

Chapter 18

I guess I shouldn't of told you about all that. You'll think I'm this dreadful goon and won't go on and hear about the end. Besides, my father says that just the most selfish people in the world are always dwelling upon themselves. He thinks that if you do that too much you'll go insane. People in Ashton are always going insane. They're pitiful. I sometimes feel so sorry for them I could die. But Father believes you've got to have some "get up and come on" in life. And he doesn't have too much patience with people that're dwelling upon themselves too much. I don't blame him.

Really, though, I don't talk about myself very much. A lot of people do and I'm always listening. Older women especially like to talk to me. ~~For instance~~ if I'm waiting in the dentist office or something and there's this older woman in there she'll tell me all about her daughter-in-law and how she's just got one kidney and this dry socket and all. I don't know why it is people

are always telling me things. It embarrasses me, though, to talk out loud about me or Mother or Father or Arthur or anybody. You know the other person is bored to death because I am, usually, listening to them tell about what all ^{somebody} ~~their mothers and~~ people did yesterday. That's what Marilyn and Melissa do all the time.

After the dance Marilyn called me up and asked me just once if I didn't think the dance was just the most heavenly thing I'd ever been to. When I said "yes", then she went into all about herself and what this boy said and what that one said. I just rested the telephone on my shoulder and when it was silent, I'd say "gosh" every now and then and that was all. I guess she hadn't heard about me leaving and everything. I don't guess anybody did because nobody said anything to me about it. You'd have thought Mrs. Summers would have told Marilyn at least, but I guess she didn't, thank goodness.

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When I got through talking to Marilyn I went on outside and thought about the dance for a while. I figured one of the reasons I wasn't popular was because I didn't talk or laugh loud enough. You take everybody there that was popular---they all talked and laughed tremendously loudly---everybody except Carolyn Dunwoody and she didn't say hardly a thing. But the rest of them just carried on almost like boys were girls or something. I don't understand it because in the movies popular people don't do that. In the movies some girl just stands there and these boys start falling all over her, just for nothing. It's a very difficult thing to figure out. I mean how somebody gets popular.

I don't know why but boys kind of scare me. They're so tough and they're always going around in groups and things. Also,

I think many boys are terribly boring. } All they like to talk about is cars. I'll never understand to my dying day how somebody can sit up and talk about nothing but a car for one hundred hours. You have to act interested, though, if you want to be popular. Also you have to wear gobs of lipstick. Mother makes me perfectly furious because she won't let me wear it. She thinks lipstick on me is vulgar, except at a dance, but she's profoundly old fashioned and has no idea about things at all. It's quite pathetic, frankly.

I didn't think about the dance too long, though, because it was Saturday and I thought I better do something. I decided to go on back in the house and call up Melissa and maybe play tennis or see if she just wanted to hang around the country club or something. I went moseying on into the house and right away I heard Mother talking on the telephone:

"Felicia's picture? Whaaaat?"

My mouth went dry and my whole body just ~~freez~~ froze up. The magazine! The News Review! It was out!

"Yes. Yes. The way Bill talked? Why, Margaret...."

It was Mrs. Ewing Mother was talking to. Mrs. Ewing had already read the article.

"I just can't i-mag-ine, Margaret. I don't think Felicia even ~~spoke~~ ^{talked} to him. No, I--- Oh dear. Why, I think he just made it up. No, I know she wouldn't. At least, I don't think so..."

I just silently closed the back door and went back outside. I thought I was going to have a heart attack. My legs started shaking so I couldn't hardly walk. I saw Velvet and went giggling up to her like a moron.

"Hey, Velvet," I ~~whispered~~. "The magazine's out."

"Whut magazine?"

I couldn't hardly even swallow. "The one with ~~Mr.~~ Hopper's article in it."

"Who's Mr. Hopper?"

"You know that man that- -"

Mother called me. "Felici--a!"

"Huh?" ~~I called back.~~

"Come here a minute, please."

"Huh?"

"I said come here, please."

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Mother was standing near the telephone with her car keys in her hand. "We're going down town to buy The News Review." Her mouth was set in one thin line.

"What for?" I asked. "I thought we got it in the mail."

"It hasn't come yet." She was staring at me like she was trying to drag the truth out of me. "Felicia, did Mr. Hopper take your picture?"

START "My picture?"

"Yes."

"Ohhhh that!" I laughed exceedingly gaily. "He said he wanted a picture of the front of our house and asked me to stand there. Why?"

"Let's go down town," was all she said.

Well, Mr. Hopper's article was sim-ply terrible! As soon as we got home, Mother and I went and sat in the library. I started

not to, but she made me anyway. She practically ripped open the magazine and right away there I was. 't wasn't a big picture or anything. The biggest one was of Velvet's preacher and his family--- all sitting around the table praying for integration. At least, that's what it said under the picture. But under mine, it said: "...And A Little Child Shall Lead Them..." A CHILD! I could have died, but my legs didn't look too bad.

Our house looked very pretty, too, but Mother was beside herself with fury. The nerve of that man! Taking a picture of you without our permission. I'd like to sue him! I'll bet Allison will."

As I say, she was mad then, but she was insane after she got through reading the article. So was I, from just plain fear. To tell you the truth, Mr. Hopper just out and out disgraced us. In the first place he made us all sound like sharecroppers, especially Mr. Ewing. Everytime he quoted something Mr. Ewing said he made him sound like a moron with a Southern accent, but every time Velvet's preacher said anything he sounded like Prince Philip of England!

Mr. Ewing never in his entire life has said, "Ah'll tell you, suh." Nobody in the South says "Ah" for "I" and nobody says "you all" when they're just talking to one person. I've never heard Mr. Ewing say "Madam" to Mother either, and he certainly didn't say: "Ah'm sendin' a buncha Niggahs to college, too, you heah me?" Mr. Ewing says his "ings"; I was there and I heard how he said it. Mr. Hopper didn't even mention that Mr. Ewing had gone to Harvard, and one of the strange things about it is Mother's always said Bill Ewing has a "very nice way of speaking." He does have a Southern accent, I guess; all of us do but we're not crackers, and children ~~don't~~ don't go around saying "Aint"---nice ones, anyway. Mr. Hop-

per made poor Mr. Ewing sound like he'd never come out of the cotton patch.

He didn't get around to us, though, until about the middle of the article. First he talked on about Ralph McGill and the Reverend Luther King. He said Luther King was one of the most inspiring men he'd ever met and that Ralph McGill, against "great opposition", was continuing with his quiet crusade to awaken the "backward South." He said a bunch of other things just as boring and then he got around to us!

He told about Ashton and how small it was (I knew Arthur would die) and then started talking about us. "Here is where ^{one} first discovered the strange paradox which is the core of the South today." He told about our house and the farm and about us once having our plantation and owning slaves and things.

"Let being entertained in this home is a unique experience in modern-day America," he wrote. "One had only to close one's eyes to believe that this was a centennial year and not one hundred years ago. True, the Negro servants come and go as they will now; they are not slaves today, not in the true sense, but in another sense, yes." He told how Velvet still wears a bandana on her head (She does ^{it} for her headaches) and says "Yes ma'm" to Mother, "even though she's much older than the white mistress of the house." He also went into how Isaiah bows when he serves drinks. "Graciousness?" he asked. "Yes. But graciousness built on hopeless wrong. Everything is separate in this town: drinking fountains, restaurants, the seating in movies, buses; libraries are separated, most public facilities and, of course, the schools." The wages paid these "second-class citizens" were so pathetically small, he said, that he was shocked; "twenty dollars a week for a cook."

Then he got on to Mother and Father. He said they were "well-intentioned, charming people" but "of course, as most Southerners, ~~are~~, pathetically provincial in their thinking." That made me perfectly furious. Provincial, as you know, means "hicks." He thought Mother and Father were charming hicks!

"He doesn't have any right to say that," I said.

"Apparently he does," Mother said and went right on reading. "...^{one} read fear in the eyes of these people, fear that their way of life ~~was~~ going--but mainly fear of the Negro himself. This, it seemed to me, was the answer to these peoples' blatant prejudice. They cited statistics to me---endless ones---in which ~~the~~ criminal offenses by the Negro were disproportionately high. 'And yawl up theah wanta loose this upon us! Have our chirrun go to school with that kind of element! No, suh!' explained ^{one} of the more audible guests." (I guess he was talking about poor, timid Mr. Foster.)

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Mr. Hopper didn't even like Miss Esther, and she'd driven all the way to Atlanta to buy his books, too. He said Miss Esther was a member of what Southerners refer to as a "fine old Jewish family" but ~~Jewish or not~~, she was still the possessor of some of the South's "fine old bromides." "...^{The} ~~her~~ argument, of course, has been repeated and repeated. WE've all heard it: the poverty of the South, no Marshall plan to recover after the Civil War, (~~Pah-~~ don me, ma'm and suh, ah's speakin' of the Waw Between the States) discriminatory distribution of Federal funds and on and on. Ironically, this fine lady finally ended up in a diatribe of how the true Southerner really loves the Negro. Strange land! Strange paradox! There is a frightening kind of schizophrenia here."

Velvet's preacher, though, the Reverend Moses Lincoln, was a "wise and ^{Courageous} ~~courteous~~ clergyman", Mr. Hopper thought. I didn't

know it myself, but Mr. Hopper said that Reverend Lincoln had sung "Rock of Ages" walking down the streets in Atlanta so he could get a hot dog at the dime store there. (~~Not very nice, you know. You're suppose to pray in your closet, the Bible says.~~) Reverend Lincoln was a big fan of ^{an} ~~Luther King's~~ organization called the Southern Christian Educational Fund, Inc. Mr. Hopper'd learned all this when he went to church and afterwards visited Reverend Lincoln's house. He said Mrs. Lincoln was a gracious hostess and that the house was spotlessly clean and the children beautifully dressed. (He didn't say a thing about how Arthur and me were dressed.)

"...It was here that Mrs. Lincoln, though not in the range of the children's hearing, told me of not being able to vote. It was this one small act of citizenship that this proud woman wanted more than any other."

"Why can't she vote?" I asked Mother. "Velvet does."

"Perhaps she hasn't paid her poll tax," Mother said.

"I guess Velvet must have paid hers, huh?"

"Your father gave both Velvet and Isaiah the money to pay it."

I started to say something else, but Mother went on reading and I got violently interested because the next part was about me!

Mr. Hopper thought I was full of pathos. "It is the children who constitute the real tragedy of this section. From birth they are conditioned by the well-intentioned, but prejudiced, thinking of their parents." By mere chance, Mr. Hopper said, he'd found an opportunity to speak frankly with me. Before this, I had been kept purposely, he thought, in the background. Yet when he did talk to me, all his first suspicions had been "gratified."

"Here was a kid (Mother simply loathes that expression, kid) like any other normal kid you might meet, wanting the companion-

ship of friends, black or white, and yet she was being denied the privilege of choosing merely because of the color of someone's skin." He went into how I'd said I wanted to go to school with colored people, that my ^{best} friend was colored, but that my parents and elders would not allow me to see this girl. "The kid was actually grieving. She told me of a friendship she had with another Negro girl but was forced to practise this otherwise normal relationship in private because of brutal censorship in the community."

Mother didn't read any more. Her voice just sort of trailed off and she let the magazine relax in her lap. Finally, she looked up at me and just stared. "Felicia," was all she said.

There was a look on her face I'd never seen before---like a terrible hurt, too hurt even to cry. It frightened me somehow and yet I wanted to help her, too. I can't explain my feelings, but I started shaking my head violently. "He must have gotten that all wrong. I didn't even talk to him. I didn't. Honestly."

She dampened her lips and looked down at the magazine. She didn't say anything for simply ages. "There must be some truth in it, Felicia. There's basis for everything else he's said."

My throat was aching. "Not for that. Not for what he said I said. I didn't hardly even see him. You all had him occupied all the time."

She looked at me again with terribly blue eyes. "Felicia, this is ve-ry serious. It isn't so much what you said to Mr. Hopper, it's the fact that you lied. You---"

But the back door slammed. It was Father. He came into the library and he still had on his hat and coat. His hat was tilted on the back of his head and a copy of the magazine was hanging open from his hand.

"You've read this then," Mother said very softly.

"Yep," he said and kind of fell into his red, leather chair. He didn't take his coat off or anything and he just sat there looking at Mother.

Nobody said anything for simply ages and I kept making these awful frowning faces and pinching tiny little pleats in my skirt. I wished they'd hurry up and start hollering at me. Hollering would have been a whole lot better than just silence. For some reason I let out this one, loud kind of giggle. I don't know why. Nerves, I guess.

"Well, Felicia?" Father said finally.

"Huh?" I went back to pinching my skirt and making those faces again.

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Whatdoya mean?"

"I think you know."

I looked up at him. "Mother said I lied to Mr. Hopper, but I didn't even hardly talk to him."

"Now, Felicia," Mother said.

"Well, I didn't."

"Tell us the truth," Father said.

"I---"

But there was this loud bang at the front door.

"No, I want to see Mr. Whitfield." It was Mr. Ewing talking to Isaiah.

He came striding on into the library and immediately I saw the rolled-up magazine in his hand. He looked terribly pale, but I guess that was because he'd just got through with his hemorrhoids.

"Where's that pansy newspaperman? Where can I get in touch with him?" He was practically shouting so you knew he was mad, but

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I thought that was very strange calling somebody a flower when he was mad. "Goddamⁿ it, Allison! I've never been so sore in all my life!"

Father got up from his chair. "Sit down, Bill," he said quietly. "Sorry you ~~have~~^{had} to get in on this. Kind of gave us a raking over, didn't he?"

"Well, he's going to get a raking over when I get through. I'm going to sue him! He'll be singing 'Rock of Ages' himself when I get through with him."

Mother let out this tremendous sigh. "I just can't understand it. In many ways I thought he was such a nice man."

"Nice, hell!" Mr. Ewing said. "He's nothing but one of those pansy-writer types. Knew it the first time I laid eyes on him!"

"Let's have a drink," Father said. "I think we need it."

"Not for me, Allison," Mother said. She looked at me. The reason she didn't have one is because she was getting ready to chasten me. She never has one when she gets ready for that.

"I'll have one!" Mr. Ewing said. "Might even have the whole damn bottle!"

While Father was getting the drinks, Mr. Ewing kept flipping through the article. He was breathing violently loudly. I didn't know people breathed that loud.

"Look at that!" he said. "Lincoln up there with his head bowed. I'd like to have every dollar I've given that so-called church he's always saying he's building. He pocketed every damn dime of it or either gave it to those communists over in Atlanta. 'Rock of Ages', my aaa-- foot!"

"It's just sympathy, Bill," Mother said. "A lot of the North falls for it. It's the colored man's greatest weapon nowadays."

They want people to feel sorry for them, pity them. Even the most intelligent of them; it's their way of being noticed."

"Hell, I know it!" Mr. Ewing said. "Martyrs! They love it! Always want the ride, but refuse to buy the ticket."

Mother sort of leaned back on the sofa. "But, you know--- And I really mean it now. For the first time in my life I feel as if I'm free."

"Whatdoya mean, Sarah?"

"I mean I'm free of the Negro now. I don't have to worry about him any more. We've always been so closed-in by him. They've been like a wall around us, something to care for, to mend, and always there." She sort of lifted the magazine. "But it's this sort of thing---this continual ^{hitting} jibing at the South-- that's making me almost hate the colored now. I've never hated before in my life."

"I know. I know. Put somebody on the defensive and he's bound to fight."

Mother sighed. "It's sad in a way. In many ways we had such a lovely relationship with the Negro."

"Yes, well, there's a new bunch now, Sarah. Remember that! The old conservative Negro has gone. This new crop is hot-headed and---and irresponsible. They thrive on excitement, dramatics--" he sat up straighter--- "Just staying in school and quietly trying to improve themselves isn't exciting enough. They want to martyr themselves. Well, I say---let them be martyrs!"

Mother didn't say anything.

~~"Let them uplift themselves. We've given too long. There's not one of them---not one--- who appreciates anything you do. The North will soon learn this."~~

~~Then~~ Father came back with two drinks and bowed very deeply when he handed Mr. Ewing his glass. "Suh," he said, imitating Mr. Hopper's article, "for you were a king in Babylon and I but a Christian slave."

Mr. Ewing just kind of jerked his shoulder up.

"Slaves," he said. "Sometimes I wonder just who are the slaves down here." He got up from the sofa and went and sat in the chair by Father. "I mean it, Allison. I'm going to sue that magazine, for every penny it's worth."

"Oh what grounds, Bill?"

"Libel, that's what! Public ridicule. You can sue them for taking your child's picture."

"I don't think so."

"Well, we'll discuss that later," Mother said. "About Felicia."

I started making my faces again. Gosh, I was hoping Mr. Ewing would stay forever. I was sick in my stomach. My throat was aching, too, and all I wanted to do was just run somewhere, anywhere, so I could cry. I was aching to cry.

Father said he didn't think it would be very wise to sue because that would only mean more publicity.

"Yes, we have Felicia and Arthur to think about too," Mother said.

"I don't care how much publicity it gives me," Mr. Ewing said. "And I don't have any children to think about. I'm so damn tired of these Northern newspapers and magazines---television, too,

with their damn editing---trying to throw off their so-called morality on us! They sit up there in their air-conditioned offices and pant about the poor Southern Negro, and most of them don't give a damn about the Negro; they're just having a circulation fight up there and they're scared to death---scared of the Negro! They're like politicians. And the South's as safe a target as any."

"Still, there's no way to fight back," Father said. "They won't even print our ads. Freedom of the press! Who was it who referred to the Northern press as the paper curtain?"

"I don't know, but it's an apt expression."

"One thing for sure, they're not being very wise," Father said and he used a word I haven't attained yet. (I think it meant insane.) "They're not helping the Negro and they're only making the white man angrier. It's a kind of sins of the fathers all over again."

"Exactly." Mr. Ewing kind of scraped his chair. "And the North always wants to know what the rest of the world thinks of the South. Hah! They ought to ask themselves some questions."

Father sipped his drink slowly. "But it's the poor white who's going to get the brunt of this---not us. They can't afford private schools. Sometimes I don't blame them for their madness. It's the only way they know to fight."

I kind of thought about that for a while. It was people like Nadine Miller and them that'd end up going to school with colored people. In some ways it really isn't fair. I don't think it's such a terrible thing, not wanting to mix with people you don't want to mix with. Colored people are the same way.

Nobody said anything for a while, then Mother said: "I was

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just telling Bill, Allison, that it's this sort of thing that actually stirs up hatred."

"What?"

"Magazine articles like this!"

"Well, it shouldn't," Father said. "Nothing's worth hatred. Nothing. But if they're trying to ruin the South in other ways, they're doing a good job of it."

~~"Sure they are!" Mr. Ewing said. "Take those Kennedy boys. They've always fought the South for taking industry away from New England. North Carolina's the only Southern state that's shown any sense yet. They put a few Negroes in the white schools--- just to pacify the Fascists-- and went on with business as usual."~~

~~"Perhaps," Father said.~~

Mr. Ewing drained his glass in one big gulp and stood up. "Maybe I'll calm down one of these days, but right now I don't think so."

"It's all very unfortunate," Mother said.

"To say the least!" Mr. Ewing said. He waved at Father. "Go 'night, Allison!"

"Go 'night, Bill."

I heard him slam the front door and there we were alone in the library again. I just sat there, waiting.

"Now," Father said. "Felicia, I want you to tell us the truth. You were not truthful to Mr. Hopper, were you?"

He was standing over me and when I looked up at him I thought he looked suddenly very tired. He looked older, too, and I guess it was this-- the way he looked and everything--

that started me acting like an insane person. I don't know what happened, but I had worried so long.... Just all at once almost, everything started getting blank or something and I started sobbing like I was a four-year-old. I threw myself down on the sofa: "Yes, I lied," I said. "I betrayed you all! They called you all hicks. If it hadn't of been for me, you would've---he woulda said nice things..." My breath started jerking and I started sobbing louder and louder. Everything just kind of broke inside.

From somewhere that seemed almost far away, I heard Father say:

"No, Sarah, just let her cry it out. Just leave her be."

I guess they went away. I don't know. All I know was that I wanted to be dead and I kept thinking that if I could just make it until I was old, that's all I had to do. Just live out the years. Go to bed, get up. Go to bed, get up. And at the end of many days I'd die and it would all be over. I got to thinking about my life that had gone---the dance, people at school getting popular and me this tall giant of a person that nothing good would ever happen to, not as long as I lived. Now I'd betrayed my own parents and Arthur, too. Finally the ache inside was so dreadful and I was so afraid, that the only thing I knew I could do was to pray. So, biting the pillow, I prayed:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
 I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
 If I should die before I wake,
 I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

And I hope He heard me.

*poetry
 center on
 longest line*