-shirts. In the midst of it all she examined her face in the mirror. Yes, she was beautiful. She wanted to be that, especially today. She hugged her arms to herself and whirled about the room:

"I'm in love. I'm in love. I'm---" She fell on the bed laughing. After a while she was silent. Good-bye ceiling. Good-bye bed. Good-bye room. Good-bye Josh. The tears began to fall down her cheeks. Happy and sad. Happy and sad. But there were no fears, no voices, no horrible faces.

She drove to the newspaper office with her val-pack suitcase in the back of the car and eighty-two dollars in her purse. Today was payday, so with the additional money she could buy the watch. She hoped nobody had died last night; she wanted to leave the office early.

The other reporters had begun to like her. She often had coffee with them and listened to their boring stories of City Hall and the Courts. She liked them, though. And if it hadn't been for Oliver she would have seen more of them after work. They were nomads, wanderers coming from nowhere seemingly, pausing for a while, then wandering away. Two had left during the summer. She felt a kinship.

"Got only two today," said the funeral director. "That all you do--just write up dead folks and go home? That all?"

Thank God she would never hear the man's voice again. "I file," she said. "I keep up with the files. I only work in the morning, you know."

"Then what you do? Smoke pot with your boy friends? Better watch out about that stuff. They got a dead un over in Blufton that'd mixed up booze and pills. Plum dead. That's what's wrong with the world, why the crime's so high. They oughtta never to have let Martin Luther Kang get away with marching and hollering like he done. Now ever-body thinks they can do the same. No respect for the law."

"Would you give me your notices, please?"

And shut up, she said to herself.

"Why you always hurryin? You aint goin nowhere. Hurryin to the grave, I always say."

"I said, and I will repeat it, would you kindly give me your notices? There's no need to chat, you know."

"Just trying to be obliging, that's all. Just obliging. Some say your sister she the sweet one and you're the mean one. Are you mean? If so I'd like a little of that mean. Know what I mean?"

Hadley threw the telephone down and walked out of the newsroom. Let the dead bury the dead. She went to the business office. The woman who was making out the payroll glanced up at her.

"Oh, Hadley," she said.

"I'm quitting."

"Quittin?" Her fish mouth flopped open.

"Would you give me the money due me."

The woman stared at her, her eyes almost watering with curiosity. Hadley said nothing but looked away, tapping her right foot to an unheard beat.

She left the building without once giving so much as a glance at Josh's office. She went immediately to the one jewelry store in town. She

had been in the store often, even as a child. She had an insatiate passion for jewelry. And it infuriated her that each Christmas Josh gave her scarves and sweaters, always selected by his secretary and usually exchanged the next day by Hadley.

Once Josh showed her her mother's jewelry kept at the bank. There were two fair-sized diamonds, one for Rosanna and one for Hadley. But they were not to be given to the girls until they were "older." There was also an emerald and diamond ring and a pearl necklace. They were all to be Hadley's because Rosanna "hated jewelry," considered it "vulgar, overdone."

Hadley went immediately to the ring counter in the store. She wondered if Oliver had picked out something here. Or perhaps there was some family jewelry if the bitch Mrs. Eubanks would let it go. She bent over the counter examining each ring: the diamonds, emeralds, the tiny diamonds poor people bought, she supposed. There weren't any large ones on display. The jeweler told her once he could always order if a customer wanted a certain piece. Poor Greenleaf. There were only a few in the town who could afford "to order," including Josh.

She left the rings and asked to see men's watches. "For my father," she added to the saleswoman, who by her silence appeared to demand the explanation.

The smashed watch had been French, intricate and involved. The watches here were cumbersome with gaudy bands. One, however, rather pleased her. It was simple, but the band was wrong. Could they change it? Now? She would wait. She had enough money. One hundred and sixty-five dollars plus tax. Later she would have it engraved:

For Oliver
from
Hadley
August 8, 1974

She was wildly excited and while the band was being fixed she went back to the ring counter. Which one? Which? Then she spied a pair of diamond earrings. They were small but they glistened from the overhead phosphorescent light. Instinctively she reached to open the case. But a clerk, a young man, appeared.

"May I hep you?"

"No thank you. I only like to look at beautiful things."

Did he think she was trying to steal? Yes.
His eyes stared with suspicion.

She laughed. "I was going to lift the case.
My father, a newspaperman here, says I always act by
instinct rather than reason. I guess I do."

Why was she telling this anonymous face this?
Why did she always have a need to explain? She shook
her hair back from her face. To hell with it. In
time she would be able to buy the entire store and
everything in it. She sat in the chair nearest the
watch counter, impatiently swinging her leg up and
down.

She would give it to him first thing, she was
thinking. Ye gods, how happy she was. It was like
a wonderful dream, this, her life all settled and
trembling with joy like a blooming pear tree. She
closed her eyes. Thank you, God. Thank you.
Thank you.

She ran up the stairs to the garçonnière. The
package was gripped in her hand. The door was half
opened. Breathlessly she entered the hallway.

"Oliver! Look. Oliver!"

There was no answer. She glanced at her own watch, three minutes to twelve. Usually he called out to her from his studio in the back. Everything was so quiet. Then at once she sensed a presence. Instinctively she knew who it was. She entered the front room.

"Hello, Hadley."

It was Mrs. Eubanks, dressed in a black cotton morning dress, a gardenia pinned to the belt of the dress.

Hadley looked from the flower to the package in her hand. It was tied with silver ribbon heralding some happy occasion. A present.

"Where is---" was all she could say.

"Oliver?"

Mrs. Eubanks rose from the sofa and looked out the window at a tall crape myrtle tree in full bloom. "Oliver will not be seeing you again, Hadley." She turned. "I have to be blunt, you see."

Hadley's mind was spinning and she dropped the package in her hand, staring at it as she had done the smashed watch the night before. She stooped to recover it and nonsensically held it in both hands.

Then she saw the two paintings of herself, placed side by side against the bare wall.

"Where is he?" she managed.

"He will be in Paris tonight, meeting friends. How small the world has become. Such a short flight nowadays. Breakfast in Alabama and Paris in the evening." She almost sung the latter.

"But we---"

"Now, sit down, Hadley." Mrs. Eubanks patted a place beside her on the sofa, the same sofa Oliver was lying on last night, planning their marriage, their lives.

"When will he be back?" She sat beside the woman, her throat aching and her heart so wild she couldn't think.

"Oh, who knows. Oliver is quite a gadabout, you know. And his home is in Florence now. The Senator and I will have Christmas with him this year. Such a charming villa."

Tears would not come. "You knew Oliver and I were to be married?"

"Oh, I don't think so. No, I don't think so." She was still singing, this merry mother of her melancholy lover.

"He loved me."

"He's loved many women. But he only married one. Pity. He should have children. Perhaps one day."

"One day?" Hadley was examining the woman's face. So handsome. So complete. So sane, telling her in this joyous way that her life, Hadley's life, was finished, over. It was impossible to go back to the old ways, back to Josh, Mrs. Shorter, Rosanna, Greenleaf with its small town smell, broken with poverty and prejudice and cruelty.

"No," she almost shouted at the woman.

"Now, now." Mrs. Eubanks patted her hand.

Hadley crossed her arms as if to hide the tainted hand. She gazed at the portraits again. He didn't even take them with him.

"Oh there," said Mrs. Eubanks, "I'm sure he would want you to have it." Obviously she was speaking of the flat picture. The other would never have made any sense to her. But it was making sense to Hadley now--especially the grays.

"Now, dear," said Mrs. Eubanks. "I've lived a long time and---" she was patting her shoulder --- "I've had many disappointments. You think you won't

live through this." She was smiling peculiarly, a sad little smile. "But one does. Yes, we endure."

Hadley looked away and then back again. "But why? Why didn't he tell me? He loved me. He really did. I loved him."

"Love," said Mrs. Eubanks sadly. "Such a young word. The Senator and I had a little talk with Oliver early this morning and he saw our reasoning, I think. You're such a young girl. Why, when Oliver will be sixty you'll merely be in your thirties. My dear, you don't know life." She put her hand to the back of her head as if to adjust a wave there. "I think Oliver was infatuated with you, yes. A young pretty girl like you would flatter any older man. He's a very sweet man, really. He wouldn't want to hurt you." Her voice had changed. She had become a lecturer. "Believe me, it is for the best, your best. Oliver knows this. It was not cruel of him to leave. It was brave, you see. Very brave."

Hadley merely stared at the woman's teeth. They had all been capped.

"Oliver, too, has his concerns. I don't think he's ever found his work in life, what he was meant

to do. Until that day comes I fear he shouldn't share his life with anyone. He feels that, too." She tapped her fingers on the sofa. "He's a very kind person."

"What do you mean by 'too'?" Hadley asked.

"Well, Oliver seems to think you need a little help, dear, professional help of a sort. But that isn't for me to recommend. Besides, I'm sure there's some nice young man here in Greenleaf whom you soon will take a fancy to." She stood. "Forgive me. I do have an appointment." She looked at her own watch.

"But---wait. His address. I have to write him. I have---"

"I think that would be very unwise. Besides, we don't know his address in Paris, and he won't be in Florence until Christmas." She was standing taller. "My advice to you, young woman, is to forget Oliver. I'm sure he has already forgotten you. I don't mean to be cruel, you understand. None of us do. But it's for the best--just to end everything as quickly as possible."

Hadley stood looking at her in disbelief, the woman's face was coming to her in waves, diminishing

and then coming again clearer. Inside there was a great weeping. It was finished, everything. Her life was finished. But there were no tears. What she felt more than anything else, she believed, was anger. She wanted to take the smiling woman and shake her, shake the hairpins out of her waved, blue hair, shake her until the caps fell off her teeth, shake her until the petals of her gardenia turned brown and fallen.

But then Mrs. Eubanks was gone and so was the anger. She felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. And she wandered about the rooms as if she had never seen them before. She had to get home, she knew. But she continued wandering, occasionally stopping to look at the pictures of herself as if she were looking at strangers.

After awhile she left and calmly opened the door of her car. She drove home, parked the car and once inside the house climbed the stairway to her bedroom. She was so tired. She had never been so tired.

"You home?" Mrs. Shorter met her at the top of the stairs. Hadley did not answer but went to her

room, fell backwards on the bed. There she lay, not sleeping, but staring at the ceiling. She lay there all afternoon.

At dinner Josh came to her room. She thought it was Josh. He was angry because she had quit her job at the paper without telling him. She didn't answer him. She was too tired to answer. Vaguely she wondered how he had the strength to talk. All she felt was a hollowness and it was so deep, the hollowness, that once she fancied she was in her grave, her life completed and there would never be wind in her face or the sound of rain or a sky or a blooming pear tree. There would only be this darkness and the everlasting smell of red earth. God forgive us all.