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Chapter 24

"Felicia, your father and I have been talking and I think you're a little too concerned about the sad side of life. It, uh, worries us a little."

I let out this huge sigh of relief. It was after lunch and we'd already worried enough about what Arthur's letter in the newspaper would be like. Just out of the blue Mother had told me to come in the library, she wanted to "have a talk with me." I was worried out of my mind she was going to start telling me about you know what, like Melissa Stewart's mother did, ~~about you know what.~~ But all she wanted to talk about was about me being sad, thank goodness.

"I don't think sad things all the time," I said.

"Well, for instance." She went over to her desk. "Now here's this little story you've written." She came and sat back down on

on the sofa.

The story she had was one I'd written about this poor old woman dying down in her basement by her booze bottle. I hadn't wanted her to read that. It was embarrassing.

"I don't think that's very nice of you to go prying around in my things," I said.

"I wasn't prying now, Felicia. I was just straightening and the story was on top of the desk. Actually, I was delighted to see you'd written a story."

"Well, did you like it?" It was just about the best thing I've ever written.

"Yes, but it's a little morbid, I think."

"I meant it to be! Life's pretty morbid, you know--- for some people."

She very slowly put my story aside. "Now tthe bestat I want to talk to you about."

"What?"

"Of course, there're sad phases in life, but there's a great deal of beauty, too."

"Like what?"

"Ohhh, the morning, I think---sunsets---marrying, having children. People can be beautiful, too, you know."

"A lot of people aren't."

"No, but a lot of them are---inside."

"Whatdoya mean, inside?"

"The way we love one another. The way we---worship--- and even in the way we appreciate."

"Yes, but all that's pretty sad too, I think. I mean pitiful people going around doing nice things for other people. That's very sad to me."

"But it's a lovely kind of sadness."

"I don't think any kind of sadness is love-ly. You go a-
round with this huge lump in your throat and feel like dying all
the time."

She kept looking at me in this exceedingly curious way. I
think she thought I was about to go insane, ~~or something.~~

"Well, your father and I, of course, want you to be happy,
Felicia. It's the little things that make one happy."

"Like what?" I started tearing this huge fingernail off
my thumb. It came off just beautifully.

"Oh, I don't know. I think you have to discover these for
yourself. You will, soon. When I was your age I think I found
everything sad too."

K looked at her. "Wonder why?"

"I don't know." She was speaking very softly. "I suppose
it's just your age. So many new feelings seem to ~~over~~ these all
at once almost." think I fo

"But Melissa and Marilyn and them don't go around finding
things sad, I mean, not like I do."

"~~That's~~ probably because you're more sensitive to things
than they are."

"What's that?"

"What?"

"Sensitive?"

"Oh, you feel things more keenly, more deeply."

"Is that bad?"

"No, I don't think so. ~~I think it's rather wonderful,~~ But
of course it makes life more difficult, ~~too,~~ sometimes."

I sort of hung my head. "I know it," I said. "I don't
think I'm going to have a very nice life." The ~~old~~ lump was com-

ing back into my throat again. Every time I start thinking about my pitiful life I want to cry.

"Now there! That's one thing I heart-i-ly dislike."

I looked up at her again. "What? That my life's gonna be terrible?"

"No, feeling sorry for yourself. That's the easiest thing in the world to do and highly selfish. I like people who have courage, the courage to be cheerful and thoughtful of others--- especially now when the world's in such revolution. That's the least we can do."

"I'm pretty cheerful---on the outside."

"Yes, but I want you to be cheerful on the inside, too."

I just humped my shoulders over and folded my hands. Now they were getting mad ~~with me~~ because I wasn't cheerful. That's she inside. I tell you, I can't ever do one thing right. almost as bad as Arthur. "I don't see how that's gonna help the revolution, just being cheerful---"

"Well, it ^{will} ~~is~~."

gal 90 "Just to go chirping around all cheerful all the time. People like that bore me. Like this girl at school, she's always chirping around about something."

"Yes, well, that's not very interesting either, but it's just as uninteresting to go crying around over everything too."

"I guess so," I said, "but I don't cry all the time."

"No, I think you're a very interesting girl. I do think, however, you take some things a bit too seriously. It isn't very pleasant for you."

What she said was pretty true, I guess. I do take things

too serious. I mean, for instance, like going to Charleston, I worried so much about it before I got there that it hardly wasn't even worth going. And Connecticut. I'd been worrying about that for months. I can just sit down and think up all these horrible things that might happen. I wonder if anybody else is like that, ~~or is it just me?~~ I worry myself to death. But not about the revolution, I guess.

Mother came over and started brushing my bangs back with her hand. "But that's all I wanted to say to you, Felicia. Run along now. Play some tennis---have a good time! You're a very sweet girl, really."

I started to get up, but I flopped back down. I wasn't much in the mood to play tennis. I'd ^{much} rather have stayed on there talking about what a gloomy individual I was. That's ~~mu~~ Felicia. fun to me than playing tennis. Not one of my friends ~~ca~~re ~~avng~~ about talking deep. Oh, I mean they'll cry in the movies and things, but they don't know what you're talking about if you try to talk ~~to them~~ about is there a God or about the revolution or something. I just never even try to talk to them that way because you know they're bored anyway. Our family is the deepest family in Ashton, except for Miss Esther maybe. We never talk too much about just stupid things. Other families do. When I go to one of my friend's house for dinner, or something, they don't talk about President Kennedy or Cuba or Russia or anything. They just grin at you and keep asking: "Now what have you two girls been up to today?"---like they were just forcing conversation. And then that just leads into nothing.

The mothers of my friends aren't very cheerful either; they're always sighing and stuff. I told Mother so. I wanted her

to keep on talking anyway.

"Perhaps they're just tired," she said.

"Uh uh, they're just ignorant!"

"Now, Felicia. That's not very nice."

"Well, they don't ever like to talk about anything important--- just sewing and people that just died and things."

"Yes, well, some people have other interests. You must learn ~~to~~ appreciate everyone for their own capabilities. I certainly admire ladies who can cook and sew. They're lovely talents to have, I think."

"I don't think so."

"Well, you should! I ~~envy the ladies who are able to sew their own clothes.~~

~~I~~ ^{But I} "I surely don't." And I don't. ^{rather} They're always lovely sitting away on sewing machines with gas heaters on and pieces of string ~~all~~ all over the floor. I can't stand that sort of thing. The gas heater puts a bad taste in your mouth. I started to say something else, but then there was this great bump at the front door.

"Oh dear, that must be the paper," Mother said. "I'd almost forgotten."

"Arthur's letter to the editor," I said.

"Yes, go get it, Felicia."

"Where's Arthur? I asked.

"I don't know, but go get the paper. Oh dear."

Well, I went and got it and brought it back in the library. Mother quickly unfolded it and then very hurriedly and mumblingly started reading out loud. Like I said, it was the most embarrassing thing in the world and Mother kept saying "mercy" and "oh dear" all

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the way through it. This is what Arthur had written:

Every morning I go to my little bench beneath the spreading Chinaberry tree and there I sit me down to contemplate the worms. ("Mercy, I hope they don't think Allison wrote that!") Who would make a slave of these poorly creatures---working and loving and knocking out their brains? Once of a morning I watched the worms from my little bench and I thought: "I am for you, worm." Yes, I am for them as is Albert Schweitzer. So, too, am I for the other downtrodden of the world---prostitutes and opium eaters and ("Mercy") yes, for the lowliest bum. They are my friends. They are your friends. Ashton, Georgia, is full of them. They are the town's worms. ("Oh dear.")

We must fit ourselves and go toward the central flame (He spelled central wrong.) This means LIFE. You travel through a dark passage and then in the midst of the jungle there is this little rustling of leaves. Behold! The Central Flame. It behooves us. Be kind, even to little worms. These are my thoughts as I sit upon my little bench. Bums and prostitutes, also, march down the aisle of LIFE. The flame burneth!

Cordis... cent...
A. C. ... means LIFE
I Woodlen in the ...

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We heard the back door slam. It was Father. "Hessasičk,"

he shouted as he came into the library. "If anybody thought I wrote that rot, they're crazier than he is."

Mother put her handkerchief to her nose. "Now, don't, Allison!" She glanced at me. "Don't let Arthur hear you. He's very proud of the letter, I know."

"Sitting on my little bench!" Father quoted Arthur. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," Mother said quietly and didn't move her handkerchief.

"Maybe he's looking at the worms," I said.

"Now don't tease him, Felicia," Mother said. "His thought is really quite fine."

"Fine my foot!" Father said, and stormed out of the room.

"Oh dear. Oh dear. Oh dear," Mother said.

Poor thing. She's harassed to death. All she's got is gloomy me and pitiful Arthur, exposing himself all over the place. I tried to cheer her up. I decided I was going to have a very cheerful personality. "I guess we were just meant to be public," I said. "But it looks like Arthur would've learned how ~~indec~~ ^{indecent} it is---I mean after Mr. Hopper's article and everything."

She just glanced at me. "It's just one thing after another. Sometimes I---" But she didn't finish. In a few minutes I heard her upstairs, going into Father's room.

Arthur didn't come home until just before dinner that night. He had had a new haircut which made the two bumps on the back of his head more noticeable. Also, he had on him a ~~minutes~~ ^{minutes} Amos T. Caldwell look again. Father started to say something to him, but Mother shushed him. "No, now Allison, we want to have a peaceful dinner."

Arthur himself brought up the letter. He wanted to know how we liked it. And when no one said anything very jubilant, he said he had first written it at school. It was an English theme and he had gotten another C on it because of commas. "They take off even if you have one small ~~comma~~ ^{comma} out of of place," he said. He'd corrected the commas, though, before he sent it to the newspaper.

"That's good," Father said and Mother shushed him again.

"I've got another one upstairs," he said. "I might send it in too."

"No," Mother and Father said together.

"I think you got your thought over quite well in this one," Mother said.

"I wonder why people think it's vulgar to expose yourself to the public?" I asked violently cheerily. I just thought I'd ^{kind} ~~had~~ of hint the thought to Arthur.

"People don't think it's vulgar," Arthur said. "The richest people in the world are always writing to The New York Times."

"Richness has nothing to do with vulgarity," I said. "Most of them are pretty cheap."

"It's perfectly all right to write your opinions," Mother said.

"Like about prostitutes and all?" I said.

"Let's not talk about that at the table, Felicia," ^{said} Father said.

"He said it!" I said. "He even said it in this," Mother!

"Shall we go in the other room?" Father said. "I think Isaiah would like to clear the table."

"Hey, Arthur," I said as we were going through the hall. "Did you know I'd written a story?"

"Uh uh." He wasn't interested at all.

"It's pretty morbid," I said, "but I can write cheery ones, too. I think I'm going to."

"Hey, Mother," he said, "you know what the Head said about---"

See? ^{was} Arthur wasn't interested at all in what I'd done. All he wanted to talk about ~~is~~ School, School, School. He didn't even care whether or not we were embarrassed over his letter or not. Well, I'll tell you, we WERE!!

The worst thing about it was no one said anything about it. I mean, Mother or Father's friends. None of Father's friends called

him up or anything. I guess they were afraid to. Father had just started teaching a class at Sunday School and I guess they figured he'd really gotten "that way." Too, everybody at school nearly died over the letter. You know, about prostitutes. But I told them Arthur'd written it at school and that was the way you're suppose to write up in Connecticut. Nobody in Ashton, even in high school, writes that way. All they write about is "My Trip To North Carolina This Summer." Stuff like that. I told them that the school Arthur goes to is very high up intellectually, but they just stared.

Finally, though, everybody found out it was Arthur that had written the letter; at least they told Father they had found out. "How's your little bench getting along, Allison?" Mr. Ewing kept asking Father all the time. He was out of his mind with intellect over the whole thing. All Father's friends were. I don't see, I'll never understand older men. They never have any consideration for the other one's feelings. I'm glad I'm not a man. I wouldn't be one for anything.

Well, anyway, I guess it's pretty boring about all that, but the main thing was I didn't get my opportunity to ask Arthur about how we were suppose to look when we came up to Connecticut. So much was going on and he was so interested in his award and stuff.

I didn't even get a chance to say anything to him at the train station.

"We'll see you soon," Mother said, as he hurriedly got on the train.

"Best vacation I ever had," he sort of yelled back at us.

Then there he was up there on the platform again. He and the

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porter seemed to have gotten up a kind of companionship. They were laughing back and forth and stuff like they'd known each other for centuries.

But when the train started moving, he began waving violently at us the way he always does. I waved back, too, and his little glasses kept flashing around and things. Gosh, Arthur I thought, I hope you do get that award. I hope you do!

"Old Amos T. Caldwell," I said aloud, but I don't think Mother or Father heard me.