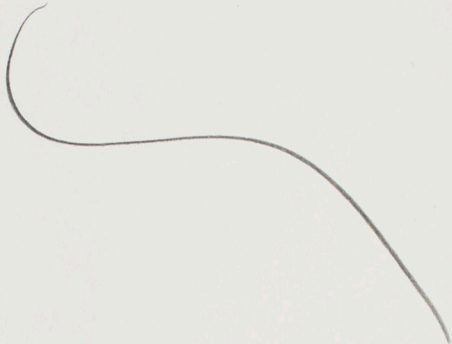


Part III



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Chapter 15

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"Oh, hello theah, Felicia."

...So she was back again. Ann Dodge with her cold New England voice and strands of dark hair falling forward on her face, was talking to Janyt Pamponassi, the music major.

They were standing in front of the main building, dead-pannedly locked in their own restrained way of communicating. Ann was wearing a belted polo coat, and Janyt, her auburn hair carelessly twisted to a bun in the back of her head, had on a short plaid coat, her hips expanding almost maternally beneath the coat and wide black skirt.

Felicia, carrying her suitcase and following a striding Miss Gates, who earlier ^{and} had (fretfully) ^{had} met her at the station (the train was an hour late), spoke first to the two girls. She never had before, but somehow now the holiday at home ~~and the perspective distance sometimes offers~~ had given her an extra dividend of confidence.

It lasted only for a second, however.

"Hellew," said Janyt Pamponassi and casually turned to Ann again.
 "As a mattah of fa-aaact¹..." she was saying.

Felicia didn't linger. She followed Miss Gates into the hall. There was an awkward moment at the door in which Miss Gates paused slightly for Felicia to manipulate ~~somehow~~ the opening of the door. But taking note of the suitcase Miss Gates herself opened the door and Felicia coweringly entered.

As usual the bulletin board outside Miss Gates's office was filled with memos. There was a notice of some former teacher's death, printed on a folder and edged in black. Beside it was a list of girls who during the month of January would usher at chapel¹---all juniors and seniors¹,¹ ~~though~~ and, below, was a typewritten notice that interviews for Smith would be held Wednesday in the assembly hall: "Dr. Mary Handley McAneny will be at the school on Wednesday and Thursday to interview all...."

Yes, she was back again. Ashton, home, Melissa, Horace Jenkins and Isaiah lying somewhere beneath a leaning pine tree, were miles and miles away.

Felicia took a firmer hold on her suitcase and began the climb up the winding staircase. She wondered if Patsy and Cannon had arrived yet, if, in fact, Patsy would ever arrive.

She entered the door to the room backward, pushing it open with her back and dragging the suitcase in behind her.

"We-yull, mah Lawd, look what's comin' in the dowah!"

It was Cannon, lying on the cot and reading an old copy of LIFE, no doubt one brought from home. She let the magazine drop over her face, covering it.

Felicia laughed. "The train was late and Miss Gates was furious!"

"Uh," said Cannon, her face still covered by the magazine. "She's been ~~my~~ tearing around all morning about something." Cannon jerked the magazine away and stood up. "Well, how are ya? D'ja have a good time? Start any little ole race riots?" She was leaning forward, her hands on Felicia's cot.

Felicia grinned at her. "Wonderful! I had a won-der-ful time!" For a second she thought of Isaiah, but Cannon wouldn't understand. "Did you?"

"Lousy!" Cannon said and plopped prone on the cot again. "The dear ~~step~~mother and I screamed at each other from the beginning to the end. Literally."

"Aw, Cannon."

"Just don't get me started. Cheeee-zus!"

(Yes, she was back again.)

Felicia glanced ~~over~~ at the cot on the other side of the room. It was neatly spread, just as it had been when Felicia left. "Hey, did she come back? Patsy?"

"Oh, God, yes," Cannon moaned.

Relief spread through Felicia. She sat on the end of her cot.

"Fat as a little pink rose," Cannon said.

Felicia turned to her. "Fat? Who?"

"Dedham, me, you!" Cannon leaned on her elbow. "Do you know I've gained thirteen pounds since I've been in this dreary institution?"

"Thirteen? You don't look like it?"

"I have. That's one of the things the ~~step~~mother and I locked up about. She had me on metrecol, green pea junk, and kept making little funnies and ~~stuff~~. Then I got to saying little funnies about her tacky clothes." She lifted her hands. "Train wreck every day!"

"They said I'd gained some, too, but everybody has, I guess. Where is she?"

"Hell, I don't know. We don't tell each other things like that." Jall. 68

"Ohhhh me," Felicia said.

"Gawd, how she suffahs!" Cannon put her hand lightly to her forehead.

"She's been suffering all morning and all afternoon."

Felicia laughed. Still, she had hoped Cannon could have gotten over Patsy by this time. She started to say so, but thought better of it,

Cannon got up from the cot and in her hoarse voice started singing: "It's just one of ~~those~~ things, one of those HORRIBLE things..." She quickly stopped. "Hey, d'ja hear about Betty Farnsworth?"

"Who?"

"Farnsworth! You know." Cannon sucked in her cheeks and put her hands to her face in imitation of Betty Farnsworth's rather gaunt face.

"No, what happened?" Betty was in Felicia's class, a slight brunette who represented the ninth grade on the Board of Student Council.

"She died!"

"She whaaaat?"

"Uh huh. About two days ago. She got meningitis and **just** died."

"Oh, Cannon!" For a moment, the same feeling of sickness and disbelief came over Felicia she had felt when she first learned about Isaiah.

"Yep," Cannon said. "Kaput, ~~morte~~, dead!"

"She wrote poems," Felicia said. In English class Betty Farnsworth sat two rows over from Felicia. Miss Peacock sometimes read her poems aloud.

"She won't any more," Cannon said.

Felicia looked at her. "I just ~~can't~~ believe it."

"Her clothes and all are still hanging up in her closet. Just think

of Dinky sitting in that room staring at that closet all the time."

"Gosh," Felicia said. Dinky was Betty Farnsworth's roommate.

"Spooky," Cannon said.

Neither of them said anything for a minute. They both were silent, looking into space, a kind of memorial to the dead girl. Then Cannon said: "Well, the king is dead, long live the king! Maybe you'll get her spot on the board."

Felicia looked at her, startled. "What board?"

"Student Council! What else?"

"Oh!" Felicia said, but inwardly she wanted to smile. Was Cannon serious?

"There's a possibility, I'll bet you will."

"No, they'll want Dinky or somebody like that."

"Dinky's too much of a nut! Eubanks likes nice little quiet gulls from Gawwwjaa that suffer through things like being accused of cheating."

Felicia wondered if that was the way everybody here thought of her. It wasn't a bad image really---a kind of long-suffering, noble, thoroughly trustworthy---

"Well, you know she does! God, that's all we need in this room, some righteous little spy going around reporting everything."

"I wouldn't be that kind!" Felicia couldn't hold back her grin any longer. Me! Felicia Whitfield! On the board!

"You'll probably end up being a Southern Mary Olmquist!" Cannon turned to the mirror. "Oh, oh!"

Patsy had strolled into the room. She had on a grey Shetland sweater, and Felicia thought she had gained weight, just over Christmas. It was very becoming, however. Her skin was clearer and somehow she looked younger than she had when she first arrived. Something hard in her face

seemed to have disappeared. "She looks so happy," Felicia thought. She wondered if Patsy had gotten a letter while she was home.

"Well, hi," Patsy said in her slightly breathy voice, and for the first time Felicia noticed Patsy had a dimple on her right cheek. "Did you just get in?"

"Uh huh," Felicia said, and grinned at her.

"Good time at home?"

"Divine." She always said "divine" when she talked to Patsy. "Did you?"

"Quiet but nice."

That was like Patsy. Quiet but nice. She always managed to make everything she did sound more interesting, as if having a "divine time" was childish, overdone, perhaps even vulgarly extravagant.

"I really wasn't much in the mood for a lot of silliness. Mummy and Gigi and I spent most of the time in New Hampshire. It was dreamily peaceful with the snow and ~~the~~"

"One of those HORRIBLE things," sang Cannon again loudly. "Adios, mad creatures of an hour!" she hit Felicia on the head with a pencil. "I'll be hanging in the attic if you need me, dearie!" She slammed the door.

"Really, that geht," said Patsy. She touched her face lightly with her slender fingers. "She's awfully cute, but sometimes she's so dreadfully ~~awfully~~ ^{juvenile}. You know?"

"I know it," Felicia said and immediately wished she hadn't. She was always agreeing with Patsy. She really didn't think that of Cannon.

Patsy took up a knitting bag from her bureau and sat in the small rocking chair. The knitting was new, a dark blue sweater.

"I didn't know you could do that," Felicia said, →

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"Oh?"

Felicia sat looking at the needles, the steel prongs busily clicking against one another. "Is that going to be for you?"

"No, this is a man's sweater."

"Is it for--?"

Patsy glanced up at her.

"Hey," Felicia said. "Didja hear from Peter? Did he write you?"

Patsy shook her head.

"Not even a Christmas card?" Felicia leaned forward and began biting the edge of her fingernail.

"Nothing. I called Hack, though."

"Your uncle, in France?" The idea of calling long distance to France was so fantastic to Felicia that for a moment she looked away. She tried to sound casual. "What did he say?"

"Peter's in Spain, but Hack had heard he was getting a divorce." She let the knitting drop to her lap as if the effort of holding it was too great.

"Oh, Patsy! That's wonderful! Then you can ^{cl-}~~---~~"
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"Why?" she asked. "He doesn't want to marry me." She closed her eyes and opened them again.

"How doya know?"

"I just know, that's all. He's in Spain with another gehl."

"How do you know?"

"Everybody knows."

"Do you know her?"

"I've met her."

"Who is she? What's she like?" Felicia bit down harder on her fingernail.

"Odd thing is ~~it~~^{it}" Patsy put her hands to the back of her neck and leaned her head back. "She's a lot like me. Older, but we really do look alike."

gothic
"And she's just staying there with him, not married or anything?"
Felicia's mouth was one round o.

"Don't be naïve."

"Oh!" Felicia closed her mouth.

Patsy was looking at her with solemn ^a grey eyes, ~~as if she were defying~~
~~her something.~~

"Gosh, I mean ~~it~~^{it}" Felicia cleared her throat. "Well, what are you gonna do now?"

Patsy raised her arms. "Forget him, forget him, forget him!"
She closed her eyes and raised her eyebrows in a gesture of complete hope-
lessness. "Simple as that."

~~Felicia dampened her lips.~~

"I never want to see another man as long as I live!" Her eyes burst open wide. "I hate him! Do you understand, I hate him!" Felicia thought she was going to cry again. "He's ruined my life!"

Felicia slowly nodded her head. "It's funny, isn't it? I mean that you believed him and everything."

"Funniest thing I ever heard. It's right down cheery."

"No, I mean ~~it~~^{it} You know. Peculiar. But aren't you glad, I mean really, that you found out what he was like before you ~~it~~^{it}"

"I just found out too late," Patsy interrupted. She was looking beyond Felicia, out the window.

"It's not too late, Patsy! You don't know everything. I'll bet you hear from him. I'll bet you will." It seemed incredible that any ~~man~~ could ever forget Patsy.

"Yes, it's too late," Patsy said again. She looked ~~back~~ at Felicia and shook her head. "One of these days I'll tell you why. I'll tell you!" She stopped short and rose from the chair.

Felicia watched her. She wondered what she meant, and she ~~started~~^s to ask her.

"But, really, you've been cute to go through this with me." She turned to Felicia and smiled, a kind of wistful smile. "You must come up and visit me this ~~Summer~~."

"Me!" Felicia got up from the cot and her suitcase fell to the floor.

"Yes, you really must. Gigi and her friends will be at the farm this ~~Summer~~ and we can ride and swim, things like that."

"Gosh," Felicia said softly. "Thank you. I would certainly like to come." Her excitement was so great she could feel her cheeks burning. She touched her face, and her fingers were cold. But what would people think of her in the north? All those rich, great people? Tonight! She would write to her mother and father tonight for permission. She told Patsy this.

"Cute," Patsy said casually. She picked up a notebook from off the mantle. "I'm going down to ~~study~~ hall for a while. See you later."

Felicia watched her leave the room. When the door shut she said aloud: "Patsy Dedham is the most wonderful person in the entire universe." And she meant it, then.

Dinky Downing was sitting alone in her room when Felicia knocked on her door and ~~came in~~^{entered}. Since the death of her roommate, Dinky had reached a kind of prominence by way of proximity to tragedy. She was thoroughly enjoying her role, though, playing the brooding roommate to the hilt.

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Actually, Felicia ~~didn't believe she had~~ ⁿ ever seen Dinky and Betty Farnsworth together except in their room and at fire drills, never just casually walking together like most roommates.

Dinky had on tweed bermuda shorts, her thin legs curled up under her like two toothpicks. She was sitting on the pillow on her cot, her head resting dramatically on the wall behind her. Felicia had decided to see what further information she could find out about the vacancy on the Student Council Board. But one had to be subtle about these things. In no way did she want to show she wanted to be appointed.

"The nights are the worst," Dinky was saying. "I **just** lie here and honestly, Felicia, I can just hear Farnsworth. You know, turning over in the bed and even whispering. She was always yacking after lights and stuff."

"Gosh, d'you guess they can put you in another room or something?"

"I've already asked Eubanks, and the only things ^r she said was for me to start acting mature. They've got some girl from California coming in tomorrow."

"You mean to room with you?"

"Uh huh. I hate people from California."

"Why?" Felicia asked. Dinky sometimes had the strangest ideas.

"I dunno. They don't have any background and they're always wearing white wool skirts, stuff like that."

"White wool skirts!" Felicia laughed.

Dinky shook her head. "I just don't like them. I went to Los Angeles once and the whole place was like one great huge Walgreen Drug Store."

"Dinky, honestly! You've got the wierdest^m---"

"Well, it's the truth."

"Maybe she's from Hollywood or some place like that."

"Uh uh. Eubanks would drop dead first. But right now I don't care who it is. Miss Gates promised me she'd have all those clothes out of here by this afternoon. Just look at them!"

The closet door was half open. Hanging there were all Farnsworth's skirts and dresses she hadn't packed for Christmas, a white blouse and wine velvet skirt (an almost necessary item for dinner at night) a couple of summer dresses and a raincoat. Somehow now the clothes had a museum quality about them, old, musty, and slightly soiled, as if they had hung there for ever, tainted by death.

Dinky got up from the cot and raised the window. "I keep the window open all the time, just to keep the place aired out. I'll probably get pneumonia and die myself." She sat back down on the bed and hugged the pillow to her.

"Death's a terrible thing," Felicia said. "I had to go to a funeral while I was home." She looked at Dinky. "Do you ever think about dying? ← I mean, really?"

"Quite often," Dinky said. "I don't think I'm going to live very long."

"You, Dinky? Why?"

"I dunno. I just have this feeling, that's all."

"Has anybody in your family ever died?"

"Uh uh."

"Not even your grandparents?"

"Nobody."

"Then why do you think you won't live long?"

"It's just this feeling," Dinky said lightly.

"Would you mind, dying I mean?"

"I don't think so." She looked at Felicia and her snub freckled nose seemed incongruous with the look of delicate self-pity in her eyes.

Felicia looked at her. "Do you believe in God and stuff?"

Dinky turned her head slightly, averting her eyes. "In God? Yeah, I think I do. Why?" She brushed her hand across her eyes.

Felicia wished she hadn't brought that up. God was embarrassing, she guessed, at least to talk out loud about, sort of like the figure she had seen stretched out on Miss Peacock's wall. "I don't know," she said. "This colored man that works for us at home died this Christmas. It was so sad. But, you know, the funeral was really kind of beautiful."

"Uh?" Dinky said, but Felicia knew she wasn't interested, not really. That was the way it was with people. You could never tell them anything, anything you felt or knew because it was boring to them. She would never be able to tell anyone what she felt about Isaiah's dying or the funeral or anything she had discovered that day.

Dinky got up and closed the window. "You can't keep it open for long. If Gates doesn't come soon I'm gonna get rid of those clothes myself!"

Felicia looked back at the closet. "I guess they'll send them home to her parents. Just imagine them getting that box, what her parents will be thinking and stuff."

Dinky looked at the closet as if she were seeing it for the first time. "Yeah," she said softly. "It's pretty pitiful. Poor old Farnsworth."

They were silent for a while, then Felicia said casually, "Who d'you guess they're going to put in her place?"

"Put where?"

"On the ~~board~~?" Felicia said. She was carefully studying Dinky's face.

"Oh, that's right! I hadn't thought of that." Dinky stretched her

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legs out, looking at them as if she were admiring them. "Shoot, I wouldn't want to be on it. Would you?"

Felicia shook her ^hhead and yawned. "Me either. Reporting everybody else, not having any friends or anything."

"I guess they'll put Langsdatter or Barbour or somebody like that on it."

"Not Langsdatter!" Felicia said.

"She's class president," Dinky said, looking almost suspiciously at Felicia, as if she were purposely reminding her of something.

"Yeah, but she's about to flunk out and Barbour's kind of blah. Don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Dinky looked away and then looked back at Felicia. "What about you?" For some reason she had an odd sneer on her face.

"Me?" Felicia forced a laugh. "No, not me! I'd be the last person on earth they'd ever appoint."

"Yeah, I guess so," Dinky said thoughtfully.

The agreement was infuriating.

"Specially rooming with who you do."

"Who? Patsy?"

"No, that crazy Cannon!" Dinky laughed. "She's the craziest girl I ever saw. Did ja hear what she said to Miss Peacock at lunch?"

"Uh uh, what?" Felicia didn't want to talk about Cannon, not now.

"I nearly died. Pedie was talking about this soldier that was on the train bothering her and everything and Cannon said, 'Don't talk to me about soldiers, they just manure all over Missouri.'" Dinky started laughing. "She meant maneuver!"

"She didn't!" Felicia said. "What did Miss Peacock saaaaay?"

"Nothing! That was what was so bad, but everybody else nearly fell

off their chairs. Cannon's crazy. She really is."

"But she's not bad, though, Dinky. She doesn't break many rules and stuff."

"Don't tell me," Dinky said. "There isn't one rule around here she hasn't broken. I'll betcha she'll be shipped before this terms over. I'll just betcha."

"People're always saying that," Felicia said. "But she just acts that way. Crazy and stuff. Really."

"Maybe so. But you just wait."

Felicia frowned. "Well, who do you guess they will appoint?"

"It won't be you or I, I'll guarantee you that! You and I won't ever get on any kind of board."

Felicia yawned again. For some reason she was infuriated with Dinky. She didn't want to be ~~linked~~ⁿ with her in any way. And it made her furious that Dinky herself coupled them together, even if in a competitive way.

Felicia stood up. "I gotta go," she said hastily. "I'll see you, hear?"

"Okay," Dinky said boredly.

"Bye."

"Bye."

Felicia closed the door when she went out. She never had before. "I'll show her! I'll show everybody!" And then she paused for a moment. What had come over her? Was she changing or something? She had never been like this before. Maybe this place was doing something to her. She wondered for a while.