

Chapter 20

The day before we left for Charleston, Mother started talking around about that she thought it would be a good idea for us to go to Connecticut in June.

"We've never really seen that part of the country and I think it would be interesting for Arthur to see more of New England too. We could take a little trip after school is out."

"Gosh," I said, and I meant it. It was bad enough just going to Charleston, but to have to go up to Connecticut and have Arthur ashamed of us, was just about the worst. ~~Mother and Father don't know one thing about how people are.~~

"Why don't we just let him come home on the train," I said.

"Why, Felicia, don't you want to see Arthur's school?"

"Not particularly. I'm sure Arthur'd rather come home on the train. That's such a long ride in the car."

"We can drive leisurely."

"Okay, but you're not gonna like it up there."

"Well, we'll see. Now, Felicia, have you finished packing?"

"Uh huh. I packed two weeks ago."

Mother laughed and kind of put her arm around my shoulder.

"You have been looking forward to Charleston, haven't you?"

"Yaaaas," I said, ^{which} ~~with~~ was a distinct lie. One reason was I wasn't looking so hot. It's funny about me but some weeks I can really look pretty good and then let something come along like going to Charleston and I look perfectly insane. You know Charleston was a big city, didn't you? ^{in Charleston} ~~It is, and everybody there~~ is highly advanced. Girls start wearing stockings ~~in Charleston~~ when they're eleven even.

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~~Anyway, the next day Velvet suddenly got a cold and so we decided not to leave until Saturday. Mother didn't want to leave Father without making sure he would get along all right. She never believes in just thoroughly abandoning him.~~

Father had wanted to come along with us, too, but since it was Spring he said he had too much to do out at the farm. So it was just Mother and me. We had a hilarious time, driving in the car. It was the first time just us had ever been anywhere together and it was lovely to drive along in the warm air and sort of talk deep, ~~and stuff~~. I kept asking her why so many people in Charleston were snobbish and she said they weren't really, they were just used to their own ways, "that's all."

"But I mean---just say I might have turned out this girl with sort of pathetic parents and all---they wouldn't even let

me in the back door of the St. Cecelia Ball, would they?"

I was talking about this Ball they give every February. It's mainly for debutantes but you're supposed to have about one million ancestors before you can go. Some inferior people sneak in sometimes, but not too many.

"In that case, I guess you couldn't go then."

"Do you think that's fair of them?"

"Yes, I think it is. I'm sure the other girls have a dance they enjoy just as much."

"I bet they don't. I bet every girl in Charleston would want to go to the St. Cecelia Ball. To me, it's pitiful. They can't help who their ancestors were."

"I don't know. Decency also enters into it. If you're divorced, for instance, you can't go."

"Just because you're divorced?"

"Uh huh."

"I guess Uncle Alex couldn't go then, could he?"

"No, I guess he couldn't." Mother kept looking straight ahead at the road, but I couldn't tell what she was thinking because of her dark glasses.

"You went, didn't you? Didn't you make your debut at the St. Cecelia Ball?"

"Yes."

"Well, didn't you feel kinda sorry for all the other girls that couldn't go?"

She sighed. "I don't think I really thought about it then, but I suppose if it weren't the St. Cecelia, it would probably be something else. When you give a party you only invite your friends. The Ball is the same."

"Ohhhh me." I leaned back on the car seat and thought about how if I ever gave another party I'd invite even some of those people that live down near the train station. I'd be nicer to them than anybody and Marilyn and Melissa would turn out these excruciating snobs.

At Junior-High School there're lots of poor people. There weren't hardly any in grammar school, but once you get to Junior-High School just everybody goes there. [After school the poor ones with white eyelashes walk one way home and we walk the other way. You kind of know they want to walk the way you do, so I never look when they start off in the wrong direction. It's tragic.]

"I do wonder how Pett is," Mother said. I guess she was tired of talking about snobs. "Petrie wrote she hadn't been feeling well lately."

"I hope she's all right," I said and sat up straighter. "But, look, Mother---when she has her little glass of sherry at night, let's don't---you know---get her to talking about how Charleston's changing and all. That's kind of boring to me."

"You use that word too much, Felicia."

"What word?"

"'Boring.' You say it much too much."

We were just whizzing down the highway. "Well, I'm bored pretty much of the time. Things are all the time boring me."

"They shouldn't! If you're bored, it's just a sign you're not a very interesting person."

"Well, I'm not. I'm not interesting at all."

"I think you are."

I looked at her. "Do you? Do you, really?"

"Yes, you have a fine spirit about things."

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"Oh, that." Irritating! Who wants a fine spirit about things? That's not very interesting.

"An interesting person always has inner resources. I've never heard your father use the word 'boring.'"

"Maybe so," I said, but what I really think is that Father does get bored. I've seen him talking to some of the women around Ashton. He's listening all right, but I know he's probably thinking about the farm or going hunting or something. You can just tell.

Mother started talking about Aunt Pett again. "Most people in Charleston think she's fascinating."

"I know but- -I don't mean she's boring all the time, but I get kind of tired listening to all that about Charleston---about who's nice and who isn't. Some of those she thinks are so nice don't look so hot to me."

"Yes, well, that's one of the reasons for this trip. You're getting old enough to appreciate Charleston now."

"Like snobs and all?"

"Of course not! The history and charm of the city. You're very, ve-ry fortunate to have an aunt and uncle like Petrie and Ann---and a great-aunt like Pett, too. You can learn a great deal."

"I know, but- -" Oh well, it didn't make any difference. When Mother doesn't want to understand you, she doesn't even try. I really do like Aunt Ann and Uncle Petrie, but at night there's nobody there my age and you know how it is. Winky's always gone out and they really don't care whether you're there or not.

You'd like Aunt Ann, though, I think. She's this grand work-horse. At least that's what a friend of hers told us the last

time we were in Charleston. Aunt Ann's always wearing sports clothes and tearing around working herself to death for the church and for these House Tours they give every Spring. She also plays a lot of golf, but not as much as she wants to because she's always having to drive Aunt Pett and this other extremely feeble aunt of Uncle Petrie's around. She's pretty too, I think, with dark hair and blue eyes, but a lot of the time she looks tired because she's just got through working herself to death. Everybody likes her.

Uncle Petrie's different. He's very tall and about Father's age but he never has made much money. He just simply can't make any, that's all. He's an insurance man and he never has ever really liked it. Nobody ever understood why he went into it. Father says Uncle Petrie should have been a minister or a teacher or something. What he cares most about is Charleston---gardens, old churches, and history. Things like that.

Uncle Petrie and Aunt Ann had enough money to send Winky to schools and stuff, but they don't have anything like what Aunt Pett has. Aunt Pett lives in the house with them and she even has this trained nurse that goes literally everywhere with her. Miss Boggs. Even when the telephone rings, Miss Boggs answers it and finds out first if it's somebody with ancestors Aunt Pett wants to talk to. Miss Boggs knows about everybody too---even who your great, great, grandfather was. She learned it from Aunt Pett, but she also has a red nose.

The thing that everybody in Charleston really likes, though, is Aunt Ann and them's house. It's very large and has two drawing rooms! In the upstairs drawing room they have these two Chippendale chairs of Aunt Pett's that everybody's always slurping around about.

They also carry on about the ~~fully~~ paintings in the dining room. In the biggest drawing room there's this harp! Aunt Pett says that I may inherit the harp some day, but I don't much want it. To me, it's pretty ugly, but Aunt Pett's always talking about this famous harpist that played on it once. That's the kind of people Aunt Pett likes---famous generals and harpists and stuff. You ought to hear all the famous generals and politicians Aunt Pett's related to. Practically the entire Confederate army! She's got all their swords and portraits and things. The Whitfields have a drunkard in their background. (Boy, I shouldn've put that in!) But we don't talk about it when we go to Charleston.

12 Well, we didn't ~~get~~ there until late afternoon which was unfortunate. See, people in Charleston, the nice ones, have their dinner in the middle of the day but not until about three o'clock in the afternoon. If you miss that, ~~you've had it~~, because all you get at night is some pitiful salad or something. People in Charleston have been eating their dinners at two and three in the afternoons practically since the Wise Men. It's very peculiar and I don't know how it all got started. If you really want to know you can ask Mr. Stoney---Mr. Sam Stoney. He knows everything about Charleston. He's this walking book of knowledge and he's also got ancestors. But when you visit somebody you nearly die of hunger until three o'clock comes. They do give you a little snack around eleven in the morning, but it doesn't help too much.

Gosh, but it was nice driving along the Battery. It was warm and there was a slight breeze coming in from the water. We passed the Fort Sumter Hotel and went riding along ~~down East~~ ^{by the water}

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 Bay Street. That's what I always think of when I think of Charleston---East Bay, the water, and sailing. Also trees with moss, flowers, old streets and brass doorknobs. A lot of people even live in alleys, not the kind with garbage cans, but St. Michael's Alley and Price's Alley. A lot of Aunt Ann's friends live there. The houses are very nice, but not like ones in Ashton.

"Well, here we are," Mother said. We parked in front because Aunt Ann and them don't have a driveway. See, their house has a huge brick wall in front of it and this wrought-iron gate you walk through. Inside is this kind of court with all Uncle Petrie's flowers and shrubbery and stuff. There's also a small fountain. After that you go through another kind of gate and there's the house. It's very ancient brick and has a black-green door with a shiny brass knocker. Everybody keeps their brass shining in Charleston, even the doorbell on the outside wall. It's a mark of decency to do so, you know.

We rang the door bell inside and guess who met us? Winky! Right away she and Mother started kissing each other. How I do wish you could just shake hands!

"Felicia!" Winky finally said to me. And we just kind of put our cheeks together. Embarrassing! "Gosh, you've grown some more!"

I didn't think Winky would've said that. As I told you, she's tall herself. I just grinned. ~~What else can do you?~~ You can't just suddenly shrink up or anything. I did feel pretty tall in the hall, though. I just kept holding onto this one suitcase and grinning. I simply never know what to do when I first come into their house. Mother's always carrying on with everybody and I'm usually just standing there. ~~What are you~~

~~supposed to do? Just keep on grinning, I guess.~~

Winky started calling for Aunt Ann and Uncle Petrie. They came down from upstairs and there was more joy! Aunt Ann looked tireder than I'd ever seen her, even though she was pretty tanned. Uncle Petrie always looks tired. He kind of stoops some and has wrinkles round his eyes. They acted overjoyed to see us, though.

Then Miss Boggs---the nurse I told you about---came from somewhere in the back!

"That child's the tallest thing I ever saw!" she said to Mother about me. "When did it happen?"

"Oh, it just happened," Mother said, and put her arm around my shoulder. That was nice of Mother. But I could have killed Miss Boggs, naturally. I have discovered that many women that have worked a long time in other people's houses are very rude. ~~Also they get to having red noses.~~

My jaws were aching from grinning so much. But then we heard Aunt Pett's deep voice from the east parlor:

"Seyruh! Seyruh! Is that you?"

"Oah, it's Awnt Pett," Winky said. "She's been waiting all afternoon. Didn't even take her nap."

"Well, of course," Mother said.

We went into the parlor and there was Aunt Pett, sitting all dressed up in her chair looking exactly like Franklin Roosevelt. She had on a grey dress and pearls, and you've never seen anybody that looks so much like Roosevelt. I have this feeling they're related, except he was a Northerner.

"Pett, you lovely darling," Mother said. She's practically wild over Aunt Pett. Mother can say things like "lovely darling"

and it sounds all right. But if I said it, everybody'd really think I was insane.

"You're looking well, Seyruh," Aunt Pett said. "I see those Georgians haven't changed you too much."

Zung! Right away I thought of the article in the magazine. I hoped she'd forgotten about it. I hadn't even mentioned it to Mother on the way over because I didn't even want her to talk about it.

"Now, Pett, let's not get started on Georgia right away," Mother said.

Thank goodness, she didn't say anything about the article. But there I was, waiting for my time to come.

"Felicia! Felicia, is that you?" she said.

"Uh huh," I said. "How are you, Aunt Pett?" I went up and didn't do a real curtsy, only the jerk one.

She took hold of my hand. "Let me see you."

I tried to stick my face out better.

"Character!" she said. "Seyruh, she has character."

I guess that's all she could think of to say. "Thank you," I said, but I was pretty disappointed.

"She's a Whitfield." She started chuckling. "Through and through, a Whitfield."

That wasn't much of a compliment. In her mind it's a whole lot better to look like her side than the Whitfield side.

"You had a sweet grandmother, Felicia."

"Grandmother Whitfield?"

"Yes, she was a sweet woman. Used to come to Charleston to visit. She had nice connections here. Always came with her colored girl."

I guess maybe she didn't think the Whitfield side was too bad after all. But that's the thing about Aunt Pett. She gets you to looking at her and then tells you these things about your family as if she were telling you history. All you can do is just stand there and nod your head violently every now and then.

At least, though, she didn't mention the article and she didn't say anything about me growing or how tall I was. She's not at all mean or anything. She just isn't very partial to "simple people." That's what she says about you if you don't have any ancestors. "Good people, yes, but simple people. Just a simple little family."

Thank the lord I heard Aunt Ann saying something about going upstairs.

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"I guess I am a bit tired," Mother said. "Come, Felicia, you can see Aunt Pett later." As if I were just dying to stand there, holding Aunt Pett's hand all afternoon.

We started up the stairway and Aunt Ann followed us. Half way up she told us she was giving the cocktail party tomorrow. I ~~she~~ glanced back at her.

"For both of you," she said.

"Oh, Ann, that's too much trouble now," Mother said.

"Nooo. Just a few in after church."

"After church?" Mother said. "Honestly, sometimes I forget the way we do in Charleston."

I didn't say anything but I nearly fainted down the stairway with joy. She was really going to give it. She really was! Me, at a cocktail party! In Charleston! Hot spit!