

Chapter 14

When Felicia was thirteen, going on fourteen, she had once written on a piece of paper: "To grow up, that's all I want to do." The adult world then had seemed everything a child's world was not—warm, safe, free. You could do what you wanted to do; you could go on trips, drive cars, fall in love, drink cocktails, meet beautiful people in beautiful places. To Felicia this world was so magical, ^{and} so filled with wonder, ~~that~~ her eagerness to be a part of it ~~all~~ was so great that once, she remembered, she even dreamed of it. She was on a great ship at sea and she was twenty and beautiful and all the people around her were twenty and beautiful.

She awoke from the dream and she was still only Felicia, not beautiful, not twenty and not on a ship at sea. ~~Somehow~~ [≡] then she had discovered some- ^{gall} thing that later she found to be true: that the grown up world was not ⁶⁴ what she had fancied. It was a hard world, a place with too many tears, too much wilderness, ^{was} and too little laughter. Now she ^{ing about} had learned death. _≡

On the day of Isaiah's funeral she lay in bed, sleep leaving her gradually, and first she listened for ~~sounds~~ the morning sounds that had always greeted her in this house: Velvet busy with dishes in the kitchen below, Isaiah running the vacuum cleaner, the telephone ringing, the high gay lilt of Negro voices. There were no sounds. And it was this way ^{that} the fact of death came to her ~~in~~ in silence. ^M Isaiah would never come again.

After the first shock of the news that night had worn away, the practical side of death ~~the~~ the price for living ~~had~~ had to be arranged. For two days Felicia had listened to her mother and father as they calmly discussed "arrangements." They sat in the library, the tall Christmas tree shimmering in the corner, and discussed details. A casket had to be bought, a plot must be provided for, cars to ride in and flowers to be sent. Her father would pay for it all. "It's the least we can do," he told Velvet.

Felicia had tried to avoid Velvet. The thought of her, her pleading eyes so filled with tears, was more than she could bear. She had heard her voice that night when her mother and father rushed out to see her. Felicia had stood outside on the little screen porch and listened, too afraid ^{of} what she might see should she go inside.

"He was so afraid, Miss Sarah."

Now Isaiah lay in his satin-lined coffin at the Negro funeral home, so much more splendid in death than ever he was in life. Felicia knew the inside of Floyd's Funeral Home. When she was five a nurse had taken her there; the nurse's boy friend, Floyd, was the undertaker and Ella Mae (that was her name) had sat her down in a wicker rocking chair with a walnut ice cream cone while she and Floyd disappeared behind a curtain in the back of the ~~one~~ story building. There had been one coffin there that

day, banked with orange gladiolus, and an old Negro man lay inside, his bluish hands, gnarled and stiff, clutching^{red} one perfect lily. Did one think after death? Could one hear? Did God really welcome you up to some white-robed heaven?

It seemed incongruous that Isaiah should be lying there now. Only the day before he had been telling Felicia about his new "scheme." It was a scheme to raise chickens. He wouldn't actually raise them himself, but his girl friend would. "She'll tend to 'em, and then I'll sell the eggs when they comes."

Isaiah thought he could sell enough eggs to buy the car he wanted. He had pointed it out to Felicia, a black and cream car that stood large and shiny, like a prize Black Angus, in the middle of the used car lot. He wanted that car.

"But by the time you get all the money, Isaiah, it'll be sold," Felicia had said.

"Naw, you just puts yo down-payment down and yo company up for co-^llateral." ¹⁰

It seemed a reasonable enough scheme. There had been others, many others, but this one excited him more. Felicia wondered who would buy that car now. Who would drive it? It seemed wrong, terribly wrong. Then for the first time in her life Felicia thought seriously of her own death. It would come, surely, and yet would it really? Yes. She, too, would lie in some casket far into the earth. The Spring would come, the hot summer, the tall pines, the water oaks and rich summer laughter. God, help us all.....

"What's the matter with me?" she asked her mother at breakfast.

"My stomach aches. I can't eat."

Start → "Why, you're just grieving, Felicia," said her mother.

"Is that the way you grieve?"

"Sometimes."

Grief, a sickness? "I don't think I'll go to the funeral."

"Yes, now, Felicia. Velvet would wonder."

A low, full holly branch outside was touching the breakfast room window.

"I wish funerals were held outside, sort of under the trees and every thing. Churches are so closed in. It would be nice with trees and sky."

"Felicia, you must eat something."

"I can't. ~~Am~~ Do I have to go?"

"Isaiah was your friend. You've known him all your life."

"I feel dizzy. What if I faint or something?"

"Now you must learn to control your emotions. We don't give way to these things. We keep our dignity. We ~~...~~"

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The little church was wooden clapboard painted white with wide glass windows on either side. Felicia walked a few paces behind her mother and father. It was a cold, sunny day. The glaze was high and the wind biting. Colored people in groups, some with little children elaborately dressed for the occasion, were streaming into the church. Felicia kept her head lowered. She wondered if these people wanted her there. Were they intruding?

"I'm not going to look at him," she kept saying over and over.

She glanced round as she turned to go into the church. There, sitting in a black car in front of the church, was Velvet. She had on a dark hat with a veil Felicia had never seen before. The veil didn't cover the face but fringed it. Her wide face was worn, but she had on lipstick. Felicia

had never seen her with lipstick on before. Velvet led two lives, the life with them at home and the life here, among her friends. In this life she wore lipstick; she was a different Velvet, one she did not know.

A large colored man in a black suit and bald head greeted them at the door.

"Thaze seats reserved in the front," he said to her father.

"Thank you," said Allison Whitfield, and then a pathway seemed to be made in the sea of dark faces. The church was completely filled. There were no other white people. Oddly, fear touched Felicia. She didn't know why.

An organ was playing, one chord like the sounding of a gong, over and over. The church was warm and the sweet smell of flowers hovered closely. Ahead, lay the casket, open, and a piece of thin white gauze was draped from the lid to the base of the coffin. It was unmistakably Isaiah lying there, helpless. Roses, in the shape of a heart, were placed to one side. There were other flowers, but the roses struck Felicia first. Who had sent them? How little she knew of Isaiah really, ^{and of} his friends. He had been married once; she knew that. But his wife had left him, taken his daughter and gone ^{to Cleveland} ~~up north~~ to live. Isaiah was always planning to go ^{Cleveland -} ~~to see his daughter~~; he never went.

Felicia followed her mother and father into the third pew. They did not go up to the casket. Felicia sat on the end of the pew and rested her elbow on the arm. In this way she could half cover her face with her hand. Behind the coffin a small picture of the river Jordan was painted on the wall. The river was very blue and seemed to wind into sky. The trees on either side were very green. The wierd chords on the organ continued. Slow and minor.

Soon the two pews in front were filled with family. They walked down the aisle in a body. Velvet, a handkerchief to her face, ~~was~~ helped to her seat by Extra, Isaiah's older brother. Extra was wearing a ^a grey double-breasted suit and he was taller and larger than Isaiah. A young girl, about sixteen, was trembling uncontrollably. A spasm seemed to have seized her whole body, her shoulders, her head, her hand as she tried to touch her face. Don't let them scream, God, Felicia said to herself. Years ago she had been to Velvet's sister's funeral. There was much screaming and shouting.

Gong. Gong. Gong. The organ continued, slowly and methodically, ^{growing louder with each chord} Then it seemed to grow into crescendo loudness.

"Man who is born of woman is born in sin," came the rich, resonant voice of the minister from the back of the room.

"A-men!" shouted one high female voice across the aisle from Felicia. There were no other voices.

Six colored girls, dressed in white and carrying bouquets of orange gladiolus, came down the aisle. One by one they placed their flowers by the casket and then sat in chairs placed on either side of the coffin. Their arms, necks, and legs were slender and startlingly dark against the white of their dresses. Their nostrils were flared and their eyes were ^{opened wide} like ~~young doe's eyes.~~

The minister, a slender, lean-faced man with a small mustache, followed the girls. He was dressed in a dark suit and walked with his Bible open. For a moment he stood before Isaiah's casket, then he slowly walked up the few steps to a raised platform where a rococo-carved lectern stood.

The church was very still.

"By the rivers of Babylon," the minister's deep voice rang out in the church, "there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We

hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof." He lifted his head. "Upon the willows! For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song."

A high soprano voice, the rich notes unmistakably and inimitably Negro, sang clear and perfect from the choir loft above the painting of the river Jordan: "And they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

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The minister repeated: "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

"We sing unto the Lord," came the soprano voice again.

The voices of both the minister and the soloist were so lushly rich that for a moment Felicia, meeting the emotion of them, almost began to cry.

We must not give way to these things. We keep our dignity.

Felicia looked back at the casket again. Isaiah's face, so still, ~~It~~ had never been still in life. She closed her eyes and for a moment ~~and~~ she pictured Isaiah the way he was so often, laughing, bending over laughing, clapping his hands. And they that wasted us required of us mirth. Was the minister speaking of his own people?

"For man he is like the flower of the field. But the wind passeth o'er and he is gone," spoke the minister. He turned his gaze to the first two pews. "We do not mourn. For the Lord giveth and he taketh away. We do not mourn," his voice intoned. "Isaiah Johnston has worked long in the fields. The bell has rung. Sun down, Lord."

"A-men," came the same female voice across from Felicia again. "Thas right." The voice was followed by a low, general moaning.

The minister raised his eyes. "Quittin' time will come, Lord. Come,

Lord. Bring us words! 'I will scatter them as with an East wind...
 For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, that spreadeth out her
 roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf
 shall be green.... A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place
 of our sanctuary.'

"Heah me. Heah me," said the minister, his head lifted. A glorious
 high throne."

"She weepeth sore in the night," sang the voice of the soprano,
 "and her tears are on her cheeks M."

Felicia looked down at her hands. She had never heard the scriptures
 said more beautifully nor heard a voice as purely lovely as the voice of
 the soprano. It was the first time in her life she had actually listened
 to all the words of a minister. In all the Sundays she had attended
 church she had never really listened. She had followed the Episcopal
 service from the Prayer Book, automatically repeating the words she had
 learned for Confirmation, but she had never really listened. Could it be
 that in this church, this day, she had discovered something ---a beginning
 perhaps? For the first time somehow she seemed to see the entire movement
 of life, its cycles and its dyings like slow winds and tides. For he shall
be as a tree planted by the waters, that spreadeth out her roots by the
river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green.
 It was as if the minister had taken words, cupped them into his hand, and
 presented them as a gift.

"But the wind passeth o'er and he is gone."

Two colored men rose from the pews on the right and slowly closed
 the coffin. Velvet was weeping aloud now. Felicia turned to her father.
 His head was lowered and his mouth stern.

They drove to the cemetery in silence. Isaiah was to be buried on the rise of a slight hill. A canvas was placed over the grave. Beyond, the hills of Georgia rose, spotted green with winter pine and sloping downward into the plains of the south. One pine, slightly bent, stood by Isaiah's grave.

Felicia ^{and} her mother and father stood back from the crowd of weeping colored. To enter their circle now would be intrusion. The flowers were placed about the open grave. The pallbearers rested the coffin amongst them. Yet, down there, in that damp red earth, they would ^{put} ~~not~~ Isaiah. Felicia looked over at Velvet. She was standing with her arms outstretched, her mouth wide as if she must shout her wounds but voice would not come. Extra, his arm about his mother, was weeping, too.

"Help them, Lord," Felicia said to herself. "Somehow, help them."

The coffin descended to its home.

"Man, that is born of woman, hath but a short time to live and is full of misery," said the minister. "He cometh up, and is cut down; he fleeth as it were a shadow.

"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.... In sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life. The Lord be with you;"

The minister closed his book.

They stood there for a while, Felicia, her father and mother. Already somehow, with the coffin lowered, the act done, a kind of healing had begun, almost a relief. Yet there was disbelief, too. Had they really witnessed the end of a man?

Slowly they walked away from the grave and into the high noon of a busy day.

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