

Chapter 20

It happened so suddenly, on one of the first warm nights in April. Felicia remembered the night because she also remembered standing on the balcony with Cannon before the light bell rang. The moon was racing under low, heavy skies and Cannon had said: "It's a witches night, isn't it? A good thing the Russians aren't trying to hit that moon," and Felicia hadn't said anything because the heaviness of the air was like the heaviness inside her and she didn't want to laugh. She wanted to cry.

Then sometime after midnight she was awakened. Fingers were pulling at her arm. "Felicia!" came a whisper.

It was Patsy.

"Wake up!"

The desperation behind the whisper struck Felicia first. She sat up.

"What's the matter?"

"Get up!" The fingers were pulling her wrist now.

"What's happened?"

"Come on!"

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 Felicia followed Patsy's blurred figure down the hall. She was wearing a green and white striped seersucker bathrobe, hanging loose, and she seemed to be bending slightly. Patsy opened the door where the bath was and Felicia followed her in. "What's ^h~~---~~?" A bath mat and pillow were on the floor by the tub. A used towel was thrown wadded up on the wicker bath chair. Felicia looked up at Patsy.

"It's begun," Patsy said. Her eyes were wide and she put her hand over her open, limp mouth.

Felicia stepped back and put her hand over her own mouth. They stood there this way, looking at one another, not saying anything, then Patsy said: "it's getting worse."

"What?" Felicia asked. She could scarcely form the word.

"The pains." Patsy began wiping her forehead and nonsensically shaking her left hand. Her face was swollen.

Felicia's legs went weak. "But it's not even time yet."

"I know it," Patsy said and looked wildly about her.

She's going to die, was Felicia's first thought. She's "I'm going to get somebody!" she said and her voice was more of a cry than anything else.

"No!"

Felicia looked back at Patsy and then at the pillow on the floor.

Patsy followed her eyes. "I've been here for hours," she said.

"I'm going to get somebody," Felicia said again. She was backing away.

Patsy took hold of her arm. Her fingers were wet.

"You can't have it here! Are you crazy?"

"Why can't I?"

"You just can't!" Felicia looked at the bathtub, gleaming in the night light. "What'll you do with the ~~the~~^{it} when it comes?" Her heart was hammering against her chest.

"Ohhhhhh ~~the~~^{it}" Patsy bent over. "Get the ~~the~~^{it}"

Felicia stood there, dazed, as the pain seized Patsy and seemed not to let go. When it was finished Patsy lay down on the bath mat, breathless. She was biting her lips. They were parched and a crust of blood was on the lower lip. "Get the scissors and things!"

Felicia bent over her. "Now, Patsy? Right now? Are you going to have it now?" Her voice was sobbing.

Patsy rocked from side to side. "I don't know." She was biting her lip again and then she put the pillow over her head. Felicia heard the muffled sobbing.

"What're we gonna do? What're we gonna do?" Felicia kept asking.

Patsy jerked the pillow from her face. She didn't look like herself. She looked very old.

"This afternoon," ~~she tried to say.~~ "It began this ~~the~~^{it}"

"What?"

Patsy breathed deeply and her body seemed to relax. She was nervously running her fingers over her face. "Like a cramping, I didn't even know what it was."

Felicia moved the towel from the chair and sat down. Her hands were trembling.

"I'm so thirsty," Patsy said. "Give me some water."

Felicia tried to cup her trembling hands underneath the faucet and then she remembered. "In the book," she said, "Even her voice was trembling," "It says just ~~the~~^{it}" She picked up the damp towel. "Just wet your lips. You're not supposed to drink water."

Patsy jerked the towel from Felicia's hands. "Go get the scissors and things. And there're matches in my pocketbook. You can sterilize the blades. Hurry!"

Felicia stood up. "Right now, Patsy? Is it ~~it~~?"

"I don't know. Hurry!"

Felicia kicked off her bedroom slippers and ran down the hall. She was whimpering. The scissors? The scissors? In Patsy's sewing basket. Beside the chair. She picked up the whole basket. The matches? She put the sewing basket on Patsy's cot and fumbling on top of the bureau in the dark found the pocketbook. She picked it up and holding it by its strap in one hand, picked up the sewing basket with the other hand. She glanced once at Cannon's cot. I'll wake her up! I'll wake her up! I'll ~~it~~ She didn't. She was running back down the hall. The shoe strings! Oh, God. Shoe strings. I forgot the shoe. She left the sewing basket and pocketbook in the middle of the hall, went to Patsy's closet at the end of the hall and down on her hands and knees began rummaging on the floor among the shoes. Walking shoes! God help us. Patsy's walking shoes. She ripped the string out of one shoe and without closing the door ran back down the hall.

Patsy had the pillow over her face again. The veins in her hands were swollen high, and she clutched the pillow like a fighting cat as she writhed there on the floor.

Felicia stood there, the pocketbook hanging from one hand and the sewing basket from the other. Nausea suddenly seized her.

gal 192 Patsy thrust the pillow away, and through the haze Felicia saw her face, a wild distorted mass, and then from the body came a high loud shriek, like an animal's cry.

Felicia was running. She didn't know where. She was just running,

her sobs echoing through the halls, and then she was knocking on a door, knocking and calling. The door burst open in a blaze of light. The arms of Christ stretched wide against the wall, and she fell sobbing into the arms of Miss Peacock.