

THE SEVENTEEN WIDOWS
OF SAN SOUCI

Charlotte Armstrong

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CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG



*The Seventeen Widows
of Sans Souci*

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FOR JACK


with love

*What shall I do now? What shall I do?
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?
What shall we ever do?*

—T. S. Eliot, THE WASTE LAND

The Seventeen Widows of Sans Souci

Chapter 1

 The woman in the taxi could see a brown metal plate set importantly in a stucco wall.

[SANS SOUCI]

The driver said cheerfully, in the tone of equal to equal, “I guess this is it.” He got out, banging his door.

She hunched along the slippery seat toward the curb side and still she could see no more than the head-high wall that ran severely, for all its smothering vine, some ninety feet along the sidewalk.

The driver opened her door. She put her foot out and it occurred to her that this foot, in its brown pump with medium-high heel, was still handsome. This carcass, she thought. The nerves of this carcass still vibrated to the clack and beat of the train. The face of this carcass was stiff with whatever stiffening agent it is that emanates from a Pullman car. But the carcass was sound. It was the heart, the nervous system or the soul, some inner part, that languished and had no energy to leave the cab. The carcass moved, however, and the sunlight, as if it had weight, thudded down upon her brown woolen shoulders.

Now she was able to see a utilitarian black-and-white sign hanging on an iron stand.

SANS SOUCI
FURN. HSKPG APTS.
Sgle Dble
Maid Service
ELEVATOR
Monthly Rates

She took a few steps to the corner.

Ah!

The very corner was spanned on a diagonal by a stucco arch of Spanish motif which pierced the wall. She could see through it into the—courtyard, garden, she struggled for the word—*patio*, and to the outline of the building, a two-story L-shaped affair, in the same yellowish stucco as the wall, that occupied the inner two sides of this square patch of ground. Ah, it *was* like the picture postal card!

Nona Henry discounted the differences without disillusion. The postal card had shown the structure longer, lower, brighter, newer. The postal card had exaggerated the flowers. The postal card had given an impression of a building sprawling in free space.

Actually, Sans Souci stood on a Pasadena street corner, where the streets were lined with old wooden houses, some standing back, dingy and decayed, some built forward with flat fronts that had become odd shops. There was a gas station, catercorner behind her. There was a mortuary, directly across. Still, Sans Souci *had* a patio garden, walled on two sides. And all Americans know that advertisements make everything look longer, lower, brighter, and newer than anything really is.

As advertised, beyond the arch a very wide, paved walk led diagonally across the patio to the inner angle of the L. At about its center it widened still more to a paved oval, and on the left side of this oval a raised fountain did exist. (It did not play, as it had played on the postal card. Perhaps this was not its season.) Upon the oval too, out of the way of foot traffic, there were indeed garden chairs and small metal tables, even if the chairs were not spanking new. The remainder of the square really was a garden, and flowers did bloom here in late November . . . a high tree with red in it, some low purple, some cerise. And the sun, as advertised, shone down. Just now, it slanted over the north and west wing and struck upon the fountain side of the oval, illuminating two female figures seated on a wooden bench near the fountain. To Nona Henry the walled garden, lush with unfamiliar plants, seemed, in November, romantic, exotic—in fact, charming.

The taxi driver had pulled out her luggage—the huge wardrobe suitcase, the smaller suitcase, the hatbox. Nona herself carried the little train case, together with her handbag.

She braced her body, drawing on, without premeditation, the role of the traveler, the arriving one, from afar. A woman of poised decision who had chosen to winter in Southern California. It seemed necessary to make this

impression upon those two women beside the fountain and upon anyone who might be looking down into the patio from the windows of Sans Souci.

If a part of Nona Henry saw that this was somewhat silly, nevertheless as she followed the driver who lurched off along the walk with her possessions, she held in her middle and placed her feet with precision.

The elder of the two women sitting there in the sun, a small slight person with a head of white hair, made a genteel inclination of that head in Nona's direction. It reminded Nona of her mother's "bow"; it was almost Victorian. The younger woman looked up with a dreamy smile. Nona let herself nod, with ladylike discretion.

Before the heavy glass door which was set, not catercorner but evenly in the façade of the eastward wing of Sans Souci, the driver was standing, laden and baffled. Nona Henry with a pretty exclamation reached to help him with the door, but he had freed one hand by now, and they managed it awkwardly between them. It was as if she and the driver and the baggage tumbled through in a tangle.

The lobby of Sans Souci, she perceived, was reassuringly neat and elegant. A big mirror hung on the wall to her left. Under it a low-backed green couch, flanked by pinkish chairs, sat behind a coffee table upon which a low bouquet was exactly centered. Straight ahead there was another array of chairs and small tables standing in line. Lamps were lit here, shedding a warm and generous light. The carpet was agreeably squishy.

The office—a counter of dark wood, a lattice of mailboxes, a switchboard—was to her right. The man in it was pink-skinned, smooth-faced, and talking on the telephone. She could not call across the lobby to ask him whether he knew who Nona Henry was. (This is Sans Souci. This is the place, she told herself, feeling a sudden giddiness.) She paid the driver and tipped him generously, in a nervous flurry. Then she left the heap of her things and advanced on the squishy carpet. The man put down the phone and tipped his head inquiringly. "I am Mrs. Henry?" Her voice that had intended to sound poised and confident bleated off into a question mark. "You have my check? I airtailed it . . ." She was nervous.

(Because she was cut off. The driver, linked to the train that was linked to the past, had gone. She stood alone in space and time and what if this man had kept no place for her? Then was she free! It made her dizzy.)

"Mrs. Valentine Henry," the man said in a smooth reassuring voice. "Oh yes. We have been expecting you. Did you have a pleasant train trip, Mrs. Henry?"

“Oh, very nice.” She felt herself smirk, in relief (and disappointment).

“All the way from New York,” he said admiringly. “Excuse me, ma’am?” He picked up the phone. “Rose, could you please?” He broke the connection, made another. “Kelly?” He spoke more curtly. “Luggage here.”

Then he reached for a key somewhere behind him, opened a flap in the counter, and came forth. “The houseman will bring your bags, Mrs. Henry,” he said. “I’ll take you myself. 208.” He flipped the key. “Is this your first visit to Southern California?”

“As a matter of fact, it is,” she said almost gaily. (She wanted to tell him everything. I am a woman from a place where I was known. But things have happened to me. . . .) She did not, of course, say anything of the kind.

“I am Morgan Lake,” he said.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Lake.” He had signed the letter, she realized.

“The elevator is this way.” He bowed her to the right. Nona Henry noticed, without disillusion, that the squishiness of the carpet disappeared as soon as they had passed the corner of the lobby wall. The carpet here was hard and smooth. The light lessened. Or perhaps her eyes were sun-dazzled. The elevator was only ten steps from the lobby, just beyond a flight of stairs. It was a very small self-service type. Dark within. Nothing brisk about it. It ran with a grudge up the one story.

“I suppose one could walk up?” she asked.

“Oh yes, of course, ma’am. Some of our older people, however, dislike the stairs.” He smiled. “Not many buildings have an elevator, in this area. Especially two-story buildings.” (She sensed the salesman.)

“I suppose that’s true,” she said.

They stood close in this moving enclosure. But he was a clean-smelling man, deferential, smooth, and kind.

He opened the door to the upper corridor. They came out almost exactly at the angle. Very dim. She had a sense of being buried away from all light and all air. Many people had cooked many things in Sans Souci.

Feet were thudding somewhere, quick feet, young feet.

Mr. Lake moved quickly and called around the corner. “Kelly? 208, please.”

Nona Henry saw that she was to follow him up the north wing. So she turned the corner, stretching her eyes in the dimness, holding her breath against the cookery smells. She could see daylight coming through a kind of French door at the far end of the wing. There must be a fire escape. She saw the silhouette of a man, encumbered with her luggage, who had come running up the flight of stairs and was now moving swiftly before them as if his burdens weighed nothing to him.

A door near the corner burst open behind her. Light poured through, danced past her feet. Dust seemed to puff up from the worn path in the faded carpet.

“Pick me up about seven thirty,” said some woman in a hearty husky voice. “Might as well get going early. O.K.?”

“I’ll wear my rabbit,” said another female voice in shrill cheer. “And don’t you laugh!” The speaker herself was laughing, the humorless laugh of good will.

“Listen, who’s laughing?” said the husky one. “My mink, you know . . .”

Then the voices ceased abruptly. Nona knew she had been noticed. She did not look behind. She placed her feet carefully. Yet the dark stuffy corridor was not quite so dismaying. Life, of course, was lived on the other side of the walls.

Morgan Lake led her to the last door on the right. He used the key. The man waiting with her bags was a Negro with a young smooth face atop a slim body that moved with an energy so abundant that it was more like rhythm, more like grace. The door went inward, and Nona stepped over the sill. Her eye ran into a half-wall, shoulder high. She turned right, the way that was open. She stood still.

Morgan Lake told Kelly Shane to put the bags in the bedroom. He had an eye on the motionless figure of the new tenant. A neat little body. Pretty feet. Pretty hair. Crinkling eyes. A woman who had been a very pretty girl. But one never knew quite how it would go, with the ones who had rented sight unseen. It depended, he supposed, on what they were used to. Some were pleased. This one was not going to be pleased. But he was braced for that.

She was standing just within the living room, the airless dim drab place that still smelled faintly of the paint that had been slapped on the kitchen. He moved around her and reached through the yellow-white glass curtains to open one of the windows that overlooked the patio.

“The dinette and kitchen are this way, Mrs. Henry,” he said unctuously.

She obeyed his escorting gestures. She came through the dinette, which was no more than a passageway the other side of the half-wall. She barely glanced at the apple-green table drawn bare to the window here, and the two hard apple-green chairs. She peered over the low dividing dish cupboards into the mean little kitchen, where the new cream-colored paint looked lumpy and sticky, plastered as it had been over many ancient layers. She didn’t listen to his enumeration of the equipment—stove (four blackened burners and a crooked oven door), icebox (built-in and therefore small and old and unreplaced too long), sink (and the old-fashioned tiny white tiles on the small drainboard that were uneven from sheer age). “There is an incinerator in the hall,” he told her.

But she turned away. “Isn’t it very dim?” she said in a dispirited voice.

Morgan Lake pulled out some long-practiced answers. “At this time of day,” he said gently, “yes. You are on the northeast here. Of course, in the mornings, *you* will have all the sun.”

“I see.” Her small teeth came over her lip.

“Most people prefer,” he said, “to be able to overlook the patio. It *is* pleasant.”

“Yes.”

He waited. He wondered about women. Why didn’t they realize, the ones who had made a bargain from a distance, that they were stuck with it, for a month at least? A man would, he thought. A man would either raise complete hell, and defy lawsuits—anything to get out of it—or else he would shrug and say, “I guess I’m stuck with it, but I’ll be looking around.”
Women . . .

She said with a frown, “Have you any other vacancy?”

“I don’t have another double at the moment,” he said regretfully. “The only actual vacancy in the building is a one-room apartment on the first floor. 109. It does face the west. Would you like to see it, Mrs. Henry?”

“One room?” she said dubiously.

“The bed pulls down.” His air apologized.

“Oh.”

“I ought to say that you might find the western sun a bit uncomfortable,” he murmured, “whereas here, of course, your bedroom has two exposures.”

On the corner.” She must value a corner, his tone implied. She must know that there were only so many corners. Gently he shepherded her back to the pseudo foyer and through the narrow door to the left of it.

The bedroom, he thought, was not so bad really. The twin beds were neatly spread in pink. The furniture was painted ivory. The two windows, one north, one east, gave a steady light. A quiet light.

“This is all right,” she murmured.

He opened the door to the bathroom. It was, as he well knew, in a plumbing block, exactly parallel with the kitchen, and therefore inside. He heard her breath snuffing in. “No *window*?”

“All of our baths are like this,” he told her, keeping his voice complacent. “There are some advantages.”

“I’ve seen them,” she said in that spiritless tone, “in hotels in the city . . .” She had been animated, at first, down in the lobby.

“Oh, there is plenty of ventilation, of course,” he said smoothly. “And there *is* perfect privacy.” She was staring in at the old-fashioned tiny hexagonal tiles that lay lumpy on the floor.

“I will be glad to show you the apartment downstairs, Mrs. Henry,” he said gently. “However, it does need redecorating, and so far . . . Painters are very difficult, I’m afraid. It isn’t ready at the moment.”

“I see,” she said. She turned—blindly, he knew.

He knew that Kelly was still standing in the foyer, waiting for his tip. As the woman moved, he followed and signaled Kelly with his hand, and Kelly faded. Morgan Lake himself waited for her capitulation. He knew it would come. He waited for what he had seen so often. For the female eye to begin to accommodate. For the little ideas. A picture here, she would think. A personal trinket there. Change the lamp shades. (So often they wanted to change the lamp shades.) Or she would ask for another color in a chair. Woman were resilient, he thought. They made over a place, yanking at it with their imaginations, and having done so they felt as if they had made a home. A few token material changes. A major adjustment in the mind. After this, they could put up with a good deal.

This one surprised him.

He thought he had recognized her. On the young side as widows went, but a widow, of course. And not yet too used to going it alone. Rather flustered at being far from her family or whatever. Overacting the

sophisticated traveler. Determined, now, to be shrewd. But on the whole, a lively sensible little woman who would accommodate after the usual pattern.

Nona Henry said bitterly, “This is exactly right. It suits me.”

His surprise kept him silent for half a moment but then he began to talk, for one talked past such a surprise. “You will find,” he said soothingly, “that this location is very convenient. So near the shops and theatres. On level ground, pleasant for walking. We are rather proud of our patio, too. Now,” he said to her bitterly passive face, “is there anything more I can do, Mrs. Henry? I can perhaps direct you to a market? There is a very fine market a block to the north of us. Open in the evenings.”

“Is there a restaurant?” she said dully.

“Oh yes, quite near. Small, but rather nice, I understand. About a block and a half to the east, the opposite of the street. Hunt’s is the name. It’s not *expensive* of course.”

He watched to see if his reverse emphasis would cheer her up. He had learned to say “It’s not expensive, of course,” as if he believed that the tenant naturally desired and preferred an expensive place. He never said that a place was “reasonable.” No. He had often been amused to see how they reacted with a reassuring smile, and told him, in words or otherwise, that, in spite of their normal fastidious ways, they were not at all too proud to settle this once for the convenience.

Nona Henry, however, said thank you in a tight voice. Her two hands lifted. Her handbag was still in them, and this was as if she had not yet let her anchor down. He saw, by her face, that if he did not leave at once, she might begin to weep in his presence. So he left her.

He rode down in the elevator. (The doctor had forbidden him the stairs.) He felt sad. His wife, Rose Lake, was substituting for him behind the counter.

“Thanks, hon,” he said to her. “That was 208, Mrs. Henry, who came in.”

“What’s *she* like?” said Rose grumpily. She was willowy and tall. Her dark hair was massed upon her neck in a great knot. She turned to him her brooding, unhappy, dark eyes.

“Oh, late forties—or fifties,” he said. “All right.” There were some things, he had learned, he could not say to Rose. He could not now say,

“This one puzzles me. She’s in pieces!” Rose would only stare. And he could be wrong. He had no confidence in his own insights.

Rose said now contemptuously, “Can she pay her rent? That’s the point, isn’t it?”

“I would think she could,” he answered smoothly.

“Felice Paull wants her kitchen painted,” said Rose with a *moue*.

“Yes, I know,” he groaned, trying to catch her eye with a companionable glance of despair.

“I told her,” said Rose haughtily, “that *I* never had anything to do with these things.”

He had come through the flap and stood beside her in the cramped space. “I’ll deal with her,” he said gently. “Thanks, hon.” He knew that his unshakable courtesy sometimes maddened her. So he asked quickly, to divert her mind, “Winnie’s home, is she?”

“She’s washing her hair,” said Rose sulkily. “By the way, Mrs. Rogan is talking long-distance.” She gestured at the switchboard.

“Thanks.”

“*Por nada*,” said Rose, unpleasantly.

Morgan Lake let his haunches down upon the stool with a small gusty sigh.

Rose Lake went through the nearby door of her own apartment and immediately to the open door of the bathroom where Winifred Lake stood pinning up her dark wet hair.

“Did you get all the soap out?” her mother asked suspiciously. “I could have rinsed it for you.”

“I think I got it out, Mom,” said Winnie pleasantly.

Rose came in and sat on the rim of the bathtub. Winifred worked away, with her young arms high, the young bosom lifted. The dark eyes, tilted a trifle saucily in her creamy face, communicated with themselves in the glass.

“What are you doing tonight, sweetheart?” Rose asked. “Much homework?”

“Oh, not much at all,” said Winifred, whisking a tiny wet strand around and around in her fingertips and then reaching for a clip. She actually had three chapters of pretty tough reading to do and she ought to work on her theme. But she did not tell her mother so. No sense to that. If her mother thought she had a lot of homework, her mother would nag and nag. And Winnie wouldn’t even get it done. There was this, too. If Len should call and if Winnie needed to ask if she could go to the early show, she’d *never* get out. So Winifred lied to her mother, with long ease. Just in case.

“I’m going to make chicken à la king for dinner,” her mother said. “You like that, don’t you, love?”

“Ooooh, gooody!” said Winifred.

Her mother’s face changed and looked satisfied. “Well,” Rose said. “Well, I suppose I could fuss around in the kitchen.”

She touched Winnie’s neck with cold fingers. She left her.


Winnie smiled to her image. She didn’t give an absolute damn whether they had chicken à la king or whatever. It didn’t *matter*. She began to think about what did matter. She knew what signified. Winifred Lake, age seventeen, knew the secret of life. But she kept it to herself. She would not tell her mother. Winnie wouldn’t have put it in the proverbial form but she knew very well that there was no use casting pearls before swine. Or the secret of life before a woman whose life was over.

Rose Lake went into her living room and saw by the clock that there was nothing to do in the kitchen yet. She looked about her, restlessly, but the room, all done in maple and colonial, windowed to the south upon the narrow strip of lawn, the wall, the tree, was in perfect order. She sat down on the yellow-and-brown love seat and picked up a *House Beautiful*. Her mind wasn’t on it. Her mind was searching for something Winnie ought to have. The time was coming when Winnie ought to have a car, she thought daringly. Morgan must manage somehow. Her expression settled into pleasurable yearning.

Upstairs, Nona Henry unclenched her hands. She’d had self-pity. She had wallowed in it, on that train. One more wave of woe to meet; it would subside. She could make it subside. A bulldog streak knew how to build up phrases against the woe. “I must hang up my dresses. I must bathe, change. I must find that restaurant and dine. I must go to the market.”

At the same time, a separate part of her—neither the word-forming part nor the part that was drowning in sorrow’s tide, but some other Nona that had connection with the feet and the arms—*this* wanted to kick out in a jig. This wanted to do something crazy. This would have thrown her purse, money, identification cards and all, up to the ceiling and let it crash where it would. She tightened her will to beat away the devil in the heart—this insane loose joyful feeling that was traitor to all the rest. “I must make a list,” brain said. “Breakfast things, at least. Tomorrow, I must find a bank. So much to *do*.”

Chapter 2

 Felice Paull, in all her black-clad mass, stood at the office counter; her large nearsighted brown eyes were moistly shining.

“I will speak to the owner,” Morgan Lake was saying. “Of course.” He had embanked himself behind an almost supernatural courtesy.

“It’s a disgrace,” she insisted in her deep voice. Her bushy brows were drawn fiercely horizontal. “I would like to speak to the owner personally.”

“I’m afraid that’s imposs—”

“I want to show *him* my kitchen.”

“I am here,” said Morgan Lake, “to take these things under advisement.”

“Where can I find the owner?”

Morgan smiled faintly.

“I can write him a letter, I suppose?” she said sarcastically.

“Certainly, Mrs. Paull,” he replied, most courteously. “I will see that a letter reaches him.” He kept his voice cooing-smooth, himself detached. He had fought this battle with Felice Paull before. Neither she, nor any other tenant, knew what person or persons owned Sans Souci. There was a corporate name, abstract, unrevealing.

“I have written a dozen letters,” she boomed. “I don’t believe they are read. *I* think the owner is liable.” Felice Paull was always talking about law and liability, as if she assumed that the law had been designed to extract anything she wanted from all the rest of the world. Yet for all the mass of the body, the beetling of the brows, the overbearing boom of her voice, her cow-eyes continued—somewhat to Morgan Lake’s dismay—to look hurt.

So Morgan Lake detached himself and saw and heard from afar. The big woman insisting, demanding . . . and yet pleading. He refusing, but so carefully as to sound almost as if he were saying Yes instead of No. She thought he had the power to give her what she wanted. He knew he had no such power. He was a buffer, and he must buff, but so gracefully that he offended no one. It was a miserable position. The only way he could endure it was to detach himself and view the whole thing from afar.

“Perhaps so,” he murmured now, agreeably, “but it is a question of time —” Then he saw his deliverance coming.

It wiggled through the glass door, in the shape of Ida Milbank, who spied Felice, gave out a hoot of greeting, and scurried toward them. She was, he noticed with resigned interest, carrying a package.

“Felice, are you busy? Come on up. I want to show Agnes . . .” She was a little woman in her middle sixties, with almost no chin, a prominent but somewhat shapeless nose, and frizzy gray hair. Her close-set pink-rimmed eyes showed watery blue behind her glasses. Her face fell in soft folds that seemed to have long left the bone. “I happened to be in Bullocks’ . . .”

“What now?” said Felice Paull gloomily, turning her dour brows upon her friend. “How did you get into Bullocks’ *alone*?”

“Ah, Felice, wait till you see! Only nine ninety-eight.”

Like a fuzzy little tugboat, Ida Milbank seemed to be herding the steamship mass of Felice Paull so that it turned to move majestically away.

Morgan Lake let his rear sink back upon his stool, grateful for present deliverance.

The little elevator groaned them upward and Ida Milbank tapped upon the first door to the east of it.

“Come in,” said Agnes Vaughn.

Agnes Vaughn inhabited this one-room apartment directly over the entrance to Sans Souci. She was sitting in her favorite chair which was placed so that she occupied the very angle of the building. Almost nothing could happen in the big patio below without being observed by Agnes Vaughn. She sat over the entrance like a nerve cell, a receptor.

The room was large, serving as it did for bedroom and sitting room. The pull-down bed was permanently pulled down here. Agnes Vaughn claimed it was beyond her strength to push it up neatly into its alcove where it could be hidden by double doors. So it was never hidden, but stood messily in the middle of everything. Clutter, however, was natural and pleasant to Agnes Vaughn.

She had a pug-dog face, bristling with chin hairs, and a brown-toothed grin. Her eyes were small and sly. She was seventy-four years old but her hair had not altogether turned white. She said cheerfully, “Greetings,

greetings. You mailed your letters, Felice, eh?” This was to show Felice that she had not left the building and returned without Agnes having known all about it. “What have you got there, Ida? Oh, shame . . .”

“Now, wait till you see!” Ida began to tear paper.

Felice sat down and stared before her. “*Mister Morgan Lake . . .*”

“It’s a hot pot,” cried Ida, like a child who can’t quite keep the secret long enough.

“Oh, for goodness’ sakes.” Agnes waved her small plump, rather dirty hand.

The ensuing dialogue was perfectly disjointed, yet perfectly comprehensible among the three of them.

Ida said, “It’s electric. It boils water in less than three minutes.”

Agnes said, “He won’t paint your kitchen, I suppose. Well, of course, he won’t.”

Felice said, “What do you want to boil water *for*?”

Ida said, “Your poor kitchen? That’s too bad.”

Agnes said, “Make us a cup of tea, then. I think there are cookies.”

Agnes always had cookies or cakes or candy or nuts. She almost never went anywhere but things came to her.

Felice said, “Sometimes I think Morgan Lake *is* the owner, himself.”

Ida said, “Can I unplug your toaster, Agnes?”

Agnes said, “Surely not. Or Rose Lake would let us know it, believe me. They’re in the round box, Ida. Oatmeal.”

The three of them settled down in the midst of the clutter, very cozily. When the little elevator began to move (its protests were audible, here, so near its shaft) Agnes held up her hand for silence. They heard it go down, heard the door clang, heard it come up, the door crack . . . heard soft murmuring. “Mrs. Fitz and Georgia Oliver,” pronounced Agnes. “Mrs. Fitz has been taking a sun bath for hours. Hoo!” Her laugh was derisive. “208 came. Georgia better watch out,” she said.

“When’s Glamour-boy coming?” asked Felice, who could read Agnes’ train of thought. “About due, isn’t he?”

“Oh, yes. Wonder-boy is supposed to come back right around Christmas. You see the new one?”

“What’s she like?”

Agnes, of course, knew. “She’s *young*,” said Agnes and looked at her friends with malicious satisfaction.

(Youth is dynamite. Youth is trouble. Agnes Vaughn was seventy-four. Ida Milbank was sixty-six. Felice Paull was sixty-one. Youth is relative.)

“Right across the hall from Mrs. Fitz.” Oh, Agnes foresaw trouble.

“What is her name? Hanley?” Felice inquired.

“Henly,” said Agnes, firmly. “From New York. Real smart. Nice clothes.”

But the meaning of the arrival of Nona Henry slipped away from their tongues and their minds. Felice said, “Did I tell you . . . my lawyer thinks the parking lot may be liable? There is no sign posted.”

Ida said, “Isn’t it cute?” Her hand hovered near the small electric pot for heating water very, very quickly. “I think it’s the cutest thing. And only nine ninety-eight.”

The disjointed talk proceeded. The three of them nibbled and sipped, while dark came down upon Sans Souci. Downstairs, Morgan Lake touched the switch that lit the light over the entrance, the light in the far arch, and the double line of lamps on posts that marched beside the patio walk . . . before Oppie Etting came in, at five o’clock, to relieve him at the desk.

Therefore, Agnes Vaughn was able to say (for, night and day, whenever a figure moved below, Agnes Vaughn was usually aware of it), “There she is, now!”

Felice stood up and so did Ida. From the windows over the doors, three sets of eyes watched as Nona Henry, wearing her long tweedy top coat, walked away from the lamplit patio.

“Out to dinner,” pronounced Agnes Vaughn. “She hasn’t had time to shop.” Her pug-dog face looked shrewd. Agnes was often right, up to a point. Agnes often went a point farther. “*I think she’s attractive*,” said Agnes. “And looks like she might have a little snap to her, too. Hoo! Hoo! You just watch Mrs. Fitz’s baby-boy!”

Ida Milbank’s white-rat face looked wistfully stupid.

Felice rolled her cow-eyes. There was no doubt; Agnes Vaughn had the gift of imagination.

“Oh, oh!” cried Agnes. “Oh, oh! Do you see what I see? There goes Harriet Gregory. There she goes!”

Three sets of eyes watched a second figure, thin, driving, that followed upon Nona’s footsteps.

“She’s got her hat on backwards,” said Agnes with glee. “Hoo! Hoo! She’s on the trail. Wouldn’t you think Harriet would give up? You notice Mrs. Rogan is through? Since Saturday?”

“Mrs. Rogan lasted two full weeks,” said Felice, “and that’s remarkable. Well, dinner. I think I’ve spoiled mine.”

“It won’t hurt your hips,” said Agnes. Felice took no offense. She even smiled.

“I’m just going to boil some eggs in my little pot,” said Ida rapturously. She pulled out the plug, took up the new pot by its handle, and went trotting out, omitting farewells, happily absorbed.

Felice Paull lingered. “Nine ninety-eight,” she said and shook her head.

“Oh well,” said Agnes, reaching for a cookie. “That’s Ida.”

Felice left.

Agnes, with her small feet crossed over at the ankles, looking singularly childlike, did not move. She could look down into the patio, upon light and leaf pattern, green shadow. . . . Beauty did not interest her. Dinner didn’t interest her either. She munched the cookie, and watched for something human.

Nona Henry clicked her heels along alien sidewalks. She crossed the street and, at the mortuary corner, where its pink neon sign made her wince, she crossed again. The early dark seemed uncanny to her winter-trained senses, because the dark was not cold. It was simply dark, by the calendar.

A strange youngish man, at the desk of Sans Souci, had explained to her, very thoughtfully, how to be a pedestrian in Southern California. “Stay between the white lines,” he had told her, “and *you* have the right of way. That is, they can’t mow you down *legally*, ha ha.” He had a balding head, and ears that stood out from it, a long and slightly crooked nose, and an

evident wish to please. He had handed her a postal card. "I guess Mr. Lake didn't see it in your box," he had apologized.

Nona Henry put it in her coat pocket.

A postal card, she thought with a pang.

Hunt's Restaurant was not, she agreed, what one could call "expensive." Olde Englishe had been the original intention of its *décor*, but Modern American had crept in upon it. She opened the door and the essence of French-fried potatoes assailed her. The place was a lattice of aisles, between rows of booths. The customers sat with only heads and necks showing above barriers of wood and red leather. There weren't many customers, but such as they were, they looked respectable.

Feeling somewhat reassured to see that it was a respectable place, Nona slid into a booth and began to look at the menu without enthusiasm. She was trying to decide between filet of sole (if only it were done with a light touch) and old reliable prime ribs, when a shadow fell.

"I *beg* your pardon," said a female voice, "but haven't you just moved into Sans Souci?"

"Why, yes . . ." Nona looked up, startled, and there was a woman. A woman with a long oval face that was plastered with some brand of pancake make-up, and an old-fashioned amount of rouge. A woman with eager gray eyes under plucked and penciled brows. A woman with red hair that was not natural . . . with a long broad-shouldered bony body that was angular in tension.

"I live there, too," said this woman, with the brows arched, sweetly. "My name is Harriet Gregory. I think it is only right to be neighborly, don't you?"

"Well, of course, Miss-er Gregory. I am Nona Henry."

"It's *Mrs.* Gregory," said the woman. "*May* I join you?"

"Why I'd be very glad . . ." Nona was amazed.

Harriet Gregory at once slid in beside her, as Nona shuffled over to give more room.

"Now, this is nice," the woman said. "I hate to eat alone, don't you? And your first meal . . . You *looked* lonely."

"I suppose I was," said Nona feebly. But she tried to smile because surely this woman meant well, she was really being very kind, and perhaps, perhaps . . . she was a friend-to-be . . . something to go on with.

“What are you having?” Harriet Gregory asked chummily. One hand batted at her small black hat that did not seem to settle comfortably at the forehead. “I can tell you what’s good here and what isn’t, believe me.” She snorted. There was no other word to describe the sudden intake and expulsion of air through the nostrils. “Oh, they try,” she said, “but it’s *not* high cuisine. The roast beef is fair.”

“I was thinking of having it,” said Nona. “I think I will.”

Harriet Gregory summoned the waitress with an imperious gesture. “Two prime ribs,” she said. “How do you like yours, Miss-er Henly?” She wore the air of a hostess.

“Mrs. Henry,” said Nona. “Medium rare, if you please.”

“Yes. And mine well done,” said Harriet, “and I mean it. *Please.*” Her eyes closed in a gesture of long-suffering.

The waitress took notes, stolidly.

“And don’t put any goo on *my* baked potato,” said Harriet. “*Please.*”

“No, ma’am.” The waitress’s voice held a note of dull resignation.

Ordering the meal took a long time because there was no single item that was not subjected to revision by Harriet Gregory toward her individual taste. Nona began to feel ashamed. Nona began to say to the waitress, in apologetic tones, that, as far as she was concerned, it didn’t matter.

When the ordering was at last over, Nona asked with curiosity, “Do you eat here often?”

“Oh, we all do,” said Harriet Gregory. “It’s the nearest decent place and you do get tired of cooking for yourself.”

Nona let her lashes wag. “Is there anyone else from Sans Souci in here now?” A part of her called this curiosity childish.

“No, no. Oh, there’s Mrs. Rogan . . .” Harriet shrugged.

“Which is she?”

“The old woman in the corner,” said Harriet Gregory in a contemptuous tone. “She’s . . . odd.” The implication was that no one who was not odd noticed anyone who was. And of course Nona Henry was not odd.

Nona found herself peering to spot an old woman in a corner, but before she could find one, Harriet was speaking.

“I can’t tell you,” said she with a quick and almost gruesome contortion of her painted mouth that was meant to be a wry and charming smile, “—I can’t tell you how nice it is to see somebody young moving in.”

“Young!” said Nona in genuine surprise. “I’d hardly say that about me. I am a grandmother.”

“Are you really?” said Harriet. “I can hardly believe it. Pardon me for asking a personal question but are you a widow, Mrs. Henry?”

“Yes,” said Nona quietly, not to arouse the sleeping pain.

She looked up in a moment because there had been no response to her admission. No “Oh, I’m so sorry.” No comment. Her seat companion had clenched her long jaw and was staring, not seeing.

“We are seventeen,” intoned Harriet Gregory.

“What do you . . . ?”

“Seventeen,” said Harriet Gregory crooningly. “It is so strange. We always come back to seventeen.”

“Seventeen what?” Nona asked with asperity born of sudden fright.

“Seventeen widows.”

“I don’t understand—”

“There are seventeen widows in Sans Souci.”

Nona felt shocked. Oh Lord, oh Lord, what have I got myself into? she cried in her mind. “You can’t mean that,” she chided aloud, aghast.

“Oh, yes,” said Harriet Gregory. “Since Jessie More—she was in 208 where you are—since Jessie left to be near her daughter . . .” The voice was dreary. “And since poor Rhoda Gorman is . . . gone.” Her eyes flashed and Nona knew, divined, was intuitively certain, that this Rhoda-whomever was dead-gone—and also that Harriet Gregory would never let the word “death” or any of its derivatives past her terrified lips. “But Tess Rogan came two weeks ago, and now you come and we are seventeen again.”

“Seventeen widows!” Nona blinked. “How many apartments are there?”

“Only nineteen,” said Harriet promptly, “not counting, of course, Morgan Lake’s private apartment, which I’ve never seen but they say—”

“Are there no *families*?” interrupted Nona.

“The Lakes,” said Harriet. Her grimace held pity.

“No *children!*”

“The Lakes have a girl in high school.”

“No . . . no *men!*”

“Well, there is Mr. Avery Patrick.”

“Who is he?”

“They say he does sleep in his apartment at night but nobody ever sees him around. I don’t know why he lives at Sans Souci. Nobody knows.” Harriet relished the mystery.

“Seventeen *widows?*” said Nona. “But that’s . . . that’s . . . very strange.”

“That’s *nothing!*” said Harriet Gregory. “I know buildings with more widows than that in them. Sans Souci is very small, you know. The owners are holding it for the sake of the land.”

“The land?”

“Of course. Land here is very valuable, and especially a corner. They will get a fabulous price for it, someday. Meanwhile, they let it run down . . . as I guess you can tell . . .”

Nona swallowed.

“Of course that’s what they say,” continued Harriet. “I don’t know anything about real estate. I do know it’s hard to get anything *done*. Nobody knows who the owners *are*, you see.”

Nona felt battered about by surprises.

“Of course, the rent is reasonable,” said Harriet encouragingly, “and the location . . . oh, you’ll like it.” Her eyes glistened. “Especially if you make friends. Friends make all the difference. Sans Souci is not so bad really. Do you know Southern California, Mrs. Henry? Or may I say ‘Nona’?”

Nona regarded the arching brows helplessly. “Please do,” she said mechanically. “This part of the world is all new to me.”

“Oh then,” cried Harriet, “you must let me show you . . .”

The food came and Nona ate it, listening meanwhile to a long list of sights to see. Harriet would take Nona to a Mission. No trouble. Harriet had a car. It wasn’t much. But it would get them around. Harriet would take Nona to Hollywood. Of course there was nothing to see really, but everyone always wanted to go. Nona kept making grateful little protests, deploring the effort, but not refusing the invitations. For surely this woman meant well,

was being very friendly. Prospects were opening to Nona's bewildered imagination. Sight-seeing? Well, that filled time. That would help fill a letter. Something to write home about. (The postal card lay in her coat pocket.)

Her dinner companion had a difficult voice. It was sometimes too sweet, sometimes almost strangled with tension and excitement. It went on and on.

Nona ate daintily, and as slowly as she could, the mediocre food. She did not wish to consume her meal too soon, for her companion was talking so much that she was scarcely eating at all.

Meanwhile people came and went in the restaurant, without Nona's attention, for she took care to listen politely.

Suddenly Harriet stopped in the middle of a sentence. Nona could not guess why until she saw that Harriet's silence was related to the movement of a certain woman who had just risen from a corner table and was about to walk their way.

This woman was tall, and not too bulky. In fact, her dark red coat hung with a certain swagger and she moved lithely. She had white hair, cut close to a round head. Her face was short-chinned, like Nona's own, with rather a merry look to the mouth and jaw.

She approached. Her blue-gray eyes cast a glance to Harriet Gregory. "Good evening," she said.

"Oh, hello," said Harriet with that grimace. Harriet said no more and the woman did not pause. Her eyes had time to meet Nona's briefly, and then she had walked past.

"That's Tess Rogan," said Harriet with a smoldering look. "She's seventy-one!"

Nona gasped. The woman had given no such impression.


"See what I mean?" cried Harriet triumphantly. "There's you and me and Georgia Oliver and, well . . . maybe Daisy Robinson, who are still young enough to navigate . . . fairly well. Everybody else in the place is *doddering!*"

Nona only half-heard. "You say she is odd?" she asked. Those gray-blue eyes had sent a shiver through her. Nona Henry had been sitting properly, poised and bright, woman-in-restaurant-dining-with-stranger . . . and then that look had shaken her, ripped at her. She had felt like pulling the tablecloth, and all the dishes with it, off the table. It was that crazy

feeling. . . . Why? Was it something odd about the woman that had roused up Nona's personal imp, her little enemy, that frightened her these days?

"Tess Rogan?" Harriet made a slashing motion of her hand. "Nobody knows who she is. I tried to be friendly. I mean, I am not a snob. But she says odd things. You can't get close to her." Harriet's eyes glistened approvingly upon Nona Henry. "Not of *our* world . . . I hate to put it this way, but she's common. She tells lies," said Harriet Gregory. Nona blinked. "Oh yes, but most of the women at Sans Souci are ladies. It's a good address," said Harriet Gregory with satisfaction.

Chapter 3

 When the meal was over, and each woman had paid for her own with an absent-minded air, as if money scarcely existed, Harriet Gregory insisted upon showing Nona Henry the market. They walked the short distance to a bright and humming place where every kind of food on earth, and many things besides, seemed spread out in a vast horizontal labyrinth. All one had to do was pluck these things from a convenient shelf, put them into one's metal cart, and then pay for them. Nona was dazzled by the sight of so much. She tried to organize her thoughts, to find and select what she would need for breakfast, possibly for lunch, and, in addition, certain inevitable staples. But Harriet Gregory began to trip off into distant aisles and return with prize packages, earnestly recommended.

Raisin bread? Nona didn't care for raisin bread and said so gently.

Minestrone? Oh, excellent, for something in a can. Nona didn't fancy the look of it.

"You *must* try this cheese! It's delicious!"

Nona found herself—tired as she was, and emotionally worn, disorganized, and anxious not to offend—beginning to accept at least some of Harriet's offerings. It seemed necessary. The woman was so eager.

But when at last they staggered out, Harriet was carrying a large brown bag and Nona was carrying another even larger. The bags were heavy.

Outside, now, suddenly, a breeze was blowing. Nona Henry would have made nothing of the rattling of leaves, the dancing of the dust, or she might even have welcomed the cooling touch on her brow, but Harriet Gregory reacted as if it had been a hurricane. So unusual, she opined. Something ominous, she implied by the hunching of her shoulders, the ducking of her head. Possibly dangerous. So Nona found herself, infected by the same feeling, huddling and hurtling toward the safety of Sans Souci.

They panted across the street to the corner where a light shone in the top of the Spanish arch. Just as they reached that curb Nona became aware of a figure standing quite still on the sidewalk, just on the rim of the lights' circle. Harriet Gregory saw it too, and stopped moving with a wrench of her

nerves that reverberated upon Nona's own. "Is anything wrong?" croaked Harriet.

The figure wore a long coat which was reddish where the light could touch it. She had a close-cropped white head and although her face was shadowed and invisible one could tell that it tilted upward. "I'm just sampling the wind," said Tess Rogan placidly.

Harriet ducked her head and scuttled past into the arch. Nona—feeling, again, that shiver, as of something strange—followed as if a demon bit at her heels. They rushed along the patio walk. The wind shook the treetops: they were in the bottom of a box, and all the air seemed to be drawn upward into the turbulence. Nona, watching her own footing, could see Harriet's feet and realized that Harriet was one of those women whose ankles seemed to rise from the middle of the foot. The heels protruded. Nona felt a wash of distaste that turned into a sense of wrongness. What was so wrong?

They burst through the glass door and here was no wind and no weather, but bright still warm air and the stiff order of the little lobby and Oppie Etting behind the desk, agreeing at once that the world outside was wild, tonight.

Surely, thought Nona, no woman—and certainly no woman seventy-one years of age—stands alone at night on a street corner. It is not done! It is so odd as to be *wrong*. The old woman in the red coat must be *very* odd. Nona shivered.

"May I make a suggestion?" said Harriet Gregory for the seventh time.

"What is it?" said Nona mildly.

"*This* cupboard is the most convenient for your canned goods. You don't want to stoop every time . . ."

"I think I'll arrange the rest of this in the morning," said Nona suddenly. Her head was beginning to ache.

Harriet Gregory lived on the first floor but Harriet had insisted upon carrying the grocery bag. Harriet had come up. Harriet was here. Harriet was very kind, but she had no sense of limit. There was no end. Nona looked around her kitchen, where all but the perishables were dumped upon the tiny counter. (All the too much she'd bought.) She said, with the type of sweetness that asks for a no, "I could make a cup of coffee. Would you like one, Mrs. Gregory?"

“Oh, no,” said Harriet promptly. “No, don’t bother. I’ll just have a cigarette. And *please* call me Harriet?”

She went into the living room and sat down. Nona followed and sat down helplessly.

“Do you mind a suggestion?” said Harriet. “Jessie More used to have her sofa drawn right across the windows. It was quite attractive.”

“Was it?” murmured Nona.

“I can’t do that. I have only the one room, you see, and the bed comes down. A separate bedroom is so nice.”

“Yes.”

“You must come see *my* house.”

“Thank you,” said Nona.

“I wish *I* could have afforded this,” said Harriet with a grimace. “This is very nice. Across from Mrs. Fitz, too.”

“Mrs. Fitz?” Nona had reduced herself to echoes.

“It’s Mrs. Fitzgibbon, of course. But everybody calls her Mrs. Fitz. Oh, she is just a lovely, lovely person! Very fine family. Good blood, you know, *tells*.” Harriet’s eyes glistened. “Her husband was a judge in New York. A very important man.”

“A widow?” said Nona.

Harriet didn’t even hear. She was embarked upon a flood of talk. “There are two Fitzgibbon sons,” she said. “One I haven’t seen but he is a very successful attorney in San Francisco. The other one is a foreign correspondent! If you can imagine! What experiences! All over the world!! And the sophistication. I am *not* a snob but I do like to see a man who has a certain something . . .”

Nona said, “Um.”

“He was here last summer,” announced Harriet. “As a matter of fact we have had a romance. He is engaged to Georgia Oliver. You’ll meet Georgia. She is a lovely, lovely girl. That is to say, she’s about our age.” Harriet snorted.

“A widow?” murmured Nona. She had a vision of Harriet wound up, pierced and crisscrossed by all the interrelationships, all the news, all the

gossip of Sans Souci . . . and of herself pinned here to listen to all of it. Tonight.

“Oh yes. But Georgia, of course, is marrying again. She’s so devoted to Mrs. Fitz. So nice to see that. I’m happy for them both. Although I, of course, could *never* marry again.” Harriet Gregory’s face lost its piety and took on a fanatical look.

“My husband . . .” she began.

She rattled on. She talked as if she had thirsted so to talk that the thirst was unquenchable. She spilled out her version of her life. Dick Gregory had been so talented, so misunderstood. He had wanted to write. Oh yes. Harriet had his manuscripts. She never showed them to anyone, she said fiercely (and Nona wondered). He had been denied his true career. Harriet would keep his manuscripts for the children. Oh yes, a son—a bachelor. A fine young man. Only thirty. Time enough. A daughter, too. Eve was a career girl, unmarried. Both so busy, so very very busy. Devoted of course—but busy. In New York. Oh, it *was* far. Harriet put up with life alone out here on the coast for the sake of the climate and the easy living. But to be so far from her devoted children was *not* easy. And Harriet had found no truly understanding friend. A friend made all the difference . . . Harriet always said. Two women could go where one could not. Didn’t Nona think so? And Harriet had this little old car . . . “You and I,” she said.

Nona found herself turning cold.

And Harriet’s hide was not too thick to perceive this. Harriet said, immediately, “I’ve been talking about myself. What did *your* husband do?” She contorted her mouth. It was not a smile. It was an announcement of Harriet’s intention to appear to be smiling.

“He was in business,” murmured Nona. She always said this, vaguely. “In Poughkeepsie, New York.”

“Oh, I know where that is. And do *you* have children?”

“I have a married daughter,” Nona said, “with a baby granddaughter.” The sore and weary heart was wishing to talk, she discovered with some surprise. “And I have another little grandchild . . .”

“Oh, *how* nice!” gushed Harriet Gregory. And then talked on. Harriet didn’t wait to hear the straight of it. Harriet assumed this was simple, although it was not. “May I make a suggestion?” gushed Harriet. “You will be here for the winter, at least? Well, I have been here six years. There are

some . . . mistakes. I would suggest that you be a little bit careful about Agnes Vaughn.”

“Who?” said Nona, politeness just barely disguising her frustration.

“Well,” said Harriet, “Agnes Vaughn is just impossible, actually. There are three of them. I call them the Unholy Three . . .” Harriet began to snort. Oh, that was a rum bunch, she told Nona. Agnes Vaughn, who was pushing seventy-five, was an old spider, that’s what she was. And just couldn’t bear the fact that Ursula Fitzgibbon was beloved by all. And higher *class*. Well, you couldn’t deny it. There was that Ida Milbank, a little idiot of a woman, who trotted back and forth bearing tales . . . and there was Felice Paull and wait till Nona saw *her*. A mammoth! Always starting trouble.

Harriet was getting more and more confidential, excited, and malicious.

Oh what do I care? thought Nona. I wish she’d go. What do I care about this nest of widows?

Still, there was one flare of curiosity and she might as well gratify it. “Who has the angle apartment on this floor?” she asked bluntly, remembering that flood of light from the opening door and the two voices, the sense of life and gaiety.

“Bettina Goodenough,” said Harriet, in a grudging tone. “She and Sarah Lee Cunneen, they *go* a lot. Cards, you know, and that sort of thing.” Harriet was contemptuous.

But Nona received enlightenment. Nona *knew* that, whoever and whatever these women were, they had not wanted to play cards with Harriet Gregory. By now Nona knew that Harriet was not talking kindly to inform. Harriet was talking from her own need to talk. Harriet had not approached Nona with pity for Nona’s loneliness. She was a snobbish, opinionated, shallow *pest*—and this was both the cause and the effect of Harriet’s own desperate loneliness.

But I can’t have this, Nona thought, in panic. I can’t *let* her leech onto me. She’s too intrusive. I can’t have it!

“Oh, we have all kinds in Sans Souci,” Harriet was saying, with bright eyes. “*All* kinds, believe me. A hermit. An alcoholic, we *think*. I can tell you whom to avoid. Your refinement . . . I mean, that’s something that *shows*, Nona. I know *you* would have perfect taste . . . but, may I make a suggestion?”

“Do you know,” said Nona, “I am very tired, Harriet. I wonder if you’ll excuse me.”

She saw the brightness in Harriet’s gray eyes begin to dim.

“I’ve had a long train trip and a long day. You have been so kind . . .” Nona rose. It was a ruthless thing to do. Nona knew it, and did it, even so.

“I know I talk too much,” said Harriet cravenly.

“Oh no, please . . . I have enjoyed it,” said Nona. “It’s just that I am so tired and my head aches a bit. Please forgive me.”

“That’s quite all right.” Harriet rose. “Tomorrow . . . ?” she began.

“Oh, I have so many things to get settled tomorrow,” said Nona prettily.

The sickening thing was that Harriet not only knew she was being rejected, she was used to it. She was not even surprised. “Some other time,” she said dully. She shrank back upon her own skeleton.

“Oh yes, thank you.” Nona believed that, in her heart, she was truly sorry for this frantically lonely woman who flattered and gossiped, intruded and wanted to grasp, but must not be let in, because she would be a leech, she would always go too far, she would devour. . . .

When Harriet had gone, Nona stood in the shabby lifeless quiet of this apartment. Tomorrow, tomorrow she must try to make it feel like some kind of home. But she *must* shy away from Harriet Gregory. Loneliness was not as desperate as that, was it? No. Lord help me, prayed Nona. Seventeen widows and I am one.

The mind jumped away from the emotion. One might learn. Seventeen widows, and all kinds, the mind noted. In cold blood, one could learn a good deal in this place.

The third part, the imp in her, said, Or do as you please? As you damn please and the hell with them? Who knows you? Who cares? You are free!

I must sleep, said common sense. I am too tired. After a good night’s sleep, I’ll feel better.

Ralph, the gardener at Sans Souci, a bowlegged man with a sun-beaten head, a hot eye, a bitter heart, had more than once spat out his bitterness to Morgan Lake. Damn women, taking it easy on the sweat of their dead husbands! Where were the husbands? Tell Ralph that. They’re in their

graves, that's where! Worked hard all their lives. Who got the money? Bunch of useless women. Why should a man kill himself, cut short his life so that some old bag of a woman could floss around and do nothing, eat, enjoy herself? The injustice of it made Ralph sick! Rich, lazy women!

Morgan Lake, whose smooth façade protected an uncomfortably compassionate heart, could not see the women quite this way himself. It was true that the seventeen widows of Sans Souci were, none of them, poverty-stricken. Had they been, thought Morgan, they would have been scrounging for a living which would have given them something to bite into. But the seventeen widows were not rich, either (with the possible exception of one who was, at least, well off). Had they been really rich they might have had power, for whims or projects, for good or evil. As it was, they were in the middle. They had to be frugal; and they were respectable. It did not leave much scope.

Sans Souci suited them. The climate was easy, the location was convenient, the dwelling units were adequate, the rent was not exorbitant, the address was respectable. Sans Souci means without worry or care.

As the building settled for one more night, and the wind went down, the stars steadied, the leaves stilled and breathed and grew in the deserted patio, most of the lights went out in Sans Souci. Some of the widows, asleep, felt neither worry nor care.

But, in 101, Marie Gardner knelt on the floor with her arms flung out upon her bed and shivered and prayed because she was afraid of she knew not what, nor had she ever known.

In 207 (the desirable angle apartment) Bettina Goodenough knew she ought to be able to manage better, and lay sighing, adding, subtracting, turning, twisting. . . .

In 206, Kitty Forrest lay awake wondering if she had better just go to the doctor and be rid of this notion. But what if he were to say that she had it? The scourge, the ultimate horror, the haunter of women! Better to be haunted than to *know*?

In 205, Elna Ames knew pain, and knew she had it, and thought about death, and night was no different from day.

The seventeen widows of Sans Souci were somewhat haunted by worry and care. The specter of death haunted them, and the specter of pain. The specter of fear in many guises. And the specter of pride, lest they trouble

anyone,—and the specter of loneliness, lest they trouble no one and be forgotten.

Morgan Lake, the manager of Sans Souci, knew these things and he was not without worry and care. Abed, he was always acutely aware of the fact that after one A.M. all phone calls, in or out, were going to ring their trouble in his ear. He could also imagine trouble that would never get to the telephone, and this was worse. He was worried about Leila Hull, in 203. The owner had said the hell with it, he'd take the risk. But Morgan Lake was taking the risk: it slept with him. While Rose, his wife, breathed deep in the other bed, looking happier than she ever looked by day. Morgan Lake turned over. A phrase came mocking into his head, "No bed of Rose's."

In 208, Nona Henry lay on her back and tried to close her eyes against the oddments of light that moved on this unfamiliar ceiling, and her senses against the alien smell of this linen, and her brain against the incursion of memories. But the scenes of her life were flapping relentlessly through her mind like the pages of a book when a strong thumb riffles their edges.

Beginning with marriage and the blazing young ideas. The setbacks and squelches that dimmed those down. The great decision, after Millicent was born, when Nona had left off being the Bohemian New Yorker on the fringes of the arts, and Val had "faced the facts" and left off trying to get ahead in the technical side of the legitimate theatre, and put their meager savings daringly (cravenly?) into that motion-picture house in Poughkeepsie. The great move away from the city.

The house, then. Dodie born. The slow building up to the "better" house, the bank account, security—all steady plugging punctuated by the excitements of the ordinary—and every human step lived a second and a third time in the girls. First words, schools, dates, colleges, up to Millicent's wedding. Millicent's baby. Millicent's death. This page flipped over fast and covered the ineradicable woe.

Dodie's wedding. Dodie's baby. (Nona's first dental plate.) Val's operation.

Last year! Now the pages flipped frantically. Val's operation. The kidding when it was over. The day the doctor's words were 75 per cent hopeful and his eyes 75 per cent the other way. Ah, that hospital and the long-endured sequence. The kidding shallower every day, the patience deepening. Patience getting into the bones. Patience that ended in simple waiting for an end.

Dodie asking something about the bonds, something to do with her husband's, Si's, new business and a time element. Dodie's saying that Dad had said . . . Nona replying, superstitiously, that she would *not* speak of bonds or money or any material things when nothing mattered now, *nothing*, except for Dad to be well again! Superstitiously not putting before her daughter the flat news that Dad would never be well.

Then the sorrow, what patience waited for . . . and the relief of patience.

The speaking about money, too soon, and she numb and not interested. The lawyer, the safe-deposit box, the bonds gone and her son-in-law's personal note in their place. But, of course, if that had been Dad's promise . . . Nona believed them, although vaguely bewildered. . . .

She had bumbled about that empty house.

The loss of it. Almost as much a shock as the loss of Val. The superhighway had reached out suddenly, to obliterate that house, their "better" house, where Val's hands, Val's tastes, Val's mind, had left memorials, and where Val's routine had lived after him to guide Nona through a day.

Gone. She had packed her life in a thousand pieces into trunks and boxes.

Nona, moving into Dodie and Si's house temporarily. Trying to be cheerful there, and kind and helpful, and not intrusive while she decided what she would do. Not seeing her own old friends, not wishing to see them, two by two.

The awful night the young parents had left Nona sitting with the baby! She had been rigid with terror on the living-room couch, mumbling the words of a book aloud to make her panic-stricken mind stay on them.

Nona had found that she no longer felt like a woman over fifty, mature and capable, calm with the experience of the years. She had wanted to run! She had wanted to scream for somebody to come!

She had been ashamed and frightened, and she had not spoken of the panic to the kids.

Another baby-sitting night, and worse. Her trembling. Her sudden sweating relief when she had heard the car come in. But this would not do! It was impossible! Could not be endured, or risked—or admitted, either. Where would she go, then?

Little apartment? Mother available for baby-sitting, nearby in the small city? Nona had begun to feel the imp within herself, something rising up that wanted to smash. She found herself, one day, wanting to drop one of Dodie's ruby goblets. She was afraid that her will would not hold. She might do something crazy!

She'd had to avoid doing things for the darling baby, Nan, whom she adored. Because her hands would shake, and she would feel danger, projected out of herself, and if she were to hurt the baby she would have to die.

Just before Thanksgiving Nona had gone to bed for three days; perhaps she needed a complete rest. On the fourth day, she had known what a nuisance and a burden she was being in her daughter's house. And this was not to be borne! This could not be!

So she'd wept, and while weeping, remembered, and crept out of bed to rummage through papers for a picture postal card that had freakishly survived. A friend had written on it: *Enjoying trip so much. California is delightful! See you soon.*

Had written airmail, to the address under the picture.

Received, airmail, the answer with rates and tentative reservation.

Mailed her check, looked up the trains, told the children, on Thanksgiving night.

Dodie had looked startled (and for a flash, thanksgiving?) and then she had wept from the surprise of it.

"Oh, cheer up, Dodie," Nona had said. "I can afford it, honey."

She had a widow's allowance of two hundred fifty dollars a month, pending settlement of Val's estate. She was not an executrix. She had that twelve hundred in her own savings account. "Can't I, Silas?" she had said, somewhat saucily.

Her son-in-law had felt the tiny dagger in the tone. "Of course, Mother." Young, male, stern, proud. "Maybe it's not a bad idea for you to go," he had said quietly.

"It's a *good* idea," Nona had said. "I'll skip the winter—fancy that! There's no reason not to go. Really, I think I need the chance to pull myself together."

They had been kind and helpful.

Now, here she was (and the imp with her) and she was not pulled together yet. Dodie had written on her postal card: *Dear Mother. Welcome to California. We miss you already. Especially the baby. Please have fun. Much love, Dodie and Si.*


How much love, thought Nona, have I, that *I* could have gone to pieces so?

It was my loss, she explained to herself quickly. Val, and the house too, and *all* the habits of our life together—everything swept away, too fast.

Yes, Val had been her keel and her steadiness. She just didn't know, yet, how to get along without him. But she would learn.

Nona began to doze. In the back of her life, the front of the book, a page stirred. Once upon a time she had gotten along without Val. Nona O'Connor had been a girl. Someone, in herself. Long ago.

Chapter 4

 Mr. Avery Patrick's day was out of sync, beginning as it did just before noon and ending long after midnight. In what was the morning to him, he cautiously left Apartment 102 and crossed to tap on the door of 103. Rose Lake got up from her luncheon table to open the door to him.

103, the manager's apartment, was like all the rest as one entered, but then it ranged narrowly far along the south side of the east wing. Rose Lake often pointed out how the extension of the lobby indented their space and made Winnie's bedroom so pitifully small. When she complained of this, Morgan Lake only said patiently that they were lucky to have two bedrooms. Rose never complained to Avery Patrick.

Avery Patrick was Morgan Lake's first cousin, and his employer and the secret owner of Sans Souci. He lived—if what he did there could be called living—in 102, a one-room apartment just off the lobby, whose windows faced—if facing was the word for the perpetually drawn blinds—the patio. He slept there. He kept no food there. He kept liquor. He did not use the stove. He used the ice cubes. Mindy Shane, the housekeeper, took care to do his room herself and she also took his laundry home. All this suited Avery. If he had very little private life, what he did have was absolutely private.

He never spoke to the widows. He went across the lobby in a fast nervous scuttle, and they had learned; they did not greet him any more. They did not know and he had forbidden Morgan Lake, on pain of dismissal, to let them know that he was their landlord.

Avery Patrick was a man of fifty-one, divorced long since, with one child, a daughter who lived in Pennsylvania with her mother. He was the kind of man who had to drive a Cadillac and did so.

The basement garage of Sans Souci was entered by a drive that pitched violently down from the street at the middle of the end of the east wing, and Avery's long car could barely scrape over the sharp lip at the top and barely keep traction when it came to the equally sharp reverse angle at the bottom. But Avery put up with this. It was as if he went to ground, he burrowed here.

Avery Patrick was a member of the vulturelike fringe of the motion-picture industry, one of those with a thousand schemes for making money out of other people's talents. He was "around" by day. His home burrow was

nobody's affair. In fact, he feared that were the inhabitants of Beverly Hills or Bel Air to discover *where* he holed up when he disappeared, he'd be "dead."

He lived in Sans Souci because this cost him almost nothing. He had inherited the building and he held on to it. But he wasted little attention on it, and as little cash-money as possible.

Morgan Lake was supposed to manage it. Morgan Lake had a bum ticker and there were kinds of jobs he could not wisely attempt. So Avery Patrick had installed him here—from kindness and from the obligation of the blood, the way Avery saw it—and Avery didn't give a damn what Morgan did so long as Avery wasn't bothered too much. Morgan Lake was his buffer.

Rose Lake took Avery to the dinette table and poured him some coffee.

To her husband, Rose complained endlessly about having to live in this awful place, about Winnie's having to grow up in this miserable atmosphere, no kind of home for a young girl! Rose hated Sans Souci. She affected to be involved with its management no more than was absolutely inescapable. She despised all the widows, as if they were to blame for having been left alone, for having grown older, for being what they were. She reproached Morgan for not taking her and Winnie out of here, as if Morgan were to blame for his damaged heart and his limitations.

Yet to Avery Patrick, Rose sweetly deferred. She was even just a bit flirtatious. Avery, however, was a wise and nervous bird. He had been entangled, in his day, and needed no more of that. He well knew how to keep a distance.

Winnie Lake was home for lunch today, something unusual.

Avery Patrick, it seemed, had stopped in to ask Morgan when he was going to rent 109. "How about that little idea?"

At once, Morgan Lake felt miserably unsure of himself. He simply could not trust his little ideas. They came to him. They kept coming. But he had lost his confidence long ago, soon after he married Rose.

"You ought to get rid of Agnes Vaughn," said Rose, but without force.

Avery Patrick didn't even take note of her remark. "How about this shuffle?" he pressed Morgan. "Frankly, I forget. What was it, again?"

Morgan did not like himself, at the moment. He did not like the sensation of moving people about as if they were pawns. If there was any

power in his little idea he didn't want the power. He hated the very thought of "handling" people. (Which he did for his living.)

"If Ida Milbank defaults again, on the first of December," he explained more coldly than he felt, "that will mean I can talk turkey to her relatives. They know. I've already talked to the son. And she's been buying . . ."

"So foolish . . ." Rose said.

Poor Ida Milbank, foolish? thought Morgan Lake. But she was just a pack rat, really. She was addicted to gadgets. Her rooms were full of them, yet she could not resist the sight of another household device. It was like a disease with her. But it was all she had.

"If she can't stop buying," Morgan said, "the son told me that they'll have to move her into a less expensive apartment. Now, if *she* goes into 109, that will stop Agnes Vaughn." Well, there it was. His little idea. The manipulation of personalities.

"I hope you know what you're talking about," said Avery Patrick sullenly. He was a manipulator in his own field but he hated hearing about the widows.

"The point is this," said Morgan. "Agnes Vaughn could put the frost on 109. She's got it into her . . . imagination," he used the substitute for "head" wryly, "that Rhoda Gorman suicided. It's not true, but Agnes Vaughn would rather it were, so . . ." He made a helpless gesture. "Now, if we rent 109 to some stranger, Mrs. Vaughn will make life miserable for whoever it is. We'll have superstitions. It will be haunted or unlucky. Agnes Vaughn will have fun—but she won't do that to Ida Milbank."

"But then," objected Avery Patrick, "we'll have to paint 111."

"Right," said Morgan, "and do some work on the oven, in there. Mrs. Milbank has so many different kinds of electric stoves, she doesn't use it. But it's a mess. However, we can rent the two rooms easily. At better profit. The painters can do both places while they are here. Makes it cheaper. You have to paint on occasion . . ."

Avery looked gloomy. "You got the painters lined up?"

"Yes. I thought I'd let Ida Milbank choose her own colors. Be a way to make her happy."

Rose said, "Why bother to make her happy?" She smiled at Avery. "If she can't pay the rent on two rooms she'll have to go to the one-room. Simple enough."

But Avery Patrick well understood the value of being indirect, of tackling people on the vain side, of doing things other than simply. He did not respond to Rose.

Morgan said, lightly, “While the painters are in they could do Mrs. Paull’s kitchen.”

“They will not,” said Avery savagely. “Keep the bills *down*.” He rose, ever a restless one. His eye fell upon Winnie, who had been demurely silent all the while. Winnie raised her eyes to him. She knew that Avery Patrick was male, divorced, and important to the family’s economic welfare. Winnie understood life very well, so she became female indeed, young and pure, and most obviously his grateful admirer.

Avery Patrick’s wise and nervous eye took note and immediate flight. So did his body.

“About Leila Hull,” Morgan said, pursuing him. “Something ought to be done about her, Avery. I mean it. It’s taking an awful chance.”

“You listen,” said Avery. “Not until you rent 109—or 111 as it works out—am I going to take any chance of letting Leila Hull out of 203. *Her* bills get paid, don’t they? Frankly, that’s what counts.”

When he had gone, Winnie began to explain to her mother that she probably wouldn’t be home until pretty late, after school. There was this club meeting . . .

Rose grudgingly accepted the news.

Morgan Lake had an intuition. Now he thought he knew why Winnie had come home to lunch. Winnie had wanted to work it so as to get away free this afternoon. Winnie was “handling” her mother. (There was probably no club meeting. God knew what there was.)

But he couldn’t question, accuse or interfere. He could not reach Winnie, in word or in spirit. He had to let her go whatever way she was going. His wife, Rose, stood as she always had stood, fiercely between.

He went out into the lobby and let Kelly Shane, who had been relieving him at the desk, go about Kelly’s own work.

Winnie skipped through in a moment. “Bye, Dad.”

Morgan Lake had a few moments of depression. What kind of life had he? A buffer, buffeted from all sides. And no one to love, in the sense of

communion and understanding, nothing to keep him alive except his own lonely secret one-sided reaching to understand them all . . . every one.

All the “things” that Nona Henry had to “do” she did in one day. The banking, some more-thoughtful marketing, the writing of the “arrived safe” letter, the unpacking and rearranging, then the pressing and the rinsing out.

On the following day she already found herself thinking of a trip to the store for the evening’s meat as a high spot. She was a little dismayed to perceive this. But there was nobody, and nobody’s wishes, to shape her days for her. She must get used to it.

For several days she remained alone, and in the apartment most of the time. She tried her best to rest. (She must, in some way, consolidate herself. This was necessary.) But there was no present tense. Whenever she thought of the past, the procession of scenes from her married life would go flapping through her mind, just as before. When she thought of the future, it had no sequence at all. It was a confusion of possibilities that hopped like popcorn in a pan. She might sight-see. She might go to theatre or concerts. She might read, seriously. She might sit in the sun and breathe deeply. She might reduce. She might sew. She might make new friends, but not yet. She could do nothing until her wounds (whatever they were) had begun to heal. But there was no “now” in which they were healing.

She might go to a doctor. Find help? No. Not yet. Wait and see.

She would, of course, sally forth in this new world when she was rested and felt stronger. She would explore. Experience *something*. But not yet. Not today. She didn’t have the energy. She felt timid about it.

She began to sit behind the glass curtains in her living room, to watch the comings and going in the patio below, and to distinguish certain patterns.

Two of the tenants must have jobs of some kind since they always scurried out of the building at a quarter after eight in the morning, wearing staid and dignified clothing, and they returned—not together but in close sequence—at about six P.M. One of these was very thin and always wore blue. The other was flabby and faded and usually wore beige.

There were also two women who went in and out together in a variety of costumes at a variety of hours. One of these was tall and thick and minced when she walked as if her shoes were too tight. The other was short and thick and walked with her toes turned out. They passed by, always talking, gesturing, tapping each other’s forearms, sometimes giggling. Nona guessed

they were the two who “went a lot” as Harriet Gregory had told her. Gadabouts. One of them, then, lived in the angle apartment on this floor.

Another pair. That dainty little old lady and the fortyish woman with fair hair moved in and out together with slow grace, as the younger one accommodated to the older woman’s pace. Nona knew that the older woman was Mrs. Fitzgibbon (Mrs. Fitz) who lived directly across the hall. The younger one would be this Georgia Oliver, who was engaged to be married again. Sometimes these two sat peacefully together in the sun, on the bench where Nona had first seen them, near the fountain.

Then there was the huge woman in black who stalked in the majesty of her size along the walk, with a mousy little woman sometimes scurrying beside her.

Some of the widows traveled alone. Nona recognized Harriet Gregory. And that Mrs. Rogan. Separate.

Nona never saw a man in the patio who looked as if he lived here. But there *was* a man. She wondered.

She observed wistfully that, alone or in pairs, most of the widows came and went as if *they* had something to do. She wondered if there were other eyes who also watched, alone, from other windows.

One thing she noticed. Just inside the arch at the corner, there was a gray wooden bench against the encircling wall, hidden among a clump of trees that had, perhaps, grown thick and high since the bench had been put there. From Nona’s eastern bedroom window her angle of sight struck down and behind those trees, but she began to think that the bench would be visible from no other window. (For the same window, directly below, would be too low.)

Every afternoon, at about five o’clock, a figure slipped through the arch and turned to sink down upon this bench. It would wait there perhaps ten, perhaps fifteen minutes. Nona knew who it was. One of the colored maids, the one named Elise (who, in fact, did Nona’s own apartment on Fridays). Evidently she was in the habit of waiting there, after work, for someone to pick her up in a car.

Nona was faintly amused. She thought it was no harm, of course, but she wondered whether the colored woman would have been forbidden the patio, had anyone known.

She wondered all alone.

Nona began to feel ashamed of this sitting and watching. Was she, then, nothing? An observer only? Nothing, in herself? Then the scenes of her life would go rushing by, and one of them began to take on an ugly look.

One day Nona found herself sitting with clenched hand, her teeth tight, her mouth contorted. Well? Had she not been robbed? Had not Dodie connived with Silas Jones to *take* those bonds from the safe-deposit box, while Val was so ill and Nona paying no attention? Those negotiable bonds risked, now, on Silas and his hardware store? But Val could not have promised to lend them to Silas on a personal note! Could not have done such a thing, without even talking to Nona about it! Those bonds had been for Nona's safety. They were a part of Val's love and Val's care and *this* belonged to Nona and should not have been violated. Never, never would Val have promised them. . . . So that was a lie! How could Nona have believed it! No wonder she had been unhappy in their home. They were guilty toward her and they knew it and—

Nona stopped this in a panic. What evil suspicion rising up like scum here? Why Dodie was her child, her beloved, and anything Nona had she would gladly give to Dodie, her beloved child. They had *not* lied. No. Never think it. If they had, perhaps, misinterpreted something Val had said, why Nona could forgive them. Had forgiven them already. Could understand. Was not stingy or greedy or begrudging. Had faith in them, loved them, would sacrifice for them. Had, indeed, done so. Why, she had come far away and was here, so alone, so broken away from everything she had ever known, for their sakes, really! And greater love had no woman . . . Nona wept.

When common sense dried her eyes and washed her face, she fled the silent apartment. She went down to sit in the patio herself. Sat, feeling eyes upon her.

Went to the market and pinched fruit and bought none.

Did not even cook a supper. Ate a sandwich, walking, walking back and forth.

Went, at last, to lie on her bed fully clothed.

Could not bear it.

Pulled and heaved at the bed until it angled across the window and she could lie there and stare down into the street. Something might be alive down there, she thought pathetically. And jeered at her own pathos. Tomorrow, she would . . .

She saw a car, a convertible with the top down, slide to the curb directly below. It would be hidden from every other eye in Sans Souci (unless Ursula Fitzgibbon was also lying in the dark on a bed that was out of place so that she could hunt the night for something, anything, to think about).

There was a boy or a man at the wheel, and a female beside him, sitting so close that the front seat could have held two more.

Nona saw them kiss. Saw them begin to wrestle and strain together. Knew they were young.

Nona hid her face. (I am fifty!)

When she looked out again the girl—for now on the dim edge of the street lights' reach she could see that it was a girl—was getting out. The boy slipped to the curb side of the car. They talked in low voices. The girl stepped away. He called after her, raising his voice. “Hey, Winnie?”

“I’ve got to go in,” the girl said clearly, desperately.

“Baby?” he said, not pleading but commanding. “Tomorrow?”


The girl must have answered by a gesture. She must have walked away. The boy leaned over the side of the car in silent watching for a moment. Then the car made loud noises going away.

Nona Henry found herself scrambling on all fours, off the bed, across the floor, to the other window. Yes, there she was, the girl, just inside the arch now. She had her arms up. She was combing her hair. In a little while, Nona saw her walking down the center of the wide pavement, passing through light and shadow. Dark head, slender waist, graceful legs, so young and lithe, and the nimble young feet . . . !

In the darkness above, Nona’s face was hot.

“Oh God, what am I? Oh God, what am I? Oh God, what am I?” It was indecent to spy at life. Perhaps it was dangerous.

Chapter 5

 Early the next afternoon, a thin woman with a long jaw and black-and-white hair that was about as tamed as an old mop was waiting for the elevator. Nona changed her own mind about taking the stairs. This woman had a stack of library books under her arm. When Nona showed signs of taking the elevator, too, the woman smiled. “It’s slow, isn’t it?” she said cheerfully. “Somebody is getting on, I suppose.”

Nona said, “I beg your pardon, but could you tell me where the public library is?”

“I’d be delighted. Why don’t you come with me, right now? I’m driving there. My name is Daisy Robinson.”

“I am Nona Henry.”

“Oh yes, you’re new, I believe. I’m on my way to the library, as I imagine you can see. I could sponsor you, if you want a card.”

“That would be awfully good of you.” Nona nearly stuttered.

“Not at all. Come along.”

The elevator door opened and Georgia Oliver held it for Mrs. Fitzgibbon to emerge. “Oh, Daisy,” said this lady in a soft voice, “were we keeping you waiting? I’m so sorry.”

“That’s all right,” said Daisy Robinson.

Mrs. Fitzgibbon’s lovely purplish eyes met Nona’s. “How do you do?” she said graciously. “We are neighbors, Mrs. Henry. I’ve meant to speak to you before. I am Ursula Fitzgibbon and this is Georgia Oliver.”

“I’m so glad to know you,” said the fair-haired younger woman, with a sweet smile.

Nona felt flustered by an encounter with three people, all at once, after so many solitary hours.

“If you ladies don’t mind,” said Daisy Robinson dryly, “I’d like to get along to the library. Mrs. Henry is going with me.”

“Oh, of course,” said Mrs. Fitzgibbon. “But please, do let us be neighborly.”

Nona thanked her with a grateful heart. What an adorable little old lady!

But Daisy Robinson urged her into the elevator and pushed the button. Nona found that they were sinking down past the lobby floor into the basement. She had never been here before. It seemed to be a garage.

Other men besides Avery Patrick kept cars in the garage of Sans Souci. Oppie Etting kept his old Buick down there, sometimes. Kelly Shane, who lived in what could only be called a slum, owned a handsome Mercury. It was his acceptable outlet for pride of possession, and stood there, shining. Avery Patrick's Cadillac was by no means as bright and clean and shining as the houseman's car.

Morgan Lake kept no automobile. He felt that all the extra expenses involved were too many to pay for the small amount of driving he would be able to do.

The widows kept few cars.

There was Harriet Gregory's battered old Chevvy, and Felice Paull's old Ford. There was Bettina Goodenough's fairly new Ford. There was Daisy Robinson's middle-aged Plymouth.

The widows were, on the whole, living too close to their economic margin to run cars, or else they were too old, or too timid, being alone now, to face the traffic any more. So they walked, or took buses, or, on gala occasions, called a cab. This, in Southern California (Daisy Robinson explained to Nona), was terribly limiting. Daisy herself would run a car as long as she could.

She put Nona and the load of books into the Plymouth and bucked it up the steep ramp. As they burst into the street Nona felt pleased and excited, as if she had embarked on a great adventure.

At the public library, however, it was just like Harriet Gregory in the market. Nona did not know her way in this place. But Daisy did. Did Nona enjoy anthropology? If so, Daisy had just read an enchanting new book. Perhaps it was in. Daisy would inquire. Was Nona interested in English history? Then she must take this really fine biography of Richard the Third. Admirable. And how about the Dead Sea Scrolls? So fascinating. *This* account was the best yet, in Daisy's opinion.

Nona, who had been thinking of a novel or two, and perhaps a couple of mystery stories, was intimidated. She took the books Daisy recommended and Daisy was pleased. So delightful, she said, to meet someone who could read. It was shocking to Daisy how few books there were in Sans Souci. She

herself read so enormously that she could not, of course, afford to own books. Except a few indispensable favorites.

“Let’s go to the Huntington,” said Daisy Robinson impulsively, as they emerged. “It’s open. I would enjoy introducing it to a sympathetic person.”

“Where?” asked Nona feebly.

“The Huntington Library,” said Daisy. “Surely you’ve heard of that. We are not far. Of course, you realize, one cannot read there unless, as a scholar, one can get a card. But there are the manuscript exhibits. And the paintings.”

Nona swallowed. She felt at odds with her own nature. Did Daisy Robinson think *she* was a scholar? Was Nona required to state bluntly that she was no such thing? “Of course, I’d love to see it,” Nona murmured. “You will have to excuse me, Mrs. Robinson, if I seem literally dumb, today. I’ve been alone for a week. My throat feels rusty.”

“It is not wise,” said Daisy, clashing fenders with the next car as she unparked, and simply ignoring this as if it were routine, “to become a hermit. Unless you have great resources within yourself.”

“I don’t know that I have any,” said Nona humbly.

“I am a widow and I have been told that you are another,” said Daisy amiably.

“Yes.” Nona didn’t know whether to be annoyed, or very glad indeed, that her name had been spoken in Sans Souci.

“The problem for us,” said Daisy, “is not only living alone but growing old, alone. I have my theory. As one grows older, the body inevitably stiffens . . .” She passed a small truck on the truck’s right. It took a frightened leap but Daisy paid no attention. “The mind, however, does not necessarily stiffen,” said Daisy triumphantly. “So surely it is wise to go on with the mind.”

“I suppose that is so,” said Nona. “I hadn’t thought of it that way. I suppose I haven’t really been thinking . . .”

They were crossing what appeared to be the main street of the city and Nona gasped. “What on earth!”

The entire street was trimmed with great arching garlands of stars and wreaths and bells. The tinny elements of the decorations clashed together in the gentle warm breeze and the bright sun glittered and flashed upon the tinsel.

“Christmas is coming,” said Daisy Robinson. “We don’t have the climate for it, so the merchants take great pains to remind us. Yes, right after Thanksgiving. Isn’t it ridiculous?” The car scuttled across on a yellow light.

“As I was saying about the hermit life,” resumed Daisy, “it is not wise to shut oneself up in Sans Souci. For one thing, Felice Paull might roust you out.” Mrs. Robinson had a wolfish grin. “We *have* a hermit, you see, and thereby hangs a tale. We are going to the Huntington? Or so I am assuming.”

“I’d love to go,” said Nona, clenching her toes, not sure they would get there, wherever it was, with Daisy Robinson at the wheel.

“This is Cal Tech, by the way,” said Daisy, careening the car to the left. Nona admired the vine-clad buildings as best she could between wincing and watching traffic. Soon they began to run past handsome lawns that were spread opulently before beautiful houses.

“But isn’t this lovely!” exclaimed Nona.

“Yes, very plush,” said Daisy, brushing off material wealth. They were going along fairly steadily and Nona unclenched her toes.

“What is the tale?” she inquired. “About the hermit?”

“Oh, well . . . a woman named Marie Gardner,” began Daisy. She disciplined her mind, even while her body maneuvered the car with a hair-raising sloppiness. “—lives on the first floor, east end. She has been there I don’t know how many years and has never been seen outside of her door. Well, Felice Paull— Do you know Felice Paull?”

“I don’t know anyone,” said Nona, “except Harriet Gregory.”

“Poor Harriet,” said Daisy with a wise look. The car wavered and Nona’s foot pushed instinctively upon the floor even as she returned the look and felt a wave of satisfaction for the communication.

Daisy seemed to lean on the wheel; she subdued the wobble for the moment. “Well, our Felice is a large black-clad female who busy-bodies under the impression that this is civic virtue.” Daisy chuckled. With this relaxation, her right front tire hit the curb. She yanked and a black Dodge in the next lane braked hard, saving the day, as Daisy did not appear to notice. “Our Felice got herself worked up about Marie Gardner, in sheer curiosity, I imagine. Although perhaps Agnes Vaughn was behind it. Agnes Vaughn thinks up these things. Felice Paull just does the dirty work.” Daisy guffawed. “Anyhow, Felice began to insist that Marie Gardner was very probably ill or dead or at least moldering away in there and she *must* be

checked up on. Poor Morgan Lake,” said Daisy. “Whoops, I think that was our turn. Oh well, we’ll try the next one. Well, Mr. Lake finally succumbed to her exhortations and, key in hand—Felice breathing down his neck of course—he opened Marie Gardner’s door. I wish I had seen it.”

Nona hung on as Daisy whirled them to the right. “What happened?” she gasped.

“Aren’t these street names delightful!” cried Daisy. “Orlando, Chaucer . . . this is San Marino where culture is *rife*!”

Nona laughed aloud suddenly.

“Well,” went on Daisy, “poor Marie Gardner happens to be a psychological prisoner.”

“Oh?”

“She’s neurotic as they come. Afraid, you see?” Daisy herself seemed fearless, Nona noticed. “But when attacked in her lair she went (of course) on the defensive and simply flew at Felice, tooth and claw. Felice, I understand, retreated without honor, and poor Mr. Lake took the brunt, like the gentleman he is. Oh, there is nothing one can do for the poor soul. It would be impossible, now, to coax her to come out. She has been alone too long.”

Fear walked up Nona’s spine. Did Marie Gardner watch out her windows, from where she cowered? She said, “That’s rather sad.”

“Yes, it is,” said Daisy at once. “Do you know the older of the maids, one Elise?”

“Yes, I do.”

“She is the only human being that Marie Gardner can tolerate. The poor soul lives from week to week for the day that Elise comes in to clean.”

“Oh, *dear*,” said Nona. (She herself had welcomed the Friday appearance of the black woman, so neat and polite, with her quiet smile, her human presence.)

“You may say so,” said Daisy. “But at least Marie Gardner never pesters her fellow man which is more than one can say for Felice Paull. *Or* Harriet Gregory. Who is a first-quality pest. Compulsively, I imagine.” Daisy Robinson’s face was perfectly cheerful.

“It’s our lot,” said Nona piously, “to study how not to be a bother.”

“It is our lot,” said Daisy Robinson, “to find something to *do* with ourselves. That is where one’s background comes in. One’s education.” Daisy rolled the Plymouth between stone pillars into a driveway. “If you have acquired an open mind and any intellectual curiosity, this can be your salvation.”

“Perhaps so,” said Nona, thoughtfully.

“Ah, here we are. Now, let me show you . . .”

Daisy parked in a lot, led Nona past the little gatehouse (or whatever it was) and a guard who asked them to sign cards. He made Nona think of a butler, for some reason.

Then Daisy, emitting cries of enthusiasm, led her into the gallery and from Gutenberg Bible to First Folio.

There was nothing the matter with the Huntington Library. Nona put on interest, forced it hopefully as one will do in a museum, priming the pump, hoping for a real flow. No gush came. Her core remained, to her dismay, perfectly numb.

Daisy’s ecstasies over faded trivia in the handwriting of dead authors moved Nona Henry not at all. She could not care. The mind was mildly ruffled and lightly informed, but the heart was not engaged.

They trudged the long room, peering into cases, and they roamed the side galleries where Daisy scoffed learnedly at some ornate furniture, and then they crossed the grounds to the huge old mansion where the paintings were hung.

Nona knew little or nothing about painting, and she found that her feet had begun to burn, in a distracting and humiliating fashion. When at last they came into a skylighted room where the Gainsboroughs and the Reynoldses were hanging, something inside her flickered alive just for a moment. But Daisy Robinson put that light out. Daisy knew too much. Her knowledge was intimidating.

Nona found that she did not want to go on to see the gardens, after all these hard floors. Nor did Daisy. “A lot of walking,” Daisy said. Daisy’s mind was evidently not open to plants and flowers. Nona thought they were leaving but instead she found herself standing on her burning feet around that gatehouse while Daisy examined one by one the scholarly volumes on the racks there which were for sale. She chose one with a gleam in her eye that Nona found perfectly incomprehensible.

Nona herself bought some picture postal cards, bearing reproductions of “The Blue Boy” and “Pinkie.” *Culture* they would say over the miles. She’d send one to Dane Mercier, her other son-in-law who lived in Seattle with a second wife and Nona’s other little granddaughter whom she never saw any more.

But she would not send one of these cards to little Milly, Millicent’s baby. No. A stuffed bunny would be better, Nona thought. She herself had begun to think a stuffed bunny had more life in it than the Huntington Library.

She was exhausted by the time Daisy tore herself away. Daisy took no notice but chattered all the return journey about the early art of bookmaking, as if Nona must be athirst to know these things. Nona envied her.

Once they were out of the elevator, on the second floor of Sans Souci, Daisy Robinson dropped Nona like a bundle of wash. Without any ceremony whatsoever she barged on down the east corridor toward her own place, rich with inner resources.

Nona hobbled down the north wing to 208 and, in the dead air, took her shoes off, determining to make do with leftovers tonight for supper. She massaged her arches and looked at the four fat books she had brought from the public library.

Tomes!


Yet it was true and Nona didn’t doubt that it was true—the mind survives the body’s stiffening. The cultivation of the mind, the curiosity of the intellect—this one had, to go on with. Daisy Robinson was right.

Yet Nona Henry had a restless unwillingness. She could not help feeling that, for her, to begin to read and study, to acquire these intellectual enthusiasms, would be a going back.

For, once upon a time, Nona O’Connor had come out of college with a mind sharpened by and conditioned toward words and ideas. She had, on that confident peak of her youth, argued and theorized with her peers, until “real” life—love, marriage, babies, and the imperatives of learning housekeeping—had seemed to be the next right stage. *After* which, what?

Yet Daisy Robinson *was* right, she supposed. Nona rubbed her foot and felt her heart sinking, heavy, lifeless, unengaged; and she envied, but did not hope.

Chapter 6

 Christmas was coming and the seventeen widows of Sans Souci were flutter.

This was the time of the year when their two worlds came together, for, quite naturally, each of them lived in two worlds. They were like college girls in a dormitory, in that they ate and slept, moved and struggled, here . . . where nobody wanted to know, except very superficially, where they had come from. So each had her status here, detached from the past, achieved in this place, related to each other. Yet at the same time each of them existed, still, in the world whence she had come and to which she still pertained.

This division was understood. Whenever one of them had visitors—relatives or old friends from “back home”—the other widows of Sans Souci, by a never-mentioned convention, would keep away. Not many of those being visited attempted to bring the two lives together. It was not that the relatives or friends from afar could not have met the new “friends” in the building and been mutually polite. It was as if the widows were each two women and the mixing of two selves was what might be confusing.

Only at Christmas, when a widow “remembered” the family and old friends, and she “remembered” from Sans Souci, did her two worlds partially blend.

In the bright sunny weather, the tinsel garlands swayed over the shop-lined main street. At night they blazed with colored lights as the shops began to be open in the evenings. Christmas carols whined out of machines over traffic noises. Santa Clauses, their fake ermine on the red suits purely symbolic in the warm winds, stood on street corners tinkling bells over black pots that yawned for the nickels and dimes of the charitably inclined. Store windows burst into red and green . . . or else pink and gold . . . blue and silver. People swarmed.

So Southern California worked itself up to believe that Christmas was coming by artificially reminding itself of the German Christmas, a pine-tree-and-snow Christmas, or the English Christmas, a yule-log-and-plum-pudding Christmas; while all the time, the terrain, the climate, the sun itself shining on palm and fig tree, the essential desert land, the arid mountains—

all this was similar, indeed, to the real Christmas setting in Palestine, almost 2000 years ago.

Nobody thought of this (except Morgan Lake, one afternoon).

There was so *much* to think about. The widows buzzed.

There was the annual twitter about Christmas cards. The choice, the price, the delivery date, then the lists. (Whom did I forget last year?) The addressing of envelopes and the licking of stamps. So exhausting! Since this was the time when every solvent American addressed a card to every person he had ever known in all his life (and still remembered) the post office began to put on extra help. But if the post office found this exhausting nobody cared, for the Christmas spirit had begun to rage.

There was the annual twitter about gifts. How to find something that would seem thoughtful, and also more expensive than it actually was! The widows racked their memories to fit a toy to a grandchild's age. What did a fourteen-year-old want? How about a boy of six? Shop girls were trained to be helpful, so that one always went over one's budget for the grandchildren. But to be penniless on December 26th was right and honorable. (And the children so often sent a check.) The children, the grownups, would have to be satisfied with tokens. *They* would understand. It was the thought that counted. Little sachets? So nice, and not expensive. Socks and handkerchiefs for sons-in-law were not clever, but always so useful.

So it went.

The crowds in the stores were dreaded and to be avoided if possible. Shopping was not only a chore, it was a physical ordeal. But it must be done, no matter what the cost to one's strength, for Christmas was coming and everyone was filled with the spirit of it.

No gain to try the small shops, the widows concluded. After all, the big department stores *would* wrap and mail and, really, it was silly to go to all the trouble of wrapping a gift oneself. Who could do it as well as those professionals? It was definitely beyond good sense to try to take a package to the post office in person. The carrying, the waiting, the standing in line. The fatigue of it!

Morgan Lake watched all this, the comings and the goings, the frustrations and the anxieties, the grim faces.

He supervised the putting up of a Christmas tree in the lobby. Kelly Shane did the labor, strung the long cords of red and blue lights, put the silver star on the tip. It was a tall tree and a whole morning was needed to

move the furniture, drag in the tree, set it firmly upright, trim it, and then clear away the resulting debris. Afterward Morgan Lake helped Kelly arrange a string of lights to arch over the entrance door. It tired him.

Christmas was so tiring! The widows would come in groaning with fatigue, pressured with undone tasks and mailing deadlines.

Morgan thought, But *why* should it be so tiring? Why should Christmas have become an ordeal? A period of such pressure? He questioned the objective toward which people toiled. One must be clever and careful and use one's energy shrewdly, so as to *get through* this period with the least drain upon one's purse or upon one's nervous system.

Then when one *got* through, what was the reward? he wondered. What *was* success in this effort? To have done what everyone else was doing? The just-what-I-wanted's? What satisfaction, really—and *of* what?

He hated to feel so cynical.

Rose Lake was in her annual twitter about Winnie's Christmas present. "A formal," she had said. "Maybe it will cost, but we'd have to buy her one, anyhow."

Oh, shrewd. Yes, indeed. Winnie would be happy (and they would have had to buy one, anyhow, sooner or later).

Every widow who came into the lobby spoke cooingly about the tree. So lovely! Just beautiful! Put them in the Christmas spirit, they opined. Morgan thought, And saves each of you the trouble and expense of a tree of your own? He reproached himself for feeling so cynical and sad. Poor things, it was about all they could do to *get through* Christmas.

But sometimes he looked across the lobby at the shining tree, the silver and the gold, the red and the blue, the splendor . . . and he remembered how Rose and Avery Patrick had agreed, five years ago when these ornaments had been chosen, that it was more politic to have no angels.

But where are there any angels? he wondered.

The Christmas holidays had come bearing conflict within his family. High school was letting out, Winnie would be around, and Rose usually went on a perfect binge of motherhood, in this season. But Winnie chose, this year, to rebel. "I am invited down to Laguna," she had said. "Mary Bassett's folks have a gorgeous house down there and they are letting her have a house party, between Christmas and New Year's. Eight girls. For two whole days."

“Sounds like fun,” Morgan had said hopefully. But Rose’s face had turned stony.

“It would be,” said Winnie wistfully, “if I could only go.”

“For how long? Two days?” said Rose shrilly.

“No use *me* thinking about it,” Winnie had said very coldly and sadly. “They’ll have a neat time, though. The Bassetts just do everything. I mean they’ve got money . . .”

“Is it your clothes?” Rose’s eyes rolled resentfully.

“Of course not,” said Winnie, and sighed. “It would be super to go. I mean, they have fires in the fireplace and neat games and yummy food. And all my best girl friends . . .”

“I see no reason . . .” Morgan began. He changed his tactics. “Of course, *we’d* miss you terribly.”

He saw Winnie’s lashes recognize tactics, and he winced to see it.

“Why do you say you can’t go?” Rose had demanded. “If you are invited.”

“I just *won’t* go,” said Winnie and now her eyes turned hot and sullen, “because Mom will first call up the Bassetts and ask a lot of insulting questions to see if they are reliable or something. And then she’ll keep calling me up long-distance in the middle of the party and everybody will think I’m either a baby or a criminal.” Winnie began to cry.

Rose stared at her daughter.

“Yes, you will,” sobbed Winnie. “You always *do*, if I go anywhere. It’s too embarrassing. I’m seventeen and nobody else’s mother makes such a big deal.”

Rose said wheedlingly, “But that’s no reason not to *go*.”

“Yes, it is,” said Winnie, “and, unless you promise you won’t do that, I am *not* going.”

Rose began to cry. Rose didn’t want to deprive Winnie of anything on earth but this hurt, this misunderstanding.

Winnie said she couldn’t help it and she’d rather not go at all and she supposed it didn’t matter if she *never* went *anywhere*.

Morgan Lake dared not counsel either of them. Rose was quite capable of turning on him in a blaze of temper and starting a flaming row that would

resolve nothing. Winnie he perceived to be out on a limb, and if she did not win her point she really would not go. He couldn't talk her into putting up with a few phone calls, not now.

So all he could do was to remain calm. The tears flowed until Rose, lashing herself, finally gave the promise.

Winnie said to Morgan, "You'll see she keeps off the telephone, Dad?" The slightly slanted young eyes had been damp, yes . . . but also shrewd.

"I'll remind her," he had said, soothingly.

He had been trying ever since to believe that this clash was Winnie's step toward independence, a step in the right direction. At least it was direct, and better than so much "handling." But he was not sure, somehow. He felt depressed.

He knew very well that Rose would fall into a state of gloom and uneasiness, and that whatever freedom Winnie won would be paid for directly out of Morgan's peace. It wasn't this that depressed him. He didn't begrudge it.

He tried to understand them and he *did* forgive them, but he could not seem to do anything constructive. If only he could talk to Rose, make her see that if she did not let Winnie go, then Winnie most certainly would go—and go forever some day. Or if he could only talk to Winnie, and try to make the girl see that *because* Rose was not quite normal in this frantic devotion, she could *therefore* be forgiven for it. But he felt he could not reach them, either one. In his own house, he was nothing but a buffer . . . and not always even that.

So there was his own futility and uneasiness, and around him, fatigue and anxiety. No angels, at all.

Everything this Holy Season seemed to him to be especially shabby, spiritually. It made him sad.

When Elsie came in to do Nona Henry's apartment on the Friday, Nona sat mending a slip strap. "I've been hearing about this poor Mrs. Gardner on the first floor," she said pleasantly. "Is it really true that she never goes out at all?"

"I wouldn't know that, Miz Henry." The black woman's voice was soft. Her hands kept on working skillfully and steadily.

“Mrs. Robinson was telling me,” went on Nona. “She said that you actually were her only friend.” Nona flashed a bright democratic smile. “But how strange! Whatever does she *do* in there?” Nona bit the thread.

Silence caused her to look up.

“That’s right, ma’am,” Elise said gently. “I guess she do feel friendly to me.”

Nona’s face grew hot. She felt a flash of rage. It was in her mouth to say sharply, “Are you supposed to wait *inside* the patio, as you do every day? Does Mr. Lake know?” Wanted to say it viciously with full intent to wound or alarm.

But this was a devil! Nona clamped down on the wickedness. “I beg your pardon,” she murmured. “I don’t mean to ask you to gossip, Elise. I was—just interested.”

She rose and turned her back.

“O.K. if I go ahead on and do the bathroom, ma’am?” said Elise, without malice.

“In a few minutes,” said Nona shortly. “I am going out.”

She went into her bathroom to fix her face, her very red face. Lessons in dignity, or loyalty, or integrity, from the colored maid! But it was so easy to run your tongue over anything odd, for the mere exercise of that poor unused member, and mean no harm. No harm, surely.

Don’t be an idiot, she said to herself. Don’t be so ridiculously sensitive!

When Nona, in hat and coat, passed through her foyer she was able to send Elise a forgiving smile.

“Christmas shopping?” said Elise. Her smile was conciliatory and apologetic. “Enjoy yourself, Miz Henry. Have a good time, hear?”

Nona thanked her.

A good time, she thought in the corridor. Enjoy myself! I haven’t had a good time, or enjoyed myself (or anything else) for ages and ages! I haven’t had any plain *fun*!

The imp said, It would have been fun to hash over Mrs. Gardner’s neurosis.

Nona thought, Oh God, sinful or not, I need *something*. Thou knowest
...

Her eyes were full of tears. She took the poky elevator so as to wipe them away, unseen.

Mail was in. As Nona came around the corner from the elevator, Georgia Oliver passed toward it, both her hands holding a stack of letters. “It isn’t all for *me*,” cried Georgia childishly. “Most of it’s for Mrs. Fitz. Bless her heart!”

But the wild tree had been cut from its root; it was dead, although it stood, looking as if it were alive, bearing splendid ornaments.

Daisy Robinson stood by the desk, tearing open Christmas card envelopes as fast as her hands could go. Her eye wasted no time on the pictures or the printed sentiments, but ticked off the signatures against a mental master list.

“Oh, Mrs. Henry,” said she, “I’m off to the County Museum. Meant to give you a ring. Like to come along?”

“Wh—where is the County Museum?” said Nona dazedly.

“Oh, it’s a goodish drive,” said Daisy. “Better plan several hours. You’ll want to see everything.”

Nona valued Daisy Robinson, who was an interesting and admirable woman, and Nona did not want to turn her friendship away, or even to risk seeming to do so. But there was absolutely no use pretending that she could bear a “goodish drive,” or even one hour of marble floors.

“I’m sorry,” she gushed. “It’s so nice of you, Mrs. Robinson, to ask me. But there *is* my Christmas shopping and I’m afraid—”

“Haven’t you done that, yet?” said Daisy. “I finished mine in September.” Daisy made off for the elevator with no more said.

Nona looked after her, uncertainly.

“Puts *you* in your place, I guess,” said a gruff voice, and Nona turned to look into the face of the shorter of the Gadabout Girls. This was a term Nona had privately invented for the two of them; the ones who “went a lot.” The taller one was nearby, too, and she burst into laughter.

“I hope I didn’t offend her,” breathed Nona.

“You didn’t,” said the shorter woman. “I’m Sarah Lee Cunneen and this is Bettina Goodenough. Been wanting to meet you.”

“I’m Nona Henry.”

“We know,” said Bettina Goodenough merrily.

“Say, we’re going shopping,” said Sarah Lee Cunneen. “Want a ride to Bullocks?”

“I . . . really don’t know where I’m going,” said Nona in confusion.

“Come with us, then,” said Bettina, cordially. “That’ll be fun!”

“Why don’t you look at your mail, see if it’s important, and then come on?” urged Sarah Lee.

Nona’s mail consisted of six Christmas cards. She slipped one behind the other, noting the return address.

Morgan Lake held out his hand. “Shall I put them back in your box, Mrs. Henry?”

Nona wrestled with guilt. “It doesn’t seem right,” she murmured, “to say they are not important.”

He said to her, “They are not urgent.”

She looked up at him, grateful and surprised.

“Oh, come on,” said Sarah Lee.

And Nona thought, All right, I’ll go shopping. I’ll spend some money. I’ll have some fun. I don’t care. Why must I feel *guilty* all the time?

She went with the Gadabout Girls.

The big store was warm and smelled sweet. It was brilliant with beautiful wares, and crammed with living people.

Nona lost herself in the frenzy. What fun to look at all these *things*, some of which at least one could really have and give! To be drawn and tempted, to reject, to hunt and spy, at last to decide. The eyes culled; the brain darted and hummed. In this place, in the buying and the selling, the current of life was wonderfully flowing.

The three of them came up to the restaurant floor three times. On the first two occasions, a long thick line of people waited before the entrance and the rhythmic murmur of female voices rose in swells, with little sharp squeals of laughter like foam on top.

The third time, and it was very late, they reached the velvet rope; they were let inside. Nona slipped into the seat. An aching radiated from her soles. "This was just my day," she said gaily, "to get museum-feet."

"Oh, that Daisy Robinson!" said Sarah Lee Cunneen. She had very dark wiry eyebrows and lively dark eyes. Her hoarse hearty voice, her habit of nudging or tapping her listeners, gave an impression of happy vulgarity. "She's too high-brow for me. And listen, what's the fun of buying Christmas presents in September? It's cold-blooded, that's what I think."

Bettina Goodenough had a full pink face, and a frizz of streaked hair. She laughed a lot. When she laughed her upper plate showed. "Maybe you don't spend so much in cold blood. I always get carried away. Somebody should have held me down. Oh, well, what's the difference? Life's too short. I might as well go absolutely wild and have crab Newburg."

"Wonder if anybody's holding Ida Milbank down." Sarah Lee snorted laughter. "That Ida! Let's have crab Newburg. Listen, I don't feel like eating sensibly."

"Neither do I," said Nona, recklessly.

They had spent too much. Now they ate too much. They laughed, they talked too much.

Nona heard all about Ida Milbank.

"My Lord, her dinette table!" said Sarah Lee Cunneen. "She's got so darned many electric gadgets you can't even get the dishes on it. You know what I hear? They're going to put her out of 111 and into 109. Why, she can't get all that stuff *in* there!"

"Hum." Bettina cocked her head. "I was more or less thinking about 109, myself."

"Go on," said Sarah Lee, slapping Bettina's hand. "You'll never give up your prize apartment." She turned to Nona. "She's got the angle apartment, best in the house. You ought to see!"

"You certainly must come and see," said Bettina heartily. "Do you play bridge, Nona? I *can't* call you Mrs. Henry and I'm not going to."

"Please, don't. Yes, I play bridge. I haven't played—"

"That's wonderful!" cried Sarah Lee. "Now, who can we get for a fourth, right in the building?"

“How about Harriet Gregory?” said Bettina slyly and Sarah Lee rolled her eyes to heaven.

“Elna Ames, then?”

“Oh, she’s such a stick.”

They talked without scruple. Yet Nona could not feel they were unkind. It was all in fun.

She came back to Sans Souci with her blood tingling. She didn’t even look at Morgan Lake as he handed her a somewhat augmented pile of mail. The mood of guilt, of scruple, of self-reproach, had been washed away.

Sarah Lee Cunneen hit Nona’s forearm. “Say, I live right under you, you know. So don’t tap-dance, Nona.”

“I’ll give it up,” said Nona solemnly and Bettina Goodenough brayed laughter. Sarah Lee walked off, toes out, down the north wing. Bettina and Nona got into the elevator. Nona’s eye was checking over the return addresses on her envelopes. Nothing urgent. Christmas cards always came. You checked your list. They didn’t mean a lot, really.

“Look, have a bite and then come over,” Bettina said, upstairs. “Be sure, now.”

“I’d love to. I will,” said Nona gladly.

So they played bridge, with Elna Ames, in Bettina Goodenough’s apartment. The one on the angle. The prize.

The bedroom of this apartment was in the north wing and the living room was in the east wing. The kitchen was on the corner. It did give a feeling of difference. The dinette was larger than Nona’s own. There may have been more space, altogether. There seemed to be more closet room.

But Bettina Goodenough’s apartment had the same kind of “furnished” furniture. Every piece pretended to conservative elegance. Every piece was cheaply and badly made. The fabrics, no two alike, were all at least unobtrusive. So line and color blended to make a consistent impression of dull mediocrity, since no line was clean, no color crisp, and nothing was new.

Elna Ames was a pale woman of sixty-odd, who had little to say and little chance to say it. The Gadabouts had limber tongues.

They talked about Marie Gardner. “Well, she’s a little off,” said Sarah Lee Cunneen. “A few buttons missing. Calls up the grocer on the telephone. Won’t open the door for the delivery boy. Nobody *knows* what she does in there. Maybe she drinks. Like Leila Hull.”

“Oh?” said Nona.

“You’ll see,” said Bettina Goodenough. “Haven’t you heard about our drunkard? Well, as I say, who knows what drove her *to* it. Anyone care for a little wine?”

They had wine and cake and talked about Felice Paull.

“Some people are always sticking their necks out,” said Sarah Lee. “Live and let live, that’s what I say. It takes all kinds.”

There was a moment of silent respect for these profundities.

Nona spoke. “Harriet Gregory said something to me . . .”

“What? What?” The girls were eager.

“I think I heard it right. She said that this Mrs. Rogan . . .”

“Tess Rogan?”

“Harriet Gregory said she tells lies. Now, what did she *mean*?”

“Oh, that,” said Sarah Lee Cunneen. “That’s straight from Agnes Vaughn. Agnes Vaughn says it’s a lie. Or anyhow, *she* doesn’t believe it, so it’s the same thing.”

“Harriet doesn’t believe it, either,” Bettina giggled. “Not any more . . .”

“Poor Nona doesn’t know what we’re talking about,” said Sarah Lee. “See, this Mrs. Rogan came about a couple of weeks before you did. Nobody knows her. Well, she lets on to Harriet Gregory—and you might as well put it in the newspaper—that she is going around the world on a big luxury liner in the spring! And that’s not all! She’s got *two* free tickets, she says, and she’s looking for somebody to go around the world with her and for free! We-ell . . . This got the whole house in an uproar.” Sarah Lee pulled her chin in. “It *could* be just a story, like Agnes thinks.”

“Around the world,” murmured Nona. “Wow, that’s quite a story.”

“Harriet Gregory got all excited,” said Bettina, rather righteously. “*She* was going to get to go, I suppose. She was all over Tess Rogan. But then . . . pfft!” Bettina looked rather pleased. “Who dealt?”

They began to bid. Bettina got the contract.

“Oh, yes, Harriet was thick as thieves with Mrs. Rogan, there for a week or ten days,” said Sarah Lee while Elna Ames was laying out the dummy hand. “Of course, Harriet never lasts.”

“Do you really think anybody would tell a story like that?” asked Nona. “If it isn’t true . . . ?”

“Listen, *I* don’t say it isn’t true. But it does seem unlikely,” said Sarah Lee. “Tess Rogan sure as heck doesn’t spend much money on her clothes. Listen! Who knows? Maybe she tells it to get the attention.” She met Nona’s eyes and Nona received a little shock. There was something sturdy in Sarah Lee that was willing to admit the possibility. An old woman could crave attention as desperately as this.

Then, was *this* Mrs. Rogan’s oddness? Nona wondered. That she, being old and lonely and desperate, was telling desperate and stupid lies? “A stupid lie,” she murmured, “if it is one.”

“It sure is stupid,” said Bettina Goodenough. Nona looked at her and was surprised to see a whiteness along Bettina’s nostrils. “Anybody who pretends, just to get attention! So cheap! Wasn’t that my nine of clubs?”

“Whoops,” said Sarah Lee. “Excuse my itchy fingers.”

Elna Ames said in her colorless voice, “If it were Caroline Buff, or even Mrs. Fitz, you might believe it.”

“Believe what?” Sarah Lee had lost the thread.

“That she *was* going around the world.”


“Oh, for pity’s sake,” said Bettina. “Let’s play the hand. Who wants to go around the world?”

Nona thought, sharp and clear, *You* do! She quickly chopped this notion down. “I think Mrs. Fitz—that’s what you call her?—is just lovely-looking,” she said quickly.

“Oh, she’s a doll,” said Sarah Lee. “A little old doll. Georgia Oliver is going to marry her younger son. He’s *something!* *He’s* been around the world, I guess.” She put the deuce of trumps on Bettina’s outside ace. “Not tonight, Josephine.”

“Oh, you wretch!” cried Bettina. “Now that’s *mean!* I’m ruined!” She was laughing.

Chapter 7

 As the days drew on to Christmas some of the frenzy died down. (After all, mailing was over.) Now, clouds began to lower around Nona Henry. This would be her first Christmas without Val. Nothing could keep this grief at bay. A grief that gouged and hurt. But she would have to bear it. It did not matter that she was far from her daughter. She would have had to bear this, anywhere; so much of it was her own, her lonely own. So she answered Dodie's anxious letters as cheerfully as she could. She denied the bite and pain of her personal grief—in ink on paper. No other way to help Dodie; no way at all for Dodie to help her. She would just have to *get through* Christmas, somehow. Nona clung to the Gadabouts. They would help her.

They asked her to go on an expedition, three days before Christmas Day, to the Mission at San Juan Capistrano. Mrs. Fitzgibbon was going and so was Georgia Oliver, but there was room for one more, and Nona really ought to see it. They would have fun.

Nona accepted quickly. Anything to see. Anything to do. Anything to fill the hours. Anything to get her through these holidays.

They bought the tickets and went through the gate into the midst of pigeons. These birds were spoiled rotten, too fat and too tame. A small boy, half frightened with delight, stood there with four of the greedy insolent creatures perched on his arms and shoulders while his father focused the family camera.

They were in a garden. The flowers here were fat and tame as if they, too, had been fed and petted into an expectation of too much too easily. All around this garden ran the adobe buildings, some in ruin, some restored.

The white birds, the red flowers, the blue sky, the brilliant green of huge pepper trees . . . Nona exclaimed with her companions over the beauty of the scene. But this, she remembered, was a Mission. And what was a Mission? For a moment she wished that Daisy Robinson had come, Daisy would have *known*.

It had been a “goodish” drive, but Bettina Goodenough was a steady driver and the trip down had been pleasant. Sarah Lee Cunneen had sat in

front with a map in her lap wrangling amiably, and rather amusingly, with Bettina about the turns.

Nona had ridden behind with Mrs. Fitz and Georgia Oliver. She had felt a bit shy because she had long realized that this little delicate old lady, Mrs. Fitz, was in the world of Sans Souci an aristocrat. She was the Good Dean of the house. In Mrs. Fitz's company there was serenity and kindness. The little dainty lovely old lady "enjoyed" the ride.

They had stopped for lunch in a small decent restaurant and quarreled gently over the check. The presence of Mrs. Fitz seemed to have refined the Gadabouts. Everything was gentler.

Now, here they were in the gardens, and Mrs. Fitz was murmuring admiration and praise. The flowers! How lovely! Oh, what beauty!

But Nona Henry found her mind stirring and trying to make sense of this place. What had it been *for*? *Why* had it been built so? The others seemed content with color and bloom, sun and sky, and no one communicated, if indeed she knew, what else was here to be understood.

They all strolled along the wide paths, and under the long cloisters, very slowly, for Mrs. Fitz never moved very fast.

"Please don't wait on me," she said. "I'd like to visit the chapel. That and the flowers are enough."

"Excuse us then?" blurted Sarah Lee. "We'll meet you at the gate? How's that?"

The Gadabouts prepared to vanish into a shop. Nona blinked. Yes, there was a shop, a souvenir-of-San-Juan kind of place. The Gadabouts ducked in. They hadn't asked Nona to go with them. She could see them darting from glass case to counter. Buying and selling. Here!

Georgia Oliver said gently, "Let's us go to the chapel while they enjoy themselves. We must see the bells, too. Then we can sit in the garden awhile. O.K.?"

So the three of them ambled around some corners, and along a cloistered way and finally entered the chapel.

The very air of it struck upon Nona Henry like a wave upon a rock. She resisted it. Was this Church? A Holy Place? Or was it a Museum? What?

It was a very narrow, strangely proportioned room. The rafters and the crude white walls and the blaze at the far end were strange to Nona. She

followed Mrs. Fitz and Georgia Oliver down the center aisle toward the altar and the jumble of gilt-framed saints, and candles, and religious clutter.

Mrs. Fitz and Georgia arrived, paused, stood quietly contemplating these things, until Mrs. Fitz sighed with a small despair. They turned and began to walk back at the same pace. Nona followed them out of the chapel on the side opposite that by which they had entered. Here was a charming enclosure. A series of masonry arches were high in a ruined wall and some bells hung in the arches.

“So lovely,” sighed Mrs. Fitz. “Of course, I am not a Catholic. I’m afraid I don’t understand the chapel. But this! To *me!*” She lifted her small pink face and Georgia looked up too, and they were rapt.

Nona was feeling the grief. It had slashed at her, it had caught her unaware, somewhere in that chapel. It had to be met. Terms must be made with it. She said hastily, “I think I’ll just go back a minute.”

“Of course,” said Georgia with her sweet and ever-permissive smile.

Nona was not a Catholic, either. But those candles, she thought, burn there for someone’s grief. Was there something in this place that could help? If she were before the altar all alone, could she pray? And be healed?

But as she walked down the aisle again toward the tinsel and the gilt and what, to her Protestant eyes, was simply garish junk and pitiful, prayer stuck in her throat.

No good to her. Nothing.

She walked back quickly, almost in a panic, and turned to go out into the air, but to her right where she would be alone. There were cloisters here and a vista of green gardens. Against one of the columns of the covered way, a figure leaned and was familiar. Who? Oh, that coat, the red. It was Tess Rogan.

She was leaning against a pillar, looking across the gardens, but her head turned as Nona emerged. “Hi,” she said.

“Oh, hello,” said Nona. “You are Mrs. Rogan, aren’t you? I’m Nona Henry, from Sans Souci.”

Tess Rogan grinned. It was the only word for the spreading of her generously proportioned mouth. “How do you like this?” she inquired.

“I am not a Catholic,” said Nona. “I suppose I don’t quite understand . . . the array in there.”

Tess Rogan said, immediately, “The gold? The frankincense? The myrrh?”

Her words boomed and gonged in Nona’s breast. They gave her panic.

“But it’s not real . . .” she stammered. “I’m sorry. If you are a Catholic . . . I don’t mean . . .”

“Oh, I’m not a Catholic,” Tess Rogan said. She put the back of her head against the masonry. “It’s real, just the same.”

Nona’s mouth was dry. She said, “Excuse me? I am with Mrs. Fitzgibbon. I . . .”

Mrs. Rogan said, “They were Franciscans, you know.”

Nona ducked her head. “I don’t know,” she stammered. She hurried across and out to the enclosure where Mrs. Fitz and Georgia were still standing.

“Shall we go back to the first garden?” said Mrs. Fitz in her soft voice. “I do love this spot. But there is a bench, I know, where we can wait for the others. Mrs. Henry, wouldn’t you like to roam about and see a little more?”

“No, no,” said Nona. “I’ll stay with you.” She felt frightened. The grief was dark and heavy upon her heart. But a stone, not a sword.

When they came through, at the end of the chapel, the figure of Tess Rogan was gone from where it had stood.

Mrs. Fitz sat on a bench for a long time, waiting. She was tiring, as Georgia and Nona could tell. At last, Georgia sent Nona hurrying toward the shop to stir up their chauffeur. She met the Gadabouts, who were just coming forth, chattering, bearing packages.

“I think Mrs. Fitzgibbon is a little weary . . .”

“Oh, is she?” said Sarah Lee contritely. “Then we’ll go, if you’ve seen all you want, Nona?”

“Yes, I think I have,” Nona said. Her conscience pricked her. “Do you know, I saw Mrs. Rogan from Sans Souci?”

“You did!” cried Sarah Lee. “How did *she* get down here?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask. She seemed to be alone.”

Sarah Lee said, “I wonder if she needs a lift home.”

“There really isn’t room,” said Bettina Goodenough shrilly. “If Mrs. Fitz is tired, I wouldn’t want to crowd the car.” She was clutching her packages. Evidently she did not want to do a casual favor.

“Well, that’s so,” said Sarah Lee, agreeing. She peered about them. “I don’t see Mrs. Rogan now. Do you? I guess she’s gone. So skip it.”

Nona said nothing. It was not her business. It was not her car.

They found Mrs. Fitz murmuring her hundredth comment upon the swallows and their nests against the tall ruins. Her voice was definitely feeble. Time to go. They went slowly out into the dusty small town street. Mrs. Fitz leaned upon Georgia. She confessed that luncheon, in that restaurant, might have been indiscreet. She ate so very meagerly and carefully at home. And she *was* accustomed to lying down right after lunch each day. She would be all right, of course . . .

There was concern for Mrs. Fitz in the car, on the way home.

It was on their way home that Nona found out what was *not* going to happen to her on Christmas Day.

“Well,” said Sarah Lee, “that’s that, and tomorrow night we are off to Vegas.”

“To where?” said Georgia.

“Oh, we go to Vegas for Christmas,” said Sarah Lee. “We go over on the train. There’s nothing doing around here.”

“Well, of all places!” said Georgia, generously amused, and speaking with her characteristic smiling tolerance. “I suppose you’ll gamble. Aren’t you the sports, though!”

Bettina laughed merrily.

“She always wins,” said Sarah Lee. “Not me. But I don’t mind. Listen!”

Nona was silent in the tonneau, trying to swallow her sense of having been unfairly abandoned. There would be no Gadabout girls to help her through Christmas Day. But they hadn’t told her. She ought to have been told.

“Oh, we went last year,” said Bettina, as if Nona had spoken. “It’s a lot of fun. You know, Sans Souci is dead as a doornail.”

They had not asked, and they did not now ask, Nona whether she might care to go along.

It was unreasonable to feel, as she did feel, betrayed and let down.

Ursula Fitzgibbon seemed to sense something. "What are you doing on Christmas Day, Mrs. Henry?" she asked. "Have you family coming?"

"No one," said Nona, rather crisply.

"Say, let me tip you, Nona," said Sarah Lee in her coarse husky voice. "Just don't let Felice Paull rope you in."

"No?" said Nona rather saucily.

"Oh Lord," Sarah Lee groaned. "Felice Paull always gets up a Christmas dinner. At Hunt's, for heaven's sakes! I am telling you! Don't go! It's simply ghastly."

"She hasn't asked me yet," said Nona, rather rebelliously. "I don't know Mrs. Paull."

There was silence.

"She means well," said Georgia generously.

"I'm sure she does," said Mrs. Fitz with a sigh. "My son, Robert, will be here," she went on sweetly, "for Christmas Day. And Georgia, of course . . . just family. Won't you come to dinner with us, Mrs. Henry? Right across the hall. I don't like to think of you alone . . ."

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that," said Nona quickly. "Thank you. But you will want to be family . . ."

"Why, we'd love to include you."

"You are very thoughtful." Nona felt frozen. A waif, was she? Orphan? To be taken in by kind hearts? Not that this heart wasn't kind. "I'd best be alone," she said. "I hope you'll understand."

Mrs. Fitz's dry old fingers touched her. "Of course," she murmured.

At last they dived down into the bowels of Sans Souci. When the car stopped, Ursula Fitzgibbon's sigh was unquestionably relieved. "Such a lovely day!" she said. "So good of you to take me, Bettina. I did enjoy it."

"You're not too tired?" asked Sarah Lee anxiously.

"I am tired," admitted Mrs. Fitz. "After all, I am seventy-five. And at such an age, one tires." She was brave.

Georgia was helping her tenderly from the car.

Nona stood by. Abandoned? She said to the Gadabouts, “Thank you very much for a delightful time.”

“Not at all,” said Bettina. “Why, we were glad to have you.” She laughed and her dental plate showed, and Nona suddenly, savagely, longed to tell her so. Instead she said, with a little frown, “I do hope poor old Mrs. Rogan got home all right. She is seventy-one, isn’t she?”

She knew that the little dart had been felt just where she had meant it to strike and that it stung. The Gadabouts were silent.

“Mrs. Rogan?” said Ursula Fitzgibbon. “Oh, was *she* at San Juan Capistrano?”

“I spoke to her,” said Nona. “Yes, she was there. Alone.”

“Oh, then we *ought* to have asked her,” said Ursula, “how she came. I do hope she had a way to get home.” Her small pinkish face was concerned.

“She got down there,” said Sarah Lee brusquely.

“She couldn’t have expected *us* to come along,” said Bettina. “*I* didn’t see her.”

“She must have made her own arrangements,” soothed Georgia.

“I suppose so. Of course.” The trouble cleared from Mrs. Fitz’s brow. “So nice to have been with you.”


“Let me go ahead,” said Nona solicitously. “I’ll ring the elevator down.”

She could tell that somewhere behind her, Sarah Lee was nudging Bettina.

It was all so small. So unimportant and so small.

But, she perceived, the smallest and least important pond can have its ripples.

Chapter 8

 Sometimes, somebody comes to the edge of a pond and throws in a stone. Two days before Christmas this inquisitive stranger came into the lobby of Sans Souci at about six P.M. when Oppie Etting was at the desk. The stranger did not look prosperous. His manner was not confident. He put himself against the counter sideways. His tone was apologetic.

“A Mrs. Quinn living here?”

Oppie Etting had, both literally and figuratively, big ears and a long nose. When he said, “There is nobody here by that name, sir,” he did not say it with the proper frost. The very seediness of the stranger, and a palpable but indefinable air he had of being not quite square with society, made Oppie feel very curious.

“Reason I ask, I believe I saw her come in here,” the stranger said in a wheedling tone.

“She may be a visitor, of course,” said Oppie, too helpfully. “In which case, I wouldn’t necessarily . . .”

“Reason I think she lives here,” said the stranger, “I saw her first come out and then come in again.”

This was presenting the matter in the form of a little puzzle and Oppie was drawn to consider it. He saw the flaw. “Perhaps you should have spoken to her, then,” he said lightly.

This broke any formal relationship from Oppie’s side. This asked a personal question.

The stranger used both hands to hold himself away from the counter, but he leaned on them. “Oh, she wouldn’t know *me*,” he said confidentially, reading Oppie’s interest in Oppie’s eyes. “I’m just an old newspaperman. But I never forget a face, you know. It was Mrs. Quinn, all right.” He looked behind him. There was no one else in the lobby. His eyes licked at the Christmas tree. “I’m looking for a story,” he confided.

Well, Oppie couldn’t bear it. Oppie put his elbows on the counter. “A story? That so?” Oppie was extraverted and he got bored.

“Never heard of Mrs. Quinn?” the stranger asked. “Well, I guess that was twelve, fourteen years ago. Long ago and far away. Also, she’s probably not using the name of Quinn.”

Now, he held Oppie like a three-year child.

“Might be a little money in this,” the stranger said, delicately probing here. “With a little help . . .”

Oppie straightened up. “I’m afraid I can’t help you,” he said virtuously.

The stranger backtracked quickly. “And I could sure use a little money,” he said, putting on what was obviously intended to be a rueful smile. “A follow-up story, see? Where is she now? Like that. I’ve had a bum year, bad luck. Health went back on me. But you don’t know any Mrs. Quinn, you say?” His eyes reproached Oppie for holding out against a poor unlucky man.

Oppie was hung between raging curiosity and his duty to repulse this character, in whose bad luck he could not believe. The man looked like one who would create bad luck for himself, being out of step with the rhythms of prosperity. Oppie said, “You may have made a mistake,” stiffly.

“No mistake,” the stranger said with complete assurance. “I know her. I was at her trial.”

“Trial?” Oppie’s brows went up.

“Murder trial, yeh.” The man nodded as if this were the only really interesting kind of trial there was. “She killed her husband’s girl friend. Or, I should say, ‘allegedly’ she did.” The stranger was deeply cynical. “They got her off. Called it an accident. You can believe that or not. Afterwards, this Mrs. Quinn, she disappeared.”

“What happened to *Mr. Quinn*?” burst Oppie. His elbows were back on the counter.

“Divorce. Nobody knows where he is, either. But I’ll tell you where *she* is. Mrs. Quinn was in and out of *this building, today.*”

Oppie moistened his lips. His brain whirled with pleasant excitement. “About how old a woman is she?” He succumbed. “Is she tall or . . . ?”

“Well . . .”

Then the glass door opened. A shaft of air from the patio crossed the stale lobby and touched them. Oppie straightened guiltily and the stranger took a step backward.

Mrs. Caroline Buff, seventy-seven, was coming in. Mrs. Buff had more money than any other widow in Sans Souci. She lived in the first-floor angle apartment, 107, and she was the only tenant in the building who lived with her own furniture. She had even had her floors carpeted.

Now she came toward the men, walking well, her beautiful white head of hair immaculately coifed, her face serene, her clothes exactly right, expressing exactly what she was, an elderly woman of means and good taste. Her whole aura was that of a person securely square with all the known world.

“Good evening, Mr. Etting. May I ask you . . . ?” Mrs. Buff did not ignore the stranger, yet he receded to the status of a mongrel roaming the outskirts of civilization.

Oppie gave her due reverence. “Anything I can do, Mrs. Buff?” The stranger was postponed.

“I am expecting a package from New York,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am, I believe it is here.” Oppie dived below the counter. When he bobbed up again, the stranger was across the lobby at the glass door. Oppie cast him a glance and the stranger looked back, with an air of hesitation, perhaps a promise to return. Then he pushed out and Oppie could see his badly held body scurrying away between the lampposts.

This was the last that was ever seen of the inquisitive stranger at Sans Souci.

But he had thrown a stone.

Oppie Etting thought until he thought he’d split. First, the stranger was no joker, no hoaxer. He might be in error, but he had not been playing a game, or exercising a queer sense of humor. No, the stranger had wanted money, all right. In fact, it now seemed to Oppie that he could have been hinting at money from pressure. For certainly anyone like this Mrs. Quinn would prefer *not* to have her whereabouts known to a newspaper. Oppie did not think there could be much money in a mere follow-up story. He congratulated himself upon his own shrewdness.

But the tantalizing question was: *Did* this Mrs. Quinn, under another name, live in Sans Souci? A woman with a trial behind her? A trial for murder! Oppie thought he would split.

But he dared not, he knew, mention any of this to Morgan Lake. Morgan Lake had been severe with Oppie before, in the matter of gossip with, or about, the tenants. *He'd* have none of it. *He'd* want to know why Oppie had not simply sent the man away. There would be no discussion. But Oppie had to discuss this with someone or Oppie would burst.

Maybe he could tell Kelly Shane about it. Kelly was a pit of discretion, a receiver of confidences, a listener who buried forever what he heard. (Or else it went down to some dark-skinned parallel civilization from whence it never reappeared to bother anyone white.) But Kelly Shane, whose hours were erratic, was gone for this day, and would not be around again till 6:30 in the morning. And Oppie, off at one A.M., crossed Kelly's path only infrequently. So Oppie thought and thought, by himself, and kept watching for the stranger to reappear, but he did not return . . . and Oppie would split!

Was one of the widows at Sans Souci this Mrs. Quinn? An alleged murderess? Who had "got off"? Changed her name? Disappeared? It was *possible*! Oppie's veins thrilled. Yes, it *was* possible! He kept going over the seventeen names in his mind. Oh, this was too juicy a bit for such as Oppie to keep to himself, forever.

Forever lasted until nine P.M. when Harriet Gregory came into the lobby to buy cigarettes, as she often did. Oppie eyed her.

Harriet Gregory was moody about Oppie Etting. Loneliness was nothing rare at Sans Souci, but she was, in some ways, the loneliest widow of them all. So, some nights, she kidded Oppie and set up a companionable gossipy, giggly session, in which Harriet assigned him the role of the devil and herself the role of the tempted who shouldn't laugh, but who did appreciate wit since she was *very* witty herself. Then, on other nights, her innate snobbery won over the loneliness and Harriet revenged it by being extremely haughty and rude to him.

This night, with Christmas so near, she might have been driven to an especial rudeness, but she did not seem to have put on either attitude firmly. She looked lost. She had so little, Oppie found it in his heart to feel sorry for her. He swore her to secrecy and told her about this Mrs. Quinn.

Harriet reacted with an uncertain veering between strong indignation that such a thing could be rumored about so respectable an address, and an avid, fearfully delighted licking over of names. But who? Who? She solemnly agreed with Oppie that this must go no farther, probably nothing to it . . . and yet . . .

When she left the lobby, however, Harriet knew very well where she could barter this news for a long session of companionship. It would be weak of her. Yet, ought not warning be given? It took her all the way around the corner to the foot of the stairs to rationalize her desire. Harriet Gregory went up and rapped on Agnes Vaughn's door.

Agnes Vaughn was watching television and let her in reluctantly. But Agnes grew cordial as soon as Harriet began to tell. The two of them had a fine two hours, ripping the widows up and down, and Harriet finally went to bed sated, and even purged.

Agnes had agreed that this story ought not to be spread but of course the next day she did tell her special cronies, Felice Paull and Ida Milbank.

It was Felice Paull, viewing the possibility of the presence of Mrs. Quinn with civic-minded concern, who told Daisy Robinson. She, Felice, proposed to find out the facts. She would go—yes, just as soon as Christmas was over—to the library and look in the old newspaper files for any account of the trial of a Mrs. Quinn. Perhaps Felice would find her photograph. This would settle the doubt. This was the intelligent thing to do. Felice respected Daisy's intelligence and awaited praise.

But Daisy Robinson was not one for murder mysteries. She didn't believe in them, either in fiction or in life. They were cheap, she felt. Crime was below the salt on Daisy's mental table. So she laughed at Felice. It was pure melodrama. The intelligent thing to do, said Daisy, was to forget it. Felice Paull felt miffed.

Ida Milbank told Sarah Lee Cunneen, blabbed it out. Ida was a transmitter of news who seemed never to appreciate the meaning of what simply went through her. Sarah Lee immediately checked with Agnes and promised not to spread the rumor except, of course, to her sidekick Bettina Goodenough, with whom she talked it over all afternoon. In fact, they helped each other pack for their trip so as not to have to stop talking.

That was how Georgia Oliver came to overhear some of it in the hall upstairs when they were on their way to Bettina's. Bettina innocently filled her in before Sarah Lee could stop it.

So Georgia went down the hall and told Ursula Fitzgibbon. Ursula refused to believe any part of it. So distasteful! It was that Mr. Etting's *fault* and unfortunate. Georgia said she was very sorry for this woman, whoever she might be, and really thought one *ought* not to talk about it. At all. So they talked about Robert Fitzgibbon—a subject interesting to them both.

Nona Henry was sitting in the last sun in the patio as Sarah Lee and Bettina went forth, carrying overnight cases. Sarah Lee Cunneen was a realistic little soul and, by now, she knew perfectly well that the story *was* being spread. She didn't intend to miss the fun of doing her share, before leaving. So she told Nona.

"This woman could be here," Sarah Lee said. "For heaven's sakes, who'd know the difference? You got the rent, you get the apartment. Did *I* give references? Anybody ask *you* about your past life?"

Bettina said, "I think it's scary. I don't see how we will ever know. One of us might be a murderess!" (By now, Mrs. Quinn was a murderess and no doubt about it.) Bettina laughed. Bettina's laugh meant not mirth but interest. Bettina's laugh was for oiling social hinges.

Nona scarcely responded. She bade them godspeed politely.

When they had gone on, Nona sat fuming. She thought the story was ridiculous.

The sun was almost gone when Tess Rogan ambled by. When Nona nodded Tess turned back. "Hi," she said. "Have you heard this thing about a Mrs. Quinn?"

"Yes, I have." Nona felt surprised that Tess Rogan knew.

"Daisy Robinson told me." Tess sighed and sat down on the bench. Her feet were large and ugly and stood on their heels before her as if she'd forgotten them. "If she got it straight, somebody's here in disguise." Tess grinned.

"You don't *believe* it, do you?" cried Nona. "A criminal! *Here!*"

"I don't know enough to have a belief," Tess said mildly.

"In this place!" Nona bristled. "Maybe you're one of those who say that where there is smoke there has got to be fire." Her voice held scorn. She was braced against this woman.

"I should say that where there is smoke there may, or may not, be fire," said Tess amiably. "You think 'this place' is too respectable?" She looked up at the windows of Sans Souci. "Respectability. We pay for it."

"I don't know what you mean . . ." Nona felt confused. This woman did confuse her.

“We put up with the poor plumbing, the chipping paint, the smells—because Sans Souci is so respectable. I wonder why.”

“Because, I suppose, decent people, living decently—” Nona flared and stopped and bit her tongue.

“Just the place for this Mrs. Quinn, then,” mused Tess. “Respectable. She would want that. She could live here, decently. Among the silverfish,” Tess added mischievously, “in these dismal kitchens and beat-up bathrooms.”

“Why—” Nona bit her tongue again. She had been going to say “Why don’t you live somewhere else if you don’t like it here?”

“I’m going around the world, in the spring,” said Tess Rogan, as if she were answering what Nona had not asked aloud. “Or, I may.”

“Isn’t that nice?” said Nona, polite and skeptical. “I see you got back safely from the Mission,” she said.

“Oh yes.” Tess Rogan did not volunteer any explanation of how she had done this. She was looking up at the windows. “But don’t you suppose,” she said in that musing tone, “that in the pasts of seventeen women—a lot of years when you add them together—there must have been *some* sin? There well may be *some* repentant and forgiven sinner, living quietly and decently among us.”

Nona felt irritated. She found this old woman’s manner of speaking annoying and upsetting. “I’m afraid I’m chilly. Would you excuse me?” Nona rose. “I certainly hope this wild tale will just die down,” she said.

“Yes,” said Tess.

And that was irritating too. It didn’t *mean* anything. Nona resented those eyes and whatever was in them. She walked away, disliking Tess Rogan heartily, and the more heartily because she did not really know why.

But when she was in her kitchen making supper, her brain began to tick the widows off and she could not stop it.

Out of and into the building today, the story went. All right, that eliminated Marie Gardner who never came out of her door. And Agnes Vaughn who seldom, if ever, went out, and when she did, did so with fanfare. And Elna Ames who, rumor said, was not feeling well would not have been out this day. And Kitty Forrest and Joan Braverman, who had jobs and were therefore away from the building all day long, not going in and out. So that’s five from seventeen leaves twelve—

Not *me!* thought Nona. For pity's sakes! So that leaves eleven.

Her brain kept going around and around. But surely, not Ursula Fitzgibbon, so fragile and full of grace (and not Agnes Vaughn). And not Caroline Buff! Unthinkable! Not one of the older ladies, the deans of the house. Not Ursula the Good Dean (nor Agnes the Bad Dean), nor Caroline, the Dean who transcended this kind of judgment.

Tess Rogan? Did age eliminate her? Why should it? Nobody knew how old this Mrs. Quinn would be. Nona shivered. Oh, nonsense! Melodrama! She sat down to eat and fix her mind, God help her, on a book. It was Christmas Eve.

Georgia Oliver knocked on Nona Henry's door at eight o'clock that Christmas Eve. "Mrs. Fitz wants to know if you won't come over and have a Christmas cookie," said she. "We are watching television and waiting for Robert. Please come."

Nona had been crying for almost an hour and crying bitterly. Her eyes were swollen, her whole face lumpy and distorted. She had turned off all but one lamp and stood in shadow. "Oh, I don't think . . ." she began.

Georgia said, softly and pityingly, "But tomorrow is Christmas. And everything works out. It always does. Please come." She must have been able to hear the aftermath of tears in Nona's voice.

Georgia Oliver's nicely formed body was, by Sans Souci standards, young. In her sweet face the soft blue eyes had always been friendly. Now her fair hair, silhouetted against the pinkish light from the open door across the hall, was reminiscent of a halo. "Were you going to church?" asked Georgia gently.

"I . . . hadn't . . ." Nona straightened. "As a matter of fact, I've been bawling my head off," she confessed bluntly. There was virtue in this. She felt better, she realized with surprise.

"We all do, sometimes," Georgia said. "But please come over? We aren't going to church, either. It really doesn't matter."

"In just a minute," Nona pleaded.

She hurried into her bathroom and did what she could to her face. All right. She would go. She did not know these women very well but they were gentle and good. That much was obvious. Perhaps goodness was the thing she longed for.

“Come in, Mrs. Henry,” said Mrs. Fitz cordially. The room was warm and a little stuffy. The furniture was pure Sans Souci but, here and there, Mrs. Fitz had strewn her personal touches. An ivory letter opener. An African violet. Some photographs. A white-and-silver shawl over the back of a chair. The room was softly lit by one pink-shaded lamp. A television set was flickering busily in the corner; a singer, wearing a long spangled gown, was singing a carol there.

“Just some Christmas music,” said the old lady, her face crinkling. “Do sit down, Mrs. Henry. That chair will be comfortable, I think.” She herself sat, without lounging, in a smallish chair. “Perhaps Georgia will bring you a cup of tea.”

“I’m fetching it,” Georgia called jauntily from the kitchen.

“And the cookies?”

Nona was suddenly very calm and, in a numb way, quite happy. She felt safe, as if she had just rounded a windy point and come abruptly into a harbor.

She took tea, nibbled a cookie. The voices lapped against her soothingly, saying nothing that was upsetting, nothing that needed analysis, or argument. Nothing that hurt.

In the corner (In New York? In Chicago?) people kept singing. But the volume was low and the music did not interfere with the gentle voices present.

Where was Mrs. Henry from? Oh, from Poughkeepsie? Oh, yes. Mrs. Fitz came from New York. The city, yes. And what had been Mr. Henry’s profession? A motion-picture theatre! Why, how interesting! Samuel Fitzgibbon had been an attorney—and finally, of course, a judge. “A rather well-known judge,” Georgia added.

Georgia was from San Francisco. Pat Oliver had been a newspaperman, she said. “We were so happy,” Georgia said. “I remember everything good.”

“Val and I,” said Nona, “had such wonderful times.” How could she have imagined, an hour ago, that she would be sitting here, teacup in hand, saying *this*?

“Robert is a newspaperman, too,” said Georgia. “There is something about them, I suppose . . . for me.”

“Georgia is going to be my daughter,” said Mrs. Fitz fondly. “She is like my daughter, now. Robert is coming, later on this evening.”

“He is wonderful,” said Georgia. “It is wonderful how things work out.”

(I suppose he is, thought Nona, and so was her first husband. I suppose that is possible.)

“My Pat would have liked Robert very much,” said Georgia. “Another cookie?”

Nona could feel a knot in her mind uncoiling and going limp. How strange—and wonderful, really—that this was possible! “When do you plan your wedding?” she asked politely.

“Oh, we aren’t sure,” said Georgia. “We’ll see.” She was perfectly relaxed. So gentle and easy. She seemed to be afloat on some cushioning faith. Not torn by anything.

“We are all very happy,” said Mrs. Fitz, “that this is going to happen. Robert has been a gypsy long enough. Europe, Asia.” She sighed. “So good to have him around.”

“Will he stay in this country?”

“I think so,” said Georgia. “If not, why, I can go with him some of the time. I wouldn’t leave Mrs. Fitz for too long, of course. Or Joanna, either. Joanna is *my* daughter. She is married a year, bless her heart.”

Nona exclaimed and the talk turned to children. Mrs. Fitz told about her older son, and tolled off the names of his children. The names were pleasant to hear.

Nona spoke of Dodie and Silas and the baby. She spoke of Millicent and Milly’s baby and Milly’s death.

“It is hard to understand sometimes,” said Mrs. Fitz, “and go on. I know, my dear.”

“Yet you know you must and you do,” said Georgia serenely.

She smiled in the little ensuing silence, and changed the subject gracefully. “Did you enjoy the Mission? Wasn’t it beautiful?”

“Yes,” said Nona. And what came into her mind came out of her mouth. “I can’t *imagine* Christmas in Las Vegas . . .”

“Ah, well,” said Mrs. Fitz, forgivingly. “They are nice persons. Very gay. I suppose they will enjoy it. Not that *I* would. Or you, Georgia, dear?”

“No,” said Georgia, “I like to be quiet, at Christmas time with—” she changed her sentence, “with nice persons.”

Nona felt a healing peace. These women knew. This was the way. To be gentle, to be kind, loving, and serene. She thought that, if she were to live to be seventy-five, she would like to be as calm and as good and as well-beloved as Ursula Fitzgibbon. (She would like to be Georgia. Loving and useful.)

Nona remembered, for all she felt so happy here, to rise before too long. “I’ll say good night. Your son will be coming along.”

“Oh, don’t go. It’s . . . ten thirty is it? Robert will be late. A night owl, actually . . .”

“I think,” said Nona, “that I will go to the Christmas Eve services, after all. You have put me in the mood.” She meant this with all her heart. She wanted them to be pleased.

“Ah, then *do* go,” said Georgia, at once. “So glad you feel like it.”

“We mustn’t forget what Christmas *means*,” said Mrs. Fitz.

“It’s for giving,” said Georgia Oliver.

Nona crossed to her own rooms, got hat and coat and purse. She felt so wonderfully soothed. She was very glad, now, that the Gadabouts had gone away. This was better than bridge, and nibbling and giggling. “Better” was not the word. This was *right*.

She firmed her door and walked down the corridor and down the stairs, full of this revelation.

Yes, Christmas. *Of course*, it was goodness, good will. Very simple. Very corny. Very true.

Bemused, she came into the lobby where the tree shone splendidly.

Oppie Etting was at the desk. One woman was standing, alone, near the glass door. Nona knew her name, Caroline Buff. An elderly widow, dressed for outdoors. The sight of her was tinder and Nona’s mood the flame. An old woman, alone. Was she wishing to go out and hesitating to do so, alone, by night? Was she in need of someone? Could Nona be of service? Was Christmas not for giving?

Nona crossed toward her and said, gently and sweetly, “Mrs. Buff? Are you going to church? I am going and I would be happy, if you are alone . . .” She stood smiling, like Georgia, gentle and kind to an elder.

Mrs. Buff looked up from the buttons of her glove. Another handsome old woman, Nona was thinking, in a flood of generous admiration. “I am just waiting for my son and daughter-in-law, who are parking the car,” said Mrs. Buff. She smiled and nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Henry. I am, however,” she added, “a Jewess.”

Nona stammered that she was sorry. She hadn’t meant— She had only meant— She would say “good night” then.

Mrs. Buff’s eyes were neither amused nor offended. They kindly dismissed her.

Nona bumbled through the glass door. The string of lights over the entrance threw colored blobs upon the pavement. She started along the walk. She had meant to ask Mr. Etting about churches. She had not been to a church in California, not yet. Nona realized, now, that she had been thrown into confusion, she did not know where she was going.

But I am going, she told herself firmly, searching for that mood of peace and joy. I *meant* well, just now. I didn’t know . . . how could I have known? I meant to be kind. I *want* to be good, and I will go to church.

She heard the sound of the glass door moving and looked behind. Oh yes . . . that coat, the red one. Here came Tess Rogan, out into the night.

Nona conquered the impulse of her feet to hurry on. No, it was Christmas, and one old lady was the same as another, surely, in the eyes of human kindness. So Nona waited.

As Tess Rogan caught up to her, she said, “Are you going to church, Mrs. Rogan? If so and if you’d rather not go alone . . . mayn’t I . . . ?”

Tess Rogan stood still. “One always goes to church alone, I think,” she said reflectively. “But it might be nice if we walked along together.”

“I don’t quite . . . I mean to say, *where* . . . what church?” Nona felt herself floundering. She did not know where they were going or who was being kind to whom or even whether she was wanted.

“Presbyterian?” said Tess Rogan with faint dryness. “It’s the nearest.”

Nona began to move beside her, with her mood a shambles.

A car door slammed violently. A figure came lurching into the arch. A tall man paused under the light there and tottered.

Tess Rogan was near enough and quick enough to take three steps and catch his arm. “Whoops!” she said.

“Now, I wonder . . .” He was tall and good-looking with dark hair, and a snubbed-off profile that was boyish, but weather-worn and seamed. The scent of liquor emanated from his mouth in a cloud. “Shall I go up?” he asked. “Or shall I *not* go up? Which is the better part of valor? What do *you* say?”

He peered at Tess Rogan.

“Air,” said Tess.

“Air?” he murmured. He cocked his head. “*Fresh* air, I presume?” He had not seen Nona at all.

“Can you stand up?” inquired Tess mildly.

“I think so,” he said. “I am standing, am I not? Or are you holding me up?” He knotted his eye muscles.

“We’ll see,” said Tess and she took her hand away.

He swayed. “A hundred paces, eh?” he said. “Back and forth. Forth and back. Then, I go up. O.K.?”

“Twenty paces might do it,” said Tess judiciously. “Or none. You are not as drunk as you seem.”

“That’s *true*,” he said. “I’m stalling. Don’t want to go up. I think I’ll go with you. Where are you going?”

“To church.”

His brows flew. “May I come?”

“No,” Tess said, “not with me.” Her voice had no anger in it, at all. This was fact.

He threw one arm across her shoulders. “Pity?” he begged. “For pity?”

Nona, standing there as if she were invisible, could see very well what was going on. *He was trying to kiss her!* Nona’s heart pounded, her gorge rose . . . trying to kiss an old woman of seventy-one! It was nauseating! And the old woman stood quite still.

He did not kiss her.

Something stopped him. He stepped back. “I am carried away,” he mumbled, “with good will to all. That is a lie, mistress.”

“So I perceive,” Tess said dryly. “Good luck to you, sir.”

“I wish you wouldn’t leave me,” the man said, plaintively, turning as Tess started by, “at the bottom of a pit. I still . . .” He stood erect suddenly. “If I didn’t still know it when I see it, the pit could close over.”

“Perhaps it will,” said Tess softly. She went through the arch.

Nona stood in a shadow. Utterly paralyzed.

“Who’s there?” the man said owlshly. “Nobody?”

Two figures came in through the arch. A stout woman in black satin coat and a stout man. Both were sober and respectable. They hesitated.

The drunken man became sober in an instant. “I beg your pardon,” he said urbanely and stepped from their path. They went toward the building. The man settled his coat with a wag of his shoulders and walked after, stepping as steadily as they.

Nona slipped out of the shadow and through the arch.

Out on the sidewalk, Tess Rogan was waiting for her.

“I don’t . . . don’t think I’ll go,” Nona fluttered. She was frightened. She was fascinated. She wanted to be reassured. She wanted the mystery to be brushed away by some commonplace. She wanted to be coaxed to come. And in the worst way, she wanted that conversation clarified so that she could be inside the mystery, too.

But Tess Rogan neither coaxed nor explained. “As you like,” she said amiably and walked on.

Nona went back inside the patio wall and sat down on that hidden bench; she hugged her coat around her. She did not know what to think or even what she actually was thinking.

But the sky had removed to a higher place, the horizon had retreated, the little saucer of Sans Souci spilled over.

Now, in the book of her past life, on those pages that flipped by so fast, her memory seemed to put in a thumb, to cease skimming and begin to read.

Sitting in the dark, Nona remembered that she and Val had been happy. She and Val had also been miserable. There were things about Val she had never liked at all; she had simply put up with them. She knew exactly which

things. She and Val had discussed them, fought about them. And Val had hated Nona on occasion, as she very well understood, for things about her that he had never been able to change. This was so. It did not banish grief. Or love. Or loss. It was just true. And she had always known it.

And I am Nona O'Connor, she thought, and I always have been.


Her grief was suddenly for Val Henry, for him, just as he had been and now was no more, and she wept as she had never wept in her life, a deep and terrible dissolving.

Afterwards she felt very strange. What was she doing here on this dark bench in the middle of the night before Christmas, staring through foliage at some colored lights far away? She had meant to go to church, but she was not in church. She had meant to pray, but she did not know what to pray.

A thought struck in. That drunken (or not drunken) man had said "go up." Then he couldn't be Avery Patrick, who lived on the first floor. Then, could he be Robert Fitzgibbon? Impossible!

But she knew that it was so.

Chapter 9

 To Sans Souci came Christmas Day.

In the morning, after the squeals and the packages, Morgan Lake went to his post at the desk.

Soon after, Miss Winifred Lake went on an expedition of her own. He saw her begin it, and he winced, but she had done this for years; Rose still thought it was cute.

Miss Winifred Lake, playing Santa, began to distribute little gifts among the widows of Sans Souci. Pot holders, they were. (They always were.) She had made them herself and they were well made, for Winnie could sew expertly. She had wrapped each of them carefully, lavish with ribbon and seal.

Morgan reflected that not all the widows were here. Some celebrated Christmas elsewhere. Morgan was thankful that Mrs. Hull, for one, had been taken off by some nearby relatives for the day. Mrs. Goodenough and Mrs. Cunneen were gone to Las Vegas. Daisy Robinson was also out for the day. She had hustled away early.

Winnie, he knew, would visit all the rest.

He watched her set off down the east wing where Marie Gardner never answered her bell but Felice Paull would, at the patio end. He saw her return on nimble feet, to cross the lobby and do the north wing. Caroline Buff, at the angle. Harriet Gregory. Ida Milbank. In a little while, he thought he heard her skipping up the stairs.

He moved his shoulders uneasily. Winnie had begun to do this as a child. But now that she was seventeen, *he* did not think it was cute. True, none of the widows had ever complained of it. In fact, many had said to him, over the years, that they had been touched and pleased. But he did not like it. Never had. And definitely did not like it now.

He didn't entirely understand why Winnie kept it up. As far as he knew, Winnie was not fond of the seventeen widows of Sans Souci. She had let those so inclined make a pet of her when she had been smaller. But now that she was too old to be a pet, and almost old enough to be a friend, he knew that she was not really a friend to any of them. She, rather, reflected her

mother's attitude, her mother's contemptuous impatience with the lot of them.

The switchboard began to claim his attention. There would be long-distance calls throughout the day for those widows who remained.

Nona Henry was dreading her own inevitable long-distance call. She could not imagine what she could say to Dodie. Must neither laugh nor weep . . .

When her doorbell rang, she went to it in surprise. (She fleetingly hoped this would be Georgia Oliver.)

"Oh," said the young girl standing there. "Oh, I'm sorry. You know, I forgot that Mrs. More was gone. You are Mrs. Henry, aren't you? I'm Winifred Lake. Mr. Lake's daughter."

"Oh yes, Winifred," said Nona. Her voice was kind and her smile polite. What she knew, in the back of her mind, stayed hidden. What she had seen, by night, below.

"Merry Christmas," said Winnie, smiling so that in her smooth cheek a dimple appeared. "I have a present. Well, I don't know you yet, Mrs. Henry, but I made Christmas presents for everybody. Here." With an engaging awkwardness Winnie thrust forth a small flat, fancily wrapped package.

Nona was overcome. "Why, how nice!" she murmured. "Won't you come in a minute, Winifred?"

Winifred would.

Nona's mind was scurrying about. What did one do? She had no gift for this girl. Was there anything she could wrap up quickly? No, no, that would be ridiculous.

But one could not refuse to take a Christmas present. That would not do.

"I haven't a thing . . ." she began. "I wonder if you'd like a glass of juice, perhaps? Won't you sit down, Winifred?"

The girl sat down in one of the chairs near the windows. "I'd love it," she said, with stars in her eyes.

Nona went into her kitchen, flustered, but rather pleased too. She opened her refrigerator and took out the remains of the morning orange juice. She turned to open a cupboard and reach for a glass. What could she give? The only solution leaped into her thought. Well, of course, a bit of money. If it were presented gracefully . . . She could say, "Buy something *you'd* like,

dear.” She could put it in an envelope, she was thinking, a dollar or two. Any young girl . . .

“I hope you like orange,” she called. “Are you having a nice Christmas?”

“Oh, just lovely!” Winnie said ecstatically.

Nona just happened to look over the top of the cupboard, expecting to see the young face turned toward her with a smile.

The morning sunshine came strongly through and hit upon the girl and upon her hands. Winnie wasn’t even looking. What was she doing?

Nona stood still, with the glass in one hand. Winifred Lake was pulling money out of the pocket of her dress. Crumpled bills. The young hands were smoothing them and stacking them and counting them. Miss Winifred Lake was adding up the loot.

Nona turned away. She filled the glass, feeling stony cold. She brought it into the living room and the girl took it in innocent empty hands.

Nona picked up the tissue-wrapped package, sat down in an opposite chair, and deliberately opened it. The two pot holders, within, were blue and yellow, very gay.

“I made them,” Winnie said shyly.

“You made them for Mrs. More?” said Nona coolly. “Don’t you think you might have sent them to her?”

“But I don’t know where to reach her,” said Winnie making her eyes big. “And I want *you* to have them, now.” (Oh, she controlled those dimples. She had them when she wanted them.)

“Thank you,” said Nona. You little fraud! she was fuming. You junior racketeer! Butter wouldn’t melt in your mouth, would it? But I’ve seen you, you and that male, whoever he is, and I’ve seen you when you were not quite so innocent and not quite such a sweet little child!

Nona placed the gift upon a table with fastidious fingers.

Winnie Lake was female enough to receive intuitively the news of that cold fury.

She cut her losses. She drained down the orange juice and rose with an insulting swift and easy thrust of her young muscles. “I must skip along,

Mrs. Henry,” she said and her voice overdid the sweetness now. “Thank you so much. And I hope you have a lovely day.”

Nona received the hostility and returned it in kind. “You are very sweet,” she said. “Thank you, my dear, for the lovely present.”

When Winnie had gone Nona ground her teeth together. Christmas, she thought bitterly. Oh, what is it? Last night, for a while, I thought it was goodness and giving. (Oh, what am I?)

Her phone rang. It was Dodie. Nona was able to talk across the continent with no sentimentality and no false cheer either. When she hung up she knew she had sounded fine, controlled and easy, because that little phony had made her so mad!

Strange, how things work out!

When the group of widows came in, at midafternoon, returning from the Christmas dinner party that had been organized by Felice Paull, Morgan Lake cast an expertly assessing eye upon them.

He knew at once that it had been ghastly, again.

It had. Kitty Forrest and Joan Braverman had been roped in. They were the only workingwomen in the building.

Joan Braverman was an old war horse, heart and soul in her job, quite convinced that the business could not be run without her. A Christmas dinner was necessary; she didn't like to cook, so she didn't mind where, what or with whom she ate. Kitty Forrest went along with Joan. She too lived a disproportionate amount of her total life in her office. But Kitty was a private worrier and Joan, always so sure of herself, was something to cling to. Both of them gladly let Felice manage.

Elna Ames had gone along in sheer weakness. She felt so ill, it really did not matter. She was quiet, as usual.

Ida Milbank, of course, had made no trouble. It was Harriet Gregory who had had a run-in with Agnes Vaughn.

This could almost have been predicted.

Agnes, who almost never went out, had allowed herself to be dragged forth for this affair. After all, Christmas was Christmas and an effort must be made. So, arrayed in a garment so madly out of style that it was almost back in again, Agnes had walked on her tiny feet as far as the elevator, and all the

way through the patio as far as a taxicab. The crisp air had not been too much for her.

The necessity of sitting at table in the restaurant and waiting for the waitress, however, had bored Agnes Vaughn, who was used to doing exactly as she pleased. A little controversy would make things livelier. Agnes cast about for a victim. She discovered a bit of a grudge. Oh, she had been intrigued into being much too chummy the other night. So Agnes pounced on Harriet Gregory.

Harriet had considered herself to have been mortally insulted before the roast turkey came in. But she had eaten it, for economic reasons, in a bristling silence that radiated her self-image of “good breeding.” Before the pudding, Harriet’s “good breeding” had broken down before her even more powerful self-image of the “sensitive soul.”

Felice Paull, who was a master at giving and taking offense, had begun to scold Harriet, claiming to be under the impression that this would brace her up. So Harriet had flared back at Felice, although she had not left the battlefield, for poor Harriet had long known how little solace there is in solitary indignation.

Elna Ames had borne the unpleasantness in pale withdrawal. Kitty Forrest was upset and feared she would not digest. Joan Braverman had laid about her with common sense, and this was easily beaten away by Agnes Vaughn who felt quite stimulated by the challenge.

They returned finally, en masse, but in varying degrees of huff or disappointment.

Morgan Lake watched them break up in the lobby, where Harriet fled dramatically (she had to go to the bathroom anyway) actually *running* around the corner to her own apartment. Elna Ames and Kitty and Joan had sat limply down in the lobby to deplore everything, with the righteousness of those who had not really been involved.

Felice, her eyes swimming not too much more than usual, had shepherded Agnes to the elevator (with Ida trotting after), and upstairs the three of them no doubt would sip and munch the rest of Christmas away.

It had almost been gotten through. Morgan sighed.

He was pleased to see Georgia Oliver and Robert Fitzgibbon come through the lobby, going out, at about 4:30. A man opening a door for a

woman, bowing her through before him, putting the red velvet carpet of masculine courtesy under her feet—this was good to see, in the lopsided world of Sans Souci, sans men, sans children, on Christmas Day.

(Avery Patrick had not been seen for three days.)

Morgan checked his flock over. Poor Marie Gardner had spent Christmas Day no one would ever know how. There had been no sound and no sign of her. There never was. Mrs. Buff, also, had minded her own business but he felt very sure that *she* had done so competently.

The rest . . .

He found himself wondering about two of them. Mrs. Henry. He had not seen her, all day. Still, he had caught the tone of her voice on that long-distance call from Poughkeepsie, and she had sounded quite all right.

Then, Mrs. Rogan. She puzzled him. There had been no less than five long-distance calls for her. New York, New York. New Haven, Connecticut. Berkeley, California. Dallas, Texas . . . and one call, overseas, from Honolulu.


He could not help wondering why—why in the world!—was this Mrs. Rogan alone at Sans Souci at Christmas time.

He, himself, was alone most of that day.

Only when Oppie Etting came was Morgan Lake freed to go to his own celebration—the eggnog bowl, what friends were still beside it, Winnie permitting herself to be admired, and Rose, a little flushed and excited from a long afternoon of showing Winnie off.

But it was dark, now. The day was going over. Sans Souci had got through it, somehow.

Chapter 10

 Impeded somewhat by Christmas Day, the ripple went outward from the fallen stone. But the story about this Mrs. Quinn did not reach every ear in Sans Souci. Avery Patrick was one who heard nothing about it; he ducked hearing about the widows, anyhow.

Oppie Etting, recognizing that the story was dubious and incomplete, was well aware that he should not have told Harriet Gregory one word. The rumor was spreading, the house was talking; and the less known, the more to guess. Oppie Etting felt guilty and he was afraid of Morgan Lake. He did not tell Mr. Lake. In fact, for a few days, Morgan Lake was one who did not hear.

In a way Morgan Lake *was* the respectability of Sans Souci, visible, incarnate . . . and he was not disturbed until Christmas had been gotten through.

Two days after Christmas, however, Felice Paull returned from the library, tired and baffled. She had sacrificed her morning and most of her afternoon, but she had not been able to uncover any news story about any Mrs. Quinn. Of course, the year was in doubt and the place was impossible to guess, and there were so many, many newspapers. Felice was miffed, just the same. She decided that the whole thing was bunkum. If *she* couldn't find a newspaper account of Mrs. Quinn's trial, there probably had never been such a thing.

It was Felice's nature to protest. She had a compulsion toward argument and contention. She felt it her duty to raise questions. So Felice Paull spoke of the rumor to Morgan Lake.

He turned to stone. Even Felice was taken aback by the frozen look upon him. No one had seen Morgan Lake angry. Perhaps this was how anger took him.

When Oppie Etting came in that afternoon, at his usual hour, he perceived at once that he was in for it. He had never seen Morgan Lake look so.

Oppie did not want to lose his job. He had thought of a possible way to make amends, to squirm out of punishment. Of course, it would sacrifice two things, the truth and Harriet Gregory, but Oppie cared more for his job than for either. So, as soon as Morgan Lake, in half a sentence, raised the subject, Oppie broke in. “Oh, that! *My* fault!” he groaned. “I don’t know what got into me. I was pulling Mrs. Gregory’s leg, that’s all.”

“You were *what*?”

“I made up that story,” said Oppie. “I mean, she comes down here . . .”

Morgan Lake stared at him. He opened his mouth.

Oppie said, “Look, I’ll explain to her. Confess the whole thing was just a joke. She shouldn’t have swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. Besides she *promised* me, you know, to keep it dark.”

Morgan Lake said, “You think you’ll stop it?”

“Certainly, I’ll stop it,” Oppie said. Morgan had caught on to what had been Oppie’s inspiration. He knew that Mr. Lake would want the rumor stopped, undercut and dissipated. Oppie had thought of this way to do it. And only Oppie, in person, could destroy the rumor in this particular way. He had hoped that Morgan Lake would see that.

Morgan Lake said, “Stop it, then.” He started to walk away. He turned back and seemed to sway unsteadily. He was not a man to show temper or to shout but Oppie found himself quaking in his boots. “It’s brutal,” said Morgan Lake. “You are a brute, Etting. I don’t think I want you here. I’ll speak to the owner.”

“Mr. Lake, listen, I *know* I shouldn’t have started the thing but *I’ll* stop it! I’m sorry . . . but I can stop it. You’ll see.”

But the manager walked away moving unsteadily as if he were a sick man . . . as if what he felt was not anger, after all, but another emotion. Disgust, perhaps. Revulsion. Even nausea.

A jittery Oppie Etting got hold of Felice Paull, at once, and told her that he had made up the whole story just to . . . well, she knew . . . get Harriet Gregory all excited. Felice took a very dim view of his sense of humor. But she was mollified, just the same. This proved Felice to have been calm and intelligent.

The counterrumor spread.

Poor Harriet came flying down to the lobby that evening, weeping and raging. Oppie apologized over and over again. He crawled. He begged her pardon; he was a dog. But he knew she would be big about this. If he hadn't known she had such a marvelous sense of humor— At last she stopped crying and said she would try to forgive him but, of course, she could never trust him again. He was a treacherous man. Harriet had begun to glimpse a certain martyrdom. She had no idea she was being betrayed, in this very moment.

The word went around that Harriet Gregory had been made-a-fool-of. Some thought it was amusing. Some were indignant and blamed Oppie Etting. But there were those who blamed Harriet, maintaining that *they* had never been fooled by that silly story.

Agnes Vaughn said, "How about Leila Hull? She drinks like a fish. What's on her mind? Maybe *she's* Mrs. Quinn." Agnes ran her thumbnail between two teeth.

"There's no such woman," Felice Paull said complacently. "I checked, remember. It was all just a hoax and I told you so in the first place." She hadn't: she now believed that she had.

Agnes said, "Don't be too sure."

Felice said, "Well! It certainly is neither right nor just to accuse Mrs. Hull when there's nothing *to* the story." Felice let her eyes water with virtue.

Felice Paull was, unfortunately, one whose virtues antagonized almost everybody. This was why she clung to Agnes Vaughn. Agnes Vaughn didn't mind an argument or even a row, now and then, and while she took issue with Felice on many subjects, she was not antagonized, in the sense of feeling upset. In fact, she enjoyed herself.

Furthermore, although Agnes Vaughn never went anywhere or did anything and Felice Paull was quite active, it was Agnes who had the attractive power. She had an imagination. Where Felice was heavy, Agnes Vaughn, in the mind, was quicksilver.

"You believe what *you* want," said Agnes, now. Nobody made Agnes Vaughn feel guilty. Agnes cheerfully *was* guilty. She preferred a scandal.

Oppie Etting did not lose his job. Avery Patrick saw no point in throwing him out and getting a new man. Night men were hard to find and a new one

might want more money. Forget it. Or else give Avery a better reason.

Morgan Lake had given the owner no better reason than that Oppie Etting talked too much and started rumors. No account of this specific rumor, about a murder suspect living in Sans Souci, had gone through his lips. Or ever would.

For weeks the city of Pasadena had been bracing itself for New Year's Day. Tall ranks of seats on iron frameworks had long been built to bank the path of the Rose Parade, muffling over all manner of buildings. After Christmas, the city held its breath for New Year's.

All the widows were back in residence. The Gadabouts had returned.

(Winnie Lake went off for two days during this period, but she was of no concern to the widows and they were not permitted to feel the tension she had left behind her.)

Sarah Lee Cunneen and Bettina Goodenough invited Nona Henry to go to the parade with them. They had places in an upstairs window—very fine. Privileged.

“My lawyer got them for us,” said Sarah Lee. “Listen!”

The widows had their connections. They were fond of saying “My.” My doctor, my lawyer. My chiropodist. My butcher. My hair-dresser. For they were interconnected with the economy. They consumed.

Nona was a trifle cool, at first. But in the end, and somehow *because* Daisy Robinson said to her that personally *she* wanted no part of the Rose Parade and would not even watch it on a TV screen if she could help it, Nona perversely decided that she ought not to miss this. Yes, she would go.

It seemed that only the younger and stronger ones were going in the flesh. The crowds would be frightful. It meant rising early. And the night before, of course, was New Year's Eve.

New Year's Eve must be *got through* too, Nona discovered. A night for dancing. But who could dance, at Sans Souci? Even Georgia had no partner, for Robert Fitzgibbon had been “called away” for a day or two. Georgia would not have left Mrs. Fitz to see the Old Year out alone anyhow. Nona could have shared their tea and cookies but she did not feel like being quiet.

So when the Gadabouts got up an evening of bridge with Harriet Gregory, Nona made the fourth. They congratulated themselves that they

had a game right here in the building, for one did not go forth on New Year's Eve, since one had the impression that the streets were thronged in equal parts by drunks and policemen, and that people were being massacred by automobiles with statistical inevitability. In the safety of Bettina's apartment, however, Sarah Lee had stirred up a punch and put a "stick" in it.

Harriet Gregory was in a bitter mood, haughty about Oppie Etting, venomous about Agnes Vaughn. After two glasses of the punch, Harriet so far forgot herself as to become rather witty and funny. If Mrs. Quinn did not exist she ought to have existed. And if she were here, then Felice Paull would make a good murderess, wouldn't she though? No, no, how about Agnes Vaughn, herself? Obviously, any husband of Agnes Vaughn's would have been driven to acquire a girl friend. . . . They were naughty, the four of them. Nona laughed a lot. "What the hell?" as Bettina said.

So the Old Year went out, like a candle forgotten in the corner, the year of Nona's losses. The year of the end of her life.

She would get up very early and put on warm clothing and sally forth to see this famous parade, and if she was going to be tired and dopey from too little sleep and if there was going to be a bad taste in her mouth from the punch and the cake . . . oh, well. "Life's too short," as Bettina would say, and "What the hell?"

Chapter 11



Traffic strangled on its own ingredients in Pasadena on New Year's Day. The parade area, a wide band across the city's middle, was closed off to automobiles entirely. People streamed into it on foot, leaving their cars to narrow to the choking point the remaining streets, clotting every foot of curb, stuffing every vacant lot, and even dropping oil on front lawns where some imprisoned householders took a measure of revenge out in simple money.

By noon, however, the parade was over. Perhaps a million souls had somehow crept out of the tangle and were gone. The football game, not yet begun, had nevertheless drawn to itself and immobilized some thousands of cars. It became possible to drive in the city, if you were young and strong, or sufficiently motivated.

Morgan Lake had watched the more venturesome of his tenants twitter home from the morning's excitement. Now he anticipated callers, for this, on top of everything else, was the Day of the Grandchildren.

It happened every year. East of here, the land was peppered with small colleges, and more than one grandchild, driving back to school after the holidays, would be going by, and (importuned by the family, or figuring to acquire a free lunch, or in simple affection) would drop in at Sans Souci. Morgan Lake awaited them with a certain pleasure.

The first to come was a stocky lad of seventeen, in blue cotton slacks and a blue windbreaker, who had a cheerful ruddy face under a blond crew-cut. He bounded in on strong young legs and asked for Mrs. Rogan.

Morgan Lake listened to the unusual sound of feet *running* up the stairs.

The second to come was a trim little girl, seventeen, with long-lashed blue eyes and perfect confidence in her own female desirability, who asked, with automatic coquetry, for Mrs. Robinson. He heard her feet pass by the elevator, too.

The third to arrive was a girl, eighteen, with a long narrow face, a weary eyelid, a very short hair cut, and an air of pitying sophistication, who asked for Mrs. Fitzgibbon. This one pushed the button and rode up.

The fourth and last to come was a boy, eighteen, in a rumpled dark suit, with a bristle of black hair and a bad complexion, who asked for Mrs. Paull. He ambled off down the east wing.

Morgan Lake sat on his stool and smiled inwardly at the thought of so much youth in the building. He thought a little sadly of Winnie. She had come home from her beach party quieted, he thought. He wondered if she would ever get away and go to college. Wistfully he hoped that she would. He hoped so.

1. Johnny Paull rang Felice's bell and she opened the door and bore down upon him. No matter how big he grew, he would never match the mass of his grandmother. Right away he was clasped too close to her bosomy bulk. (This he managed to endure.) Then she thrust him off and wanted to know why he was so late. She had fixed lunch for him long ago. It was being held back on the stove. He ought to have phoned. It wasn't considerate. Her big eyes were hurt already, before he even got in the door.

He tried to apologize. "Jeepers, Gran, the traffic was fierce, and I didn't get going too early, I mean—"

Whatever he meant, she wasn't listening. She was pressing him to the table. Then he had to eat food that was sickeningly sauced, too rich for his day-after-New-Year's-Eve condition.

Then she wanted the dope on the family. He had to remember what he wasn't supposed to tell her, and it made him sound stupid and that was uncomfortable.

Then she said his suit needed pressing and she would press the trousers if he liked. He fended this offer away in pure panic.

Then she got on to Uncle Jeff. Did his father ever hear from Jeff at all? Well, *she* never did and Jeff was a bad son and none of her fault. Johnny, who privately thought Jeff was O.K., as uncles went, was wounded by his own cowardice, for it was wiser not to defend. So he responded in "yeah's" and "I guess so's" and hated himself.

"It means so much to her," his folks had said. "Try to stop by."

Whatever it was meaning to her, he got away in forty minutes, pleading a need to study, leaving her calling after him at her door, her big eyes swimming.

Johnny Paull strode through the lobby, the patio, and out to his jalopy, breathing hard. He'd write the folks he had stopped to see her. *The old bat*, he thought viciously. He had felt obliged, he had done it to please everybody, and he had meant well, but you always got off on the wrong foot with her, right away, and it was never any good, and next year, damn it, he would *not* stop, and when he got back to the dorm tonight he wouldn't even speak of it. He spat the taste of his grandmother out of his mouth and roared away.

2. Terri Fitzgibbon answered her grandmother's questions in kind. Yes, Daddy was fine. Mother was just fine, thanks, and sent her love. Yes, Uncle Rob *had* been to see them and looked so well, didn't he? (Syrup, thought Terri and counted her word a vivid simile.)

Luncheon was served to three of them. That goony Georgia Oliver was there (and what did Uncle Robert see in her?). She kept hopping up to fetch the hot muffins, the lemon for the tea. And Ursula kept saying, "Won't you have a little more of this nice crisp lettuce, Teresa dear? Here, let me put a little more salad on your plate. And how is college?"

"Just fine, Grandmamma."

"Do you like your teachers?"

"Oh yes." (Terri thought of Mr. Peterson, of whom she had been dreaming those quite frightening dreams, too often.)

"What courses are you taking, dear?"

Terri told her. She thought to herself, And if you knew what I'm learning in those courses you'd about flip, I'll bet. Her lip curled and she put it on the teacup's rim.

"I am so happy for you," said Ursula. "You are getting to be quite the young lady, Teresa. Let's see . . ."

"I'm eighteen," Terri said.

"Imagine!"

(I bet you can't, thought Terri.) She was bored stiff. She offered to wash the dishes but they cooed, "No, no." Georgia Oliver would do the dishes, later. She insisted. This was such a treat for Ursula. Was Teresa driving back alone? Was it safe? So far?

“I’ve been driving for two years, Grandmamma,” Terri said with a bit of impatience over which she quickly plastered a smile.

Then that goony Georgia wanted to know if she dated any special boy.

Terri said, “Well, no special boy . . .” making it sound as if there were dozens.

Ursula said, “Don’t be in a hurry, dear, about boys. There is plenty of time.”

(Terri’s eyes stung. Actually there was not *any* time. Actually, it was too late, now. Mr. Peterson was married!) “I expect to go for a Master’s degree,” she said haughtily.

“So ambitious,” cooed Ursula.

“Not really,” Terri said. “I do have a brain,” she added modestly. (Mr. Peterson had given her an A and she could take English 48 under him next year and . . .) Now, they wanted to know where she had gotten her dress. What was the difference to them where she had gotten her dress? She could have screamed!

Still, Terri managed to behave like a lady for one hour, and then made her prettiest excuses.

Ursula let her go with understanding. Of course she would want to get to the sorority house before dark. And were the girls nice, Teresa?

“Oh yes, Grandmamma, very nice. It was so nice to see you and thanks for the lovely luncheon. Good-by, Mrs. Oliver. So nice to have seen you again.”

Terri didn’t take the elevator down. She needed the quick romp of feet on stairs. Her own false cooing haunted her ears. So nice!

She passed Morgan Lake without a thought for the help, here. She hurried out to her little foreign car. Grandmamma was sweet and all that, but so conventional, so *boring*! She wasn’t *aware* of the intellectual and emotional problems of this generation. Terri began to cast ahead and see herself arriving, woman of the world, clicking up the stairs at the house, pulling off her little hat, tossing it on her black bedspread. “Hi, you guys.” She’d light a cigarette and kick off her shoes. She’d say to the guys, “Had to stop and see Grandmaw. Ye Gods, 683 clichés later . . .” she would say and her roommates would grin.

3. The pretty little girl with the big blue eyes and the turned-up nose said, “Hi, Daisy!”

“Linda! Well!” Daisy pecked her cheek. “Come in. Lord, I’m sorry . . . I haven’t even started lunch. What time is it? Almost one o’clock? Oh well, I thought I wouldn’t start anything until you got here anyhow.” Daisy bared her teeth and made gusty noises while her hands picked her book from the arm of the couch and put it gently on the table. “I was just going to make a sandwich. That do you?”

“Oh don’t bother much,” Linda said. “I’m not terribly hungry.” She stood on Daisy’s rug, strangely passive, and began to repeat some family messages, quite mechanically, and in a sequence that she had evidently memorized.

Daisy listened to the recital rather impatiently. Then she said, “How are *you*?”

“O.K.” the girl said. She just stood there, as if she presented herself for inspection and expected to be inspected.

“Come on into the kitchen.” Daisy humped her own bones, threw bacon into a frying pan. “Bacon and tomato?”

“Anything,” Linda said. She leaned on a counter and crossed her feet and looked down at her pretty ankles.

“Finding school interesting?” asked Daisy. “How are your grades?”

“Well, I guess I’m probably going to be on probation,” said Linda calmly. “It’s real fun though.”

Daisy, feeling shocked and also pressed upon and confused, slapped the sandwiches together too fast. They sat down at the dinette table and Linda began to pick daintily at the clumsy pile of bread and underdone bacon and unevenly sliced tomato. She didn’t complain. But Daisy felt put on the defensive.

Daisy didn’t know what to *say* to this child. She had no questions about the family. She was an excellent letter writer, herself, and kept up a brisk correspondence. Linda had already delivered the messages, such as they were. So Daisy began to pry into Linda’s academic life some more, but there was little response. The girl seemed to be allowing knowledge to flow over her and making no particular effort to retain any of it. When Daisy ventured to protest her bad grades Linda said, Well, she didn’t want to be a DAR.

“And what is that?”

“A Damned Average Raiser,” Linda enlightened her gently.

Daisy was taken aback. “But what are you planning to *do*?” Daisy was feeling in herself a surge of energy and purpose that wanted to compensate.

“Oh, I don’t know . . .” said Linda vaguely.

Daisy swallowed down the sermon that rose in her throat. “What interests you?” she demanded.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Linda repeated. “Lots of things, Daisy.” She smiled, with her lips closed.

Daisy chewed bread glumly.

She began to realize that Linda’s huge eyes kept, without seeming to keep, a sharp watch on the street. Before her sandwich had been eaten, the girl saw something out there and got up smoothly. “There’s Rod,” she said, “so I think I’ll have to go, Daisy. I’m sorry.”

“Who is Rod?” Daisy leaned back.

“Oh, that’s a boy that’s driving me.”

“But why didn’t you ask him to come in?”

“Oh no, he had to get gas in the car.”

“But isn’t he hungry?”

“Oh, no,” said Linda, with that faint little smile.

“I see,” said Daisy, coolly. “I suppose the two of you have already eaten?”

“Well, we did stop . . .”

Daisy felt furious. She was not one who fed people easily. The preparation of food was a nuisance to her. It didn’t matter, now, that the sandwich was not well prepared nor particularly tasty. The girl should have been straightforward about this.

“It was nice to see you,” Linda was saying, “and thanks for everything. But I guess I had better be going.”

“Good of you to come,” said Daisy in a somewhat sarcastic tone.

But Linda either did not notice or chose not to notice any sarcasm. She took herself away with the same grave, passive, and infuriating air of having done all that was necessary, and a little more, to have shown her body, her

face, her eyes, her hair, her ankles, in this place. As if this ought to have been quite good enough for Daisy.

When the door closed behind her, Daisy stood still and set her excellent mind to wondering which of them was at fault. Why had the visit been so meaningless, so devoid of any contact? Was the girl to blame? Or was Daisy a failure at being a grandmother?

In about a minute she turned on her heel and rushed to scoop the dishes into the sink so she could get back to her book in good conscience. Face it, she thought. That girl bores me almost to tears. What a little twerp she is, really. There is nothing there that interests *me*, whatsoever. I suppose she'll get married, to some junior twerp. And God help them! *I* can't. And I can't care.

Linda wafted her slim hips across the lobby and through the patio.

"Waiting long?" she asked Rod sweetly.

"That's O.K.," he said, indifferently. They both knew he would have waited quite a while longer. Linda slipped into the seat and he left rubber on the pavement in a show-off getaway.

"How's your grandmother?" he asked in a minute.

"O.K.," said Linda. Then she added, "She doesn't like me much."

"Why not?" He betrayed surprise.

Linda smiled her little mysterious smile.

"Could be," the boy said sagely in a moment, "she's getting old, you know, and you probably make her jealous. Of course, she wouldn't *realize* . . ."

"Could be," Linda murmured. She rearranged her ankles. She was young and she knew it. It hadn't yet occurred to Linda that she would not always be young. She took full credit for it.

4. Young Dan Rogan told his grandmother, after she'd smacked him on one fresh cheek, that he'd *had* to stop to eat at eleven o'clock. He'd gotten up at the crack of dawn and he had been starving.

"Oh, well," Tess said, "all I want is a bowl of soup. There's pie, though. Maybe you can eat a piece of that?"

Dan thought he could.

Family messages were delivered while she heated soup and he milled about. “Hey, Grandma, what are you doing in this flea-trap?” he inquired. “The family’s having a fit.”

“I’m not worrying about the *décor*,” said Tess. “I like to be alone, sometimes.”

“Uncle George says he’s fixed it so you’re going around the world, hm? In June?”

“Starting in June,” she said dryly. “If I go.”

“The family is sure not going to let you go alone. I’m supposed to tell you. Who are you taking?” She shrugged and he said teasingly, “Take *me*?”

“Nothing doing,” said Tess promptly. “You’ll go, another time. Another way.”

“Well, gads.” The boy grinned. “But who will you take, then? Mom would go but she’s so darn busy.”

“The whole family, up and down, is too darn busy and thank God for that,” Tess said briskly. “I may find some unbusy female. Here’s your pie, and now give me an expurgated version of what goes on at school.”

He sat down and told her about his courses, about his athletic endeavors. But his heart wasn’t in this. He watched her. (And ate pie.)

After a while he said, “Say, Grandma, you’ve always leveled with me . . .”

She grinned at him.

“Well, I’ve got something to ask you.” He fumbled with the fork.

“Go ahead.”

“Well, we’re getting a lot of stuff— What I wanted— I guess you believe in God, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do, Dan,” Tess said. Below the window where they sat, a treetop billowed. In the yard next door, more trees rose up and above the fresh ranks of green above green the sky was sea blue.

The boy had his strong feet hooked around the chair legs. His torso was tense. He wanted something of her. Tess looked out at the green and the blue.

“I just wanted to ask you . . .” he said. “I know you *do*, but . . . how *can* you?”

“Don’t you, then?” she asked, mildly.

“Well, Gramma, I mean with science and all . . . I mean, religion is pretty sad stuff, I mean, to *me*. I don’t want to offend you . . .”

“You don’t offend me,” she assured him. “Now, you want me to answer. How *can* I believe in God? I suppose you’ve been hearing about corn kings and the psychological necessities of primitive peoples . . . ?”

She glanced at him. The boy caught his lower lip in his teeth and puffed out the rest of his mouth.

“Even so,” his grandmother went on, “I suppose you do believe that you exist.”

The boy nodded warily. He took a tighter grip on the chair legs with his toes.

“So that, when you say you *don’t* believe in God (or whatever it is that’s behind this existence) what you mean is this: you don’t believe in *my* conception of this God.”

“That’s right.” The boy was a little ruddier.

Tess sipped coffee and put the cup down. She focused her blue eyes away. “What do you know about my conception of God, though?” Her air was that of one who mused aloud. “Do you think it is the one we got in Sunday school, aged seven?” The boy blinked. “Thousands of years,” Tess went on, “people have pondered and written. Can we assume they must have all been ignorantly superstitious? What do you suppose, in their own terms, they were trying to say? Granting that they *may* have been intelligent, although, of course, less hep than you and me . . .” She turned her eyes, smiling.

He put his head down. “Well, I don’t know *too* much . . .”

“Look the other way,” his grandmother said. “Whatever conception of the universe and existence you are learning now, it’s tentative, isn’t it? In fact, it’s *sure* to be wrong.”

He bucked in the chair.

“Don’t you suppose the next few thousand years will see some revisions made?” she mused. “You don’t think the answers are *known* this year, this month?”

“Well, of course . . .” he sputtered.

“All right,” said Tess. “Best I can do. If you look both ways, someplace in the middle you may be able to understand how it is *possible* for me to believe in God. And that’s what you wanted to know.” She took up her cup and twinkled at him.

“But what . . . ? Then, what *is* it? I mean, what is *He*?”

“That’s another question,” she said. “Not today, Dan. My notion would have to be in *my* terms, see? They may be peculiar. Finish the pie? There’s a piece left.”

“I’m full,” Dan said, rather hostilely. Then he was silent.

“It’s two o’clock,” she reminded him in a moment. “Should you get going?”

“I guess.” He rose and she with him. He dragged his feet. “Look, Gramma, if I go home between terms I want to stop by.”

“Better let me know,” Tess said cheerfully, “so I’ll plan to be here.”

“O.K.”

“Glad I’ve seen you. Good luck.”

He kissed her cheek farewell. He said recklessly, “Maybe I’ll try and take a course next year. There’s one on Comparative Religions . . . I mean I . . . I wish I knew. I don’t *understand* it,” he blurted. “I mean, I used to just swallow everything . . .”

His grandmother said, “But now, you’d rather not swallow without chewing?” She patted him.

“You mow me down, you know,” he said directly, accusingly. “But you aren’t building anything up.”

“Not today.” She was unperturbed. But she hesitated. She said, “You’re in science. Science looks at *what is*, doesn’t it? And takes it on the chin when *what-is* turns out unexpectedly?”

“Well, sure,” he said.

“That’s *fine*,” said his grandmother. “Now, you’ve got to go.”

“O.K.,” he said darkly, “but I’ll be seeing you . . .”

“Scoot, now,” she said lovingly.

“I’m scooting.” He cocked his head. No words came. He grinned suddenly. He kissed her again, impulsively, and then he left her.

Morgan Lake heard the feet banging down the stairs. Dan Rogan saluted him with a swing of his hand but speeded by. He sped through the patio and at the arch collided with Nona Henry who had been to the drugstore, seeking aspirin, and had found the store closed. Her purse flew open, contents spilled.

“Oh, oh!” said the boy in blue. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I wasn’t looking. Here, I’ll get it.”

Nona said, “That’s all right.” She crouched but he was already on his haunches, his hands scrambling to find her things and ram them back into her bag. Their eyes met, on this low level, where they both crouched. The boy’s eyes were not quite seeing her. He said, with an air of exhilaration, “Um, boy! My grandmother! You know what she just did to me? She made a sandwich outa me! She put ten thousand years behind and ten thousand years in front, and she squashed me, flatter’n a fly!”

Nona began to rise slowly, and he came up on springs, helping her with one young hand. “Flatter’n a fly!” he chortled. “Sorry, again. So long, ma’am,” and he was gone.

Nona walked dazedly to the building and inside.

“Who was that boy?” she asked Morgan Lake. “Somebody’s grandchild . . .”

“We had four of them in, today,” he told her. (She was looking rather pretty, with that air of bewilderment. Her eyes, smudged by fatigue, were lovely, and she was, altogether, an attractive little lady. Morgan Lake admired her.) “This is the Day of the Grandchildren. Or so I call it to myself,” he explained.

Nona smiled at him. He was so reserved and detached ordinarily. She felt complimented that he was telling her this private fancy. “But who was the last one, the one who just left?” she insisted. “Whose grandson was he?”

“The one in blue? Mrs. Rogan’s.”

“I see.” She almost went on to confide in him. But the little incident was too complex. She went around the corner and up in the elevator. How strange an encounter!

“Flatter’n a fly,” she heard the boy saying so *gaily*! What could Tess Rogan have said to that boy? Nona was violently curious. Was the whole family odd? she wondered. Did they all speak a language she could not understand?

Chapter 12



The New Year was in. The tree came down. Everything at Sans Souci went back to normal with a grateful sag.

School was in, and Winnie Lake back in that routine.

Avery Patrick turned up, badly hung over, and growled at Morgan Lake about the painters.

The painters finished 109. Ida Milbank was moved in there. Ida was visibly losing her grip on reality. Mindy Shane, the housekeeper here (and Kelly's mother), took charge of the moving. (Kelly did the work.) Ida Milbank made no protest and had no suggestions, either. Afterwards, she kept going to the door of 111 and trying the key of 109 therein. She would come back to the desk, confused. Morgan would guide her to her new abode. Once inside, she did not seem to know the difference. She took to leaving her folding bed down in the middle of the floor à la Agnes Vaughn. She put things on it. Lily, the younger of the two maids who worked under Mindy Shane, discovered and reported that Ida had taken to sleeping on the sofa. There was no law against it; nothing could be done.

Agnes Vaughn, as Morgan Lake had predicted, dismissed from her repertoire the notion that 109 was haunted by the ghost of a suicide. Agnes Vaughn, however, did keep on trying to figure out which widow was Mrs. Quinn. Fuel for Agnes' imagination was in low supply this season.

For Nona Henry, life was steadier. She had got through the holidays. She seemed to have established a routine. It was a pale copy, for one, of the old routine for two. The marketing. The three meals a day. The cleaning of one's clothing.

She had established a certain amount of social contact. There was Daisy Robinson, with whom Nona went to the Pasadena Playhouse one evening. The play had been a modern comedy at which Daisy scoffed. But Nona Henry knew more about theatre backstage, about the technical side of it, than Mrs. Robinson. For Val had once been an assistant stage manager and Nona had known, in her time, many young hopefuls. Daisy had seemed a trifle surprised, and even a little miffed, at this practical knowledge. They had parted, *sine die*. They had, however, since gone to an Art movie house together. Amiably enough.

Pressed by Daisy's enthusiasms, Nona had even tried to read a few serious books.

Then there were the Gadabouts. Nona played bridge with them on occasion. She had lunch with them, in assorted places. She kept a little distance from them, rather cleverly, according to her own need and not their mercies.

There was Harriet Gregory, with whom Nona was able to establish a chatting relationship. Harriet felt free to sit down beside Nona in the patio and talk. Nona would listen—just so much, so long. It was understood, between them, that this was about all.

Nona Henry had begun to believe that she had routed the devil. She was pulling together. By careful rationing and spacing she eked out moments of companionship to make the lonely hours go by.

Her letters to Dodie were easier to write. If, in her mind, a cold lump of conviction had settled, she thought it was well hidden. (Oh, they had robbed her! Yes, they had! But she understood and she forgave and it was all down the drain and life went on. Nona would never raise the issue.)

A letter came, the second week in January, that shook her.

DEAR MOTHER:

I'm sorry but I have to write you on my own. Si doesn't know I'm writing this so don't, *please* don't, mention it in your next letter. Maybe you don't realize how you make Si feel. So this is between you and me, Mother. *Si is being hurt*. Do you realize you never mention him? You never send a message. You write as if he didn't exist. He can't help feeling hurt, Mother. I know it's about those bonds. He knows it, too. He's not stupid, Mother.

Dodie's handwriting began to loosen and get larger.

Dad and Si and I talked about those bonds a long, long time ago, before Dad ever went to the hospital. And Dad said that we could have them. *He did*. He also said, and this is what we never told you, we didn't want to hurt you—but Dad *did* say he knew *you* wouldn't understand at all. Dad said that you didn't really know a thing about investments or finance. He said you'd take the ultraconservative attitude. He said you were the blue-chip type. You wouldn't see that money has to be risked to make money. So

he said he'd do this quietly, keep it between the three of us, and try to explain to *you* when best he could.

Now, Mother, please believe us. Si needed it right at the time Dad was taken ill. And please remember—please *do*—you never told *me* that Dad was as ill as he really was. *We* thought he'd get better and explain all this to you in his own way. His own time. And we only did what Dad agreed to.

But Si says, and I'm afraid he is right, that you are angry—maybe with both of us. I am just as much to blame as Si, remember! But he thinks you are especially mad at him. He has been paying interest on the loan into the estate. Maybe you don't know that. He has and he will and you haven't really lost anything, and Dad wanted it this way. Dad thought it was wise.

It was *Dad* who went behind your back, not Si and me.

Just hope you'll . . .

Nona put the letter down with a terrible pang. She didn't believe it. But she understood, of course. She would have to bear all that she could so clearly see, and bear it alone.

She did not answer the letter. (Dodie had expressly asked her not to answer.) This was best, for how could the matter ever be cleared up? Innocent, loving little Dodie had been taken in. But Dodie had to live with *her* husband. Nona could not, would not, come between them. Would not make trouble. Would ignore what trouble there was between herself and Si, until it faded away. She would have to encompass the whole situation within her own mature understanding. There was nothing else that she could do. Dodie was being fooled. For Nona *knew* . . . she was absolutely certain about Val, and nothing could shake that knowledge and that certainty. It was not important, she told herself. She, Nona, could bear it.

She brought herself, at last, to write Dodie another noncommittal letter, and added at the end, with a sad nobility, *Regards to Si*.

The second week in January, Robert Fitzgibbon returned.

Nona had been on a casual but not intimate basis with Georgia Oliver and Mrs. Fitz. Now she was invited to Ursula's apartment expressly to meet her wonderful son. Nona demurred. She sensed the unwritten law, that one ought to withdraw. But she was coaxed. And so she went.

He was charming. Nona supposed he must be a year or two older than she. He had not run to fat. His body was still lean enough. His hair was thinning but not yet turning except just above the ears. His features were still boyish, the snub nose, the firm high cheekbones; and that the skin was beaten by time only made that boyish aspect the more appealing. He was glib and gay. He teased his mother, who bridled and adored it. He even teased Georgia a little bit. He was a sophisticate, or so Nona felt. In some way he roused and appealed to something very old in her—something that she and Val had had, and if they had not lost it, yet it had been glossed over, or buried under the pressures and responsibilities of their long years in the small city, as respectable bourgeois husband and wife.

But once upon a time there had been a girl named Nona O'Connor who had loved the theatre and the arts, and who had gone to New York to be in the middle of the great world, to shake off her small-town background. Nona O'Connor had lived in Greenwich Village, and had hobnobbed with Bohemians, had worried herself with advanced and image-breaking ideas, and had despised those who, unpricked by thought, sheepishly conformed. Until she and Val had soberly taken the next step, and with child and with sober realism had gone for “maturity.”

Now, as the four of them sat in Ursula Fitzgibbon's warm and cozy living room, Nona Henry could not help feeling (and felt obliged to beat away the feeling) that she and Robert Fitzgibbon had somehow an undercurrent of thought in common, not shared by the other two.

When his mother pressed him rather proudly to say how many times he had been around the world, Nona said, “Have you heard the rumor that our Mrs. Rogan is going around the world in June?”

Georgia said, “Is that really so?” She was sitting in her usual peaceful pose, wearing her usual tolerant smile.

“I, for one,” said Mrs. Fitz, “cannot imagine attempting such a journey.”

“Who is *this*?” Robert wanted to know. “Who is going around the world?”

“That's what we've heard,” said Nona. “In fact, she told me so herself. There *are* those who think it's just a tall tale.”

“Supposed to be going on a luxury liner, isn't she?” Georgia said. “And supposed to be looking for somebody to take along?”

“Well!” said Robert. “To take along?”

“For free,” said Nona. “There has been quite a flutter in the dovecote.”

In so saying she detached herself from the other widows of Sans Souci.

Robert cocked an eyebrow. “Do I know this one?”

The devil took possession of Nona Henry. “She wears a long red coat,” said Nona softly. “Her hair is cut short. She . . . oh . . . goes to church and all that.”

He was alerted. The secret current ran strong between them.

“I’m sure she does,” Ursula was saying, in her sweet voice. “I really can’t believe that she is just telling a story. It really is no one’s business.” Ursula sighed.

“Oh well, people talk,” said Georgia. “It is hard to believe that anyone has such luck.”

“Going around the world,” said Robert. “Well!”

“She is an odd woman,” said Ursula.

“You know her, Mum?”

“I’ve spoken to her, of course,” said Ursula. “When she first came, just to be friendly. But she . . . in fact, when I persisted . . .” Her brows drew into a pink frown.

“Mrs. Fitz thought it would be nice to ask her to come watch the Rose Parade on television,” Georgia said. “But Mrs. Rogan declined. Just like that. It wasn’t awfully courteous.” Georgia turned her head. “You went, didn’t you, Nona?” Georgia was going to change the subject with her usual veering away from any uncharitable thought.

“I felt I owed it to myself.” Nona’s mouth went sidewise, and it was the devil pulling at its corner. “One of those things,” said Nona with a shrug.

Robert’s eyes were on her. They were the same as winking at her. (Georgia and Ursula were really rather stuffy, but he and she knew the score.)

“Actually,” said Mrs. Fitz, not without a touch of stiffness, “I believe that Mrs. Rogan went to the parade.”

“Did she?” Nona was surprised.

“Sat at the curb,” said Mrs. Fitz, “on a campstool. Didn’t you say, Nona dear, that she is seventy-one?”

Nona kept her lashes down. “So Harriet Gregory told me. Yes, Tess Rogan is seventy-one years old.”

She looked up at Robert and his eyes were laughing.

“Well, more power *to* her,” he said boldly. “What a gay old gal! Er . . . what church does she go to?”

Oh definitely, he conspired. He knew, now, who had been there in the patio on Christmas Eve, who had seen and heard. He hadn’t been too drunk to remember.

“She prefers to go alone,” said Nona demurely, “so I’m not sure.” The gleam in his eye answered and spoke to her secretly.

As the talk drifted away Nona, suddenly uneasy, got up to go. In fact, she was horrified. Tempted and delighted and horrified!

She said good night rather primly and got across the hall and firmly closed the door.

What was this? Nothing! It was absolutely *nothing*. What if she, Nona Henry, was only fifty, not any older than Georgia Oliver? What if she *was* just as young . . . ?

Oh God, the flesh! What became of the flesh? Seventeen widows in Sans Souci, and had they all left the flesh behind? Were they gathered here, to eke out the days until they’d die, and never be touched again? Were they out of the world of men forever . . . all but Georgia Oliver? Was Nona Henry?

But the aging bones did not forget how to tilt the body provocatively, even though the result might be grotesque and disgusting—even though one did not *do* it. Yes, the old flesh, baggy or furrowed or spotted with time, *was* flesh. The old mechanism was still there and still able to be triggered. And it was too bad that because they were aging and graying and wrinkling, the widows of Sans Souci had to remember to deny this truth . . . so as not to make old spectacles of themselves. Oh God, what became of the flesh? When the crepy eyelids still remembered how the young eyes had slipped under the lashes, and the old lips, now folded over artificial teeth, still had the skill of kissing, well learned. And the old thighs . . .

Nona stood shaken in her own room. Shaken and revolted. None of that! None of that!


(If something said to her, Come now, you are raising a devil in the flesh to disguise the subtler devil in the mind, she did not listen. Blot it all out!)

She would beat down the devil altogether. She would have no more of it. She would be good.

Study to be good. Go to church, even. Ponder these things. Learn how to grow old (since that was what she was in for) and aim to become gentle and fine like Mrs. Fitz. No more malice in gossip, then, or selfishness, or vanity, or indulgences, in food, drink, sloth . . . No, be good and do good, deny the flesh and the devil, and seek salvation.

What else, the devil asked her drearily, was there left for a respectable widow of fifty to seek?

Chapter 13

 At two in the morning on the first Friday in February, Leila Hull finally set the east wing of Sans Souci on fire. This was Morgan Lake's nightmare, come true.

Upstairs, in the east wing, lived Agnes Vaughn, in 204, over the entrance. Then, Georgia Oliver in another one-room apartment, 202, on the patio side. In 200, the two-room apartment at the end of the wing, lived Daisy Robinson. Across the hall along the south side, there was Tess Rogan in 201. Next, going back toward the angle, came Leila Hull in 203. In 205, there was Elna Ames.

It was Elna Ames who first gave the alarm. She smelled the smoke in the night. She never really slept.

The phone rang in Morgan Lake's ear; once awakened, he could smell the smoke himself. He called the Fire Department. As he hung up, his phone rang again. This time it was Tess Rogan. "My living-room wall seems to be on fire," said she.

He told her help was coming. Rose was staring at him from the other bed. He said to her, "Better dress. Wake Winnie. I have to go."

He took the elevator. His heart was fluttering. He tried with the techniques he had had to learn to steady it. The noise of sirens ripping the night was welcome to his ear.

Nona Henry heard the sirens and when they stopped their shrieking so frighteningly nearby, she left her bed. From the window she saw a fireman running through the patio of Sans Souci toward the entrance door. So she put on her heaviest bathrobe, and tied the belt firmly. She picked up her purse and went out into the corridor, feeling a pleasurable excitement. No one else in the north wing had yet opened her door; all was still. As Nona trotted around the corner she saw that the trouble was in the east wing.

Agnes Vaughn was standing in her door, a terrible sight in a dirty blue wrapper with her hair on end. She was staring across the hall at Elna Ames who kept saying, "I don't know. I don't know."

Then Georgia Oliver, in a rose-colored garment, came running toward Nona, her fair hair flying. "I'm going to Mrs. Fitz," said she. "It's all right, I

think.” She flashed her smile and ran on.

The firemen seemed to be in 203 and 201, both of whose doors stood open. Against the opposite corridor wall stood Morgan Lake, in a blue-and-green plaid robe, looking very cool and collected. Tess Rogan was there, standing quietly beside him. Between them, down on the carpet of the corridor with her tousled reddish (dyed) head against the wall and her eyes bleary, her legs stuck straight ahead of her, her gnarled toes turned up nakedly, not giving a damn for anything or anybody, sat Leila Hull, aged sixty-five, a widow.

Leila Hull was under the influence of alcohol. In fact, she was stinking drunk.

“Is there anything I can do?” asked Nona, out of breath.

“I think not, Mrs. Henry,” said Morgan Lake. His calm was terrible. “They have the fire out.”

She hadn’t meant about the fire. She had meant about Leila Hull. Nona hadn’t seen a human being as drunk as this in years.

Tess Rogan said, “Somebody is coming for her. Mr. Lake has telephoned . . . there is nothing we can do.”

Nona stepped backward, not wishing to be in any way a nuisance here. Somebody came running. She turned and there was the girl, Winnie Lake. Her hair was up in pins. Her slim body was lost in a loose quilted coat. Her face looked pinched and shrewd and even angry.

“They have it out,” said Nona. “Just better not get in their way.”

The girl stopped, so close to her that Nona could feel the vibrations of her body. “But is Dad all right?” asked Winnie fiercely. “Dad’s got a whacky heart. He shouldn’t have to *do* this! That old drunk!” Winnie’s young lips closed over worse words, hardly suppressed. “Dad always said she was dangerous! This is *bad* for him!”

Nona touched her. “He seems all right,” she said gently. The girl’s concern gave her great pleasure.

“Dad?” Winnie burst away.

“It’s all right,” Nona heard him say to her. “Just go down and tell your mother . . .”

The girl stood still, looking tensely up into his face. He smiled and touched her cheek with one finger. “All right,” he said. “All right, dear.”

Winnie turned and ran back the way she had come.

Nona felt moved almost to tears.

Now Bettina Goodenough came out of her door looking frightened. She minced along in mules.

But the fire that had been burning somehow within the partition between Leila Hull's room and the living room of Tess Rogan's apartment was out, although the corridor had begun to reek disagreeably. A nasty powerful sickening odor rose.

At this moment, a strange man came running from the top of the stairs. "Aunt Leila? Is she all right? What happened?" he panted. "You're Mr. Lake. Look, I . . ."

The man's panic collided with Morgan Lake's calm and was slain. The two men turned their backs and began to speak together softly. Tess Rogan stood aloof. On the floor, Leila Hull mumbled and rolled her head against the wall.

The stranger turned swiftly, crouched, and lifted the drunken old woman off the floor. He was young enough and strong enough and frightened enough to carry her, and so he did, taking her away just as she was—barefooted, but with a dress on that flapped, half unbuttoned. Nona moved aside to let them pass. The man's eyes were rolling. One imagined that visions of lawsuits danced in his head. The woman's face was perfectly stupid. She did not know where she was, where she was being taken, or why, or what she had done.

Nona looked away and caught on Morgan Lake's pale face a ripple of compassion. Quickly it vanished, and he was icy calm again.

The affair was just about over. Firemen continued to move about in the two apartments. Nona realized that there had been an attack from a ladder at the window. There had been water. There had been axes. But the fiercely efficient burst of activity was over now. Nothing was left of the fire but that disgusting smell. The whole crisis—danger, alarm, effort, and happy resolution—had actually taken a very few minutes.

Leila Hull had been mercifully spirited away within this time.

She realized that the stirred-up hive was buzzing now; the corridor was crowded. As Morgan Lake and Mrs. Rogan moved toward her, she discovered that several women were standing behind her. Besides Bettina

Goodenough there was now Elna Ames and Agnes Vaughn. Joan Braverman and Kitty Forrest, from their one-roomers in the north wing, were there, looking dazed, leaning together. Georgia Oliver was back again. And bearing down upon the group from the rear loomed the large shape of Felice Paull, draped in lavender.

Felice Paull demanded to be told what had happened, managing to look at the same time hurt that secrets were being kept from her.

Morgan Lake told her and them all. “Just a small fire in Mrs. Hull’s apartment,” he said, suave and soothing. “It is all over. No one hurt. Not a lot of damage. Mrs. Hull is quite all right. She has gone with a nephew of hers. There is no danger, ladies. Thanks to Mrs. Ames. And Mrs. Rogan. And the Fire Department.”

Agnes Vaughn said, “We might have been roasted alive in our beds!” She looked delighted. “I suppose she was drinking, eh?”

It was Elna Ames, usually so unassuming, who replied impatiently. “We weren’t hurt. It’s all over. Be quiet!”

Morgan Lake said, quickly, “There is one thing, ladies . . .” He turned. “Mrs. Rogan, you cannot sleep in that apartment. I’m afraid you cannot even stay there, until we do the repairs and some painting and get rid of this odor. But the only vacancy I have is 111 and it is a mess, I’m sorry to say . . . painter’s pots and ladders. I wonder—” now he looked, without singling out, at the group of women—“whether one of these ladies might be willing . . . Mrs. Rogan will need a place to sleep.”

He had turned their attention from the scandalous danger to the prospect of charity.

“I’ve only got one room,” said Agnes Vaughn promptly, “one double bed.” She showed her brown teeth. Nobody in her right senses would want to occupy a double bed with Agnes Vaughn, as Agnes knew.

Georgia said sweetly, “Oh, I would be glad! Of course, *I* have only the double bed. Still, maybe I could move in with Mrs. Fitz. I could give you my place.” Georgia, so sweet and generous . . .

“That isn’t necessary,” Nona heard herself saying. “I have an extra bed, and *of course* . . .”

Bettina Goodenough moistened her lips but did not speak.

“You could come down to me,” boomed Felice Paull. “This is a *disgrace!* The owner is responsible.”

The widows were not turning back to consider the fire. They were being tested, and knew it.

Kitty Forrest piped up. “Joan and I have to go to work so early. Otherwise, I . . . at least . . .” She faltered. Kitty Forrest was the flabby one, in a beige bathrobe.

“Oh, me too,” croaked Joan Braverman. The thin one, whose robe was blue. “But only the one room—not so comfortable.”

Elna Ames had only the one room. Her bed was loathsome, being made of pain. She said nothing.

Now Sarah Lee Cunneen came puffing to join them. “Where’s the fire? Is it out? What’s happening?” Her lively eyes peered about.

Agnes told her. “Jolly old Leila Hull pretty near burned the place down,” she said with satisfaction. “Now, *she*’s gone but Mrs. Rogan needs a place to stay. She can’t stay in that stink,” said Agnes, brutally truthful.

“Well, how about my place?” said Sarah Lee at once. “Listen!”

All this while, Tess Rogan herself had not spoken. She was wearing a long dark blue robe of some woolly material. It was decent. Her short hair showed no disorder, nor did her face. Her blue eyes were even faintly entertained.

“Look, you just come on down,” said Sarah Lee in her gruff, vulgar, cordial, good-humored voice.

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Rogan, “but Mrs. Henry has already asked me. I think that might be best—at least for now.”

“Well, suit yourself.” Sarah Lee took no offense.

They all heard a kind of cry and looked toward the end of the wing. Daisy Robinson had just put her head out of her door. “What is going on?” they heard her say impatiently. Her hair was a frizzle and bristled above her keen profile. “Has there been a *fire*?” Daisy looked quite skeptical.

Morgan Lake went toward her. A fireman came out of 203 and joined him. The group of widows milled.

Agnes Vaughn said to Felice, “Well, I’m not going to close an eye, and neither are you, so come on in.” She started off on her tiny feet.

Nona said, over heads, to Mrs. Rogan, “Perhaps I had better go ahead and be sure your bed is ready?” Tess nodded without smiling.

Nona turned. She could hear Agnes saying, “Daisy Robinson and all her brains! Hoo! Hoo! The place could have burned down around her ears and she’d never notice. Leila Hull was drunk, as usual. You want to bet? Say, where’s Ida? She’s missing this!”

“The owner,” Felice said, “is *legally* responsible.”

As Nona walked past them where they had halted at Agnes’ door, Agnes said to her cheerfully, “And you’re stuck with a roommate, eh, Mrs. Henry? Well, good luck to you.”

Nona went on around the corner without a reply. What reply was there? Agnes Vaughn was right, as a matter of fact. And Nona felt dismay, and a bit of anger too.

Of course, one offered to take a homeless woman in. *Of course*, one rose to such a situation, and made the offer. If one had any charity. If one wanted to be good and do right. Yet why hadn’t Bettina Goodenough, with her prize and especially spacious apartment, made any offer at all? Begrudged the nuisance of it, did she? And why hadn’t Sarah Lee persisted a little more, extrovert that she was? Or Felice, the bossy one. Why hadn’t she been *more* bossy, and overridden Nona Henry, who was so new here—and did not *know* Tess Rogan, or want to know her?

And why hadn’t Daisy Robinson jumped in to offer shelter? *She* had an extra bed and hers would be the most convenient surely, right across the hall. But no, Nona Henry was stuck with it.

Then Georgia Oliver caught her up. “Ah,” said Georgia, “you are so good, Nona. So fine of you! The poor old thing, put out of her house . . .”

Nona felt better.

“The least one can do,” she murmured. (What a louse I really am, she thought, resignedly.) They walked along, Georgia’s arm around Nona’s waist girlishly. They came to Nona’s door, and Georgia turned to cross the hall. “Is Mrs. Fitz all right?” asked Nona anxiously. “She wasn’t too frightened, was she?”

“No, no,” said Georgia. “She was very brave, I think. But I’ll stay with her a little while.”

“Of course,” said Nona. Saint nodded to saint.

Nona went in. She checked the other bed to make sure it had linen. She turned back the spread and folded the blanket sideways down. She quickly straightened up some small disorder on her dresser.

Then she went to her kitchen, put some water on to boil. Willing or no, saint or no, louse or no, she had a roommate. (But this odd person. This Tess Rogan. Nona felt nervous.)

Morgan Lake went down in the elevator, at last, and straight to the door of 102. He touched the bell but at the merest tinkle the door opened.

“Everything O.K.?” asked Avery Patrick.

“The fire’s out,” said Morgan crisply. He entered and closed the door behind him.

Avery Patrick, who wore a silk robe and had a glass in his hand, glowered at him, his face sulky.

“She’s out of the building,” Morgan said. “I called her nephew to get her out.”

“That’s good,” said Avery. “Frankly, as soon as I heard the equipment I knew you’d have it under control.”

“We were lucky,” said Morgan grimly.

Avery turned away. “Drink?”

“No, thanks.”

“How’s the damage? We’re insured against the damage, aren’t we?”

Morgan didn’t answer. He was angry but anger was not physiologically permitted to him and he had to try to bank it down.

“Now, don’t make a big deal out of it, please!” Avery said in pain. “O.K., the old lush finally did it. O.K., *you* were right and *you* told me so. That make you feel better?” His mouth sneered.

“I feel fine,” said Morgan bitterly, and turned and left.

The owner of Sans Souci muttered to himself and mixed another highball. Life was hard, he felt. Fate was unkind.

There’s one thing left, thought Morgan Lake. One act would help him sleep.

He went softly down the east wing to the end. He did not ring the bell of 101. He tapped on the door. He knew it would not open. He waited. At last he saw the doorknob turn. “Mrs. Gardner?” he said softly into the crack along the wood. “There was just a small fire. It is out now. There is no danger. It’s all over.”

He knew there would be no reply, but he watched. The doorknob moved, again. So he felt satisfied.

Marie Gardner, the hermit of Sans Souci, left the inside of that door and padding on bare feet went into her bedroom, where the night light burned. She repeated all eleven of the rituals that she had evolved, without which she could not possibly sleep, went through them with ease and dispatch, this second time, tonight. Got into her bed with the right foot first, pulled up the blanket. Snuggled down. She would sleep very well, she realized. A real danger (that was all over) was relaxing.

“I thought we’d have some coffee?” Nona gushed a bit. “Or do you prefer tea?”

“Either,” said Tess. “That’s very nice.”

She was an old woman with tall bones, but she moved easily. She seemed to be able to move silently, with no lost motion. She had put her few things, some clothing on her arm, a case of toiletries, into the bedroom, asking no questions, making no fuss. Now she sat down in the dinette.

“What a thing to happen!” Nona said, fluttering between stove and table. “That poor Mrs. Hull, to have gotten *into* such a state! I don’t believe she even knows that she set the fire.” Her words seemed to fall into a great pit of silence and go echoing down. “But I am assuming that she did. I don’t *know* that. Did she?”

“Well, there was a fire and she smokes,” said Tess with a mischievous smile that Nona shyly returned. “If she did,” Tess continued placidly, “she doesn’t know it. Yet.”

Nona looked up from having poured the coffee. She was receiving a glimpse of future remorse for Leila Hull. But now Tess Rogan’s blue eyes fastened upon Nona’s eyes and would not let them get away. “It looks to me,” said Tess, “as if this will take time. You won’t want me here a week or more . . . whatever it takes. I’ll make another arrangement tomorrow.”

Nona said, flushing, “Well, that’s as you please . . .”

Something kept her from protesting.

The steam rose from the coffee cups. Nona said, “Sugar? Cream? Did you hear what the little Lake girl said? That Mr. Lake’s heart isn’t good? She

seemed so . . . well, so concerned for him.”

Tess took a sip.

“I felt . . . oh, I don’t know . . . *annoyed* with that girl at Christmas time,” Nona rattled on. “I suppose I shouldn’t have, but I resented catching her counting up her money.”

Tess grinned. “When she made the rounds with her pot holders? They tell me she does it every year.”

“I didn’t like it. I just . . .”

“Maybe you don’t like being pressured,” Tess said.

“I guess I don’t,” said Nona. “I don’t mind *giving* people anything I have. But I *don’t* like to be taken . . .” (Now why in the world am I saying this? she thought. Why have I let out even a hint of my private trouble? Oh, Dodie, deluded! Oh, that Silas, and my bonds!) “Of course, she’s just a child,” she said quickly. “Did she come to you, too?”

“I gave her a dollar.” Tess sighed. “It’s great sport to give. It’s a little harder to receive, I think.” The blue eyes fastened again. “Will you overlook what I said, Mrs. Henry?”

“Overlook?” Nona was confused.

“I wasn’t very gracious to receive,” said Tess Rogan. “It’s good of you to take me in and I should be willing to let you acquire merit.” She was smiling, as if she amused herself.

“Oh, please,” said Nona with a nervous wave of her hand. She felt frightened. She didn’t want any more said on this subject.

But when the old woman obligingly said nothing more, Nona felt drawn back toward an edge of some kind, a brink, a most attractive danger. “Perhaps,” she said demurely, “you can start around the world a little sooner?”

(Now what was this? With what was she flirting?)

“You know,” said Tess easily, “there’s an example. My son-in-law wants to *give* me a trip around the world, and I am having a bad time accepting it. True, it isn’t putting him out a great deal. He’s high up in the ranks of the steamship company and I imagine it only takes a word or two. Still he is giving; he *wants* me to enjoy it. A bit of a dilemma. If you were I, would you accept?”

“Would I accept . . . a trip around the world?” gasped Nona. “I don’t know. It would depend.” Her mind sharpened. “Do you think you really would enjoy it?”

“That puts a finger on it,” Tess said with a satisfied nod and a grin. “And *that* is what I do not know.”

“Your son-in-law, you say?” Nona had begun to believe this story. She had gone over some kind of brink; she didn’t know what.

“Yes, George Tremaine, my daughter Mary’s husband. They live a good part of the year in Honolulu. I’m to stop over there. But I’m not at all sure about seeing a meandering circle around the whole world,” Tess said musingly. “I am seventy-one years old . . .”

“You must have seen quite a lot already,” said Nona.

“I am just beginning to see,” said Tess, “and the more I see, the less I think it matters where, on earth, I am.”

Silence fell. It was the small hours. All patterns were broken. Here they sat. Nona felt the imp in her heart, that loosening feeling. “A grandson of yours,” she said boldly, “bumped into me in the patio on New Year’s Day. *What* had you *said* to him?” She herself was grinning.

Tess slid her eyes and laughed. “Oh that,” she said. “That was Liam’s son. Young Dan Rogan.” She did not go on.

“You have a big family?” Nona asked.

Tess nodded.

“But *why* . . . ?” Nona could not imagine what was possessing her to ask such impertinent questions, but she let this one fall out of her mouth just the same. “Why are you living *here*?”

The woman did not seem to mind the question. “It’s a tribal situation,” she said frankly. “Caroline Buff, I think, has the same. We are matriarchs. Well, that’s power. Which we all enjoy, of course. I sometimes have to take myself by the ears and get out.”

“I don’t understand . . .” said Nona, her heart racing.

“Why, when the whole brood gets to asking for wisdom and judgments from you,” said Tess Rogan, “you surely like to give. Giving is great sport, as I said. But you ought to remember . . .”

“Yes?” Nona was breathless.

“All that you have can die on the vine,” said Tess rather sharply, “unless something comes *in*. Now, let’s not . . .” She turned the subject abruptly. “How large is your family?”

“Not very large,” said Nona evasively, and also stubbornly. “You haven’t told me what you said to that boy.”

“You and I,” said Tess in a moment, “better not get into a religious discussion, at this hour. I’ll tell you sometime. I’m sleepy, now.”

“It’s after three o’clock,” Nona admitted. (*Religion!* she thought in amazement.)

“Then, shall we go to bed?” said Tess. “I am an old woman, Mrs. Henry, and I often talk too much. I give opinions to the young. You mustn’t tempt me.” She grinned. She rose.

Nona was tense in her bed, feeling the invasion of another person most keenly for a while. But the old woman lay silent, and somehow light as a leaf in the other bed. Nona began to feel the safer for her presence. Before she could even wonder why, she went off abruptly into a profound sleep.

Chapter 14



February is one of the duller months of the year. The seventeen widows of Sans Souci could not work up much excitement over the Groundhog or St. Valentine, either. Lincoln and Washington would have their birthdays, and there would be the perennial confusion over which birthday closed the banks and stopped the mail and which did not. But no fiesta.

The local great event, that fire, turned out to have a rather dull aftermath. Leila Hull's apartment was neither occupied nor given up by her. Rumor said she was taking the cure. No excitement, there. Yet.

Felice Paull got nowhere with her righteous wrath against the owner. There seemed to be a conspiracy. Nobody wanted to hear any more about the fire, or place any blame, or demand any revenge for it. Even Agnes Vaughn had lost interest.

The effect, as far as Agnes was concerned, was simply this. She no longer suspected Leila Hull of being the murderess, Mrs. Quinn. Why did she not? Well, it wasn't any fun. Leila Hull was gone away. Agnes cast about the building for another candidate. Marie Gardner she did not suspect either, and for the same reason. No fun to suspect a woman you did not know, you never saw, you could not watch.

Agnes brooded, over that entrance door.

It was Sarah Lee Cunneen who had a bright idea. "We ought to give a shower for Georgia Oliver," said she, one day.

This was a very juicy notion. It led to much talk and intrigue.

In the first place, the ideal spot for such an entertainment was Bettina Goodenough's apartment. Now Bettina was broke; she was afraid she might even be overdrawn at her bank. But Bettina, challenged, repeated to herself her motto, "Life's too short," and recklessly agreed that the party must, of course, take place in her spacious rooms. But who, she wanted to know with hidden anxiety, would supply the refreshments? Sarah Lee said that she would share. "Maybe all go Dutch," said Sarah Lee, with the careless air of the solvent. Bettina told herself that by supplying the space, surely she should be let off from giving an *expensive* present, at least, and she bent her efforts to convince herself that all was well.

Next was the guest list. The thing to do was to consult with Mrs. Fitz. Georgia had to be surprised and must not know, but Mrs. Fitz would be mother-in-law to this party. In the drawing up of the guest list she would have full sway.

So the Gadabouts maneuvered and schemed and at last they got to Mrs. Fitz alone.

Mrs. Fitz thought it was a lovely idea. How thoughtful of them! Dear Georgia would be so pleased! Of course the wedding date had not been set . . . but a shower! How delightful!

If the Gadabouts, at least, knew that no party was going to be any fun if it did not exclude someone, this was not openly admitted. Bettina and Sarah Lee and Mrs. Fitz talked it over.

Well, now, Mrs. Fitz herself, and the two instigators, and Georgia, the guest of honor, and who else? Daisy Robinson? Yes. Harriet Gregory? Well, yes, poor thing. Elna Ames? Such a nice quiet person. Of course. (Although she hadn't been well.) Oh, and Nona Henry, don't forget. A very nice little person. And so fond of dear Georgia. What about the Unholy Three—Agnes Vaughn, Felice Paull and poor stupid Ida Milbank? Sarah Lee and Bettina were against it. At this point, Mrs. Fitz looked grave. *Georgia* was friendly to all, she pointed out. It was not up to the hostesses to exclude those who were Georgia's friends.

The Gadabouts had to admit that Mrs. Fitz was right and, as usual, more charitable than they. Then, Joan Braverman and Kitty Forrest, too? Well, naturally, yes. Although they were not available during the day and this was to be a luncheon, still they should be asked. (They wouldn't come. This was satisfactory.)

How about Caroline Buff?

Well, if Georgia was the one whose relationships mattered, then Georgia was on good terms with Mrs. Buff and certainly would not wish to see her offended. Besides, Mrs. Buff had money and would no doubt contribute a substantial gift. Sarah Lee dared say so in her vulgar way.

Mrs. Fitz chided her with gentle laughter.

(Who was to be excluded?)

Let's see, Leila Hull was gone and could not be included. No use to ask Marie Gardner. Everyone knew that. Who else was there at Sans Souci? Oh,

what about Mrs. Rogan? And, if you came down to it, another woman. What about Mrs. Rose Lake?

Mrs. Rose Lake would *not* be invited. Mrs. Fitz and the Gadabouts agreed on this. She was not, nor ever had been, friendly with the tenants. It was not wise, Mrs. Fitz said, to mix socially with the manager's wife. Rose was *out*.

About Tess Rogan then? The Gadabouts were resigned to having her, but Mrs. Fitz pondered. What did the others really think? she inquired. Mrs. Rogan had had no contact with Georgia, really. She was a newcomer here. She was, also, obviously not a woman of means. Didn't the hostesses think it might be unkind to ask her? After all, if she could not afford to buy a gift it wasn't kind to invite her to a shower which required a gift. Also, the woman was rather elderly and aloof. On the whole, Mrs. Fitz thought . . . kinder not?

"We don't want to hear about her famous trip either," Bettina said. "It's embarrassing. Of course, *I* feel sorry for her."

"We'll just skip it," said Sarah Lee blithely. "Now!"

Now, how could they surprise Georgia? Let Nona Henry be the one to decoy her. Oh yes, that would work nicely! Let Nona Henry ask Georgia to go shopping. Then Nona could entice her, casually, to Bettina's door with some excuse . . . and there they would be. Oh yes! Wonderful!

The plot was made.

So the Gadabouts cornered Nona in the patio one afternoon to explain the plot and Nona's role in it. Nona could not help being pleased to have been assigned so important a part and she agreed at once. When was the day? They told her. "All right," she said, "I'll work it somehow."

"Good. We'll leave it to you."

"Who all is coming?"

They told her.

"Mrs. Rogan?" she asked, missing the name.

Well, they said, no. . . .

Tess Rogan was still occupying Nona's apartment. Only now were carpenters beginning to work on that ruined wall in her own place.

She was a remarkably easy person to live with. She came and went in that lightness and swiftness and lack of fuss. Furthermore she came and went independently. Nona discovered that there was no obligation. She herself could come and go and no questions were asked. Yet, at the same time, there was courtesy, as when each announced the time of her return, or whether she would market or prepare, share or not share a meal. Somehow, the meals were being cooked and eaten in an equitable division of effort that had become established without any formal discussion.

At first, Nona thought she had divined why the presence of Tess had made her feel safer. This was the older generation. Nona's parents, and Val's too, had been dead for some years. Nona herself had been pushed up to the last rank in the back of the schoolroom before one graduates to death. Tess supplied that lost generation which, until now, Nona had not realized she had been missing so much.

This was at first. Then the weightlessness of the old woman's presence undermined this idea. There was no pressure and no dependence, either way. It was odd. It was easy.

By now Nona believed what Tess told her.

There was the evidence of her mail and her phone calls.

Mail at Sans Souci was one of the high spots in the day. Or it ought to have been. Morgan Lake, who usually sorted it, felt that he received insight into the seventeen lives whenever he did so. Felice Paull, for instance, had huge quantities of mail but it consisted of pamphlets she had sent away for, or communications from organizations to whom she had proposed something or other, and very little of it was the precious mail, the envelopes with the handwritten addresses and the names of people up in the corner.

So many of the widows had such meager personal mail—he disliked having to put so little into their eager hands.

Personal mail was not all of the same quality either. Harriet Gregory's for instance was perfectly constant. Always the two typewritten airmail envelopes, very thin, exactly two weeks apart.

Mrs. Buff's mail was rich and full. She received many real letters, addressed in dainty hands, sprawling hands, sometimes with the address straggling uphill, having been printed crookedly in pencil by a child.

Tess Rogan's mail was of this same quality, as Nona Henry was able to perceive.

Then, Tess had many long-distance phone calls. Impatient voices. Asking for something. A call from New York. “Now, Tess, please! *You* write to him. He’ll listen to *you* . . .” (Nona couldn’t help hearing this particular loud pleading.)

“Kate, dearie, *I* will *not* write to him. It is none of my business,” Tess had said.

She told Nona that the voice had belonged to “Liam’s wife, Kate.”

“Liam is your son?”

“Not this one. This is my son Hal’s oldest son.”

Nona could not disentangle them all. But she was impressed. “Liam was your husband’s name?”

“It was,” Tess said. “God bless him.”

They were on good terms, easy terms.

So now Nona frowned at the news of the exclusion of Tess Rogan from Georgia’s surprise party. But before she could protest or, indeed, decide whether she ought to protest to the Gadabouts, along came Mrs. Fitz and Georgia herself. The subject of the party of course had to be dropped, with an enjoyable display of false innocence by all.

Nona went on upstairs. Was it her duty to urge that her house guest be invited? Was it her duty to say that she herself could not otherwise attend? Or, since Tess was only her guest by accident, was this something to be let alone and none of Nona’s business?

She wasn’t sure, but it occurred to her that she could ask Tess about it. And this was remarkable, really. Yet, if Tess were in the apartment now, that was exactly what Nona was about to do.

Musing, she opened her door with her key and there he was!

“Why, Dane! Dane Mercier! For heaven’s sakes!”

He was her other son-in-law, Milly’s husband, from Seattle.

Nona embraced him. “Where did you come from?”

“I had to fly down on business,” he explained, “and I thought I’d drop by and surprise you. How are you, Mum?”

“Oh, fine! Oh, Tess—Mrs. Rogan, this is my—”

“We’ve introduced ourselves,” Dane said. “We know all about each other.” He was a thin dark-haired man of thirty-four. He looked well, or at least as well as his thin tension ever permitted.

Tess Rogan got up from the sofa and smilingly excused herself. She disappeared into the bedroom.

“Oh, Dane, sit down and tell me about small Milly.”

“I’ve brought you some snapshots,” he said.

Nona was pleased, in fact quite touched. She pressed him to stay for dinner. But Dane said that he had a plane to catch at six. “I wanted to see you especially, Mum. Si writes me . . .”

“Si?”

“He didn’t want this to go through Dodie. It seems he’s afraid you are mad at him.”

“Well, for goodness’ sakes!”

“Now, he borrowed money from Dad, didn’t he?” Dane’s dark brows were taking this seriously and no pretty exclamation was going to turn aside what he had come to say. “I mean when Dad was so ill?”

Nona looked down at her hands. She didn’t know how grim her face had become. “Some bonds,” she said vaguely.

“Dad had promised them to him,” Dane said urgently. “Si’s afraid you don’t really believe that. He feels pretty terrible, Mum. He asked me to talk to you . . . wanted me to try to make you see . . . He never—”

“But I do see,” Nona proclaimed. Her voice went sweetly false; she could hear as much herself. “My dear, I haven’t said one word to the contrary.”

“Well, just the same he feels that you . . . *He knows* Dodie is unhappy. Tell me, why did you pack up and come out here so suddenly?”

Nona didn’t answer.

“Why didn’t you come to us, Mum? I wrote you and begged you . . .”

“Oh, Dane, now, please, don’t you feel hurt.” (My two sons-in-law, hurt . . . I am important! Nona caught her mind at what it was doing and rebuked it.) “It’s just that I needed to be by myself a little while,” she said. (Who had said that?)

“Well, we’d like to have you.” He’d relaxed a little, and now smiled. “Connie really wants you.” (Connie was his new wife.) “Connie is crazy about small Milly. Don’t you think Connie wants Milly to know her very own grandmother?”

“Well, of course,” soothed Nona, “and I will come, Dane. Thank you. I don’t know when. I’ll have to see . . .”

“Good.” He smiled fondly. “Milly talks about you all the time, you know.”

“Ah, does she?” Nona felt quite melted, wanted, desirable.

“I hope you feel O.K. about Silas, though,” Dane reverted.

“Why, of course I do.” There rang that sweetness, and she could *not* control it.

“Well, I’ll write Si I’ve seen you.”

“Please.” No use going on. She had protested as well as she could, and could do no better.

“Look,” said Dane. “He says that if he’d had any idea, he’d *never* have done what they did. He’s . . . well, he’s upset and he’s sorry. He *hates* having Dodie feel . . . you know, guilty about it. But he *can’t* get the money out of the business, right now. He’s just getting nicely started. Everything’s O.K. and the interest *is* being paid . . .”

“Yes, I know that, dear,” said Nona.

“Dad never did speak of this loan to you?” Dane asked.

“Why no,” she said. “No, Val didn’t. But I understand. And don’t worry about it, Dane, please.” Nona was trying very hard. “After all, Si did get the money when he needed it . . . and, as you say, he’s doing well. Why, then I’m happy about it, of course.”

But Dane’s dark eyes kept upon her doubtfully. He said, “That’s good,” rather woodenly. He kissed her cheek. “You’ll come see us soon?”

“Oh, I will.”

“I’ve got to run. Oh say, what’s your—Mrs. Rogan?”

Nona called out, “Tess?”

Tess answered from afar.

“Dane’s going.”

Tess put her head out of the bedroom door.

Dane Mercier said to her, with a smile that illuminated his rather dour good looks, “Thanks for talking to me. Look, I wish *you’d* try and talk to *her*.” He squeezed Nona’s shoulders. “Good-by, Mum. See you soon, don’t forget.”

He was gone.

Nona closed the door and looked at Tess Rogan. “Oh, you talked to him?” she said thinly.

“He was waiting for you a good while,” Tess said.

“I suppose he told you about my affairs?”

“He was troubled,” Tess said gently.

“And what is your advice in this matter?” said Nona, holding her head far back. Her eyes glittered.

“No advice,” said Tess softly. “*Your* affairs.”

“Yes.”


Tess stood still and said nothing. Made no promise, no apology.

Nona broke out of her pose. “Well, I’ll go start supper,” she said with an angry snap.

She marched around the half-wall and into the kitchen. She was very angry. Or, if not angry, then hurt. She did not like to think that Dane and Tess Rogan had been discussing Nona and Nona’s private problems. She blamed Dane for talking. She blamed Tess for listening. She felt alienated and cold. (And afraid.)

She said nothing about the shower for Georgia Oliver. Nona had been invited. It was her affair. She would simply go to the party and have fun.

Chapter 15

 Bettina Goodenough's apartment held the wasp hum of a swarm of females "enjoying" themselves.

Nona Henry balanced her plate and caught and threw eyebeams and gave out little cries as often as anyone. But she wasn't really enjoying herself or the party.

In the first place, she was quite sure that Georgia Oliver had *not* been surprised. Georgia had gone meekly where Nona took her in the late morning. But in her very air of riding passively on the tides of time, there was a mischievous and . . . oh, loving! . . . condescension. Have your little fun, do, Georgia seemed to say, you funny dears.

She hadn't even pretended much surprise. Just Georgia's usual praise. She had opened packages and cooed and cried, all with that tolerant undercurrent that in some way belittled everything she made much of, for she made just as much of the box of somewhat shopworn doilies from Agnes Vaughn as she did of the beautiful black-and-silver salad servers that Caroline Buff had sent (with such a sweet note!).

Caroline Buff had not been able to appear, herself, because of a previous engagement.

Since everyone else who had been expected actually came (excepting only Elna Ames), the luncheon for so many was served buffet style. Under Sarah Lee Cunneen's supervision, the table was beautifully arranged, immaculate and charming, and the food, every bit, was dainty and delectable.

Sarah Lee, however, seemed compelled to knock down the refinement that she had with real skill achieved. "How about some of this goop?" she had kept crying, in her vulgar way, or "This salad's a little weird but it wouldn't kill you!"

Bettina had kept laughing while the ladies served themselves.

When somebody had chirruped at Felice Paull and caused her big body to turn toward the table, Nona Henry had slipped backward in the line so as to put others between. Felice Paull had tried, upon meeting Nona face-to-face for the first time, to pin her down on the subject of Community Service.

Didn't Nona think that women needed an outlet for a natural feminine impulse toward benevolence and charity, and good works? Had Nona ever worked for the Heart Drive? When Nona murmured something about the Red Cross, Mrs. Paull's huge eyes had moistened. She had explained that the local Red Cross was in hopeless condition, badly mismanaged. Felice would not actually accuse them of fraud—but confusion and negligence was almost as bad, didn't Nona agree? Furthermore, Felice, doing her best to remedy these glaring and deplorable weaknesses, had run into a political clique there which had prevailed and actually forced Felice to drop the whole connection. Her lawyer . . .

“Come on, Felice. You know you're hungry,” Agnes Vaughn had nudged and spoken.

“Listen!” shouted Sarah Lee. “Take a lot! Take two!” Her face shone with perspiration and kindness.

Felice Paull had taken a lot. She was a large woman. Yet Agnes Vaughn who stood five foot two had taken just as much.

Now, eating daintily, Nona found that her whole mood had turned a little cynical, her eye jaundiced, her ear sour.

The ten women, seated more or less in a circle now, had become one group and Nona noted that the center of the party was not Georgia Oliver. It was Mrs. Fitz. Of course Georgia, as usual, deferred to her. And the delicate little old lady, as usual, was exercising her gentling influence so that even the Unholy Three were (comparatively) holy in her presence. But was it necessary, Nona thought, for all ten women to talk about Mrs. Fitz's wonderful son Robert, Mrs. Fitz's wonderful husband Samuel, the judge, and Mrs. Fitz's equally wonderful elder son, and Mrs. Fitz's completely happy and ideal life situation?

What is the matter with me? Nona wondered.

Is it the devil? Or is it Tess Rogan?

Tess Rogan was still occupying Nona's other bed. The barrier of Nona's anger had worn away—perhaps because there had always been a separating membrane, very delicate and very strong, which endured. Whatever too much Tess Rogan knew about Nona's affairs, there had been no comment made, no advice given, no push and no apology. The two of them came and went as lightly and as freely as before. How could anger exist?

Today Nona had come here, and where Tess was or what she was doing Nona did not even know. Nothing had been said about the exclusion of Tess Rogan from this shower for Georgia Oliver. But now in the midst of the affair Nona began to wonder who had excluded her. And why?

She doesn't need this sort of thing, thought Nona. *Maybe they sense as much*. Still, Caroline Buff didn't need this sort of thing either, and she had not been excluded. (She had had to *buy* herself off, thought the cynic.) Nobody else had been excluded. Even Agnes Vaughn was here. Nona's eyes went around the circle of widows, dressed to the eyebrows, buzzing and generating such a fierce sense of importance. (What is here that *I* need? thought Nona O'Connor.)

Agnes Vaughn gobbled up her second little cake and slurped her coffee. She had been subdued long enough.

"Say, where's your roommate, Mrs. Henry?" she shouted across ten feet of space. "Gone around the world, eh?"

The buzz faded so that all could hear this.

Nona said, with a smile, "She isn't going until June."

"Ah, go on," said Agnes Vaughn. "Hoo! Hoo!"

This could have been ignored. The silly-wise bobbing of Ida Milbank's head could have been ignored. The little silence would have been bridged, in a moment, by some tactful person.

But Nona chose to speak up. "Do you mean you don't believe she's going?" she asked, clearly. This tore too many comfortable veils and even Agnes couldn't get her mouth open for a moment. So Nona went on. "Why do you think Mrs. Rogan is a liar?" she asked with a sweet curiosity.

This was war.

Ursula Fitzgibbon tried to put her dove's wing down. "Nona, dear," she chided, "nobody says anything of the kind. We don't know, do we? What a wonderful thing it is to travel! I myself have been to Europe only once!" (No one else in the room had ever been.) "Robert," she continued, "is the traveler, of course, in my family. I have his letters from all over the world. So interesting!"

Agnes Vaughn was looking at Nona. Her eyes wobbled as if she were peering alternately into Nona's right eye, left eye. "I suppose she's going to

take you along?" Agnes brayed.

Nona said, "I don't believe her family will let her go, alone."

Sarah Lee said, "Listen!" explosively.

"When Mr. Tremaine called her from Honolulu the other night," Nona said, "he insisted on making reservations for two. Naturally he has to reserve cabin space even though he *is* a vice president of the line . . ."

"Who is *he*?" asked Agnes Vaughn, bluntly.

"Her youngest daughter's husband," Nona said gently.

"You mean it's *true*!" squeaked Harriet Gregory.

"Well, the space is reserved," said Nona, "at least as far as the Islands. They want her to stop over there. She also has a nephew in the diplomatic service at Brussels, which will be interesting too." Nona's smile was bright.

"Oh, my!" said Georgia. "I should say!"

"How delightful," said Mrs. Fitz, "for *her*! And for you, Nona dear, if she takes you."

Bettina said stiffly, "Of course to accept such a . . ."

Sarah Lee said, "Listen! An old lady's got a right to take a companion."

The ladies now murmured "Of course" and smiled upon Nona Henry.

At bay (for who would be a "companion" which is to be a servant?) Nona said as calmly and quietly as she could, "Oh, she hasn't asked *me* to go."

"But you took her in!" cried Bettina with a beaming face. The implication was clear: You did it for this foreseeable reward, did you not? (Bettina Goodenough, so gay, so full of laughter, had a core that was forever furious.)

Nona said smoothly, "Several people offered to take her in, as I remember." But not *you*, implication retaliated.

All this time, Agnes Vaughn was chewing the cud of reversal.

Now Harriet Gregory cried, "Well, *I'm* the fool!" Her painted face was being fiercely gay. "I might have promoted myself as her companion but I thought she must be kidding. What a fool I was! Ha ha."

"Ha! Ha!" echoed Bettina.

"I don't think you're such a fool, Harriet," said Agnes Vaughn suddenly. It was capricious of Agnes to be suddenly pro-Harriet but Agnes was driven to the wall. "You know that Mrs. Quinn story?"

"Oh, yes, *I* was the fool!" howled Harriet. She felt she had discovered a vein here. To be a fool was to be *something*.

"No, because there *was* a man that day. I saw him," claimed Agnes. "And that means there *is* a Mrs. Quinn."

Mrs. Fitz looked sweetly sad. "Ah, surely . . ."

"Anybody," said Agnes Vaughn, "who thinks that Oppie Etting is capable of making up a story like that is the *fool*, if you ask me. He hasn't got what it takes."

A sense of the truth of this filled the room.

"Well, who is she then?" burst Sarah Lee Cunneen. "A murderess! Listen!"

Agnes Vaughn let her teeth show. "She's here, all right. She's one of us."

Daisy Robinson had been in the room all this time, doing what the rest were doing, managing to seem merely a trifle absent-minded instead of bored to the bone as she actually was. Now Daisy's nostrils flared. "What nonsense!" she scoffed. (Murder? For Jealousy? Daisy's mind ran to literature.) "By the way . . . has any of you seen *Othello*?"

Mrs. Fitz said, "I *don't* get to the theatre any more. Is it well done, Daisy?"

Felice Paull said belligerently as if she ought to have been told, "Who is doing *Othello*?" (Felice Paull seemed a tiny bit ashamed of Agnes Vaughn.)

"The way to find out which one of us is Mrs. Quinn," proclaimed Agnes, "is to eliminate, eh? It wouldn't be an old-timer. Hoo! Hoo! Where are you from, Mrs. Henry?"

But Nona let her head swivel gracefully. "How I'd like to have seen *Othello*," she said to Daisy, "I wish I had known. Theatre used to be my passion."

"Well, I'd go again," said Daisy enthusiastically.

"But do tell us, Daisy," said Mrs. Fitz, "who plays Iago? Years ago," she continued (as if she, thought Nona cynically, had not really wanted to know who played Iago but rather to indicate to all present that she knew the play),

“Samuel and I,” said Mrs. Fitz, “never missed anything Shakespearean that they were doing in New York. It’s a little over *my* head . . .” Mrs. Fitz said smiling adorably and Nona, reconquered, smiled back.

The Unholy Three were a minority. And furthermore Felice Paul had temporarily abdicated and Ida Milbank scarcely ever counted for much. So Mrs. Fitz, via culture (courtesy of Daisy Robinson), carried the talk away.

Nona was grateful. She didn’t know *what* had gotten into her. She rather wished she had kept quiet.

Agnes Vaughn kept looking Nona Henry up and down.

There comes a moment when a party is ripe for an ending. The hostess turns a bit too gay as if she says to herself, “O.K., the hell with it!” A guest of honor with any perception understands that she had better catch the moment if she is to preserve and crystallize the legend of a joyful and successful occasion. It was Mrs. Fitz who rose and graciously cut this party’s throat.

Nona made haste to follow close behind her, so as not to be caught in the necessarily slow (“reluctant”) rhythm of breaking-up-the-party. Therefore it was Mrs. Fitz (and Georgia, of course) and Nona Henry who were bunched in Bettina’s doorway when it opened and began to spew the party out.

Sunshine gushed out from Bettina’s southern exposure into the gloomy meeting place of the upstairs corridors. A high blend of chirps and giggles, soprano cries of praise and farewell, the party noises gushed out into the silence. A special silence, tense and busy.

A man in a white coat silently held open the elevator door. Another man in a white coat angled and maneuvered a narrow stretcher on wheels so as to get it into the cage.

A figure under a white sheet lay silent upon the stretcher—most terribly silent.

Beyond this group, a strange, thin, young woman wearing a transparent blouse and lots of beads around her scrawny neck stood silent, beside Tess Rogan, who with her very presence seemed to be holding the lid of silence down.

The party’s merry tumult bounced and recoiled. Shock ran backward deep into Bettina’s apartment.

The woman on the stretcher was concentrated upon pure pain. Her ears did not care. Her consciousness took no heed. She had a rendezvous.

Elna Ames was dying. They were simply taking her away from Sans Souci so that she would die somewhere else.

Chapter 16



There was no movement at all for a moment. Then several people moved at once. Tess Rogan caught the elevator door with one hand. The man who had been holding it let go and caught up one end of the stretcher. Now the two men between them tilted the narrow thing enough to get it within the elevator.

The solution was sudden. Elna Ames, riding at a high angle, disappeared. She seemed to have been whisked from view. The door closed. The lighted window sank away.

At the same time, Nona was aware of Mrs. Fitz stepping backward, of Georgia's quick arm going around her.

And Nona herself stepped forward.

"Is there anything I can do?" she said to Tess Rogan, speaking low.

"Come along," Tess said, "we'll see."

Nona did not look behind her. She had a sense of the party-for-Georgia choked in that doorway, its emerging stream backed up upon itself, in confusion. But she went with Tess Rogan and the strange young woman into Elna Ames' apartment, which was across the hall from Agnes Vaughn's and next to Bettina's. Nearby.

Nearby. The other side of a wall!

They went in and Tess closed the door.

The thin young woman began to speak at once. She had a nasal whine, not loud but dreary. "We didn't know," she wailed. "We didn't know what it was. My aunt didn't say anything. She never said much. I don't get away so easy. I mean, I got the kids. So how would I know? I mean, it just happened I came with Jack this time. I guess I must have been a little bit nervous. I said to him . . . You know, Aunt Elna, she *never* said much. When she wrote she wasn't feeling so well, I mean, that was a lot for her to say. But I didn't have no idea it was cancer. I wish she'd have said . . . I wish . . . I mean . . ." She stopped and sucked in a dry gasp.

Tess Rogan said, "This is Mrs. Henry. Mrs. Ames' niece, Nona. Gloria Hudson. That right?"

“Right,” the young woman murmured. She was beginning to cry. “Maybe that doctor don’t know what he’s doing.” She hit the back of a chair with one hand.

“Let’s see what’s to be done, here,” Tess said.

Nona had been holding her breath against an odor in this room, so bitter and foul that it was almost sickening. She looked around at a battlefield. Ah, poor woman! Poor-old-woman! Fighting the terror and the pain all alone! A widow! Yet how disgusting! Nona thought her chest would crack. She began to feel panicky.

Tess Rogan moved toward the bed. “Mrs. Henry and I can help you straighten up,” she continued. “You will feel better when everything is neat.”

“I guess so,” the woman, Gloria, said dully.

Tess had taken hold of the bed clothing and was pulling it from the mattress. The idea of stripping the bed and laying bare the mattress put a vision of this place, bare and clean, into one’s head.

Nona stumbled across toward the windows and began to open all of them as wide as she could.

“You’ll want to go over the important things,” she heard Tess say to the niece. “Her valuables. Her papers.”

“Yes,” the thin woman said, listlessly.

Nona was able to breathe now and she could speak, so she said briskly, “Let me help you fold those blankets. We can leave them for the maid to send out.”

“That’s right,” Tess said. “And I think some of the clothing, too.”

They were working.

The thin woman pulled open a top dresser drawer and stared into it. She was sniffing back her tears.

“Now, that’s better,” Tess said. It wasn’t much better. To have stripped the tousled filthy bed was just a beginning. Tess turned toward the wardrobe closet.

“How about the kitchen?” said Nona, brightly. She thought she would be nauseated in a moment.

She went into the kitchen and it was, pitifully, another battleground where weakness had won, disorder was the victor. Dibs and dabs of food

had been left to mold. The pitiful half cup of broth, the limp abandoned toast, rejected food without function, had turned to filth. Nona pulled herself up sharply and began to attack the dirt and confusion. She took everything out of the sink, washed it, filled it with clean water and soap powder. Action made her feel better, at once. The odor of soap was comforting.

She could hear Tess talking calmly. "I'd take all the jewelry, don't you think so? How about putting it in this box?"

"Her watch," the niece said brokenly. "And I guess her pearls. Her locket." The voice trembled. "Look, these are my aunt and my mother—"

"Yes, I see."

"I can remember when they were—"

Tess broke in. "I think you'll want to have these dresses cleaned. Will you give them away?"

"Oh no. No, no. Can't give them away. I ought to get over to that home or hospital or whatever it is. See if it's a decent place."

"I'm sure it is," Tess said. "When is your husband coming?"

"Jack had some business. I don't know when he'll be through. I can't wait . . ."

"You can leave a message for him. There now, the closet looks in order."

"That doctor—" The voice choked. "We didn't *know*. I could have come down if I'd have known. Taken her up to our house."

"Not now," Tess said gently. "What about those papers? You can go through them later. Wrap them up? Ah, here's a big envelope."

"I can use that," the niece said, in quite an ordinary voice.

Nona had the kitchen counter cleared. Air, although reluctantly, had begun to creep through the opened windows. She looked into the refrigerator fearfully, but there was very little in it. She called out. "I think the maid could clean out the icebox. There isn't a lot and it will keep."

"Good," Tess said.

The thin woman now stood in the dinette, looking over the dish cupboards into the kitchen. Nona said quickly, "Those dishes are clean and they can drain. Let me just get that tablecloth. That look better?"

"Yes, it does," the niece said.

She turned, disconsolate, numb.

Nona followed her back into the large room.

Tess was at the foot of the bed. "Shall we fold it up?"

"Let me," said Nona.

She saw the thin woman's face beginning to crumple into lines of guilt and fear and sorrow. "Would *you* help me?" said Nona. "Please?"

"Oh, sure." The woman's face changed, and she came and together they pushed the bed up on its end and turned it into the closet and closed the doors upon it. Immediately, the room was spacious.

Nona became a whirlwind. She began to yank at chairs, turning them slightly, making meaningful groups. She whisked into neatness the objects on the tops of tables. She lined up magazines. She used to call this "slicking" a room. It was a cheap way to get an effect.

"Much better," Tess said, admiringly.

The thin woman was standing helplessly in the middle of the room. On the desk there was a box and a huge envelope fat with contents.

"There now," Tess said. "Now, you needn't be ashamed."

The niece sighed. She went toward the desk and bent and put her hands upon the bundles she proposed to take with her. She said, "I'm scared. I can't go—to that place—I mean, would you go with me?"

"I'll go with you," Tess said, easily.

The thin woman remained bent. "My aunt is dying," she said.

"Yes," said Tess.

"We didn't know. We didn't know what it was. My aunt didn't *say* anything . . ."

She was going to go around, again, that dreary way.

There came a sharp tap at the door. The door opened.

Nona turned.

It was not another of the widows. It was a man.

"Gloria?"

"Oh, Jack, she's *bad*," the thin woman said to him. "She's got cancer. She's going to die. The doctor's put her in a nursing home. It'll cost, but

there isn't anything else we can do." She went to him and lay against his chest and sobbed.

The man was in his thirties, a hairy man with a craggy nose. He looked rather suspiciously at Tess and Nona. "What's this? You breaking up her apartment?"

Gloria turned her face upon his chest. "No, just straightening up. No. I can't do that. I can't take it away from her."

"She's never coming back, is she?" the man said gravely.

"But just the same, I can't take it away . . ."

Tess Rogan said, "These are the things your wife thinks ought to be kept somewhere safe."

"Yeah?" The man moved his jaw as if he shifted a cud. "Well . . ." He stood his wife upon her own feet, rather gently. "If you done all you got to do here, what now? We better go to this nursing home? Is that it?"

"We've got to go."

"O.K." He looked hard at Tess and then shot a hard glance Nona's way. He marched into the kitchen, looked around, went to the window, pulled it down and locked it. He did the same with the dinette window, and the two windows in the big room. He looked sharply all around. He picked up the box and the fat envelope. "This all?"

"That's it." Gloria was using her compact, not because she was vain but because she wished to look decent. She put it away in her purse and tried to smile. Her red-rimmed eyes fastened hungrily upon Tess Rogan. "Thanks a lot."

Her husband opened the door and stood, ushering the ladies out. Gloria went first, then Tess and then Nona. The husband said, "Got her key?"

"Yes."

So he closed the door and firmed it with a strong decisive hand. "That's that, I guess. Let's go."

Gloria was the stronger for his strength. Now she did smile. "Thanks again," she murmured to Tess. Then she said to Nona, vaguely, "And you, too."

The man did not thank either of them. He gave them a cold stare. Tess made a nodding motion of dismissal. The couple started around the bend of

the hall toward the top of the stairs, he with his hand under her thin elbow and she, herself again, tense and sad, but supported.

Oh, God, this place was full of widows! Who were *not* supported!

Sans Souci was deathly still.

But Nona found, in herself, an unexpected reaction. Now that they had been put out of that tragic place, now that they were locked out, she had energy left over. Why, she could have scrubbed . . . !

Agnes Vaughn's door burst outward. Agnes was still in her party dress. "What was it?" she asked abruptly.

"It's cancer," Tess Rogan answered, quietly, promptly. "Mrs. Ames is dying."

Agnes stared half a moment. "I'm not surprised," she said flatly. Then her door waggled closed in their faces.

Tess and Nona began to walk around the corner and down the north wing. Bettina Goodenough's door did not so much as tremble. Mrs. Braverman and Mrs. Forrest were at work. Their doors were still. No life appeared in this corridor until, down at the end, there stood Georgia Oliver leaning out of 211.

"Ah, the poor *thing*! Where have they taken her?"

Tess did not answer, so Nona found herself answering. "To some nursing home."

"Much the best," said Georgia. "They'll take care of her. Was she in pain?"

Again, Tess did not speak. Nona said, "I'm afraid so. It's cancer. She is dying."

"Ah, you mustn't . . ." Georgia chided. "You can never be sure. You must never lose hope. I'm sure she's in good hands, now." Georgia moved a step or two nearer them. "It was distressing. I'm sorry Mrs. Fitz had to see . . ."

"How is Mrs. Fitz?" asked Nona mechanically.

"She is lying down. Robert is with her. That helps." Georgia brightened and her mouth spread in her gentle smile. "I can go reassure her, now. It's so

much better to *know*.” Georgia tilted her head, still smiling. “We must take good care of Mrs. Fitz,” she said and went within.

Nona touched her own doorknob. The unlocked door swung and she and Tess went in.

Without discussion, each went to wash. First Tess. Then Nona, who had a compulsion to clean her face, to scrub her hands and arms to the elbow.

Nona said, “Let’s have hot tea.” (To clean the throat of the taste of fear and loathing.)

They sat down at the dinette table, beside the window. The patio below was darkening now. A little sunlight still fell on the flowers the far side of the fountain. Sans Souci was the same and yet it was not the same. The enemy had been here, had raided the ranks. There was a mortuary sign behind those trees.

Nona thought of the quiet woman at the bridge table—“such a stick” the Gadabouts had called her. She cried out compulsively, “What a horrible way to come to the end! How pitiful! How *disgusting!*”

“Yes it is,” said Tess Rogan.

Downstairs Morgan Lake already felt the pall that would settle upon the building. He understood it very well. He hated the loathsome enemy as much as any. It was he who had called his own Dr. Huffman, and failing to find him, a Doctor O’Gara, when the niece had phoned down to him in such panic and dismay. It was he who had connected the doctor with the nursing home and he who had relayed the grim order for an ambulance. It was he who had felt for that strange, frightened young person, walking into such trouble as this. And he had racked his mind for the name of a woman, some woman to stand by her. The house was full of women. He would not send Rose. He knew about the party. He felt that it would be better not to stir up that wasp nest. In fact, he had rather hoped that Elna Ames would be mercifully away before the widows at the party found out what was happening. He’d thought of Mrs. Rogan, for he knew who had been invited and who not, to Georgia Oliver’s shower. So he had called her up, in Mrs. Henry’s apartment, and Tess Rogan had simply said, “I’ll go right away.”

He did not know yet that the party had broken up at the exact wrong moment. He sat on his stool in the empty lobby and gusts of pity and horror were blowing through his heart.

The widows of Sans Souci did, each, what she had to do to be able to endure. Daisy Robinson was reading a book fast and furiously.

The Unholy Three sat in Agnes' apartment and ripped over the party, and all done or said there, with concentrated living human venom. Agnes Vaughn was not crazy about that Nona Henry.

Harriet Gregory kept taking pills. An aspirin. A tranquilizer. A stimulant. Anything that might, yet, do the trick and make her feel well. She huddled in her chair, smoking one cigarette after another in a state of miserable panic, waiting for her own sensations to improve.

Sarah Lee Cunneen and Bettina Goodenough were cleaning up after the party. Bettina was being pettish about everything. She didn't think Georgia had been properly appreciative. It would be a long day before Bettina gave such a party again. Trouble and expense, and, really, for what? Bettina was going to think of Number One. Who else would? She did not repeat her favorite slogan, "Life's too short." She believed it, too well, in this moment.

Sarah Lee agreed to everything without argument, indeed almost without attention. Her hands moved slowly, polishing glasses. Sarah Lee could not get out of her head a sense of having failed, of having somehow missed something very important.

Nona said to Tess over the teacups, "Do you know Agnes Vaughn?" She was feeling better, as if to have looked the enemy in the face was to have done *something*.

"I've heard of her." Tess turned the cup of cooling tea. She seemed to be admiring it.

"I fixed her wagon," said Nona with satisfaction. "Did you know she's been calling you a liar? About your trip?"

"Has she?" Tess was mildly interested.

"Well, I fixed that." Nona found herself biting into the middle of a smile. "What a crew, really!" she said. "What a crew at that gathering! That Felice Paull! That Agnes Vaughn! She hasn't a scruple to her name. She's *still* trying to talk up this Mrs. Quinn, this murderess. I think she's going to cast me in the role. *She's* the liar!"

"She may be a liar," said Tess thoughtfully. "She's no lie-ee, though."

"She's no what?"

Tess smiled. “There are some people who insist upon being lied to. I don’t know what else to call them.”

Nona’s mouth fell open. A sense of illumination flooded into her mind. “A lie-ee,” she murmured. “I never heard of such a thing.”

“It’s just my term,” said Tess. “The *thing* is real.”

“Yes, it is,” said Nona.

“*I* see it.”

“I do, too,” said Nona with awe. “Why, I *do*!”

Downstairs, Oppie Etting had come. So Morgan Lake told Rose about Elna Ames. Rose said, “Well, she ought to have gone *somewhere*, long ago. The old *fool*! Honestly, Morgan, why you don’t get rid of these old creeps and at least try and fill the place with younger people . . .”

“Younger people,” said Morgan sadly, “wouldn’t live here.”

“See!” she cried triumphantly. “But Winnie’s got to live here. And me! And me!” She was looking fiercely young. She had pulled herself up to narrow her waist. She had thrust her breasts forward.

“You haven’t a gray hair on your head,” said Morgan gently.

Rose flushed. Her passionate selfishness did not always win over his control.

Upstairs Nona said, “But how did you get in on all that, Tess?”

“Mr. Lake called me.”

“He did?”

“Well, someone was needed. I was the only one—the only mobile one,” amended Tess, “who wasn’t at the party.”

“Why *was* that?” said Nona sharply. “I didn’t like it.”

But Tess said, “There is no need to like it or to dislike it, Nona.”

“Weren’t you offended?”

“On the contrary, I suppose I must have offended someone,” Tess said. “Don’t you see that?”

“You are the strangest . . .” Nona leaned against the table edge. Her eyes were bright with curiosity and she let it loose. “You reverse things. *You* say it is more blessed to receive . . . *you* say it is better to be a liar than a lie-ee.”

“Not *better*,” Tess said. “It’s just my way of clarifying, or at least it works for me.”

Nona’s throat felt dry; her whole being felt reckless. “I *was* robbed, you know,” she said boldly. “By my own daughter and my son-in-law. What would you do? Mustn’t I forgive them?”

“If you want to,” Tess said. She got up and took the cups into the kitchen.

Nona said, loudly, “It isn’t easy.”

“No,” said Tess, “very hard.”

Nona wandered into the living room.

A lie-ee? She sat down, musing. Georgia Oliver with her faith that everything always “worked out” since the world was finally made of sweetness and kindness and tolerance. Was she a lie-ee? Nona felt ashamed. No, no, Georgia was kind and good. But enviable?

Nona twitched restlessly. (To forgive was not easy. And when you reversed that, to be *forgiven* was very hard. Oh, now!) She took a cigarette out of a box. She saw that the ash tray already had cigarette ends in it.

“Who was here?” she asked Tess as Tess came in.

“Here? Oh. Robert Fitzgibbon dropped by.”

“He did?” Nona was astonished.

“He’d forgotten about the shower for Georgia,” Tess explained. “No one home, across the hall. So he came and talked to me.”

Nona said in a moment, “What do *you* think of Mrs. Fitz?”

“Ursula Fitzgibbon,” said Tess Rogan, “wants the history of this world to have been written by Louisa May Alcott.”

Nona burst with one shout of laughter.

“You asked,” accused Tess, “and I told you. You needn’t take it for Gospel, you know. Now, I think I’ll lie down. Shall we go out for dinner a bit later? Go to Hunt’s? Live dangerously?”

“All right,” sputtered Nona, ashamed to have laughed.


“It looks as if we might as well,” said Tess thoughtfully.

“Yes.”

Nona settled back, lit the cigarette. The devil was dancing in her heart. Down, devil! But *was* it the devil?

Death’s wing had brushed over Sans Souci. As it will again, Nona thought, soberly now. Of course. It must. Death, danger, a little madness . . . all these. How can you hope to be alive or safe or sane unless you reckon with these, since they are real?

Chapter 17

 The next day was very quiet, although the hive stirred. The widows went in and out. But none congregated in the patio or in the lobby. Greetings between them were grave and aloof.

The two workingwomen were late leaving the building. When they went forth, Kitty Forrest wore a face ravished by sleepless terror. She showed the white of her eye, like a skittish horse, as she went by the desk. Joan Braverman was close beside her. Thin, lantern-jawed, brusque, matter-of-fact, Joan was shepherding her softer chum to the doctor's. Joan said it was wise. Joan said no use to worry until you were sure you had something to worry about. This basic misunderstanding of the very meaning of the word was supposed to be comforting.

The widows of Sans Souci had been reminded of their mortality.

That day was long.

Nona Henry dined alone. Tess Rogan had gone out. Some people had called for her. She'd gone down to meet them in the lobby.

After dinner, Nona felt restless and oppressed. She slipped across the hall.

Robert Fitzgibbon let her in. His eyes had a red look. His breath reeked. "Mother's abed," he said. "Georgia's the nurse. *You* come in and watch TV with me."

"I came to see your mother." Nona didn't find this man attractive tonight. An air of petulance about him repelled her. "All right for you," he said childishly. But then Georgia called her name and Nona went into the bedroom.

Mrs. Fitz was propped upon pillows. A soft white woolen stole was wrapped about her shoulders and under the rose-shaded lamp she looked immaculate, precious, frail.

"How are you?" asked Nona warmly.

"Very well, really. Now, Georgia, you go talk to Robert, please. Nona will sit with me awhile. Sit down, dear. Will you be comfortable?"

Nona sat down and felt again the sense of harbor. The old lady's voice lapped against her ears like gentle water.

"Dear Georgia spoils me so. I'm perfectly all right. Perhaps just a *little* tired from the party. Sometimes I find it's wise to spend a day in bed. But wasn't it a lovely party? Such delicious food and all so pretty! It was very kind of the ladies."

"Too bad—" Nona began, and bit her tongue.

Mrs. Fitz smoothed the coverlet with her pink old hands. "Poor Mrs. Ames. The poor soul. What hurts us," said she, "we do wish we had found ways to be kinder. Don't you think so?"

"I suppose—" Nona said to herself, That's *true*.

"But we mustn't reproach ourselves," said Mrs. Fitz firmly. "Certainly *you* did *your* share. You went to help."

"That wasn't much," Nona stammered.

"Ah, but it counted," said Mrs. Fitz. "You are such a kind person, Nona. You will never regret it. The longer I live the more I think that is the only secret. Just to be kind enough."

"Kind," Nona echoed. The word grew strange, as words sometimes will. It dropped all its trailing associations and stood naked in her mind, a syllable, a sound. Meaning what? Meaning akin? Member of the same species?

Mrs. Fitz was rippling on. ". . . good hands, now. And all that *can* be done, of course. I didn't know her well. She seemed a very nice woman, very quiet. How is Mrs. Rogan?"

The question was a surprise. Nona blinked. "Why, she is fine. She's gone out to dinner and the theatre."

"Oh?" The syllable held the faintest flavor of reproach.

"A date she *had*," explained Nona.

"I see. Did *she* know Mrs. Ames well?"

"No, I don't think so. Mr. Lake called her, I think, because she wasn't at the party."

"That was a kindness," murmured Mrs. Fitz. "Yet I wonder if it was a mistake. If she has such wealthy relatives . . ." She frowned.

"Kindness?"

“I believe the thought was that an invitation demanded a gift, you see? And perhaps that would have been oppressive?”

Nona sat still, feeling only half satisfied.

“Was she hurt, Nona dear, not to have been asked?” Mrs. Fitz’s purple eyes were anxious.

“No,” said Nona truthfully. “No, she wasn’t, really.”

Mrs. Fitz sighed. “No one knows Mrs. Rogan very well.” She paused. When Nona did not speak she went on. “Robert says she is interesting. Of course, Robert has been everywhere and seen so many types. She is a little odd, so I hear. You were kind to offer to share your apartment.”

“We get along very well,” murmured Nona.

“Ah, but *you would*,” praised the old lady. “Mrs. Rogan’s a countrywoman, I understand. Perhaps that is what seems odd to us, here.”

“Country?”

“Isn’t she from Maine?”

“Yes.”

“Her husband was a—oh dear, now somebody told me!—a manufacturer of some strange thing.”

“I don’t know,” said Nona, who had never asked Tess Rogan this question. (Which was rather odd, she now reflected.)

“Canoes,” said Mrs. Fitz triumphantly. “That does seem so strange. Canoes!” She sighed.

There was in Sans Souci a shadowy hierarchy of prestige derived from one’s husband’s status, which persisted even now that the husbands were gone. Nona Henry was well aware of this. It was (she knew when she felt honest) the reason she did not volunteer the fact that Val had owned a motion-picture theatre. This was not a prestige occupation.

Highest rank went to the professions and, within them, to fame. Mrs. Fitz, with her noted Judge, ranked very high. (Mrs. Buff, with her Banker, had a sheer prestige made of simple money.) Daisy Robinson’s Doctor, Sarah Lee Cunneen’s Doctor, and Bettina Goodenough’s Attorney ranked up there, too. Harriet Gregory kept trying to convince everyone that her (unpublished) Writer was of the elite. There was a rumor that Marie

Gardner's husband had been a Professor, which was respected, and vaguely pitied too.

For the rest, Businessmen. Leila Hull's Veterinarian was counted a businessman.

There was no Clergyman's widow in Sans Souci. Sans Souci was not *that* "reasonable."

All this slipped through Nona's mind. So Liam Rogan had manufactured canoes? This *would* seem odd to Ursula Fitzgibbon. Nona, sitting in the rose-soft light of this bedroom, thought with fond amusement that a canoe was about as far from Mrs. Fitz's ken as an object could possibly be.

But Tess Rogan? Nona found that she could imagine *that* body, upright from the knees, and those arms swinging in free grace. Tess Rogan in a canoe? But not *now*!

"She's seventy-one," Nona murmured.

"And quite remarkably strong and well," said Mrs. Fitz, with admiration lingering upon each syllable. "Country people. Of course, I think they are closer to . . . well . . . to the earth than we."

Nona wondered for a moment if by "the earth" Mrs. Fitz meant crude health.

"They live so much with nature," said Mrs. Fitz. "They see animals . . ." She looked a bit queasy.

(Oh, death had brushed a dark wing over Sans Souci. Left a feather in the throat.)

"We can't do any more for poor Elna Ames," said Nona softly. "Any of us. We mustn't talk about it."

"You are wise," said Mrs. Fitz gratefully.

But Nona found herself turning in her mind Tess Rogan's strength. Yes, it had been either strength or a total lack of sensitivity . . . in that room of pain and struggle. Was this of the earth? Of the country? Nature and animals? Rhythms and cycles? Her mind jumped. But you don't manufacture canoes in the *woods*, she thought suddenly. Not *this* century!

". . . dear children," Mrs. Fitz was saying, "press me to say I'll come and live with them. Of course, I wouldn't wish to trouble Robert and Georgia, for the world. Although I may not trouble anyone for long." Her fine

features took on a look of sorrow and Nona's heart curled. (That feather in the throat?)

"How could you trouble them?" she chided gently. "They want to be near you."

"I am blessed in my children," said Ursula, "and in my friends, my dear. You comfort me."

Ah, she's a darling, Nona thought, quite melted.

When Nona left her, she found the living room still taken over by the TV screen. Georgia Oliver was seated in her relaxed way, with her normal smile upon her face. She rose at once to say good night and thank you. But Robert Fitzgibbon remained sprawled in his chair, a glass in his hand, his still-handsome, boyish face glowering toward the entertainment.

Later, bedtime, Nona Henry, in robe and slippers, came out of her bathroom, leaving the door just a little ajar, the light on in there, for Tess's sake. She moved to the slot between the beds, turned Tess's spread back and the blankets diagonally down, then opened her own bed and snapped off the lamp on the little square table between her and the window. She leaned over it to take hold of the lower sash and raise it.

The night was moonlit. The street below looked clean and deserted, although the hour was not much after ten. Nona could see over the fat mass of the leaf-draped wall to a strip of grass and the curb. There were palms in this parking strip, and moon-made shadows of the tall bare trunks were slanting a series of bars across the pavement.

There came that convertible, swooping in. Nona thought, Well! Winifred Lake is early tonight. She had come to know Winnie's hours. She had seen this car many times, or heard it, as it swooped in here just below her bedroom window. She had watched the disembarking, the farewell embraces, often enough to want to turn away in distaste. Knowledge of something that was surely a secret, and perhaps not a nice one, made her uneasy. She did not intend to watch them now, but there was no time . . .

The car came in fast. Its brakes screamed a little like a human cry. It jolted to a stop. There was swift violent movement. *What?* The door burst open. The figure of the driver gave a heave of some kind, the figure of the girl went tumbling, flying, crashing. The car door crashed closed. The car took hold of the pavement with its rubber toes and pelted away.

All this—so tumultuous and shocking—was over in ten seconds. Then the street was silent and bare and clean; but a moon-shadow lay strict, with no flutter, across the girl's still body as it was left, crumpled there upon the grass.

Why, he had *thrown* her! Brutally! Wickedly! Was she *hurt*? Nona's blood raced. Why, how wicked! How brutal! How terrible!

She ran out of her bedroom, out of her apartment, and down the corridor on swift, soft-slipped feet. Yes, she had *known* all along it was secret and *evil*! Perhaps she ought to have interfered before or ought not to interfere now? But there had been no one else to see! And if the girl was hurt!

What should Nona do? Thought caught up as her feet padded swiftly down the stairs. Should she turn into the lobby, dressed as she was, and get Oppie Etting to go with her? Yes, wise . . . but the car had gone. There was nothing *dangerous* out there. Wiser to see? For this was evil and secret.

Nona turned away from the lobby at the first floor and went rapidly down the north wing to the fire door at the end. She pushed on the bar that released it. Without thinking why, she stooped and picked up a small stone and put it between the door and the jamb to leave this way back in available. In case. In what case? She did not know. She knew that she *must* know whether the girl was hurt. That first. That first.

She found herself on a narrow, almost overgrown walk between the building and the wall. She went along it, fending branches, slipped through the arch and ran back along the public sidewalk.

Winnie Lake had lifted herself enough to be resting her upper back against the rough bark of the palm.

“Are you hurt?” Nona panted. “I *saw* that. Did he hurt you, Winifred?”

She moved around to where she could see the face.

There was a smudge of earth along the cheek. The eyes had a sick-animal look, a dumb suffering.

“I'm not hurt,” the voice said feebly, without passion.

“Let me help you.” Nona leaned to put her hand under the armpit. The girl's torso twisted away.

“I'm okay,” she said. “Just don't . . .” The last vowel began to rise in pitch.

“Come, let me help you in and we can call the police,” said Nona impatiently. “You don’t have to put up with this sort of thing. I saw it. Whoever did this to you can’t get away with it.”

The girl expelled her breath like a little cry of despair.

“I can’t,” she said.

“Can’t you get up? Is it your leg? Your ankle? Shall I call Mr. Etting?”

“No,” said Winnie. “No, please . . .” It was a wail.

“But, my dear . . .” Nona was crouching. Her face was close to Winnie’s face. The girl’s eyes were not staring numbly now. Fear curled in them. And hatred, too. Let me alone, can’t you? they cried. You old biddy!

So Nona rose to a standing position and heard her knees crack, loud in the stillness. Her knees were old. I’m just an interfering old crow, she thought—or so *she* sees me. Am I?

She stood there, thoughtful, and her personal dignity came home to her. She knew the girl was beginning to get her feet under her and to scramble up. Nona did not touch her to help her. She said quietly, “You are no dear of mine, but I meant to help you, and still will, if you’ll tell me how.”

Winnie said, breathlessly, accusingly, “Are you going to tell?”

Nona said, “You little idiot! I’ve seen a great deal out my window that I haven’t told *yet*.”

The girl’s face rippled in the moonlight. She had thought she’d been invisible, Nona remarked then, with satisfaction. Her young life invisible to the old biddies—the finished lives. She had thought no one knew. Do her good to learn!

The girl said, “Don’t tell my *mother*. Promise you won’t tell, Mrs. Henry, please?”

Nona said, “You are filthy dirty. Your leg is bleeding. Nobody will have to *tell*, you know.”

Winnie looked down at her own slender leg. She extended it into the moonlight. The stocking was ruined. The scratches were bleeding. “I could say I fell.”

“You could,” said Nona. “Good night, then.” She turned, but rage caught her. “What’s the matter with you?” she blazed. “That was a brutal thing! Do

you *like* it when your boy friends beat you up and throw you out of automobiles?”

Winnie said, “*Would* you help me?” She said it wonderingly, as if the very idea that any woman of Nona’s generation could possibly be her friend was quite new to her.

Nona softened. “Yes, I would help you. That’s what I came running down to do.”

“Promise, if I tell you, you *won’t* tell?”

Now the girl was quivering. She might be in shock, Nona thought. She was surely in trouble. Deep trouble.

Nona simply could not visualize herself going away, into the building, up to her apartment. And so to bed? But that was not possible.

“I promise,” she said solemnly.

“Well—see—he’s—my husband,” Winnie said. Her hand grasped Nona’s hand involuntarily. “And if my mother knew she’d—I just *can’t* tell her—*or* call the police. See? Do you see?”

Nona felt shock. But she rallied. “I think we can get upstairs,” she said, “without being seen. I can lend you some stockings. You can wash and get your breath. What was this? A lover’s quarrel?”

Winnie sobbed once.

“Come on, then,” Nona said stoically.

She took the girl’s arm and they went along the outside of the wall, ducked under the arch and into the shadows quickly, then along the inside of the wall to that fire door.

Nobody was stirring in the lower corridor. Sarah Lee Cunneen must be gadding about. Nona hoped so. Ida Milbank’s ex-apartment, 111, was vacant. Ida was in 109, and her door was still. Harriet Gregory, across the hall on the patio side, could have heard nothing.

They went along swiftly. They went up the stairs.

Nobody was in the upstairs corridor either.

Nona pushed the bedraggled girl through her own door, closed it, locked it.

Tess had a key. Tess wasn’t in yet. The theatre was not over until eleven or so, and it would take time for her to get here.

So Nona pushed the girl into the bathroom. “Wash,” she directed. Winnie washed her face and hands, stripped off the ruined nylons, washed her legs. Nona inspected the cuts and scratches, put an antiseptic powder on them, found stockings of her own, all silently. Handed the girl compact, lipstick and comb.

Then they were sitting in the living room. “Do you smoke, Winnie?” The girl shook her head. Nona lit a cigarette. “Now then. You are secretly married? Is that it? But you are only . . . what? Seventeen?” She would be calm and wise.

Winifred Lake was watching her with bright eyes. The period of silence had puzzled and intrigued her. “We went to Mexico, during Christmas vacation.”

“I see.”

“My mother thought I was at Laguna.”

“I see. I suppose that is one reason you needed money?” Nona was cool.

Winnie said, humbly, “Yes.”

“And now,” said Nona, hard and bright, “what is *your* idea of your future?”

“We had a fight,” said Winnie in a low voice. “That’s all.” Her head moved . . . and it was pitiful. Her eyes were trying to be on top of this trouble, but the head despaired.

“You will have to tell your parents, sooner or later, won’t you?” Nona was calm.

Winnie said, “My mother will just . . . just blow her top.” Her hands clenched. She looked scared.

“Your father, then? You might tell him—privately.”

Winnie’s teeth caught at her lower lip. She let it go and said explosively, “Dad’s got a whacky heart. He’ll tell *her* . . . I know that . . . and then she’ll just . . . She’s going to kill him, Mrs. Henry.”

“*Kill* him?”

“She *will*,” sobbed Winnie. “You don’t *know*! She’s just going to *kill* him, one of these days. And he’s always been so good . . . I mean, he is good . . .” Winnie’s head began to go down. “I don’t want her to kill him because

she's upset about this . . . about *me*. But she *will!* Honest! He's not my real father. But I don't want . . . I can't tell . . ." Winnie wept.

"Not your real father?"

"No, he married my mother when I was a little kid. So she won't *let* him . . . I mean, he can't . . ."

This child was mixed up in some domestic tensions. And, of course, she might be dramatizing. Must be exaggerating. Yet . . . Nona Henry remembered the night of the fire, and how this girl had come up behind her, and how she, Nona, had been touched by the girl's fear for the man. No, there was *some* truth in this. There was some reason to fear for his heart's health. Or at least this girl believed there was.

"What was your idea"—Nona spoke in that same hard bright way—"when you and this boy, whoever he is, got married? What thought was in your mind then, about the future?"

Winnie looked up, tears streaking her cheeks. "I don't know," she wailed. Then she put her head all the way down to her thighs and Nona was able, in the midst of shock, to notice how lithe the young torso must be.

She said sharply, "Now stop that! Get your eyes red and then you will be forced to explain."

Winnie choked. The crying stopped.

"I'm glad to see you have *some* control," said Nona grimly. "Now then, you had better be downstairs by eleven or so?"

The girl raised her head and nodded it, looking surprised that Nona Henry knew the drill.

"*I* think," said Nona crisply, "that you have been a fool. *I* think the sooner you get yourself *out* of any marriage to *that* particular brute the better off you will be. You are going to have to tell somebody, some adult, who can help you on the legal side. Now, maybe if you could tell your stepfather without breaking into hysterics . . . ? Perhaps you don't realize," said Nona severely, "what it means to be grown-up. I daresay your stepfather has more self-control than *you* can imagine. Pull yourself together and figure out how to tell him quietly. He will help you."

Winnie said, "Yes, Mrs. Henry," with young lips parted, with young eyes grateful—and sliding just a bit to one side.

Nona said, "I see you haven't told me everything." She watched the eyes grow round and innocent and false. "Well?" Winnie said nothing.

"All right. Do you feel you can make it home?" said Nona tartly.

"Oh, Mrs. Henry, I don't know how to say thank you. For the stockings. And everything. I mean—Gee, you're swell!"

You are not like other women your age, the eyes were saying.

"You'll have to come to terms with the truth here," said Nona, exasperated. "There is nothing else for you to do."

"But I know *you* won't tell," said Winifred. "Because you *promised!*" Her slightly slanted eyes had taken on a glow. They were standing now, and Winnie picked up Nona's hand. Her young hand felt feverish. It squeezed. "I know I'll have to tell . . . I know *you* won't, though."

Nona said shortly, in a moment, "I promised. Go along now."

No more was said. Nona let her out. In a few moments from her window she saw the girl's figure pass through the patio, for she had gone out that fire door or got around the lobby some way. Winifred Lake looked much as usual.

Nona went and sat down on her bed in semidarkness. What had she got herself into? She was appalled. The father, the mother, *ought* to know. *Ought* to be told this secret. Nona's promise *ought* to be broken! What was she to do?

When Tess came softly in, Nona was still threshing upon her bed. Tess slipped in and out of the bathroom and into her bed like a wraith, while Nona made herself rigid. Wished she could ask Tess Rogan what to do. But had promised not to tell. Shouldn't have promised. Had.

She lashed herself over upon her other side. Face it. Winifred Lake was nothing to Nona Henry. A wild, a silly seventeen-year-old, and no kin. . . .

But what was it to be kind?

When Winnie slipped in, it was still only ten thirty. Rose called out immediately, "Winnie? Have fun, dear?"

"Unhum."

"Come here, darling."

So Winnie went past Morgan Lake, where he sat with a book, and presented herself at the door of her mother's bedroom. Rose was brushing her abundant hair. "Was it a good picture?"

"Oh, not too," said Winnie, discontentedly. "We left a little bit before the end." She leaned on the doorjamb. Her legs were out of Rose's line of sight and Winnie took care to keep them there. She was so used to this sort of thing, this telling-mother-the-news, that her voice kept answering the questions, her mind kept improvising the answers, freely and easily.

But Winnie's heart was trembling in her breast. She had known about life. To get married in Mexico! Ah, what a kick! To get *away*, to work it so that her mother wouldn't check on her by telephone—what fun to have been so clever!

And in that motel, she had lived, surely.

But now she knew that she had a tiger . . . Len's very charm was his brutality. He was a wheel, at school. Powerful. Ruthless. To be feared and therefore to be courted. And if any girl could, kittenwise, twine herself into *his* life and *his* attention—that made *her* important.

Winnie had told herself she was in love, but now she knew that it had not been love, or anything like it, but rather that exhilarating sense of gaining power over what had power. Entangling *this* male. And all secretly. (Getting free of Rose had been the victory, the self-assertion, the need, and the compulsion. But Winnie did not know this.) Winnie had not imagined that Len's brutal arrogance would turn *against* her.

Oh, but she would get him back, she thought. She went over her arsenal . . . the kitten moods, the pouts, the teasings, the little tricks. The trouble was, Winnie Lake knew somewhat more about life, in this moment, than she was willing to admit. She knew—somewhere, somehow—that all her arsenal was pitiful and weak and no weapon that she had was going to prevail.

Len had said to her, "Dope! *You* thought that was a *wedding*? You're not married to me, and don't get stupid, either. I've had it. Far as you go! Just stay lost, understand?"

Winnie's thoughts veered away from the worst fear, the fear that lurked, the fear of life, life that *would* be. Life that did not care for ceremony or law or love or anything but its *chance* to be. She said to her mother, "I guess I better get to bed."

Rose said, "O.K., sweetheart. You sound tired. Take a good night's rest."


So Winnie turned and saw Morgan Lake, who had been sitting in his easy chair, all this while, in a position to see her down the long hall and to hear.

“Good night, Dad,” she called, raising one hand.

“Good night, Winnie,” he replied serenely—this courteous gentleman who lived here.

But Winnie knew that he was not now, and for a long time had not been, deceived. His eyes had communicated stolen glimpses of his concern, his hunch that Winnie was troubled—a communication that was forbidden. He and she never occupied the same room alone together, if they could manage to drift apart. He and she had both learned, long ago, that this was to be done, for otherwise Rose would come, suspicious, jealous, peering, prying, making everything unbearable and dirty with tension. So they waved to each other, now and again. If they might have been fond, or in some measure parent and child, or helpful to each other—Rose must not even know what might have been.

Chapter 18

 The sun came up, the sun went down; February rolled over Sans Souci. Then it was the first of March. The Unholy Three were in session.

Felice Paull had lost a lawsuit against a parking lot and brooded and was not reconciled to defeat. Ida Milbank sipped tea. Her wits were a bundle of untied threads. Agnes Vaughn was running her tongue over the inhabitants of the building.

“One of these days,” Agnes said darkly, “Marie Gardner is going to pass out in there, and it will be a week before the maid comes and finds her. She’ll decay! You’re the boy who cried ‘wolf,’ Felice.”

“It’s not likely,” said Felice. “Mr. Lake has Elise going in there once a day to check. Didn’t I tell you?” Felice looked wronged, rather automatically. She was thinking about that lawyer.

Agnes had lost a point. But she grinned and picked the frosting off a piece of chocolate cake and inserted it into the middle of her grin. (Felice had told her. She had forgotten. Never mind, one day *somebody* would die and not be missed.)

Elise, the colored woman, felt the burden. But when Mr. Lake asked her and when Mindy Shane, the housekeeper, had counseled her (with understanding), she began to go in there, for a minute, every day. Mindy Shane knew, of course (and elsewhere Elise’s people said bluntly), that it didn’t do to get a white woman hanging onto you. Didn’t do, they told her, wasn’t so good. Lily, the other chambermaid at Sans Souci, was young and a second-generation Californian. She had no real memory of any bonds reaching from black to white, or devotion, either way. *She* said Elise was crazy. You wouldn’t catch Lily! Mindy Shane understood. It wasn’t wise. Yet Elise *was* caught and couldn’t help it. Poor lady, locked in, and scared of everything in the whole world. If you were the only thing in the whole world she wasn’t scared of, then—black or white—what were you going to do? Not everything, Elise knew uneasily, was black or white in this world.

In the apartment over the entrance door, Agnes Vaughn went on. “Say, Bettina Goodenough is about ready for a nervous breakdown. She’s got *something* on her mind. Notice?”

“What?” asked Felice vigorously, yet rather absently. Maybe she ought to have had a different lawyer.

Agnes hadn’t been able to figure out “what” so she veered again. “It’s eating her, all right. Say, did you know Caroline Buff asked Tess Rogan to have tea with her yesterday afternoon?”

“She did!” Felice Paull responded to this. World politics could not have roused her more.

“Right,” said Agnes, “and Tess Rogan went. Ida saw her.”

“I saw her,” Ida said, very pleased.

“Nobody else was asked. Who’s been in that apartment? Well, two of a kind, maybe . . .”

“I don’t see that.” Felice frowned.

“Don’t you?” said Agnes mysteriously. (She didn’t either. Agnes was simply restless.)

Caroline Buff had had an impulse. Perhaps because Tess Rogan had been left out of Georgia’s party. So Tess Rogan and Caroline Buff had taken tea and compared children and grandchildren, each frankly praising her own. They had discussed modern parenthood, as it differed from the old ways, and had parted with mutual respect but not much spark between them. Caroline Buff was thoroughly conventional and seemed to be moving toward her life’s end with a conviction of the perfect propriety of all things, including death. The two of them saluted each other. Caroline Buff kept her fears, if any, and Tess her wayward thoughts well hidden and apart from the “pleasant afternoon.”

“Harriet Gregory is trying to butter up Mrs. Rogan again. Notice?” said Agnes Vaughn.

“Is she? Well, who wouldn’t like to go around the world for free?”

“Harriet would, believe me. And she’s not the only one. Guess who else?”

“Who?”

“Wonder-boy.”

“Who?”

“Robert Fitzgibbon. That’s who. Every time Tess Rogan’s in the patio he stops and talks . . .”

“Well?”

“Hoo! Hoo! She’s nearly as old as I am! But Georgia Oliver better watch out. Mrs. Fitz better watch out, too.” Agnes was delighted with any prospect of trouble for Mrs. Fitz; she always had been.

“Mrs. Rogan’s back in her own apartment. I hear it’s fixed up nicely. The owner could paint for *her*,” said Felice sullenly.

“But they’re thick. Very thick,” Agnes said.

“Who?”

“Tess Rogan and Nona Henry.”

Ida Milbank said, “Can I hotten up your cup? Isn’t this good! What is it? Jasmine?”

“Jasmine,” said Agnes kindly. (Poor Ida.)

“*You* thought Robert Fitzgibbon would go for Nona Henry,” said Felice accusingly.

“Ah, that Nona Henry!” said Agnes. Accusations of inconsistency didn’t ruffle her. “She’s a sly one! *She’ll* go around the world—you wait and see. Did you notice that nobody ever recognized any Mrs. Quinn at Sans Souci until right *after* Nona Henry moved in here?”

Felice had a logical mind, or at least it *could* function logically. She said helplessly, “Well . . .”

“*I* wonder if she’s a widow at all,” said Agnes, really soaring now. “Suppose she’d gotten rid of her husband’s girl friend (and got off, of course). Well, he’d be mad. Maybe she’d *have* to lie low someplace. She was pretty quick to get Mrs. Rogan in there with her. Maybe she’s afraid.”

“I thought this crime was supposed to be years ago.” Felice squirmed, fascinated.

“Oh, that Oppie Etting’s had *his* orders!” said Agnes. “Don’t worry. The owners wouldn’t let a little thing like murder bother them! Not if Nona

Henry can pay the rent. I *saw* the man that day, you know. Listen, you know who else must have seen him?"

"Who?"

"Caroline Buff," said Agnes. "Because I saw *her* come in."

Ida came to hotten up the tea. "Such a darling little kettle, Agnes."

"Thanks," said Agnes. Her tiny feet crossed. She was pleased with herself and with the alarm that was flattening Felice Paull's eyelids.

"Leila Hull will be back before we know it," she said mildly. "Getting 'well.' Hoo! Hoo! Getting 'sober' is what they mean."

"Have you heard how Elna Ames is?" Felice asked, sipping. "This is *hot*, Ida."

Ida beamed. "I let it boil!" (She could boil water.)

"Oh, she's *bad*," said Agnes. "She's a mess." (Agnes always knew.) "Tess Rogan and Nona Henry went over to see her. They looked pretty sick when they came back, or at least Nona Henry did. You know those nursing homes," she said brutally. "Foyers to the cemetery."

Felice shuddered.

"Kitty Forrest thought she had it," Agnes announced.

"Ah, did she?"

"Had what?" said Ida.

"Well, she didn't, it so happened," Agnes continued, not bothering to inform Ida. What was the use? Ida's mind was a sieve. "*She's* spry as a spring chicken these days. Notice?"

Felice depended upon Agnes to notice, as they both knew.

"That's good." Felice was vague. "I still think that judge . . ." Her attention wandered to her own affairs.

"Forget it," said Agnes Vaughn. "Somebody bumped your car, somewhere. You'll never prove where."

Felice sighed. Her whole bulk sighed.

"Say, Nona Henry's gotten pretty chummy with young Winifred Lake," said Agnes. "You seen them? Listen, just a while ago Nona Henry was in the patio reading her mail. She was out someplace all day. And Winnie Lake

comes along. Well, Nona Henry didn't even finish her letters. Got right up and they went off together."

"Off?"

"In," said Agnes. "They're up in 208 right now. Um, boy! If Rose Lake ever catches on, she'll pop."

"Rose Lake," said Felice dully.

"You know Rose Lake," cried Agnes. "Jealous as a cat. She'd throw a *fit* if she thought her precious Winnie was getting a crush on somebody in the building. Be some fireworks!" Agnes sipped.

Agnes Vaughn didn't miss much.

It was true that Nona Henry had been sitting in one of the nylon-webbed patio chairs. She had read the first page of Dodie's letter and she had been staring at it, omitting to turn the paper and read on.

DEAR MOTHER:

Guess what? We're coming to California! Si and I! About the third week in March. He says we can afford it and he can take the time.

(Oh, *he* can afford it? thought Nona bitterly.)

Si's mother is all set to take care of the baby and we'll fly. Can't stay but a day or two. But I've *got* to see you, Mother.

Dodie's handwriting went sprawling as it always did when Dodie *felt* what she was writing.

You won't say when you'll be back, or what your plans are, or anything, and I've *got* to see you myself and be sure you're O.K. So as soon as we . . .

Nona felt dismay. Dismay! They shouldn't come. It was too expensive! It wouldn't be satisfying. It wouldn't do any good. A waste! An ordeal! But how could she stop them?

Then Winnie Lake's voice had said, "Mrs. Henry, could I talk to you? I've *got* to talk to you. I've just got to."

Nona had looked up and seen a desperate need naked in the girl's eyes.

She and Winnie Lake had spoken, rather often, in the last week. Cordially but casually, in passing. But not by chance. Nona felt sure that Winnie was contriving all these casual meetings. She sensed that the girl had developed an admiration, a devotion, a crush (perhaps because Nona had told nobody the secret). Nona was sure she had not wanted this, and not sure at all what she ought to do with it, now that she had it. It was a responsibility, in a way. (In a way it was life. It was a connection.)

But on the first day of March, when she had looked up and seen that desperation, Nona knew that this girl was on the edge of screaming. That she had held some hysteria in only long enough to get here.

So Nona had folded her letter, part unread. She was well aware of the eyes of Sans Souci. The patio was not a good place for confidences, and certainly no place for emotion. Better go in. But Morgan Lake was in the lobby.

Nona had risen, with her wits working. "You sew, don't you, Winnie? Those pot holders? You make clothes?"

Winnie had nodded.

"Then leave this to me."

So she had walked Winnie inside. Had gone by Morgan Lake in his wooden pen with a smile. "I'm taking your daughter upstairs, Mr. Lake," gaily. "She's going to show me how to fix a dress."

"I'm sure she *can*," he had said, gracefully.

Winnie, walking the other side of Nona, had not been able to speak. Nona had not lingered to notice the intuitive alarm on the man's face. They had taken the elevator, since it happened to be waiting. In it, Nona had caught hold of the girl's shoulders and felt their deep quaking. She had held hard, until they disembarked. Then Nona had led the way briskly.

Inside 208, the door shut, Nona said, "What's wrong?"

Winnie had flung herself upon Nona's couch in a terrible necessary abandon. Sobbed, "Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"Hush . . ."

"Oh . . . !"

Now, Nona sat on a footstool beside the hysterical girl and touched her dark hair with stroking fingers. "I've had daughters," she said soothingly. "You better tell me what is wrong, Winnie. You know I will help you, if I can."

"Oh, Mrs. Henry." Winnie writhed. Her stricken face came out of the cushion. "Len is dead! He is *dead!* He died!"

The young one? The boy! Dead?

"Hush," said Nona. It crossed her mind freakishly in this moment that here was a widow for Sans Souci. Incredible!

"What happened?" she crooned. "Just tell me, Winnie. I want to know so that I can help you."

This girl was only seventeen years old!

"He cracked up," Winnie sobbed. "In his car. This afternoon. It's all over the school. I just heard . . . I thought *I'd* die! I thought I'd never get . . ."

Her voice stopped. Nona's fingers kept stroking.

". . . home," gasped Winnie and clutched at the couch.

Nona rummaged her memory for any phrase that one could say. Nothing really helped. Perhaps one thing. "Hush. I am here," she said.

"You are not entirely alone." That was comfort for a widow, a genuine widow. But this child, who still had mother, father, who had never really left them and was not yet eighteen years old. Loneliness was not her trouble. Or was it?

Winnie said, "What am I going to *do*?" She raised up on her forearms, a young lizard, the slender length prone on the couch. "I don't know what to *do!*" she said. "What I didn't tell you . . . When Len got so mad at me . . . that night . . . he said . . . he said it wasn't a real wedding . . . in Mexico."

Nona rocked backward.

Now she perceived that it wasn't grief she had to deal with. It was terror.

"But *you* thought it was a wedding?" she asked sternly.

Winnie did not say, "Of course." She did Nona the honor of saying a plain yes.

"And then you . . .?"

Winnie said quickly, "Yes, and I don't know . . . don't *know* . . ."

Nona Henry pulled out all the steadiness she could muster. She said, not harshly but not so very tenderly either, “You may be pregnant, is that it? You are not sure you were really married? And the boy is dead?” Winnie’s head trembled affirmatives.

So Nona began to make clinical inquiries. Winnie, in her terror, was frank about everything.

Finally Nona said, “Well, you may or may not be pregnant. It will take a little time to tell.”

Winnie moaned.

Nona said, “If you are, then someone will have to go to Mexico and find out. Do you know names? Where *was* all this?” She made inquiries about fact, but Winnie’s answers were moon-struck, vague and, Nona realized, fairly useless.

“A man will have to go,” said Nona firmly. “I can’t do that for you, Winnie. A lawyer would be best.”

Winnie whimpered.

“If this marriage is legal . . .”

Nona’s eye struck upon the girl’s face and her heart turned over. What good was analysis, logic, common sense, law? What good these quibbles? This girl had mated and her mate was dead (having cast her off first, as Nona remembered), and now what was the question? The *real* question?

Whether she was pregnant or not. *That* was the question, God knew.

If she were not, Nona could see that all of this could be lived over and, someday, nearly forgotten. But if she were, this was going to be rough on several people.

But here the girl was, human, in deep trouble—and who is not human? What woman, thought Nona, is not her kin?

“Somebody is going to have to stand by you,” she said aloud, musingly.

“*You* will,” sobbed Winnie. “I *know* you will. You’re so wonderful!”

“I’m not wonderful,” said Nona with distaste. “I made you a promise that I shouldn’t have made. Winnie”—she tried to make this gentle—“I truly think you will have to tell your folks.”

Winnie burrowed her head. *No*, it rolled upon the cushion. No, no, no.

“Be still,” said Nona. “One thing, carrying on like this won’t do any good. Try to stop that.”

Winnie was motionless at once. Pathetically obedient.

Whatever am I going to do? thought Nona in panic.

“Can you tell me quietly,” she asked, “how you think your mother would take it? Surely she loves you—and after all, *you* believed that it was a marriage.”

Winnie got up on all fours. “My mother is not normal about me,” she cried out. “She’d—*No!*”

“Do you think that your Dad . . . ?”

Winnie said, “She’d kill him! This would kill him. *I’d* be killing him.” Her body collapsed. Her head went back to the rolling movement in the cushion.

Nona was thinking now, Is there any truth in this? Or is she still dramatizing? Nona could not forget the night of the fire, the girl’s face that night. No, Morgan Lake was, in some way, vulnerable, and the girl did fear for him.

She said sadly, in a moment, “No use to point out that you should have thought of this. Hush.”

“If there was some doctor . . .” Winnie said drearly, into the cushion.

“I am *not* going to be a party to an abortion,” said Nona sharply, “so forget that. Right now.”

The head turned. One of Winnie’s eyes came away from the cushion. It was astonished.

“Oh, you are an idiot,” cried Nona, guessing why she was astonished. “You youngsters! You think your elders are all ignorant and purely innocent. *Don’t* you? Nobody heard of sex or sin or any seamy side of life until *you*. You discovered . . . why you practically invented all that, *this* year? And the old crocks mustn’t hear about these things? Listen, *we heard*—long ago, long ago. *We* were keeping it from *you*.”

Winnie blinked. Her whole face came up. Lines changed on it subtly.

“Tell your parents,” Nona said more gently, “with a little composure, if you can.”

“I can’t,” said Winnie with the composure of certainty and despair. “I could run away,” she added calmly, even thoughtfully. “I guess *I* could die.”

“Either one would please your folks a lot. Now wouldn’t it?” snapped Nona. “Well, I can see you’ve had no practice thinking about other people’s feelings.” This hurt, and Nona saw that it did.

So now, although she was feeling frantic herself, she wondered what good it was doing to blast the child. She said, without willing to say it but rather as if this tumbled out of itself, “If you’ve got any guts, there is one thing you *could* do. You could wait.”

“W-what?”

“Wait. Just wait. You can’t be sure yet. Time will tell. You’ve been living to yourself, secretly. (All right, maybe I understand that.) So why don’t you keep on? Do this yourself. Wait it out.”

Nona’s voice had become challenging.

Winnie’s eyes turned as if to help her ears to listen better.

“If you aren’t pregnant,” Nona rushed on—she was swept on—“the worst you’ll have to reckon with . . . you will have had what is known as an ‘affair.’ All right. A sin. A mistake. A bad one. *You’ll* have to figure what you *really* believed about that wedding.”

Winnie took no hurt this time. The ears were pricked up, the eyes were strangely steady.

“All right,” said Nona. “People have had affairs and survived. People have even been fooled and betrayed, and they have survived that, too. You might even have learned something.” The girl was listening. “If that’s the way it is, you can keep a secret awhile. Oh, I’ll warn you, it will be a load! A cross to bear. And one day, when it’s over, when you feel that your people can take it . . . when you *have* survived . . . you will tell.”

Winnie was swinging her feet to the floor to sit up, hear better.

“However, if you *are* pregnant right now, that’s different,” said Nona. “And you’ll be for it, whatever comes. You’ll just have to take it. Well? Are you game to wait and see which way it is going to be?”

The girl didn’t answer, so Nona rushed on. “And keep quiet, remember? So that the things you *say* you fear will hurt your folks won’t hurt them, yet. You can’t cry, can’t mope. You’ll have to stand up to the worry of it secretly. With no dramatics. Well? *Can* you?”

“Yes,” said Winnie, putting her head up. “Yes, if I can only come and talk to you.”

“You want *me* to help you?”

“If you let me be with you, sometimes, I can do *anything*,” cried Winnie. “I can wait and let nobody notice . . . I can wait.”

“And if,” pressed Nona, “you find out that you’re for it?”

“Then I’ll do whatever *you* say,” said Winnie Lake.

Nona closed her eyes. Ah yes, *she*, Nona Henry, was going to be the one who would eventually tell the Lakes about all this. Nona could see that coming.

But Nona seemed to be for it.

She opened her eyes. “Is that a promise?”

“Yes, that is a promise.”

It won’t be long, thought Nona. I’ll make her tell. “You’ve lied to your mother all your life,” said Nona fiercely. “Never lie to *me*, mind!”

“No,” said Winnie, her eyes glowing, worshiping. “No, Mrs. Henry. Never,” she promised. “Never.”

There followed a quick discussion of a way.

Afterwards, alone, Nona found herself trembling. Foolish, she thought. Oh, what a *fool* I am! Why am I doing this? For power? The girl asks me for something. I have to give. I have to give. My vanity has to give. Oh, great sport, she thought bitterly, as Tess Rogan says.

Yet . . .

Something struck her suddenly.

Who had spoken as she had spoken? Who had said those things? Not Nona Henry, the Poughkeepsie housewife from the nice neighborhood—mother, grandmother, respectable widow.

No. It must have been Nona O’Connor speaking, surely. Or had it? No. Nona O’Connor had been a child herself.

Then who had spoken?

The next day Nona went out early to buy patterns and yard goods. She also rented a sewing machine. Winnie was to come up after school.

Nona told herself that whichever way the question was answered, she would still induce Winnie to tell her parents, as she ought to do. Nona could teach her, surely, that this was right and must be. A week, ten days' delay, was not going to matter, surely. (Who kept saying "surely"?) She hoped the girl was not pregnant, so that to confess would not be so difficult. Mercy and understanding might be given.

But Nona was nervous and could not pray for mercy.

She felt she did wrong.

But she was for it.

Chapter 19



When Winnie appeared the next afternoon she seemed calm and in control of herself.

The boy was dead. Someone, presumably, mourned him. Winnie Lake did not seem to mourn. Did not dare? She was calm and eager to begin the sewing project. She laid out the material upon the living-room floor and pinned the pattern. She took the scissors.

Nona, who had been sewing for thirty years for herself, for Milly, for Dodie, for the babies, let the girl proceed. She herself was otherwise occupied. She was being pressed to be strong and wise. Here was a young person who listened. And Winnie Lake was calm with Nona's strength. (Or what Winnie thought was Nona's strength.) There was nothing that Nona could do but give. Only try to give what was honest, and give that humbly.

There was anxiety in this. There was also pleasure. And in the humility, and in the effort to be honest, there was a strange release.

About five o'clock the bell pinged and Nona went to the door.

Rose Lake said, "My daughter is up here, isn't she?"

"Oh yes, Mrs. Lake. Won't you come in?"

Rose Lake was handsome, Nona conceded. That mass of dark hair was lovely. The faintly olive skin was still neat to the bone. But the dark brown of the eyes held amber flashes; the full lips were pouting. Rose Lake did not smile while she sent her suspicious, probing gaze over the entire room.

"Hi, Mom," Winnie said cheerily. She was on all fours, still busy scissoring.

"Alice Carmichael called you," her mother said.

"Oh? Does she want me to call her back?"

"She didn't say." Rose's eyes had finished with the room and now came to Nona Henry.

"Won't you sit down a minute, Mrs. Lake?" Nona put manners on like a shield. "It is so good of Winnie to help me. Do *you* sew, too?"

“Yes, I do,” said Rose. She sat down heavily. She sent a brooding projection upon the girl on the floor. It was a possession, a greedy darkness.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Nona fluttered on, “that Winnie has promised to show me how to make these dresses. Of course, I’ve told her . . .”

Winnie looked up, smiling. “Mrs. Henry says I can earn some yard goods for myself—and I saw the yummiest stuff!”

“I wouldn’t ask her to do it without some—some thanks,” Nona said. “I suppose you taught her to sew, Mrs. Lake?”

“Yes,” said Rose carelessly.

The end of Winnie’s eyebrows moved. Nona thought, Well, that’s not true. “You must be so capable,” sighed Nona with her prettiest air of helplessness.

“She’s a terrific cook, too,” Winnie said. This was guidance. Nona was on the track, Winnie was saying. This woman had to be praised.

“See, Mrs. Henry?” Winnie pointed with the scissor blades. “You clip all the way in, on this line.”

“I don’t see how those little pieces go together,” sighed Nona. “But I guess I’ll find out. Would you like a cup of tea, Mrs. Lake? *I* cook, of course . . . but not terribly well, I’m afraid.” (Nona wasn’t a bad cook, really.)

Rose was looking softened. Her lips had flattened to a less discontented line. “I don’t care for any tea, thank you. I have to go down in a minute. Time to start dinner.”

But she did not rise and Nona said brightly, “Do you have other hobbies, too?”

“What?”

“I suppose you can do all sorts of things.”

“Winnie’s *my* hobby,” Rose said. This was most apparently and terribly true. She was a turbulence in the room. She exuded a pressure. She was over the girl like a cloud. She sat on, did not move to go.

So Nona began to show her the patterns for the two dresses and the blouse; she kept prattling. “My girls sew, of course.”

“You have daughters?” Rose looked at her.

“Oh, yes. I have two. Both married.” (Nona need not speak of Milly’s death.) “In fact, I now have two little granddaughters.”

“You are older than I am,” Rose Lake said.

“Well, I’m sure of *that*,” said Nona merrily. “You must have married very young.” (Flatter this creature. This sick, dark heart, this oppressing spirit, this oppressed unhappy woman.)

“I was seventeen,” said Rose, with a vicious slant on her mouth. “And what a little fool *I* was!”

Nona saw the scissors falter and she could not blame them. She said quickly, “Mrs. Lake, you really think that’s going to be a dress? All those little bits and pieces?”

Rose could not respond to mock despair.

“It will,” said Winnie. “Don’t worry.” She looked up, strong with Nona’s strength. Eyes caught in a fleeting secret communication.

“What about your homework, sweetheart?” said Rose Lake, stirring in the chair. (Did her dark intuitive passion take note?)

“Oh, I can do that tonight,” said Winnie blithely.

Rose said, “No date?”

“Well, gosh,” said Winnie, all innocence, “if I’m going to help Mrs. Henry with these dresses in the afternoons, I’ll have to stay home and study every night. But I don’t mind. I thought I’d make a kind of semiformal . . . I mean with that stuff I saw. It’s green, Mom. And oooh . . . yummy!”

Nona perceived in this girlish chatter the manipulation. The practiced skill of it. The bribery. Rose Lake would settle for this in the afternoons, if she thought she would have Winnie home every evening. But this was pitiful!

Now Winnie lifted a piece of the cutout dress with the pattern still pinned to it. “The next thing is to mark the darts. The way *I* do . . .”

“Darts?” Nona feigned ignorance.

“Well, I guess I’ll go,” said Rose Lake. “I hope the dress turns out O.K.” Her spirit had lightened. “Be down by quarter of six, darling?”

“Oh sure, Mom.”

When she had gone, neither Winnie nor Nona found it necessary to speak. My God, the poor kid! Nona was thinking. And *there* went a pure lie-ee, she thought with illumination. One absolutely had to lie to Rose Lake. Winnie does. I did. What else can you do?

Then Nona thought, prophetically, That woman will drive her child away and kill her husband and when *she's* a lonely widow . . . will she know?

Winnie was folding the pieces of the dress neatly into a pile.

“Come, sit,” said Nona warmly. “We’ll talk. You’ve got a little while.”

My God, the loneliness! she was thinking. This lonely child! Her heart was toward the liar.

“Your mother was married at seventeen?” Nona meant to turn listener. “Was that to your real father?”

“Yes, it was,” said Winnie. She sat in a chair and her hands were listless now. She seemed weary but relaxed. As if she felt safe, as if she leaned, she rested now.

Rest on me, thought Nona. I will listen and I will hear you, and I will give you leave to *be*.

“Do you remember him at all?” she asked, her voice casual.

“Well, not too . . .” Winnie said. “I was only four when he . . . well, I guess they were divorced. I don’t think he died or anything.”


“You don’t know?” Nona kept disapproval out of her voice and tried to let pure interest, close attention, sound. “That’s hard for you, I imagine.”

“Well . . .” Winnie looked down at her hands. The girl was sensing what Nona was trying to send to her. The feeling-with, so close to love, was almost too much for her hard little soul. Tears slipped upon her lashes. “My mother doesn’t like questions,” Winnie said.

Nona said briskly, “Don’t cry.” (She was really saying, I am here.) “It just occurred to me to wonder if he *is* alive. But you don’t know where your real father might be?”

“No. His name was Quinn,” said Winnie Lake. “That’s all I know.”

Chapter 20

 “Do you mean to say one shouldn’t keep a secret, ever?” said Nona brightly. “What *do* you two philosophers have to say about that?” Her hands were busy. She was able to look down at them and pretend to have thrown an abstract question into the conversational pot.

She had brought her knitting around to Tess Rogan’s apartment. Work in the hand was a good thing. (She could have been turning the cuffs on one new dress, but it would not do to finish the sewing project too soon.)

Daisy Robinson was calling on Tess this evening also. There had been much throwing about of brains. Daisy, smoking, gesturing, had just described some Little Theatre production of *Romeo and Juliet*. “Of course the old plot creaks distressingly,” she had said. “The girl was properly *married*. Why couldn’t she just say so? A secret is stupid,” she added scornfully.

Now she answered Nona. “Most secrets are stupid, Nona. You’ll have to admit that there is hardly a piece of fiction on television, for instance, that could happen at all if some character in it weren’t stupidly keeping a secret. There’d be no plots if people were frank and open to each other.”

Is that so? thought Nona rebelliously. If I were to march downstairs and tell a secret I know, to an unbalanced woman who may have been tried for murder once, who might go off her rocker now, and cause such uproar and anguish that a very nice man with a touchy heart could die of it . . . No plot? *I* don’t know that there would be no plot, she thought. No tragedy. How can *I* know?

She said aloud, “I doubt if that is always true.”

Tess Rogan had turned her eyes. “Come now, Daisy,” she challenged. “We all skate on an agreed crust called ‘manners’ or maybe even ‘civilization’ and keep our secrets decently under. Otherwise there might be entirely too much plot.”

Daisy bristled. “I don’t agree.”

“What if the three of us were to say exactly what we think of each other?” said Tess mischievously.

Daisy grinned her wolfish grin. “I’m willing. I am an honest woman, I hope. And the truth shall make us free.”

Nona felt a wave of nervousness.

“Oh, well—honesty,” said Tess Rogan thoughtfully, “is one thing. Truth is another.”

“Oh, come,” said Daisy. “Honesty is simply all the truth you know.”

“Or think you know,” Tess said.

Nona rose. “Excuse me. May I . . . ?” She needed to be hidden for a minute or two.

“There’s something wrong with that bathroom door,” Tess called after her. “The painters or the firemen—somebody has done something. It’s been knocked crooked. Don’t close it, Nona.”

“Have you told Mr. Lake?” Nona heard Daisy put in officiously.

“Oh, yes. Kelly Shane is coming to fix it.”

“‘What is truth?’ said jesting Pilate.” Daisy was quoting as Nona went into Tess’ bedroom and into the bathroom. The door did look out of kilter; the doorknob had a peculiar feel. Nona did not altogether close the door.

She drew a breath into the bottom of her lungs and sighed it forth. Trapped in a secret. And no secret of her own, either. (She had written to Dodie with enthusiasm. Oh yes, do come! Some one of her own would be good to see.) Nona was trapped in a secret about a stranger and she couldn’t see how to get out.

(“What is truth?” said jesting Pilate.)

Nona winced to remember that after her own demand upon Winnie Lake—“Never lie to me”—Nona herself had been less than frank and open. That quiver of the nerves at the name Quinn Nona had covered cleverly, saying that she’d had dear friends named Quinn. Been startled.

How *could* she have told Winnie, poor child, what the name of Quinn was meaning in Sans Souci? That her mother might have been involved in a crime somehow? Was it Nona Henry’s place to tell the girl this? When it might, after all, be just a coincidence? How could she even warn the girl to keep the name unspoken? Nona had not been able to think what else to do but keep herself quiet. Perhaps Tess Rogan is right, she thought hopefully. Nona did not know enough, and therefore was right to do nothing but carry

on, keeping her original promise, which was honorable—and all these secrets under.

How could she, after all, go to Rose Lake, now that she had seen the woman, heard her—and now that Nona suspected her past? How could she go to *Morgan Lake*? Say, “I realize your wife is not quite normal”? Nona quaked.

Oh, how could Morgan Lake, that smooth and courteous gentleman, have got himself into this picture? Whatever unhappy picture it was. Nona’s mind was going around the same old circle. If Rose Lake was Mrs. Quinn, then she couldn’t be *guilty* of murder. Surely Morgan Lake would not have married a murdering woman! The law would not have left her free to marry again.

Nona had thought of questioning Oppie Etting, who was the one man who had once claimed to have talked to a stranger. But she dared not. She felt sure that Oppie Etting had lied when he said it had all been a joke. She now believed there had been a stranger. Had he not been seen by Agnes Vaughn? But that Oppie Etting had decided, or been ordered, to suppress the story. How could Nona Henry’s questions induce him to stop lying, just to her? Unless she told too much, herself.

Now she came round the circle, as always at this point. Reasonable doubt got murderers off. *All* the guilty are not always convicted. There may have been no proof. Was *this* a secret that Rose Lake was keeping? Was she a murdering woman, abnormal—for she was certainly abnormally centered on her child. Did Morgan Lake know and keep *this* secret? That courteous man? Yet she had heard that he was cold and stubborn, and for all his good manners, *would* not grant some most reasonable requests for repairs.

One thing Nona knew. She, Nona Henry, was in a mess. No kin of hers, these people. No kin. This possibly pregnant, dubiously widowed seventeen-year-old. What was Nona Henry doing, meddling with birth, death, crime, risk? And other people’s secrets? Nona shuddered.

And yet knew that however troubled, frightened and worried she might be, this was *life*. *Someone*, in her skin, felt alive and important and responsible. A possessor of secrets, of influence, of power.

She mistrusted the pleasure in it.

She was afraid.

She would like to have had advice, but the promise she had given Winnie Lake still held her. And to whom could she apply? What wise

person?

There should be, in Sans Souci, some wise woman.

But Nona found herself staying away from Ursula Fitzgibbon. Mrs. Fitz was so frail. One could not burden her. Also, Robert Fitzgibbon was there, too often, and *his* air of a secret between himself and Nona Henry was irritating.

What about Georgia Oliver? Kind and good, Georgia would be tolerant, of course; she would also be confident and full of faith. But the Winnie Lake affair was a mess! There was nothing sweet about it. *Nona* had no faith.

She sidled around Tess Rogan. But she could not ask her what was good or right or what was honorable or what was strong or even what was expedient. Feared to break her promise.

I shouldn't have said what I just said about secrets. Nona eyed her reflection angrily. What am I doing? Flirting with detection? Dropping hints? Hoping someone will be too smart for me, and then it won't be *my* fault when I tell?

An agony came over her. She was standing before the mirror, her hands up to her hair. "So you'll poop out," she said to her image in a low voice but aloud. "You damn phony!"

Daisy Robinson's voice made her jump.

"Talking to yourself, eh?" Daisy's voice and wolfish grin preceded the tap of her hand on the door. "I've got to go," she announced, "in more ways than one."

Daisy had no false modesty.

Feeling a little shocked and frightened, Nona sent glinting glances at her via the mirror.

"Who can know the truth?" said Daisy, with an exalted expression. (She was seated now.) "We can only be honest," Daisy went on, with a benign cock of the head. "You don't seem to me to be a phony. What is the etymology . . . ?"

Daisy's eyes were friendly and full of philosophy, but color rushed over Nona's skin. She could neither laugh nor cry nor speak. She mumbled and went out of the bathroom, leaving Daisy enthroned.

When Daisy had left, pelting by in her abrupt way (whether offended or not, who could tell?), Tess said, "I like her, don't you? An honest woman! She's willing, I suppose, to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth!" Tess sighed. "A large order for any one human being."

"I guess so," Nona said humbly, sadly.

"Philosophy is after the whole truth," Tess mused on, "and cannot find it. Science is after nothing but the truth. That sometimes goes a little better."

She smiled at Nona, looking fond.

"Who is after truth?" said Nona harshly.

"Religion, I suppose," said Tess gently. "What's the matter?"

"I've got myself in a mess," said Nona. Tears came to her eyes. "But I can't talk about it."

Tess opened her lips. She looked alert, on the very brink of speech. Something strong leaped out of her face. But no sound.

"What were you going to say, *please*?" begged Nona. "I'm asking you for something."

"What you want can't be *given*," Tess said gently, in a moment.

"What do I want?" cried Nona. "I want to be . . ." Her mind switched words guiltily. "I want to be *comfortable*!" she cried, and thought, That's honest.

"No," said Tess. "I don't think so. I think you're one who is looking for herself."

Nona was shaken violently.

"It isn't easy," Tess said in her musing way, "to see that it really . . . isn't very hard."

"That's pretty cryptic," flared Nona angrily.

"I'm sorry," Tess said (and she withdrew, far away). "I guess that's age, and all this being alone. You sit alone and think a lot and little pieces without context sound cryptic if not crazy. I'm sorry you feel you are in a mess and you can't talk. *I* shouldn't preach, Lord knows. Shall we make coffee?"

"I'd better run along, thanks," Nona said dully. "It will all work out, I suppose."

“Somehow,” said Tess placidly.

Time rolled.

Winnie and Nona sewed on several afternoons. Nona feared that she was preaching and she reproached herself. But the girl listened so avidly, and it was seductive. It was irresistible.

And the girl talked. Her lonely conclusions about so many things needed correcting, or at least (Nona corrected herself) re-examination. So Nona inserted differing ideas and writhed with her own doubt. For all her good intentions, she felt—she knew—that she was doing wrong. The girl was not her child.

But Nona began to recognize a law that operated. She was becoming very fond of this girl who listened with such respect and seemed to learn. Attention *is* love, thought Nona, just as love *is* attention (not possession, but respectful attention). And which was cause, and which effect, she could not tell.

Downstairs Rose Lake’s dark soul filled up with jealousy.

Morgan Lake sent out feelers to understand. Looking into Mrs. Henry’s eyes each day as she came to the desk for her mail, he thought he could read good will there, and a troubled honesty. He did not think Winnie was going to come to any harm through association with this woman. Something in his soul, however, was prophetically sad, for it responded to a tinge of pity in Nona’s look, a troubled pity. Meanwhile he soothed Rose as best he could; he was the buffer. He waited politely for whatever would come.

Nona was too preoccupied with her own dilemma to pay much attention to the other widows. So she was disconnected from the grapevine of Sans Souci, and it did not occur to her that she was one of its subjects.

Harriet Gregory thought it was very odd that Winnie Lake spent so much time in Nona Henry’s apartment. Really!

“Oh, they’re sewing,” said Sarah Lee Cunneen, in good faith.

“I suppose she’s paying the child,” Bettina Goodenough said (her mind was on money). “If not, she should be.”

Georgia Oliver thought it was so nice to see such a friendship. Mrs. Fitz said she thought so too.


Felice Paull, however, considered the affair unwise, and wondered if someone ought not to speak to Winnie's parents, who might be psychologically naïve. Felice was willing to make the sacrifice.

But Agnes Vaughn grinned evilly. She said it was pretty funny all right, but best keep out of it. (Ida Milbank didn't know what they were talking about.) Agnes waited. She liked her scandals ripe.

Time rolled and the widows of Sans Souci went in and out and Agnes Vaughn watched from her window and listened through her wall.

Time rolled and Winnie's question was due to be answered. Nothing happened. A margin was allowed.

Chapter 21

 One night—it was ten o'clock—Nona's phone rang. "Nona? I've just made coffee. It occurred to me that you wouldn't be asleep yet. And coffee doesn't keep you awake, does it? So will you?"

Tess Rogan's voice came in like a key to fit a lock. Nona was feeling tension, feeling lonely in it, and was expecting nothing but a lonely struggle with it. Ten o'clock at night, and she had long dismissed any thought of distraction or companionship, *this* day. An invitation at such an hour was pattern-breaking. An invitation from Tess Rogan, who was usually rather tantalizingly aloof, was intriguing in its own right.

"I'll be right there," Nona said.

And Tess said, "Good for you."

Nona powdered her nose, took her handbag, without which any woman feels vulnerable and unprepared, and set out around the corner.

There was a man standing before the elevator.

"Ah . . . going down?" he said. It was Robert Fitzgibbon. "Be my guest." He bowed. There was something wrong with his balance.

"Thank you, I'm just going around to Mrs. Rogan's."

Nona would have gone by but he lumbered into her path. Now she could tell that Robert Fitzgibbon was three sheets to the wind. "Don't be so 'sclusive," he muttered. "Where's Mrs. Rogan? I'll go with you." He teetered. (Did he always offer to go with whoever came along when he was in his cups?)

"I don't think," said Nona, "that you are in a condition to go calling, really." She felt cold and prim. She ducked around him.

"Drunk, you mean?" he said loudly. His voice boomed in the quiet corridor. Nona knew they were standing just outside the door of Agnes Vaughn's apartment. "Sssh," she warned.

He began to mutter low in his throat. "Sure, I'm drunk. Stinko. Only thing *to* do, get stinko and the hell with it."

"Excuse me, please." Nona took another step.

The man was teetering. “Be glad to,” he bellowed, a caricature of courtesy. “Certainly, Mrs. Henry.”

Nona sped away down the east wing. Where could he have found so much liquor, if he had been visiting his mother and Georgia? Then she remembered that Georgia Oliver had gone off north to see her married daughter for a day and night. Nona was almost running now. At Tess’s door she tapped lightly; she looked behind. He was following, zigzagging in the lane between the walls as if he ricocheted and yet progressed.

Tess opened the door. Nona said, “Robert Fitzgibbon is out there. I’m afraid he’s drunk. I don’t know what—”

Tess put her head around the doorframe.

There was a stoppage in time. Nona with her neck twisted, Tess peering out; and the figure of the man large, and somehow menacing in the dim light, kept zigzagging crazily nearer and nearer.

Tess said cheerfully, “He ought not to be out in the street, that’s sure.”

Now his fiery breath blew upon them. “Invite me?” he said. “Want to see *you*. Come in?”

“Come in.” Tess opened her door wider.

Afterwards Nona sometimes wondered what would have happened if Tess had not done this. If she had closed the door, would he have banged upon it, found this futile, given up, staggered back, gone out of the building? Then what?

However, there they were in Tess Rogan’s living room. Nona was rigid with alarm and distaste. The man fell into a chair. Tess put a cup of hot coffee before him.

He couldn’t lift the cup. He couldn’t find the handle. He was very drunk indeed. He kept trying and at last he got some kind of hold. The cup slipped, part way up. Coffee slopped upon his trousers. But he kept on lifting the emptied, lightened cup and sucked noisily at nothing.

Tess sat down.

“Ladies,” he said, “I’m getting married in June. What do you think of that? I’m getting a June bride.” He laid his head back upon the upholstery and his face contorted in frozen mirth, without sound.

“You had better have coffee,” Tess said flatly. She rose and went to him. Her hand tried to disengage his fingers from the handle of the sloping cup.

He looked up into her face, stretching and working his eye muscles. “Help me?” he said pitifully.

“I’ll get your coffee.”

“Please?” His fingers made a spasm and the cup handle broke.

Tess caught the falling body of the cup quite deftly.

Nona was beginning to feel more angry than frightened.

“Shall we call someone?” she inquired in a low voice.

But Tess said to the man, rather briskly, “What is the matter with you?”

“I’m a bum,” said Robert Fitzgibbon. “I know that. You know that.”

“You have had too much to drink this time,” said Tess, standing over him.

“S’right. A no-good, drunken bum. Drank it all.” There was a bottle in his jacket pocket. He fumbled at it, gave that up and began to lean forward, and one hand grabbed out for Tess.

She stepped backward. Nona now began to feel as if she herself were invisible. The man seemed to have no idea she was in the room.

“You hear my mother?” said Robert, sagging uncertainly forward. “‘Mother, dear.’ What *she* says? Great foreign correspondent. Right? Fact is, no-good bum. Kicked and been kicked around the world. Can’t keep job. Never could. Never did. Can’t get a job. Who wants no-good drunken bum? But my mother, and *God damn* my mother!”

Tess Rogan said, “Put your head back. Close your eyes.”

The man jerked backward in the chair. “Go sleep, eh? Little boy, go sleep? Mother kiss it, make it well?” He leered. “June. Madam, I’m going down for the last time. Cold blood. You know that. You know what? My blood’s not cold enough. I can’t do it.”

“Then don’t do it,” Tess said quietly.

Nona felt the conversation, if that was what it was, getting away from her. She had ceased to understand what they were saying.

The man’s head bent forward again, drooping from the neck. Surely he would pass out soon and sleep, and relieve the room of his miserable consciousness.

“You’ve heard my mother,” he was muttering, “talk about my father? Big famous judge? Right? Su-ure he was! He did a job. That’s what my father did. Like anybody else. I’m telling you the truth. So he was a judge. It’s my mother, has to have a gre-eat judge. He was a poor slob, did a job. Nothing. But all my life . . . all my life . . . ‘Your father was a great and famous man.’ *Where* famous? I’m telling you the truth. He was nothing . . . special.” Robert’s face looked pinched and old. He swayed backward.

“Brother, the same thing. You’ve heard her. Gre-eat success. Right? Su-ure he is! so damned scared he’d . . . ’scuse me ladies . . . Job’s too damn big for him. Scared, I’m telling you, and it’s the truth. He’s going to crack up. And she’ll fix *that*, too. She’s going to say he’s retired—gre-eat success! He’s *tired*, all right. That’s what I’m telling you. And *I’m* tired. She . . . she’s exhausting.

“Listen . . . listen to me! What’s *she* done? What’s so wonderful? Married. Had kids. You did too? True? Right? Also, she eats three times a day. And takes a bath . . . never misses. And now she is seventy-five. So what? To what does that entitle her? What did *she* ever do that’s so wonderful?”

Tess said, “It doesn’t matter.” Tess sat down.

Suddenly he seemed to shake off the liquor and sound perfectly sober. “I may be no good and never was,” he said forcefully. “But I can be sickened! Listen . . . will you listen to me? I looked around one day . . . that was in Tokyo. I’m fifty-three. Handwriting was on the wall. You understand? Better stop and think. Right? So I came back. Thought I’d see what Mother-dear could do for me. Gre-eat foreign correspondent. Around the world. Around the world? My God, you follow a wisp of hay around the world and never *get* it . . . what is that to do? Fifty-three. No job. No reputation, if you want to know the truth. Nothing. Mother-dear, *she* says, Such a gypsy, dear boy. Please settle down? Need you near me, she says. She’ll pay a little. Pays the hotel. I can always eat with her. You think I’m worth that?”

Tess said nothing.

“I am,” he said. “I’m quite the ladies’ man.” He sagged. “Must be some nice girl, says Mother-dear. ‘You might marry . . . and live hap—’” He hiccupped. “Roam no more, says Mother. Rest on your laurels.” He began to laugh. “Mother-dear’s the great little old laurel-kid. She’s fixed a crown for all of us. You know whose crown it is? It’s *her* crown. *I* know that. What to do though? I’m fifty-three. No-good bum. Well? Look around. Why not? Who’s got enough to keep herself and me in reasonable . . . reasonable . . .

circum . . . reasonable . . .” He muttered inaudibly for a moment. Then he continued.

“Gigolo? So what about it? I’ve been worse. *Much* worse. However, still got a certain amount . . . stomach. O.K. Take youngest . . . best-looking . . . available.” He hiccupped. “Nothing to it.” He slashed the air with one hand. “Pretty romantic, eh?” His face was ugly. “Oh, I’m a ladies’ man! Cold blood. Add it up.” He pulled himself back to forceful speech. “My mother isn’t going to be here forever. So with half what father left her, and what Georgia’s got, I could live. I could live, I figured.” His face went into a spasm. Then the eyes opened. “I’m going to ask you, *why? Why should I? What kind of life is this?*”

Nona was shrunken small in her chair, hoping now to remain invisible and unnoticed. Tess appeared to be simply listening.

“My God! My God!” said Robert Fitzgibbon. “I’ve had women! A little tang, and little bite! Something to touch, and to be touched by. God damn it, not mush-mush-mush! Oh, see the pretty flowers, Robert? See the lovely sunshine? I can’t *do* it! From June to the end of my life? I’m not so far down . . .”

The man, this large male in Tess Rogan’s chair, now began to cry.

It was terrible to watch and to hear. Nona thought, this shouldn’t be seen or heard. It mustn’t be noticed. He’ll pass out. He’ll forget.

Tess said, “I’ll get more coffee.”

“You think that’s going to help?” He wept. “You want to make me sober? Listen, being sober doesn’t help. And being drunk doesn’t help. And nothing helps and nothing is going to help and why wouldn’t she let me be? Why does everybody have to be so wonderful? *I* never wanted to be wonderful. I don’t want to live hap—” He hiccupped in the middle of a sob. “June, moon, roses. Nuts! I’m fifty-three and a *bum*! O.K. Still got the . . . ’pacity. I can be bored . . . to the point . . . could throw up . . .”

“I imagine,” said Tess mildly. (He looked as if he would.)

“Knew *you* when I saw you,” Robert said in sudden triumph. “Only one in the place! Girl in Singapore . . . one time, *she* looked me in the eye. Lost her. *She* was a no-good bum, like me, but she looked me in the eye, just the same. And *you* do. Don’t you? Bet *you* can’t stand the mush-mush-mush. The world is crawling with boobs and mush. . . . Help me?” He came forward and fell out of the chair upon his knees. He walked on his knees to where Tess Rogan sat.

“You save me,” he said to her. “Save me from the pit?”

Tess said nothing. (Nona quaked.)

“I’ve been around the world,” he said. “What I could show you . . . not in the guidebooks. *I* could take you places. Real places. See things. I would never leave you. My arm, madam?”

Tess said steadily, “Nothing that I need, thank you.”

“Who is kidding?” Robert said, as if he had been accused of kidding. He sank back on his heels. He was smiling. “What’s a few years? I’ll marry you.”

Tess said patiently, “Try to be quiet.”

“I love you,” he said very loudly, and then he fell forward and put his head in her lap and sobbed.

Nona was paralyzed. Tess sat still and did not move, even to touch his hair. He was a heavy man. Nona did not think she could possibly lift his weight away. Tess was burdened and imprisoned and Nona did not know what she could do.

She said anxiously, in a low voice, “Shall I call downstairs? Maybe Mr. Etting . . . ?”

The man stopped his sobbing when she spoke. He was silent and motionless a moment. Then he seemed to realize where he was. He lifted his head, pulled back. He tried to get off the floor. He couldn’t make it and tipped backward. The back of his neck landed at the rim of the couch seat. It was supported there. He turned his head tiredly and seemed to go to sleep.

Tess got out of that chair.

She and Nona moved, tiptoe, into the dinette. Trembling, Nona got the coffee from the kitchen. They sat down at the table facing each other. It was late, for Sans Souci. The widows were all abed or going to bed. The building was quiet.

“Let him sleep,” said Tess compassionately.

“I won’t leave you,” said Nona tensely.

What, actually, could Oppie Etting do with the man? she thought. What else *was* there to do but let him sleep where he was and hope that as the fumes wore out of his brain his anguish would wear away or be hidden

under and politely denied? He would come to himself. He might not remember. They could all pretend *not* to remember. He could depart quietly.

Tess Rogan and Nona Henry had been sitting, talking only a little in very low voices, for about half an hour when Nona, looking up, had to suppress a shriek of alarm.

Robert Fitzgibbon, on his feet, had moved silently to stand behind Tess Rogan's chair.

"I beg your pardon," he said stiffly. (Was he sober now? Would they now be able to agree that nothing meaningful could have been said because of the liquor?)

Nona, on her part willing to make this a bargain, said nervously, "Of course."

Tess turned her head and began to rise. But he leaned over and put a stiff arm across her, to the table's edge. Sober or not, there was some thunder in his mood.

"Did I ask you to take me around the world?"

"You did." Tess smiled.

"You won't do it, will you?" He was very serious.

"No," said Tess. Her note of indulgence disappeared. The reply was flat, quiet, true.

He stood still, and Nona's heart was pounding with fear. Finally he moved, lifted the arm that had barred Tess's rising. He turned back into the living room.

Tess got up and followed him. So did Nona.

He had moved toward the windows. He looked around at Tess and his face was once more boyish and rather attractive. "I can get somewhat lower than I thought I could," he said. "I certainly don't blame you. But I appreciate . . . You look me in the eye, at least." The mood was tightening. "Will you tell me what to do?"

"I don't know that I can," said Tess, after hesitating.

He looked away. "I *can* go out this window," he said bitterly. "There is cement down there. It shouldn't take long. Even I . . ."

Nona's patience ended. Anger burst. "Oh, don't be such a ridiculous damn baby!" she cried.

He cocked his eyebrow; he looked sideways at Nona Henry. The look was cold and reckless. I've given myself away, it asked, to such as you? "It wouldn't be very nice," he said, "would it, Mrs. Henry?"

He seemed to be poised on the edge of the violent deed. His head was pointed, his body gathered toward destruction. Nona had no doubt that, in this instant at least, he meant to jump. She was terrified.

Tess Rogan was frightened too, but she said quietly, "You might not hurt yourself enough. Come, sit . . . I'll tell you what to do." Indulgence in her voice was faint, but there.

She moved a little nearer him.

"No, no." His head went up and back. His ear had caught that note. "Now you're conning me. Don't do that. Don't you know . . ." He was speaking to the ceiling or to God or to Tess Rogan. "Don't you know I *never* could tell the truth? It wasn't allowed. Don't you know I needed to tell the truth? *Once*, anyhow . . ."

"Of course I know. Come, sit down, then," Tess said, "and talk to me."

"Aah, aah," he spoke as to a naughty child. He turned swiftly and threw out his right arm. It caught Tess along the jaw and she staggered. Her knees crumpled; she grabbed for the back of the couch, going down, caught it a little too late. Her head fell forward and cracked upon the edge of a low table.

Nona let out a tiny yelp and fell to her knees beside Tess. "You beast! Get out!" she said up to him guttural with rage.

"Mush?" he mocked her. "Mush-mush-mush. You're another one." He reeled and he staggered.

But Tess Rogan, kneeling on the floor, lifted her head and was perfectly conscious. She put her fingers to her forehead and Nona could see that there was a streak of blood along the hairline. Rage gave Nona an animal strength. She pushed up from her own position and threw herself toward the telephone. The man was there before her. He was stronger. They seemed to be wrestling. If she hadn't been too angry to think, Nona would have supposed that he was out of his mind entirely.

She did not think. She blazed, "Hit an old lady!" She wanted to hurt him physically, give him pain, any kind of pain. She wished he *would* go out the

window. “You no-good rotten . . . !”

He said, with a strange confidence, “*She* understands.”

Tess said crisply, behind them, “Stop that. I’m not hurt, Nona. *He* has been hurt. That’s what he wants understood.”

Tess was still on her knees. Nona’s arms were held to her sides by the man’s strong arms. The man was now still. It was frozen violence.

Tess was getting up. “I do understand,” she said, and her voice was loud and clear. “Your mother pressures you, you say, with praise and expectations? So, you say, it’s not your fault you’ve turned out a bum?”

The man’s hold was loosening. Nona, with her body so close, could feel his whole body losing whatever purpose had been in it.

“That’s not the truth, however,” said Tess Rogan in ringing tones. “Nobody makes a bum out of anybody else. The truth is, it’s not that simple.”

Nona felt the man go limp. She found that she was free.

“Then I’m done,” he mumbled. “I’m done. I know it when I hear it. How do I know, I wonder? I’m done.” He did not move toward either the window or the door. Instead, he crumpled over, holding his own breast. He began to breathe strangely and to moan. He curled down upon the floor and Nona ran to Tess.

“Let me help you. What shall I do?”

Tess, with a handkerchief, was wiping blood from a smallish cut in her forehead. “I don’t think it’s much,” she said. “I’m afraid *that* looks like a heart attack. We must call a doctor.”

Nona turned and saw the man curled upon the floor embracing pain. She felt nothing but curiosity. What ails him now? she wondered.

“I’ll call,” said Tess. “What was his name? The one who came for Mrs. Ames? O’Gara? Look up his number, Nona.” She sounded matter-of-fact.

So Nona found herself, after all the violence and the fright and the fury, standing still in a quiet room focusing down upon the small type in the phone book. She found the number.

Afterwards—the doctor having promised to come at once—Nona, in the bathroom, bathed with trembling fingers the cut on Tess’s forehead. Tess

stuck a Band-Aid over it. This gave a jaunty effect.

Their ears were listening, around corners, through open doors, for the sound of the man.

“His mother,” Tess said firmly, “will have to be called, you know.”

“Oh, Lord . . .” Nona trembled all over.

“Right now, I think. He may be very seriously ill. We cannot *not* tell her.”

“No.” Nona blanched. “Georgia isn’t here.”

“You had better go and rouse his mother.”

“I?”

“Tell her,” said Tess judiciously, “that he stopped in for a moment . . . that he began to feel ill . . . that we urged him to wait before going out . . . that we made coffee . . . that when the attack finally came on, we called a doctor.”

“Your *head!*” Nona half-sobbed. “What he *did!*”

“I fell,” Tess said.

“You mean cover up?”

“I don’t see what else,” said Tess rather stoically. “He’s . . . what he said . . . done. He’s for the pit. Why should there be a fuss?” said Tess. “It comes too late.”

Nona swallowed hard.

“I’ll arrange everything here. Change this—” Tess plucked at her dress where her blood had spattered. “You go tell Mrs. Fitzgibbon, and do it slowly?” She looked at Nona. “All right. We’ll ask him,” Tess conceded.


They came into the living room. Robert was curled there around his pain. His face glistened with sweat. His eyes were holes in his skull.

“My mother?” he said pitifully. “Don’t . . .”

“The doctor is coming,” Tess Rogan said. “We must call your mother. Mrs. Henry will go and rouse your mother, very carefully. Not to upset her too much.”

“That’s right,” he said. “Thank you.” He closed those eyes.

Chapter 22

 So Nona Henry found herself speeding around the quiet corridor all the way to Ursula Fitzgibbon's door. She tapped upon it—not too loudly. Nona felt her own heart swinging fearfully, not able to help imagining the sound in the night, the break in the pattern, the terror of it, from within. She took hold of herself. She remembered her advice to Winnie Lake, the essence of which had been “if you are going to cover up and lie, do it *well*.” Nona pulled down the calm, like a garment, over her head, pinged the bell lightly.

Something stirred on the other side of the door.

“It's Nona Henry, Mrs. Fitz. Don't be alarmed. May I please speak to you a minute?”

It took a long time for the door to begin to rattle and thereafter to open. Ursula Fitzgibbon was wearing a white quilted dressing gown. Her white hair, slightly tousled, was still becoming to her small dry pink face that peered blindly forth. “Nona? Why, what is it, dear?”

“I'm so sorry to have to disturb you. I'm afraid that I must. You see, your son Robert isn't feeling well at all.”

She could think of no more gentle way to put the news.

Ursula Fitzgibbon looked as if she could not understand. “Robert has gone to his hotel,” she said.

“Well . . . no,” said Nona, speaking softly. “You see, I happened to meet him at the elevator. He went with me to call on Mrs. Rogan . . . just on the impulse . . .”

Ursula had one hand to her throat and was massaging it. “But he left some time ago,” she insisted.

Nona perceived that, slowly as she was going, it was still too fast. She stepped closer to the old lady. “Please . . . we did go to see Mrs. Rogan and it seemed that he wasn't feeling very well *then*.”

“I thought,” said Ursula stiffening, “I *thought* Robert wasn't looking quite himself. Come in, dear. Come in.”

Nona stepped in. “We thought it best to let him sit quietly, you know? We didn’t think he ought to go out.”

“Of course not,” said Ursula bravely. Her lashes fluttered. “You ought to have called me. He ought to have come back here.”

“I’ve come to call you,” said Nona gently.

“Is it his tummy?” said Ursula.

Tummy! The man is fifty-three! Nona’s heart sank.

“I think you might want to come with me,” she said. “The doctor . . .”

“Doctor?”

“Yes. You see Robert really isn’t feeling at all well.”

“Of course I will go to my boy,” said Ursula. She seemed to be panting daintily. “Will you wait a minute? My slippers . . . I cannot go out like this.”

“Let me help you.”

“Please, dear.” So Nona went with her to the bedroom. The small body leaned hard on Nona’s arm. “My glasses . . .”

Nona found the glasses. Then Ursula directed the finding of another pair of slippers and changed to them. (*Why*, Nona could not imagine.)

Ursula brushed her hair. Her voice kept lapping. “Robert *hasn’t* looked well the last week, as I said to Georgia. I don’t think he eats properly. He needs to rest. Robert has always driven himself. Did you say a doctor? Which doctor?”

Nona told her.

“I would prefer my own doctor,” Ursula said. “I’m sure Robert would too. Such a wonderful man, always so kind. Had I better call him, do you think?”

“Not now,” said Nona, wanting to scream *Hurry, hurry*. “Let’s go and see how he is, shall we?”

Ursula’s bedroom was fragrant, a dainty shell (in spite of Sans Souci’s *décor*), a clean and dainty shell to shelter a lovely little old lady. But was she a lie-ee? Did Tess’s words apply? Did Robert’s words? Did Mrs. Fitz, having created this shell, now mistake it for the actual world? Nona tried not to think of this, kept murmuring the comforting half-lies.

At last she was guiding the slow footsteps around the building.

Dr. O’Gara had come. He was youngish, crew-cut, knowledgeable and decisive. Robert Fitzgibbon was now sprawling in a chair.

Ursula Fitzgibbon came into Tess Rogan’s room, one foot shuffling after the other, in the strange walk that old ladies acquire. It was a balancing of the skeleton when the hipbones and the leg bones are barren of flesh. Old ladies, with little flesh and so little muscle, simply stagger the bones—one leg, other leg—in an imitation of life. The bones are walking.

“Robert, dear . . .” She looked misty.

“Mother, dear?”

Ursula did not even look toward Tess Rogan. She went all the way to where her son was sprawling, and her slow progress was so theatrical as to hold her audience silent. She bent to kiss his brow, as if she blessed him.

Dr. O’Gara said, “He’s having a bit of trouble with that heart.” His wise young eyes had taken everything in. “I’ve called the hospital, Mrs. Fitzgibbon, and I’ll take him there myself. Be quickest and best.”

“Oh, Robert,” said Ursula, sounding half pitying but also half reproachful. “Are you in pain, dear?”

“Not too bad,” Robert said. “Don’t worry, please, Mother. I’m in good hands.” His smile was gallant, twisted.

“Of course you are,” said Ursula with a sweet smile flicked toward the doctor. “I’m so sorry, dear. It can’t be serious. A good rest . . . Isn’t that so, Doctor?”

Dr. O’Gara was very busy and did not answer her. “I wonder, Mrs. . . . er?” He was speaking to Nona.

“Mrs. Henry. Yes, Doctor?”

“Perhaps you and I together . . . ?”

“Shall I call the night man?” said Tess Rogan. She was standing there quietly, in a different dress, in the background. The bit of plaster on her forehead was not conspicuous where she stood, well out of the lamplight.

“Oh, Mrs. Rogan,” said Ursula, “I am *so* sorry that you are being inconvenienced like this.”

It was grotesque. There *was* no answer. Nona understood when Tess did not try to answer. What could one say?

But now, suddenly, here came Sarah Lee Cunneen, in robe and slippers, wading into the room with her toes turned out, crying in her husky voice, “Oh, Mrs. Fitz! Listen! What can I *do*? So sorry, and Georgia away, too . . .”

“Just so Robert is going to be all right,” said Ursula Fitzgibbon piously.

The world steadied. The patterns came over. Strangeness disappeared. Illness is to be faced with unselfish concern on all sides. Mother loves son and hopes for him. Son hopes not to trouble mother with any pain of his. Everyone is eager to be helpful. Reassurances are given, to and fro. Everyone denies his fear. No one has a selfish thought.

Nona Henry felt immeasurably relieved that Sarah Lee Cunneen had come, for she was skilled in this sort of thing. Nona herself moved beside the young doctor, who now leaned to heave Robert Fitzgibbon up. “Show me how I can help,” she murmured. “I am young . . .”

It did not occur to her, for another hour or so, that to have said such a thing at her age was surprising.

However, Robert Fitzgibbon more or less walked, using the doctor’s strength, down the way to the elevator, while Nona Henry guarded his other side, opened the door, helped. Once downstairs, Oppie Etting, eyes popping, ears flopping, sprang to assist.

Nona Henry, released, went slowly back up the stairs to the scene of the incident.

The affair was now Mrs. Fitz’s affair. The ordeal was now Mrs. Fitz’s ordeal. Sarah Lee fluttered and fussed, quite as if she were Georgia. It was Sarah Lee who would take Mrs. Fitz to her own rooms and who would stay . . . “Listen!”

Mrs. Fitz, martyred and brave, said she would get in touch with her own doctor. She would feel better about it. Oh, she was not, of course, *worried*. But if Sarah Lee really *didn’t* mind . . . How very kind she was!

Nona closed the door behind them and turned on Tess fiercely. “Did you let the doctor look at that cut?”

“No, no.” Tess sighed. “It wasn’t necessary.”

Nona clenched her hands. “Didn’t his mother *know* he was stinking drunk?” Tess shook her head. “How bad is he?”

Tess said, “I don’t know.”

“Didn’t the doctor say anything?”

“*He* may not know . . .”

“How did Mrs. Cunneen . . . ?”

“I phoned her,” Tess said. Nona now noticed that there were three unbroken coffee cups in this living room. Were they for Sarah Lee Cunneen to see? For Sans Souci?

“*She* didn’t even notice your . . . your head.”

“I hoped she wouldn’t,” said Tess.

“I mean Mrs. Fitz,” cried Nona. Tess had known this. Tess nodded. “Why did you call Sarah Lee? I mean why *her*?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think . . . she’s generous.” Tess sank down into a chair. “I wanted you for myself,” she murmured.

Nona’s heart swelled. Tess Rogan looked very tired. And why not? Nona thought. *How* not? After all, she was seventy-one years old. A drunken man had intruded his drunken revelations upon her, had raved, wept, begged . . . proposed first *marriage* (which was shocking enough) and then suicide. He had knocked her down! And not content with that, he had proceeded to have a heart attack in her presence.

“What about *you*?” said Nona. “And your inconvenience? What can I do for you, Tess? Will you go to bed now? How can I help you?”

Tess’s eyes were fond. “We are in a mess,” she said. “But, at least, we can talk about it.”

Nona said, “We can keep the worst of it to ourselves. You were right. *Much* better to cover up . . . and just stay out of it.”

Tess was looking dubious.

“Wow!” said Nona. “I see what you mean. Louisa May Alcott!” Tess looked so sad Nona wanted to make her smile.

But Tess said, “I don’t know why he asked *me* for the answers. I don’t know why that happens, Nona. *I* don’t have the answers. I know *that* so well.”

“Perhaps that’s why,” said Nona, without taking any thought. “Look now . . . I would prescribe a slug of whisky.”

“Where will I get any?” said Tess languidly.

Nona said, “Look *there*.” A pint bottle, most obviously made for liquor, was lying on the rug half under the dust ruffle of the chair at the telephone. Nona went over and picked it up. It was empty.

She looked thoughtfully at Tess and Tess returned the look. “I missed that,” said Tess. “I wonder . . .”

“Nobody saw it,” said Nona. “And what’s the difference? I wish he’d left a little. Not he. Wine, Tess? I think I have a bit of sherry.”

“Why must I have alcohol?” asked Tess rather impatiently.

“I don’t know,” said Nona lightly. “It’s the convention.” Their eyes communicated amusement. “But if you insist, I’ll settle for your taking some aspirin. Come on now, Tess. You are seventy-one.”


“I forget,” said Tess ruefully. “You’re a nice girl.”

An hour later, crawling into her bed, Nona wondered to herself: Am I a nice girl? What am I?

It was peculiar that she had become so entangled, here at Sans Souci. She, Nona Henry of Poughkeepsie, New York, housewife, mother, grandmother, widow . . . casually here, just for the winter. One who had thought she might as well escape the ice and the snow and be comfortable.

She shuddered down under the blanket. That sounded so reasonable. (And was so much less reasonable than it sounded.) What was she? She was uncomfortably entangled. Was it because of something that she was?

Chapter 23

 In the affair of Robert Fitzgibbon Sans Souci knew all (or thought it did) before ten the next morning.

Oppie Etting had left a written account for Morgan Lake, who called Mrs. Fitzgibbon as early as he dared, to express his sympathy and concern. Then he called Tess Rogan to find out what had happened, for Mrs. Fitz had accepted the sympathy graciously but gave back very little in the way of information. Tess Rogan's version satisfied him. Of all men, he could accept the possibility of a heart attack any time, anywhere. Morgan Lake was sorry to hear it, but not to the point of acute distress.

Elsewhere there was Sarah Lee Cunneen to tell Bettina Goodenough. "Such a shock for dear old Mrs. Fitz! I stayed with her till four A.M. And am *I* pooped!" said Sarah Lee. "Listen!"

Georgia Oliver came back during the morning and rallied around Mrs. Fitz. Everything would work out, Georgia opined. When she asked Nona Henry about the night before, Nona gave her the version that she and Tess Rogan had agreed upon. (They were at Mrs. Fitz's bedside at the time.) Georgia thanked Nona for having been "so kind and loyal."

Kind to whom? thought Nona, and loyal to what? "Stay out of it," she told herself sternly, and left them gracefully.

So many tongues . . . Harriet Gregory and the Three were able to get the story as if the walls had tongues. Robert Fitzgibbon stricken! Middle of the night! In Tess Rogan's apartment! Nona Henry was there! (And Georgia away? Well!) In the hospital now. Rumor said he would recover. Well!

When Mrs. Fitz (and Georgia) made a grand progress to the hospital they did not move unseen through the patio of Sans Souci. By noon Mrs. Fitz came back again—resting bravely.

Early that same afternoon Tess Rogan and Nona Henry went through the patio on their way to the hospital.

(Agnes Vaughn spotted the adhesive on Tess's forehead from fifty paces. "What's this?" said Agnes Vaughn to herself, swallowing a peanut whole.)

They took a cab. Nona was confused about their motive for going. They were so much involved with this affair of Robert Fitzgibbon that it would *seem* only right for them to go. On the other hand, and for the same reason, it actually *was* right for them to go. And whether they were doing what they ought to do because they ought, or doing what they did in order to fool people better, seemed to be no question—or else two questions with the same answer.

There was a florist's shop conveniently near the hospital entrance. Nona said impulsively, "Shall we?"

So they entered the shop and Nona ordered a not too expensive bunch of flowers.

She felt a kind of basic strength today. An odd feeling, rather delightful. A feeling of union. A feeling of standing firm that persisted nicely without her needing to know exactly what she was standing firm upon.

Tess waited in the shop with her usual passive-alert acceptance of her surroundings. But Nona, watching the florist's girl putting the flowers into a cheap and expendable vase, felt an ancient urge. "No, no. Let *me* . . ."

So Nona Henry took up the flowers and began to place them stalk by stalk. It had been a while since she had been an avid gardener. It had been a long time since she had made a flower arrangement. But her hands and her eyes had not lost the trick of working together. She sank into a familiar trance. The strange thing was that she felt free to do so. Anxiety and any sense of ordeal fell away from her consciousness. She worked with a total concentration, guided by some interior certainty. When she had the bouquet finished she knew it was *right*. Did not know how she knew, but did know. She felt refreshed and revived . . . as if the use of an old and almost forgotten skill had deeply rested her.

"That's lovely," Tess Rogan said heartily.

It *was* lovely. Line and color. Grace and imbalance. Daring and yet restful. Because it was *right*.

Bearing the vase then, Nona went with Tess into the hospital and up in the elevator and along the corridor to Robert Fitzgibbon's room. Georgia Oliver was sitting in a chair in the corner. "Oh," said Georgia, "company! How nice! Oh, see the lovely flowers, Robert."

Nona winced.

But the man in the bed was subdued, completely. He was lying very still in the high clean place. He looked very clean and rather wizened. He lay at the mercy of his own heart and at the mercy of others to care for it. Weakened. Dependent. The room reeked of one fact. Robert Fitzgibbon, sober, weakened, finished, “done,” as he put it, did not want to die. If this was the pit, he was willing and eager for it to shelter him.

Tess Rogan said, smiling, “We can’t stay but a minute. You’re feeling better? Good.”

Robert said, rather feebly, rather pettishly, “I’m all right, thanks.” He put the contours of his mouth into the shape of a smile. “Georgia’s being awfully good to me.”

“Well, of course,” said Georgia. “What am I here for? Now, he mustn’t talk. He must just lie quietly. So nice of you to come and bring the lovely flowers.” Georgia’s sweet smile was telling them not to stay.

Nona said, with that peculiar strength, “We only want to say we hope you’ll soon feel even better. We wouldn’t tire you. Shall we go, Tess?”

“So kind. But what happened, Mrs. Rogan?” Georgia exclaimed. “Your poor forehead!”

“Oh, I fell,” said Tess carelessly. “I think I am getting old. It’s nothing. We won’t stay at all.”

Robert said, feebly from the bottom of the pit where he snuggled so cravenly, “Thanks for everything.”

They stayed no longer.

On the way back to Sans Souci Nona said doubtfully, “But shouldn’t Georgia be told? All he said! Was that untrue?”

Tess said, “Don’t be too quick, Nona. He needs her *now*. Could you see? As for Georgia Oliver, it’s possible she likes and needs to take care of weaker people. Some do.”

“I suppose . . .” Doubt drifted out of Nona’s mind. She was thinking about the flowers. Yes, she knew how flowers should go in a vase. Had known, once. *Still* knew. She wished she had bought some flowers for herself.

That afternoon when Winnie Lake prepared to make the tailored buttonholes on the gray-green dress, Nona took the work gently out of her hands. "I'm a little fussy," Nona said apologetically. "A botched buttonhole is one thing that really gives a dress that homemade look. See here? This way." Her hands were skillful. She had not forgotten how to do this, either.

Winnie Lake received the news that, all this while, she had not been teaching Nona Henry anything. She took it silently. Her faintly slanted eyes were first thoughtful and then more humbly adoring than before.

That evening Harriet Gregory went down to the lobby and got into one of those conversations with Oppie Etting. Oppie was full of the previous night's excitement.

"The doctor and I practically carried him out," he told her, elbow on counter, eyes popping. "You never know, I guess, when a thing like that is going to hit you."

Harriet looked frightened. "Never know," she agreed. Her own heart was uncomfortable and she suspected it.

"One thing I heard the doctor say, though," Oppie confided. "I can't figure it out. He said something about alcohol."

"Alcohol?"

"Just as we put him in the car. Said 'comes a time when alcohol's better left alone.'"

"You mean Robert Fitzgibbon had been *drinking*?"

"He didn't look like he was drunk to me," said Oppie defensively. "He was really *sick*, what I mean. He looked *terrible*! We practically had to carry him!"

"Such a young man, so good-looking," quavered Harriet, as if the good-looking deserved to be spared.

"You never know," said Oppie again, and they nodded solemnly, each with the fear of the known and inevitable just around the corner of the clock . . . for whom? For them?

Harriet Gregory said to Sarah Lee Cunneen the next morning, "Robert Fitzgibbon wasn't drunk, was he?"

“What do you mean?” cried Sarah Lee. “He had a heart attack! Why do you think they called the doctor?”

“But I wonder what the doctor meant, then.” Harriet recounted what Oppie had told her.

Sarah Lee Cunneen couldn't *imagine* what the doctor might have meant, or so she said to Bettina Goodenough. (This was not true. If the doctor had mentioned alcohol, then somebody had had alcohol.) So Sarah Lee got to thinking. “You know what? I had a funny impression . . . seems to me now there was a whisky bottle on the floor up there in Tess Rogan's.”

“On the floor!” Bettina laughed, not the laugh that means mirth, but the one that indicates shock.

“Listen!” said Sarah Lee with a shrug. “Who knows?”

Bettina Goodenough bumped into Felice Paull in the lobby. “Wasn't that a sad thing,” intoned Felice mournfully, “about Robert Fitzgibbon? How did he happen to be in Mrs. Rogan's apartment?”

“Mrs. Henry says that was just an impulse . . .” Bettina's eyes swerved. “Of course, who knows? There *was* some drinking going on up there, or so I heard.”

Felice Paull said, “I haven't heard that. What?”

So Bettina told her, including a vague notion of a bottle on the floor, and added virtuously, “*I* can never understand why people drink. Such a waste!” (It was a waste of money.) “I can have all the fun *I* want without alcohol,” Bettina said, laughing a lot.

When the Unholy Three got into session Agnes Vaughn said, “But what was he *doing* in Tess Rogan's place? With Nona Henry?”

“You said Georgia better watch out,” squeaked Ida Milbank, “for that Mrs. Henry. Didn't you say so?” Ida nodded and beamed because she had remembered and she was proud to have remembered.

“I did say that, didn't I?” mused Agnes.

Felice Paull limbered up her throat and told them the rumor of heavy drinking, up there.

“Drinking, eh?” Agnes massaged her teeth with her tongue. “Say,” she exclaimed, “of course. Why, I heard them myself!”

“Heard whom?” Felice was a lump in one of Agnes’ chairs.

“That’s right,” said Agnes. “*I* heard what they said.”

“What who said?”

“Listen, somebody was punching for the elevator. Must have been around ten o’clock. Nona Henry came along. I knew her voice. Couldn’t get the words. But it was a man’s voice that she was talking to. The heck he went with her on any impulse! Know what I heard him say?”

“Who say?”

“Robert Fitzgibbon, of course. Heard him say, ‘Drunk, you mean.’ So what was *that* about? Nona Henry must have been telling him that somebody was drunk. *She* wasn’t drunk.”

“I don’t follow,” said Felice. (Ida didn’t either, but she wasn’t expected to.)

“Well, *I* follow,” said Agnes Vaughn. “I see it now. She was asking him if he would help. That must have been it.”

“Help? How?”

“Help,” said Agnes, “because I distinctly heard him say, ‘*Be glad to. Certainly, Mrs. Henry.*’ Now, that’s when, and that’s why, he went to Tess Rogan’s apartment.”

Agnes Vaughn was accurate, up to a point. Those were indeed the very words she had heard through her door. But Agnes couldn’t help turning them around and about in the light of her imagination.

“You know Tess Rogan’s got a piece of sticking plaster on her forehead? Notice?”

“She fell,” said Felice heavily. Felice conceded that she was always too innocent. Often it took Agnes Vaughn to enlighten her.

“She fell, all right,” said Agnes. “That’s what must have happened.”

“What?” said Felice. (“What?” said Ida Milbank.)

The Unholy Three drew their heads together.

“It must have been Mrs. Rogan who was drunk,” said Agnes, “and that’s how come she fell. Well, Nona Henry—I told you they were thick—she

must have been up there. And when Mrs. Rogan fell and hurt herself Nona Henry must have gone looking for help. To pick her up, maybe? Who can say? Anyhow, she comes out and she finds Robert Fitzgibbon. Why, I heard them myself. *That's* why he was in Mrs. Rogan's place. *That's* how it happened." Agnes Vaughn's tongue slid over her lower lip. Her mind checked back rapidly over her theory.

Felice Paull said righteously, "If we have another alcoholic in this building, I really think somebody should protest very strongly to the owners. After all, you remember the night Leila Hull set a fire? If Tess Rogan's another one of *those*, I shall speak to Mr. Lake myself."

Agnes Vaughn's tongue was exploring a rough filling. It was a good solid theory, but it didn't please her much. She had nothing against Tess Rogan. Still a story was a story. A hypothesis was also a story.

Felice said, "It's a disgrace! I am going to ask my lawyer. *I* believe it is a crime!"

Ida Milbank said, "Yes, it is!" (Ida Milbank had taken to a little shoplifting lately.) Her little eyes turned and all the soft flesh of her face was sly. "A crime! A disgrace!" Her head bobbed and her cheeks shook.

It was Ida Milbank who let this theory-hypothesis-story of Agnes Vaughn's go through her to Harriet Gregory. Ida could repeat things, parrot-fashion, if she repeated them soon enough. Harriet was thrilled and appalled.

Harriet Gregory soon perceived her simple duty. She went to Georgia Oliver. "I just thought you ought to know, Georgia. Mrs. Rogan was dead drunk the other night. Why, there were bottles on the floor. She *fell*, and Mrs. Henry called Robert Fitzgibbon to help her. Of course, he isn't going to say anything about *that*. He is a perfect gentleman. He would be chivalrous." Harriet smiled gruesomely. "But actually, what happened . . . Mrs. Rogan was so drunk she fell down and did something to her head. You've seen that bandage? So, of course, Mrs. Henry needed help. And that makes sense," said Harriet Gregory triumphantly.

Georgia Oliver said chidingly, "Oh, I can't believe that. Not that Robert wouldn't have gone to help, if he could. Perhaps she . . . just fell?"

"That's not what the doctor told Mr. Etting," said Harriet, all ready to feel insulted. "The doctor *knew* she was drunk!"

"Then it's too bad," said Georgia.

Georgia told Mrs. Fitz about it. “Dear Robert, he would cover up for her, of course. I’m just sorry the story got out,” Georgia said.

“Robert wouldn’t have refused a plea for help, of course not.” Mrs. Fitz was getting pinker, thinking of her boy. “And she is a large woman. So tall, isn’t she? Heavy? It does seem so . . . unfortunate, Georgia dear. So very unnecessary.” Mrs. Fitz was indignant for her own.

“Poor old soul,” said Georgia softly.


“An old countrywoman,” said Mrs. Fitz rather distastefully. “How *could* Robert have wanted to go and call on *her*, so late at night. I *never* believed that, somehow. It really does seem to me, Georgia, that Nona Henry shouldn’t have protected that woman by lying to *me*. I had thought Nona Henry was my friend.” Mrs. Fitz was very much disappointed.

“Ah, well,” said Georgia. “It’s done and can’t be undone. We just mustn’t bother Robert about it.”

“Oh, certainly not,” Ursula Fitzgibbon sighed and sighed again.

It was the next day that Nona Henry got forgiven.

Chapter 24

 She came into the patio, having been to market, and found herself catching up to the slow progress of Georgia and Mrs. Fitz as they proceeded toward the entrance of Sans Souci.

Nona slowed down and hung back, thought better of it, and caught them. “How is Mr. Fitzgibbon today?” she inquired cheerfully.

Mrs. Fitz stopped walking. “He is doing very well, thank you,” said she without a smile. “Nona, dear . . .”

“Yes?”

“I want you to understand that we both *do* understand,” cooed Mrs. Fitz, and now smiled.

Nona blinked. Her heart had jumped.

“I realize perfectly,” Mrs. Fitz went on, “that you wanted to spare your friend the humiliation . . .”

Nona’s eyes opened very wide. “What . . . ?”

“Of course, I rather wish,” said Mrs. Fitz mournfully, “you hadn’t lied to *me* about it. But just the same . . .”

“Lied?” Nona’s thoughts were chasing each other in surprised circles. What did the old lady know?

“Just the same,” said Mrs. Fitz, “I can understand why you did it, my dear. And to understand is to forgive, they say.” She was benign; she was condescending.

Nona looked sharply at Georgia Oliver. “Is this about Robert . . . ?”

“Oh, we haven’t said a word to Robert, dear man,” said Georgia, benign in her turn. “Of course, *he* wouldn’t tell on her. We understand.”

“Tell?” Nona swallowed. “On whom? Please?”

“There’s no use pretending any more,” said Ursula Fitzgibbon sweetly, “because, I’m afraid, the true story is all over the building. She wasn’t badly hurt, was she, when she fell?”

“I . . . beg your pardon?” Nona stammered.

“Your friend,” said Ursula, “your Mrs. Rogan.”

“Why, not badly. I don’t quite . . .”

“Perhaps Nona has promised,” said Georgia quickly. “Never mind. Everything will work out,” she said comfortingly.

They had begun to move again, leaving Nona stunned.

Winnie Lake came along, carrying her books, and at the sight of Nona she stopped beside her.

The eyes of Sans Souci were looking down. Mrs. Fitz and Georgia were moving, in their snail’s pace, away toward the building. Nona plunked her paper bag of groceries into Winnie’s arms. “Take my key,” she said. “Do you mind, Winnie? Put the things in my kitchen, and excuse me a little while? There is something I want to do,” said Nona. She was feeling puzzled, but also, with premonition, already angry.

She went past Morgan Lake, and the two ladies who had achieved the lobby, without speaking. She walked rapidly around the corner to where Harriet Gregory lived.

Harriet would know all.

Nona had never been in this apartment, 106. When Harriet Gregory opened her door and stood, dumb with surprise, Nona said, “May I come in? I want to ask you something.”

“Of course. Of . . . of . . . of . . .” Harriet backed away. “I’m not . . . I haven’t had a chance . . .” She began to apologize. The room was a mess. Medicine bottles seemed to be everywhere that underwear was not.

“*What* story is going around the building?” demanded Nona. “About Mrs. Rogan?”

Harriet Gregory clutched her throat and, in a strangled voice, began to tell her. “Agnes Vaughn heard a lot of it,” she wound up, “and the doctor knew. You couldn’t keep it a secret. Not if the old woman was as drunk as that.” Harriet put her face into the arrangement labeled *smile*.

Nona’s anger was swelling to the bursting point, but she kept control. When Harriet began to stammer something about a cup of coffee Nona thanked her and declined. She marched out. (Harriet felt insulted.) Nona ran up the stairs and down the east wing to Tess.

“Makes me boil!” Nona cried. “After what *you* put up with! The way *he* behaved! Now they’re saying that *you* were the drunk and *he* was a hero! I just can’t stand that!”

Tess said, “There is nothing to do.” She looked distressed.

“Oh, yes there is!” flared Nona. “I’m going to tell Georgia Oliver all *about* her precious Robert. She ought to know, anyway.”

Tess said, “You needn’t tell her for my sake. It is going to become obvious, fairly soon, that I’m not a drinker. Don’t you see? Let them talk.”

“But it isn’t fair!”

Tess made a helpless gesture.

“I’m going to talk to Georgia. Do you mind?” Nona sounded as if she would be very angry at Tess for minding.

Tess didn’t answer.

“It’s just too much!” raved Nona. “Do you forbid me?”

“There’s no such thing,” said Tess distantly. “I will say that I don’t think it is necessary.”

“Well, I *do*!” cried Nona. “Not only for your sake. For mine, too. And actually for Georgia’s. You know all he said.”

Tess looked sad and her head shook slightly.

“All right,” cried Nona. “The truth is, I simply am not willing to be forgiven for something I never did at all.”

“That is hard,” murmured Tess remotely.

“It’s too hard and unnecessary! And I won’t let it happen to you, either.” Nona kissed the old woman’s cheek impulsively. Then she turned and flashed out of the door. She walked on wings of loyalty toward justice. She felt herself to be herself. She went along the east wing and tapped on Georgia Oliver’s door. If Georgia is still with Mrs. Fitz, she thought, then I’ll go tell *both* of them. I don’t *care*! I will *not* let this go!

But Georgia was there, in her own room.

Nona had never seen this apartment either. Georgia’s one room was fragrant and neat. Nona gave it no more than a glance and received only the flash impression of its neatness and its un-lived-in look.

“Why, come in!” exclaimed Georgia Oliver. Windows were sending light past her fair head, giving it that haloed effect. “Do come in, Nona. How nice! I am just about to change for dinner. Going to go cook for Mrs. Fitz and me. Sit down, please do.”

Nona came in and sat down. Her face, she knew very well, was cold and stern. (Her duty was cold and stern, but she would do it!) She said, distinctly, “I have come to tell you what really happened the other night. I think you will have to know.”

“Ah . . .” Georgia looked tolerant. Tell your little story if you must, her look was saying, you bothered little creature.

“Robert Fitzgibbon was as drunk as I have ever seen a man,” said Nona coldly. “He followed me down to Tess Rogan’s door. She let him in because, for one thing, it didn’t seem safe to let him go out on the streets in his condition.” (Georgia didn’t react.) “She tried to give him coffee. He slobbered it all over . . .” Nona began to speak faster and louder. “He then went into a nervous twit or something . . .” She made wide gestures. “And he said, among other things, that he was marrying you for your money and hated the prospect and did not think he could do it.”

Georgia was still.

“I think you ought to know,” Nona went on, blurting it out. “Actually he asked Tess Rogan if she would take him with her on her trip. In fact, he asked her to marry him!” (That was out!) Nona paused.

Georgia’s brows were drawing together and her head was tilting farther over.

“Then he . . . well, he passed out for a little while,” Nona hurried on. “But he got up and, in the course of more talk, he hit Mrs. Rogan and knocked her down.”

Now Georgia Oliver was getting slowly to her feet.

“Then he tried to commit suicide. He threatened to jump out the window. No, that was *before* he knocked her down.” Nona was going too fast. “Then he had that heart attack.”

Georgia said gently, “I think you must be very upset about something.”

“I am,” flared Nona. “I am upset about you and Mrs. Fitz forgiving *me* . . . when your boy friend caused all the trouble . . . all that there was . . . and Mrs. Rogan only wanted to spare you and his mother. You can tell Mrs. Fitz or not. I don’t care. I’ve told *you*.”

“Oh, come,” said Georgia, smiling. “I wouldn’t think of telling Mrs. Fitz. Don’t you know that all this is just too fantastic?”

“It is true,” snapped Nona.

“Robert? Hit a woman?” said Georgia. “Ah, no . . . never! I’m sorry . . .” She looked sad but absolutely sure.

“I think you ought to be sorry,” said Nona fiercely, “very sorry for a man who is nothing but a no-good drunken bum and knows it and says so.”

“I don’t think,” said Georgia fastidiously, “that I will listen any longer. Please?”

She was, Nona saw, armored completely. To her, Nona was an excited stranger, who might attack as much as she pleased, but Georgia Oliver heard no evil, saw no evil, and believed no evil—not even of Nona.

“You don’t believe a word I’ve said,” cried Nona.

Georgia kept smiling.

“Why would I *tell* you this?”

“I’m sorry for you,” Georgia said. “I don’t altogether understand, but I’m really sorry. You shouldn’t say such wicked things. You can’t hurt Robert and me,” said Georgia softly. “But I am so sorry that you want to try.”

Nona looked at that tilted, haloed head a moment, then turned on her heel and marched out.

She went along the corridor toward the corner, fuming. Lie-ee, she fumed. Doesn’t want it to be the way it is. So she won’t *have* it that way!

Nona started around the corner, stopped. So much for Georgia Oliver. Reluctantly Nona recognized that, from Georgia’s point of view, Georgia was right. And that Nona herself had always envied or perhaps resented what was *right* about Georgia. Still, Tess Rogan was being wronged, and Nona did not propose to endure that. She turned back.

She knocked on the door of Agnes Vaughn.

“It’s open.”

Nona opened. She had never been in Agnes Vaughn’s apartment. She saw that it was a place of wildest disorder. Agnes Vaughn had not stirred out of her corner. There she sat. She seemed to be chewing on a coconut bar.

“Well, come in,” said Agnes Vaughn, hailing her with animation, at least. The old spider was all alone.

Nona came in. She sat down on the edge of a chair in which there were three magazines, a tube of toothpaste, one stocking and a gray garment she could not even identify . . . already strewn. “I have come to tell you the truth about what happened the other night,” Nona said bluntly.

“Go ahead,” said Agnes Vaughn encouragingly.

So Nona told her. Rage sharpened her voice and clipped her phrases so that the whole thing was very bald. It did sound fantastic.

But Agnes Vaughn listened carefully. Her little eyes kept wobbling rapidly, as if she looked first at one of Nona’s eyes, then at the other.

When Nona had finished Agnes said, “Tell me your exact conversation with him beside the elevator.”

Nona told her, repeating what had been said as best she could remember it. She was realizing with some surprise that Agnes Vaughn was checking evidence in a rather brainy fashion.

Now Agnes Vaughn sighed with great satisfaction. “So that’s what really happened?”

“You believe me? Georgia Oliver didn’t.”

Agnes grinned. “She wouldn’t want to.”

“But you do want to?” challenged Nona, having abandoned tact long ago. “Did *you* start this story about Tess Rogan being drunk?”

“That was just a guess,” shrugged Agnes, without apology.

“You don’t have to guess any more,” said Nona. She got up. She felt spent.

“Is this a secret?” asked Agnes Vaughn slyly.

“Would that matter?” retorted Nona insultingly.

Agnes Vaughn grinned and said warmly, “Say, come and see me any time, why don’t you?”

Nona didn’t answer. She left that place. As she closed the door she heard Agnes calling, “Any time at all. I’m always here and glad to have you.”

Nona put her head down and pounded off to her own place. She wasn't sure what she had done. But she felt spent. She had gotten rid of the anger, told the truth, refused to keep a stupid secret, defended the right. . . .

Winnie Lake looked up with those adoring eyes.

"Winnie," said Nona abruptly, "we are going to have to tell your people. We cannot keep this secret. That's just silly."

Winnie's eyes filled with shock at this coldness, and with surprise.

"A f-few more days?" she stammered. "I thought . . . you said . . . please, Mrs. Henry . . . ?"

Nona stood very still. "I'm sorry," she said quietly after a moment. "The fact is, I am so spitting mad at some other people, I think I am taking it out on you. A few more days . . . all right. Yes, I promised." Then, summoning attention, Nona asked lovingly, "How are you?"

Tears were running down Winnie's face.

"Don't cry. That was mean of me."

Nona sat down beside her. (Oh, God what am I?)

Winnie's head went down into her lap and Winnie wept there. Nona was motionless, except for the one hand that touched and moved very slightly against the dark hair. She felt herself to be somewhat tranced.

"Have you ever cried for the boy?" she asked, slowly, dreamily.

"One night," choked Winnie. "I cried all night. Oh, Mrs. Henry . . ."


After a while Nona advised her to brace up. "We'll go along with the sewing. I'll make some cocoa."

The girl responded immediately. The head came up and left Nona free. "That's a good girl," Nona said.

And to hell with the Widows of Sans Souci, thought Nona Henry. I am me, and I'll do as I do!

She flamed with energy. (Who was this, so to flame?)

Chapter 25

 Two days later, Morgan Lake rang a bell, and waited. Oppie Etting had just taken over the desk to release him. So it was getting toward dinnertime. Along the stuffy upper, inner passage of Sans Souci, he had walked through a rainbow array of odors. Morgan Lake knew that Agnes Vaughn was cooking cabbage, and Georgia Oliver was having fish. Daisy Robinson? Something with cheese.

Tess Rogan, who opened her door now, let out a scent of cinnamon and apples.

“May I speak to you a moment, Mrs. Rogan? I won’t be keeping you . . . ?”

“No, no. Please do come in, Mr. Lake.”

“I came to say . . .” Morgan Lake was very tired and an assortment of worries had been nagging him, all day long. His courteous voice was weary. “Kelly Shane, unfortunately, isn’t able to fix your bathroom door. We’ll have to have the door replaced, I’m afraid. It may be a day or so?”

“That doesn’t matter,” Tess Rogan said. “Come in, sit down.”

Morgan Lake came in. He was so tired. It was relaxing to hear a tenant say that anything didn’t matter. The door closed and he was within. If only he could sometimes be within, and not just the buffer who belonged nowhere inside. He sat down. 201. He knew it. The same old Sans Souci, shabby, genteel. And yet with two lamps lit against the winter dusk, this room was peaceful.

Elise, the older of the two chambermaids, came out of the bedroom. She had some clothing on her arm. “Mr. Lake.”

“Elise.” He nodded. He noted that she was a little late to leave. No matter.

“Miz Rogan, she done give me these things.” Her brown face reflected anxiety lest he think her a thief.

“That’s right,” Tess said. “You just take them along.”

“You sure about this here coat?” Elise was still anxious.

“That coat,” said Tess, “has been with me a long time—too long.”

“It’s sure a nice coat, Miz Rogan.”

“It won’t wear out,” said Tess cheerfully. “Good night, Elise.”

So Elise left, with Tess Rogan’s long red coat upon her arm.

Morgan Lake, meanwhile, had been trying to bash his worries down.

There was Ida Milbank. Senility? (A haunt here. It had been here before.) Always a stupid woman, she was really becoming dangerously stupid. Some of Ida Milbank’s recent “purchases” seemed not to have been *wrapped*. It worried him.

There was Marie Gardner. Elise had reported to Mindy Shane . . .

(There was Mindy Shane, that strong and competent woman without whose cheerful energies the building would have decayed long since. She, alas, languished at home, ill of a virus. Sans Souci was staggering along without her, at the moment. A worry . . .)

Mindy Shane had reported to him, in turn, that Elise said that Mrs. Gardner wasn’t friendly any more. Withdrawing? Finally? Completely? It worried him.

And Leila Hull had not come back.

And Elna Ames was dying—somewhere else, with her rent paid only to the first of the month and her things still there and what was Morgan Lake to do?

The owner, Avery Patrick, refused to worry about anything but his own problems. He had had a loss, some deal gone sour. He was as touchy as a hornet’s nest, these days. Avery Patrick was not even listening to any detailed needs for any kind of repairs. He was against doing anything for anyone. He said savagely, “Lay off, Morgan. I’m telling you. Keep the bills *down*. Keep that gas bill down, can’t you?”

“How?” Morgan had asked him. “If I turn off the heat earlier or put it on later . . . you know what happens. Every woman in the building lights her oven and opens the door. You know that.”

Avery Patrick had glared at him. “You keep the bills down, *somehow*. I don’t give a damn how. I haven’t got it!”

He had said this in Morgan’s apartment which was a place of tension, where Rose Lake alternated between deep gloom and a terribly gay

extravagance, pursuing Winnie, while Winnie kept slipping, slipping, surely, steadily away. And Morgan Lake kept buffing, between he knew not what.

The whole place . . . !

The entire building was in an uproar. There was a feud on.

Two stories were current, two versions of a certain event. The first version, that of a drunken Mrs. Rogan, collided with the second version that came rippling out of Agnes Vaughn's apartment with all her weight behind it. Georgia Oliver, who had wished to spare Mrs. Fitz, was forced to tell her everything that poor little mixed-up Nona Henry had said to her. For even Mrs. Fitz was unable to ignore the hints, the gasps, the snubs, the leers, the indignations, the very loyalties, that seeped through the whole building, and nipped at her.

(Mrs. Fitz had been outraged, really angry. She had wanted to go at once to Nona Henry. But Georgia had talked her out of that. "Don't dignify such nonsense. Try not to be angry. Poor thing is so wrong. She can't hurt us! You have the faith to know *that*."

"Georgia, darling . . ."

"Come, we must be bright for Robert's sake."

"Yes, dear, we must rise above it. Of course, you *are* wise.")

But there was a feud on, all right, and Morgan Lake knew it. A real schism. A stirring-up of passions such as he had not seen, although he had seen many little feuds at Sans Souci. They tended to rise, to die down, reform, revive. Feuds were a lively part of the life here.

But this one . . . it worried him.

The lines were drawn.

Mrs. Fitz and	}	versus	}	Nona Henry and
Georgia Oliver				Tess Rogan

Sides had been taken. Oh yes! Morgan Lake could have written down firm lists.

For Mrs. Fitz:

Harriet Gregory (always pro-aristocrat)

Bettina Goodenough

Sarah Lee Cunneen (for tradition)

Joan Braverman

Kitty Forrest (for the majority)

Daisy Robinson (simply, on the side of the
least melodrama)

For Nona Henry:

Agnes Vaughn

Felice Paull

Ida Milbank

(the Unholy Three!)

Who was neutral, he reflected, except poor Marie Gardner in her prison? (And Leila Hull in the sanitarium, Elna Ames on her deathbed.) Was that all seventeen?

Not quite. There was still Caroline Buff, who came and went as busily and confidently as ever. She was possibly the only real and deliberate neutral in the place. Except himself, who did not feel he knew what had really happened and so was not judging.

The *issue* was as follows:

Mrs. Fitz's faction claimed that Robert Fitzgibbon was a hero who had almost died of a noble chivalrous rescue, in the deed of lifting a weighty drunken old woman from where she had fallen down.

Mrs. Henry's faction claimed that, on the contrary, Robert Fitzgibbon was the villain who in a drunken suicidal fit had first asked the old woman to marry him (Tongues flapped. *Marry him!*) and then had knocked her down!

As for Robert Fitzgibbon, he lay in the hospital, keeping quiet, not to be bothered—by doctor's orders.

While Sans Souci was ready to explode!

Oppie Etting was in on this, somewhere, Morgan Lake felt sure. He had scolded Oppie blindly and severely, but too late, and to what good end?

Now, he looked at Mrs. Rogan. The feud was for or against her. But she herself? She was a question mark.

Tess sat down. "I've been weeding out," she explained.

He said, "I see," pleasantly. Then Morgan Lake went on smoothly, "I'd like to say how sorry I am for all this . . . trouble, Mrs. Rogan. I don't know what happened here that night. I am sure it was nothing terrible. But I do wish I knew how to stop the talk."

Tess said, “Yes, I wish I could stop it.”

He believed this. “Sometimes I wonder . . .” Morgan Lake here surprised himself. “Could Robert Fitzgibbon put a stop to it?”

“Oh, I doubt . . . he isn’t well, you see,” Tess said.

Somehow this did not make Morgan Lake doubt *her*. It made him believe. His intuition took the jump, reading compassion and understanding instead of fear and evasion. “Did he really knock you down?” he asked, surprising himself again, for he did not ordinarily pry.

“No,” said Tess. “That is, he swung his arm and it caused me to fall, yes. But he had no such intention.”

“I see,” said Morgan Lake. Yes, he believed.

“The man was very unhappy and upset, that night,” Tess continued, “and he had had too much to drink. It was a kind of breakdown, I suppose. A nervous explosion. It would have been better . . .”

“Mrs. Henry means well, I’m sure,” he said. Their talk seemed to be jumping whole paragraphs.

“Yes,” said Tess. “Of course, she does. She means to *do* well. I’m very fond of her. If she doesn’t perceive that my having been hit was accidental, really, well, it wasn’t easy to perceive at the time. She had been standing by me, all through it. A painful scene. So you see, she was thinking of me as a woman, and old . . .”

Morgan Lake stretched his eyes.

“Whereas, I was thinking of myself as just a person,” Tess said with a little laugh, “which is to say—isn’t it?—a factor, and therefore a risk-taker, and therefore, I should think, knock-down-able?” She was smiling. He was absolutely astonished that he understood her perfectly.

“I may go off to my son’s, in San Francisco,” Tess said, “for a visit. I have been wondering whether that might not be wise. Or do you think this . . . story, in the building, will just naturally blow over, cease to be interesting . . . and disappear?”

Morgan Lake said rather absently, “It will, eventually . . .”

“Mrs. Henry is good for your youngster,” said Tess, jumping paragraphs, plucking thought from his mind. “Or so I should think. She tries very hard to be honest and fair, and to correct herself. Of course . . .”

“Yes?”

“One day,” Tess said, “she may find she needn’t try as hard as all that.”

“I’m glad if Winnie has a woman friend,” said Morgan Lake in a low voice.

Tess said, “I’m sorry . . .”

And he knew she was sorry about Rose Lake. It was a jump. But easy. If he were glad that Winnie had a woman friend, then he had confessed that Winnie needed one. He knew that he could tell Tess Rogan all about everything, all about it, here and now, and she would listen. Yet Tess would rather he didn’t, for she, as well as he, perceived that he would regret having told.

So he did not tell.

He breathed five more breaths of a peace that jumped paragraphs. Then he rose with courteous farewells, to go.

Rose Quinn. Little Rose Carter, she had been once, born and raised in the same small midwestern town, on the same street and only three houses away from where Morgan Lake had lived as a boy.

He had been horrified at her predicament when he had found out that it *was* little Rose Carter who was on trial for murder . . . there in New Jersey, where he was at that time.

He had gone to see her in the jail, for Auld Lang Syne.

Young, beautiful, beside herself in trouble, with no one to stand by her. Her people dead. Her husband now her bitterest enemy. And with a tiny child, too. Poor girl! Poor thing! Poor Rose Carter! Why, he had known her for years! So Morgan Lake had gone to her attorney to offer himself as a character witness. Anything.

Morgan Lake had attended the trial every day, hoping and fearing.

For how glad she had been to see him! How she had clung to him, wept upon his shoulder. She *hadn’t* pushed the other woman down the cellar stairs. No, no. Never. He had believed her.

The jury had believed her, too. The prosecution had not been able to prove that she had done it. It wasn’t a deed that could easily be proved or disproved.

So Morgan Lake's partisan heart had rejoiced at the verdict. But the verdict had not been enough. Thereafter, he had seen Russell Quinn cast her off, in bitterness and hatred. Rose had clung to *him*. She had no one else. No one at all. He had helped Rose Quinn through the divorce.

Morgan Lake was a good deal older than she. He was not, he thought, much. No great talent, or drive, and a heart that the doctors "didn't like the sound of." Such as he was, he had offered her himself . . . for that was all he had. And she was little Rose Carter, whom he had known years ago, and around her lingered (for him) the perfume of better days, the scents of home.

So he married her. Or, Rose Quinn married him.

He took her away, as he had promised to do.

Simplehearted, meaning well . . . but things had not gone very well. The marriage had never been much of a mating.

Rose soon turned her dark heart all upon her child (and never let him near the child). He was only the buffer . . . between Rose and the world, perhaps.

By now, Morgan Lake was not certain whether Rose was haunted by the memory of a great injustice, or the memory of guilt. He was *quite* sure that she had not, in malice or impulse, pushed the "other woman" down those stairs so that she cracked her head upon the concrete floor and died of it.

Rose was not a murderess. He would have been told, in the years. Rose had no control.

The trouble was—and this shook him, this was what made him doubt himself, too much—he *was*, by now, quite sure that had Rose Quinn ever seen her chance to hurt or destroy that other woman, she *would* have done it.

He could not help being glad that Oppie Etting (by whatever method) had squelched that rumor about Mrs. Quinn, the accused, living *here*. He would have had to take Rose somewhere . . . and he did not know where else to go.

In Sans Souci, however, there was a subfaction within a faction that Morgan Lake did not know about.

Oppie Etting dared not have him know.

Now that Agnes Vaughn was on Nona Henry's side, Agnes, of course, was no longer suspecting *her* of being Mrs. Quinn. The odd part was that

Agnes' discarded suspicion lived on. Harriet Gregory and Oppie Etting held it together, and in secret.

Harriet Gregory was rather a happy woman these days, comparatively speaking. It was very pleasant to find herself on the right side in this feud, to be associated with Mrs. Fitz, and Georgia Oliver, and all the "better" element. It was rather fun to cut the Three, to look away when that Nona Henry (so rude!) went by, to hash the story over and over with Bettina Goodenough and Sarah Lee Cunneen.

It was even better that she and Mr. Etting could put their heads together in the evenings and shudder deliciously. For Harriet had brought up to him what she had heard Agnes Vaughn say. A stranger had been *seen* in Sans Souci that famous day, the day of Mrs. Quinn. Oppie Etting, not displeased to find himself corroborated, had confessed to her that he had not wanted to lie, or to make a fool of Harriet, but he had been forced to do so. Pressure had been put upon him. He might have lost his job.

So all was forgiven between them. There *was* a Mrs. Quinn. Who was she? Why, Nona Henry was so obviously a reckless liar, unscrupulous, immoral—to tell such a crazy story! As if Robert Fitzgibbon, of all people (so good-looking, such manners, such poise), would hit an old woman! Or, engaged to lovely Georgia Oliver, would ask an *old woman* to marry him. Really! Or would have threatened suicide! Why, that was impossible! He had *everything*. Career, talent, looks, breeding, his mother's devotion and Georgia's devotion. Something must be *wrong* with that Nona Henry!

As a matter of fact (said Harriet) she *was* rather rude and crude, and had been in the beginning. Harriet could always tell!

Who knew anything *about* her background?

Another thing, the way she had Winnie Lake up in her apartment *every* afternoon. Really! One wondered. Oh, there are dark and vicious doings in this world and although one preferred to turn and look away, still there are such people. . . .

Actually, Nona Henry ought to be asked to leave (said Harriet). For Sans Souci had always been respectable, the decent widows deserved protection. But Oppie said *he* could not speak to Mr. Lake. Oh, he agreed, Mrs. Henry ought to go, all right. That was what he thought, too.

That was also what Rose Lake thought.

When Morgan Lake came down from having seen Tess Rogan, he found Rose in a passion. She had found out about the feud.

Lily, the younger maid, had told her. Oh, Lily knew how to appear very meek and mild and biddable. It was, considering her chocolate skin, the best economic policy. But she did not *feel* any such way, and she took out the frustrations caused by her masquerade in sharp and contemptuous eavesdropping.

(It was by the mercy of Mindy Shane that Lily had never told Rose Lake how some of the widows kept talking about some Mrs. Quinn. Mindy Shane had given direct warning about this. And here Lily was biddable, for Mindy Shane not only didn't kid around, but had a son, Kelly, who was single and interesting.)

But this feud that was raging, Lily knew all about that. And Mindy Shane was home, sick. And Kelly Shane wasn't finding *Lily* very interesting. And Lily felt restless. So she told Rose Lake in restless malice, for Lily knew how Rose Lake would react.

Rose Lake chose *her* side, at once.

"Morgan, that's a terrible thing! What that woman is spreading around about Robert Fitzgibbon. You better get that woman to move out. You *know* this isn't good for the building. You know she is trouble. You can tell her the place was rented ahead of time. Get her *out*."

"You mean Mrs. Henry?" asked Morgan Lake.

Winnie was silent. Winnie's hands were clasped together. He could read on her face the struggle between loyalty to a friend and the well-realized uselessness of any expression of that loyalty. The fear, indeed, that to express it would damage the friend still more. Winnie was on a spot and Rose was triumphantly pinning her there.

"I'll talk to Avery myself," cried Rose. "I'll make him see that we have to get rid of her."

"I don't think you'll do that," said Morgan tiredly.

"Then *you* do it."

"I don't see . . . why I should. Or how I can."

He got a grateful flash of Winnie's eyes.

"It will blow over," he said to Rose, carelessly.

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” Rose cried. “*Winnie’s* not going up there any more.”

Winnie’s young throat became corded.

“No, you’re not, young lady. I won’t *have* it! She’s a lying trouble-maker and I don’t care whether you’ve finished this crazy sewing or not. I want you to stop seeing that Mrs. Henry, at once! You hear me?”

“I heard,” said Winnie.

“Because if you don’t,” said Rose, “I *will* go to Avery Patrick myself and I’ll insist . . . in fact, I’ll go tell Mrs. Henry to get out. And I think she’d go.”

She was standing, neck forward, her whole body tense with the energy of hatred. *Anyone* would get out.

“You can’t do that, Rose,” Morgan said not belligerently, but wearily. It didn’t do to oppose any passion to Rose’s passions. She enjoyed the exercise. She could always win.

“If Winnie doesn’t promise me,” Rose said, “I’ll *do* it. *I’ll* get her out of here.”

“I won’t see her if you don’t want me to,” said Winnie meekly.

She raised her eyes and Morgan caught her thoughts. The promise was made to protect the friend, of course. And the promise was a lie. What else was there to do but lie to Rose? Winnie had chosen *her* side. She was for Nona Henry. She would see Nona Henry, as best she could.

Morgan Lake could not blame her, exactly. He could only try to be the buffer.

Chapter 26



The next afternoon, Nona waited for Winnie Lake some time without alarm. The girl was late. At last, so late that Nona began to realize what could have happened.

But she had been looking forward to the girl's appearance. To her company.

In and out of Sans Souci, the last couple of days, Nona Henry traveled alone.

She was not seeing much of Tess Rogan. Tess seemed to be lying low and saying little. *She* traveled, in a silent way, mysteriously alone. Nona had found herself a little impatient with Tess, who had not yet said that Nona was kind or loyal, to be fighting Tess's battles. Nor had she said that Nona was *right*, to be fighting for the truth. In fact, Tess had tried to say that Robert Fitzgibbon's blow had been an accident. Nona was quite flustered and dismayed. It sometimes seemed to Nona that Tess Rogan, in her uncanny detachment, was not even on her *own* side.

There was no denying, Nona felt this loneliness.

She remembered her first week at Sans Souci and *that* loneliness. How she had had no connections. How she had sat in her window. But this was a loneliness of a different quality. She was the pariah.

Morgan Lake, true, was exactly as courteous as ever. But Oppie Etting had become much too courteous, in a strange and almost frightened way. The widows on the other side of the schism all took good care—in fact some went out of their way—to cut Mrs. Henry dead.

(Whisper! Whisper! Whatever got *into* that Nona Henry!)

Nona was especially disappointed in Daisy Robinson. Daisy wouldn't discuss the matter. She, more or less absent-mindedly, cut most people on occasion, with her habit of quick leave-takings, unboiled by any pretty speeches. . . . But these days, Nona felt that Daisy was being deliberately absent-minded. She would steam by, so very *very* intent upon Daisy's own business. Or else, in the brief glimpse of Daisy's lively eye, Nona would read one word, of dubious etymology: *Phony?*

Not everyone was against her, of course. But Nona was almost *more* dismayed to realize who *was* on her side.

The Unholy Three! Nona had, however, gone around to Agnes Vaughn's apartment the evening before, feeling that after all they were her partisans and, as such, they should have some grateful attention.

She had found them in session. She had been welcomed. Agnes Vaughn, in the midst of all the debris, had been cordial and unapologetic, quite as if her home had been a mansion, immaculate, complete with staff. Felice Paull had bent her huge head, beamed her sympathetic eyes that almost wept with the pity of it, and had begun to explain to Nona that Mrs. Rogan had a legal case—or so Felice felt sure—and she might very well be able to sue. For there were laws to protect people. And why did Nona not suggest this? (Nona quaked at the very notion.)

There was Ida Milbank, a nibbling mouse, squeaking irrelevantly from time to time. Into Nona's mind came a thing from Browning (was it?). "*Weke, Weke . . .*" The poor woman repelled her.

On the whole, Nona had been barely able to swallow the crumbly bit of cake politely, meanwhile fending off Felice's advice, enduring Ida's squeaks, and trying not to cringe away from the cordial shine of Agnes' eyes.

Finally she got away. Oof!

This afternoon, when Winnie seemed to be defaulting, Nona realized that she had nowhere to go, or at least no one to go talk to. She braced herself, and took up the sewing. Finished the hem. It was something to do.

Her bell didn't ring. Instead, there was a scratching on the door. About six o'clock. Winnie Lake had come, at last.

"I'm supposed to be going to the store," she gasped. "I snuck back down the ramp and up the elevator from the basement. Mrs. Henry, I've got to explain. Mom says I can't see you any more."

"I was afraid . . ."

Winnie said, "But I *have* to. I can manage. I can always say I have a date and sneak up this way, in the evening . . .?"

Nona took a step backward. "No, dear."

Winnie understood at once. “But she’s not *fair!*” cried Winnie. “It’s all that stuff about the other night. And *I* don’t *believe* that you are the one who’s telling lies. I *know* you aren’t.”

“I’m not,” said Nona. “Well, I’m glad you’re here, for a minute . . . I’ve been thinking about you.”

She drew the girl deeper into the living room.

“The time is late,” she said steadily. “This is what you must do. You promised me. You must go to a doctor, Winnie. You know a doctor, don’t you? Your family has one?”

“Yes.”

“Then go. You can make the appointment yourself. He can make tests and then you will be sure. This waiting, this . . . you can’t afford it any longer. Afterwards, you must tell your mother all about it.”

Winnie was looking bleakly into her eyes.

“This is the only way,” said Nona. “I’ve stood by you—about as long as is possible and longer than was wise.” Nona was cold with the knowledge that what she was saying was *true*.

“Mrs. Henry,” Winnie burst, “I wanted to ask you. . . . If I can’t see you any more . . . got to ask you, now.”

“Ssh . . .”

“Your own daughter is coming, pretty soon?”

“Yes. Pretty soon.”

“Do you . . . might you be going back to your home? I mean, with her?”

“I don’t think . . .”

“Sometime?” said Winnie desperately.

“Sometime, I suppose.”

“Mrs. Henry, I’ll do what you say,” said Winnie. “Just exactly what you say. I promised. And I know it’s right. But, if I have a baby, *I’ll* have to be everything the baby needs.”

(Nona thought, Well, I see I’ve taught her something.)

“Only I *know* what my mother is going to be like. I just know. And I don’t see *how*. Please . . . what I wanted to ask . . . can I go home with *you*?”

Nona sank down in a chair, shocked.

Winnie went down on the rug before her. "I'll work! I wouldn't be expensive! I'd do *everything*. It's just . . ."

"Shsh . . ."

(What a corny scene! thought Nona. How absurd!)

It was, however, happening, and it was not altogether absurd. The girl's eyes tore her heart.

"Winnie," she said slowly, meeting those eyes with all that she *was* (whatever), "do not depend on me."

"I know it's an awful lot to ask . . ."

Nona repeated, "Do not depend on me. I am your friend. But I am not your mother or even your aunt. There are things I *can't* do." Nona made a helpless gesture. "Even if I wanted to take you back home with me, which I do not," said Nona carefully, "I couldn't, dear. Your family wouldn't allow it and there are laws. It's not possible."

Winnie said quietly, "Len is dead and I am responsible and none of it is the baby's fault. *It* has to have a chance like any other baby. I know . . ."

"Yes."

"But if I could *only* . . ." The girl threw herself upon Nona's knees. "You don't know my mother."

"Listen," said Nona, "I have a life. People as old as I am have lives, Winnie. And I, well, I may be going to visit my son-in-law in Seattle. I might not, quite suddenly, *be* here, at Sans Souci. Winnie, my dear, the time is late, and now I simply *must* push you . . . to stand up. For *your* sake, *do not depend on me*. Do you see?"

The girl was weeping. Tears slid silently down her face. But she nodded.

Nona said, "We'll say good-by then, in case we can't see each other for a while. Or if I should go away." Nona put her arms around the girl and hugged her. "I've gotten pretty fond of you," she said, half in tears herself. "But I wouldn't do you any favor if I let you think you can depend on me, for anything, that is, but staying fond . . ."

Nona was sniffing.

The girl drew herself gently away.

“I just want to thank you, Mrs. Henry, for all that you have done,” she said rather drearily. Her eyes were dark, very dark, like Rose Lake’s eyes.

Nona said, “You are only seventeen. But—a woman?”

Winnie nodded.

“I can’t have you for my *child*,” cried Nona. “I can’t have you for my *own*. Nor *should* I.”

“I guess nobody—is anybody’s, really,” said Winnie Lake, “except a little baby, for a while.”

She got up. Nona rose. They stood.

“Oh, for heaven’s sakes!” Nona grabbed her and smacked both her cheeks and held her tight.

Then Nona, very carefully, let her go. Winnie accepted the letting-go and stood straight.

Now Nona’s heart put her brain down in one surge. “I shouldn’t . . . but I *will* go with you to the doctor,” Nona said. “Let me know?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Henry,” Winnie said, almost unemotionally. She left quickly.

Nona thought, Oh Lord, what have I *done*?

She walked up and down her living space. The dress lay, half-hemmed, upon the sofa. She wanted nothing to do with that dress.

What *would* she do? Fix a meal. Eat it. In silence? But her ears were bursting with the silence. Nona braced up and decided angrily that she would go out to dinner. Why not? There *was* a world. She was, whatever else she was, alive in it.

In the lobby of Sans Souci, Mrs. Henry encountered Caroline Buff and said, “Good evening.”

Mrs. Buff inclined her handsome head. “Good evening, Mrs. Henry.” With a finality! Caroline Buff would not compromise her own good manners. Neither was she going to take a side. Nor was she going to be very much concerned if this offended *both* sides. Caroline Buff was above this petty feuding.

Nona Henry slipped out of Sans Souci, alone.

There was no avoiding Mrs. Fitz entirely . . . so near, across the hall. As Nona came back from the restaurant, Mrs. Fitz and Georgia were just emerging. The evening visiting hours, thought Nona. They're going to the hospital, of course. But a casual greeting stuck in Nona's throat. Before she could get it out, she saw that Mrs. Fitz's purple eyes were seeing the wall as if Nona Henry were transparent. Georgia did not smile or tilt her head, either. Georgia Oliver was just blind.

So Nona went into her own place, without speaking or having been spoken to, or even seen—and it hurt. Nona had to admit that it hurt very much. Unjust. Undeserved.

Her rooms were dead. Oh, they were full of flowers. The arrangements were *right* and beautiful. My little lonely hobby, Nona thought, and no one to see.

She felt hurt, despondent. It would be good to go to Dane's—just pack. One could fly to Seattle. But Dodie and Si *were* coming out. She couldn't now upset *their* plan. Must she stay until then?

Nona Henry was very close to running away, to being driven away from Sans Souci, in that low moment.

Mrs. Fitz and Georgia reached the elevator. They had been very rude. They knew it. They did not discuss it. They waited for the poky cage to come up from the basement and, while they did so, here came Daisy Robinson whizzing along. "Going down, eh?"

"We've rung," said Georgia.

Daisy was sensitive enough to miss the normal cooings. She looked at the two of them, so silent and stiff.

"For grown women," said Daisy Robinson tartly, "the people in this house are behaving like a pack of emotional adolescents."

Mrs. Fitz's small chin came higher.

"Let's not talk about it, Daisy," cooed Georgia.

"Why not?" said Daisy abruptly. "The whole thing is simply ridiculous."

"I cannot see," said Mrs. Fitz plaintively, "that a wicked lie about my son is 'simply ridiculous.' Really, Daisy."

“If Nona Henry is telling what you call a ‘wicked lie,’” said Daisy, “why don’t you face her and have it out? Or—prove it? Either it is a lie or it *isn’t*. Tess Rogan should know the facts. Have it out with *her*, why don’t you?”

“I know a fact myself,” said Mrs. Fitz, rather saucily. “The fact that my son Robert is an honorable gentleman. And I have no wish to discuss him with Mrs. Rogan.”

“What is so honorable about not discussing it?” inquired Daisy in her disagreeable logical way. “Or walking around in a huff? Try the brain, why don’t you?”

The elevator had come and Georgia was opening the door. “Mrs. Fitz . . . ?” Georgia was going to ignore all Daisy had said.

But Mrs. Fitz had put a small pink hand over her eyes. “Georgia, dear, *could* you ask Robert to excuse me?”

“Aren’t you feeling well? Ah, don’t be upset . . .”

“I think I had better not venture out,” said Mrs. Fitz. “*You* must go, of course. No, don’t wait, dear. I shall be quite all right. You mustn’t disappoint Robert.”

“No, but can’t I . . . ?”

“I can walk to my apartment, Georgia,” said Mrs. Fitz with a touch of frost.

“If you’re *sure*.”

“Are we going down or not?” put in Daisy Robinson.

So Daisy and Georgia got into the elevator.

“You *really* . . .” began Georgia with uncharacteristic hostility, which she quickly turned to simple anxiety. “Oh, dear, I *hope* she’s not upset.”


Daisy Robinson said loudly, “I’ve found the most enchanting hole-in-the-wall bookstore, open evenings! The man’s a real collector! Lincolniana. Why, it’s amazing!”

“How nice,” said Georgia Oliver tolerantly.

Upstairs, Mrs. Fitz turned away. But she did not turn down the north wing. She lifted her chin even higher. She began to walk—one leg, other leg—down the east wing.

Tess Rogan opened to her ring.

Chapter 27

 “Mrs. Rogan, I would like very much to talk this over, quietly,” said Ursula Fitzgibbon. “I am sure we are both honorable women . . .”

“Come in,” said Tess Rogan cordially.

So Ursula came in, a small rigid body. She looked about, rather blindly. Tess had been reading, under one standing lamp. “Such a pleasant apartment,” said Ursula mechanically.

“Yes,” said Tess. “Sit down, won’t you, please?” Tess was wary.

“Thank you.” Ursula sat down and took some time to compose her clothing, her skirt, her short coat, her scarf. Tess waited. “It seems wise,” said Ursula, “for you and me who are older and perhaps wiser to try to resolve this difficulty. Don’t you think so?”

Tess smiled. She had seated herself and the one lamp shed upon them both, the small stiff body, the bony little feet flat on the rug, and the tall woman with the cut on her forehead who leaned back, whose feet rested upon their heels.

“I am very sure,” said Mrs. Fitz, and in the quiet room her voice rang not so confident as the words, but faintly belligerently. “I am very sure that you will *not* tell me that my son caused you to have that fall.”

“That was an accident,” Tess said.

Ursula’s face relaxed and softened. “I was *so* sure,” she said warmly. “I am *so* glad I came.” She leaned forward. “But what are we to do, Mrs. Rogan, about Nona Henry?”

“I don’t know,” said Tess, rather sadly.

“Surely, you have some influence! There must be a way to stop this slander. Do you *know* what she is saying?”

“I think so.”

“I am sure you can’t approve of it, any more than I. Do you know that she is actually saying that my Robert proposed marriage to *you*?” cried Ursula. She let out a nervous little laugh. “Which of course must embarrass *you*, very much.”

Tess Rogan moistened her lips. She said to the little pink woman, “Could we not say that your son had, perhaps, too much to drink that evening? I am very sorry that he was taken ill.”

“To drink?” said Ursula sharply. “But . . . do you realize that he was with *me*, for dinner and that evening?”

“Was he?”

“Why yes. Why, he *had* a drink, of course. But only the one. We watched television together. Forgive me, Mrs. Rogan. I am trying to understand. How much had *you* had to drink?”

“If you mean alcoholic drink, I never take any,” said Tess pleasantly.

“But . . . you are now saying that Nona Henry is telling the truth!” said Ursula, stiffening.

“As she knows it,” said Tess.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Why”—Tess made an effort—“only that when he turned, so quickly, and his arm came up and hit me, and I fell, Nona couldn’t tell . . .”

“*Hit* you!” burst Mrs. Fitz. “But you just said you had an accident.”

“That was the accident.” Tess was looking sad.

“I came here,” said Ursula haughtily, “for the truth, Mrs. Rogan.”

“Yes,” said Tess, sadly.

“We will leave out the question of drinking. I am going to ask you directly, and I would like an answer”—Ursula was sharp—“if you please . . . did my son Robert, or did he not, ask *you* to marry him?” Ursula’s voice held contempt.

(Oh, this was the whisper that scandalized and hurt. Poor *Georgia!*)

Tess Rogan did not answer.

“I insist,” said Ursula imperiously. “You *must* answer. I am Robert’s mother.”

Tess moved her hands. “There are some questions you can’t answer yes or no,” she said mildly. “Things are rather more complex, sometimes.”

But Ursula was not listening to this.

“Did he? Or did he not? Surely, that’s simple enough! I would appreciate the answer.”

“He did *and* he didn’t,” said Tess rather stubbornly.

“That’s no answer!”

“Nevertheless, that *is* the answer,” Tess said with a spark of belligerence.

“Did he? Or did he not?” Ursula’s body was vibrating. “Do you *refuse* to answer me?”

Tess said, “His exact words, I believe, were these. ‘I’ll marry you.’ But if you are asking whether, had I consented, he ever would have married me, the answer is ‘Of course not.’ *No.*”

“You are not being direct!” cried Ursula shrilly. “You are quibbling! Did he? Or did he not?”

Tess sat still. Her head moved, making a small negative.

Ursula said frantically, “You say that my son had too much to drink. But I *know* that isn’t *true*. You say that he hit you. I *know* that he *couldn’t* have done such a thing! Never. Now, are you saying that he asked you to marry him? You are an old woman, Mrs. Rogan, almost as old as I am. Robert is engaged to marry Georgia Oliver. Not for her money, either. Georgia is not rich. *Not* rich! Those are all lies! Why are you trying to tell me these lies?”

Tess said distantly, “I am not interested in trying to tell you anything. You came asking questions.” Then her voice softened. “You will make yourself ill, Mrs. Fitzgibbon. Won’t you agree that there’s no need to examine every word a man says when he has had too much? I think he was a bit unhappy . . . he talked recklessly. Let it go . . .”

“Unhappy? Robert!” cried Mrs. Fitz. “How *could* he have been unhappy? That’s absurd! Everyone loves and admires him. Georgia, myself . . . how can you *say* such a thing!”

Tess did not answer this at all. Something in her silence this time flustered Ursula, and she began to fumble for a more tenable position. Her eyes were frightened. “You said—you are saying—that Robert was not *himself*?” she quavered.

“That is not what I said, or what I am saying.” Tess rose. “You don’t hear. Let’s not go on.”

“Give me any reason, at all,” cried Ursula fiercely, “why he should even think of marrying *you*. You are seventy-one, are you not? Seventy-one years

old!”

“But you see, he was asking me to take him around the world,” said Tess. “I suppose—propriety.” Tess bit her mouth and shook her head.

“It’s impossible!” cried Ursula, beyond compromise now. “He is going to marry Georgia, in June. A lovely *young* woman. *Quite* suitable. A *darling* girl! Furthermore, Robert has *been* around the world, many times. He wants to settle. *He wants to be near me!* He is my son. You are lying about *my son!* I know my own son! Why would he even *think* of going around the world with *you?* You can’t answer that!”

Tess looked at the quivering old body and moistened her mouth. “Hadn’t you better go along, Mrs. Fitzgibbon? This isn’t good for you, or me either. I’m sure of *that*. There is nothing I can say to you.”

“I want the truth!” Ursula managed to rise. “And I will *not* go, until I get it!”

“The truth?” said Tess, sadly.

“I insist. You *must* explain this fantastic pack of lies, or else see to it that they are *stopped*. My son . . . go off . . .” Ursula had begun to pant. “Marry an old countrywoman—incredible! These lies are *vicious!* I *demand* your explanation.”

Tess looked at her.

“Well?”

Tess said, “If you’ll sit down . . . perhaps if we can only go over the whole—” She stopped speaking and bit her lips.

“You *can’t* explain! *Can* you?” cried Ursula, triumphantly.

Tess Rogan said, “No.”

“Then admit it’s all lies!”

“If you won’t leave now, Mrs. Fitzgibbon . . .”

“Not until you admit . . . !”

“Then, *I* must leave,” said Tess. “Excuse me.” Tess Rogan went into her bedroom.

Ursula Fitzgibbon stood in the living room. Her lips twitched and grimaced, and let a muttering through.

This was the moment that Nona Henry tapped upon Tess's door. The door was not all the way closed, she noticed. So she pushed at it, calling, "Tess? Anybody home?"

She thought she heard a human sound. So she stepped in and was utterly astonished to see who stood in that living room, trembling with a kind of triumphant rage, her small pink mouth moving, moving, but only a muttering coming through.

"What's the *matter*? Can I *do* anything? Where is Mrs. Rogan?" Nona was frightened.

Ursula Fitzgibbon drew up her trembling little old body and turned it. She gave her back and her contempt to Nona Henry.

But Nona saw, now, that the bedroom light was up. "Tess?" She went into the bedroom. No one? She came opposite the bathroom and Tess was in there. She was clinging to the washbasin with both hands and she leaned forward, looking ill.

Nona went to her swiftly. "What *is* it?"

"Has she gone?" asked Tess.

"She's in a state," gasped Nona. "What happened?"

"Listen . . ." They could hear something, a rustle and a drag. Was it one leg, other leg? "Is she leaving?"

"No." Nona caught a glimpse. Ursula Fitzgibbon was in the bedroom, moving mindlessly, as if she would beat and beat again against that which refused to behave as she must have it behave. Nona's heart leaped. There mustn't be a battle. . . .

Tess reeled, and Nona yanked quickly at the bathroom door. "What shall I do? You don't want to see her?" Nona was whispering.

Tess said loudly, "The door! Mind the door!"

Too late. Nona, with all her strength, had pulled and lifted and succeeded. She had closed the bathroom door.

"That door sticks," Tess said. "Better try . . . ask her . . ." She bent over the washbasin.

Nona strained at the doorknob. It was closed, all right. She couldn't budge it. It had jammed and locked itself somehow. She called out, "Mrs. Fitz? Would you phone down to Mr. Etting, please? This door is stuck."

They could hear no sound.

“Just call the desk?” Nona tried again. “Mrs. Fitzgibbon? Are you there?”

No sound.

Out in that bedroom, Ursula Fitzgibbon leaned upon the dresser and saw her own image blurring in the mirror. Her head was swimming.

“Mrs. Fitz? Please. The door is stuck. Will you call downstairs? Just tell Mr. Etting . . . Mrs. Fitz? . . . We are locked in here.”

Ursula’s ears were blurring sound, too. Oh, she could hear a voice somewhere. She looked about. But where was she? A bedroom. Not her own bedroom. So *angry*. She had not been so angry in years, if ever. And it was *not* wise, she thought. No, no, composure.

She began to walk—one leg, other leg. In four steps she was at the threshold of the foyer. Wait. What must she wait for? What was it she must do? Ursula’s hand fumbled. The bedroom light went off under her fingers. No one in the bedroom, and she was leaving. Turn the light off. Yes, of course. Very proper. Now, then. Foyer, yes. Door to the hall. Open. That way was her way. *She must get to her own place.*

Wait . . . wasn’t there . . . something? Ursula Fitzgibbon—one leg, other leg—rode on the stalking of her small skeleton toward the one lamp in Tess Rogan’s living room. Her mouth was very tight. Her fingers found the switch and turned the lamp off.

There.

She staggered back toward the light coming in from the hall. The public corridor. Exit. Yes, get *out*. Get out of this place. Get rid of all that was in it. Shut the door. So forget. (None of it was true.)

So upset. Why, she felt as if she must have fainted, there for a moment. A yellow pill? Yes, she would. She resisted depending on the pills too much but on this occasion . . . (Bang! She must have slammed a door.) Surely, she deserved a yellow pill.

Ursula started down the hall. Robert. So attractive. Women, so often drawn . . . a magnetism . . . well . . . But an *old* woman! That was disgusting! Too disgusting to think about, at all.

Ursula Fitzgibbon got all the way around the right angle of the building on the energy of the furious jealousy she was not thinking about because she did not admit that it existed.

“She’s gone, I think,” said Nona expelling breath. “Mr. Etting will do something. Are you all right?”

Tess stepped backward and sat down upon the one firm seat. The bones of her face seemed very prominent. Her eyes were angry. “You had to defend my reputation,” she said.

Her anger hit Nona as if with a blow and Nona stiffened her back against that stubborn door. “Well, I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I certainly didn’t mean— But what happened? What did she come for?”

“She came for the truth,” said Tess bitterly.

“I hope you gave it to her,” said Nona with asperity.

Tess closed her eyes. “Oh, yes,” she said sarcastically. “Certainly. *I* told Ursula Fitzgibbon that her son said in our presence ‘God damn my mother.’ Oh yes, a fine chance I had to tell her that ‘truth.’”

Nona trembled deeply. “I’m sorry, Tess. I never expected anything like this . . .” Nona was thinking of the feud, and her own pariahship and Tess’s present distress.

Tess said with her eyes still closed, “I couldn’t . . . wasn’t *able* . . . and that makes me angry.” She seemed to speak of this without anger.

In a moment, Nona said, “I’m sorry. I should have listened to you.” She squirmed restlessly. “But I thought they had gone to the hospital. Georgia must have gone alone.”

Tess moved one shoulder. “I should have called Mr. Etting the moment we knew how drunk the man was. As *you* suggested. ‘Should’ and ‘ought’ . . .” Her voice fell away drearily.

Nona swallowed.

They were silent, in the small space, the bright glare of the white-tiled bathroom, where they waited to be let out.

In her own bedroom, Ursula Fitzgibbon was able to undress herself with dispatch. What now? Something she ought to do? Oh yes. Yes, that pill. She

went into her own bathroom and found the little bottle. She took the yellow pill. She did all else she must do before bed.

Strange, but against old habit she had not closed her bathroom door.

Then, her own bed. Ah, clean, comforting. Much, much better. Own bed. Own place. Own universe.

She must rest. Lies could not hurt, dear Georgia said. So devoted. Dear Robert. Simply think no more about those lies. *Abolish* them. Quite right. And wise.

Wasn't there something more that she had been supposed to do? No, nothing more. Surely, Georgia and Robert and all those, so many, who were devoted to "Mrs. Fitz" . . . (The nickname pleased her.) All of them would urge her to rest, now, and take care of herself. *She* must not worry . . . or think. She was seventy-five years old.

In fact, it was best not to worry them, either. An ugly scene, best forgotten. She had forgotten it, already.

She would think of something pleasant—a little trick she knew—and she would doze. The rosy light, so pretty. She spread her hands. Her hands were old. But well-shaped, still. The nails so well-kept.

Ursula Fitzgibbon suddenly felt well-pleased, as if something had happened that was quite satisfying, quite just.

More than an hour had gone by. Nona, shifting her weight from one tired foot to the other, said to Tess, "She *didn't* call downstairs."

"Evidently not." Tess was matter-of-fact. She sat still.

"Well," said Nona quickly, "she was pretty upset. She'll tell Georgia. Georgia will be back soon, now." Nona wound her wrist watch.

When Georgia came back from the hospital, at about a quarter after eight, she found Mrs. Fitz's door unlocked. She entered, tiptoe. Mrs. Fitz was in her bed, and drowsy but not asleep.

"Ah, you are back, dear? How is Robert?"

"Oh, he is fine," said Georgia. "We had such a nice quiet talk. But how are *you*?"

“I’m . . . just very tired,” said Ursula.

“Can I fix you anything? Something hot to drink? Would that relax you?”

“I think not, dear.”

“Shall I stay?” Georgia touched the white hair fondly.

“No, no, dear. I shall be quite all right.” Ursula raised herself a little. “There’s no more to be done tonight,” she said, rather vehemently.

Chapter 28



“She didn’t tell Georgia, either,” Nona said, in a low voice. “Well, here we are, then.” Tess was herself. Not angry, not sarcastic, any more. In fact, she smiled.

Nona said furiously, “We are *not*. We’ll get out!” She pushed her back away from the door and looked around her, filled with energy.

The bathroom was about 7 by 9. Out from the left wall, directly before her, the washbasin protruded and the medicine cabinet hung above it. Against the end wall there stood a low white wicker hamper with a wooden cover. The bathtub was set into the far right-hand corner and the shower curtain, of a white canvaslike material, billowed around it. Immediately to her right, Tess was sitting upon the hard wooden cover of the W.C.

There was no window. Above the tub, very high, there was some kind of vent.

There was a light fixture in the center of the ceiling and another over the washbasin. There was a towel rack within the tub area, and two more, one on either side of the basin.

Everything gleamed, light on white.

Nona turned her back upon this bleak interior and her attention to the door. It was a door that would not open. She strained at the knob, as she had so many times already. But there must be more than one way to open a door! She looked up and realized that this door (like her own) opened outward. She had long thought it unusual. Now she found it dismaying. For the hinges, in which there were pins which might have been teased out of their sockets, were not on the inside of this bathroom.

Still, Nona looked around for a tool, an instrument, anything.

The towel racks were of metal, but they were not the kind to slide out of metal holders. They were fixed solidly to the wall. On the washbasin there was a nailbrush. In the glass holder a plastic glass, and hanging beside it a toothbrush.

So Nona opened the medicine cabinet and took inventory.

Top shelf: A clinical thermometer. A bottle of aspirin. A package of gray plastic hairpins. A tiny box of corn plasters. A small bottle of iodine. A bottle of vitamin pills, almost full. A Gillette razor and a package of blades. Some emery boards. A metal nail file. A tweezers.

Second shelf: A box of Band-Aids. Roll of adhesive. Box of sterile cotton. Toothpaste. Two bars of toilet soap. Bottle of spray deodorant. Comb. Hairbrush. Flat box of face powder and a puff. A small syringe.

Bottom shelf: Box of Kleenex. Round box of dusting powder. Tall container, scouring powder. Bottle of shampoo, blue. Bottle of mouthwash, pink.

Nona chose from this store the metal nail file. She took it to the door and tried to slip it between the tongue of the lock and the metal rim beyond which the tongue slipped into the jamb. The file scratched and slipped.

“I’m not too experienced at lock picking,” Nona confessed.

Tess said, “That lock isn’t too pickable. Something is *very* wrong. That door’s not just locked. It’s stuck. Something’s broken.”

The file screeched and Tess winced.

“Nona, you do realize that, sooner or later, the maid will be in. We are not incarcerated forever.”

Nona stopped her efforts. “When does she come?”

“Um. Elise was here yesterday. What’s today? Thursday?”

“You mean she won’t be back until *next Wednesday*! Well, that’s too late.” Nona’s hands felt weak. “We’ll just make noise,” she pronounced. “We can yell our heads off.”

“Who is to hear?”

Nona began to consider their exact position in the building. They were against the corridor wall, yes, but thickly tiled away from it. Who went by in that corridor the other side of this wall? Nobody, except Daisy Robinson. When Daisy might come or go, they had no way of telling. “Or else, you know,” she said with animation, “we *can* let the water overflow. It will drip through somebody’s ceiling.”

“Whose?” Tess said reflectively.

Marie Gardner’s ceiling, Nona remembered. “Well, we can try,” she said. “We’ll have to try, Tess.”

But she was thinking how very isolated they were in this wing. Leila Hull was not there, next door. Elna Ames, farther along, was not there. Georgia Oliver was constantly around the corner with Mrs. Fitz, not in this wing. There was nobody except Daisy Robinson, really living in this wing. Agnes Vaughn, in *her* snug center-of-the-building corner, would not hear anything, so far away.

Nona remembered something else.

Mindy Shane, who made it her business to know what went on in Sans Souci—Mindy Shane was home, sick!

Nona sat back on her heels. “*Why* didn’t Mrs. Fitz call anyone, tell anyone we were stuck in here? Didn’t she *hear* me?”

Tess said nothing.

The night fell deeper upon Sans Souci, the Thursday night. Morgan Lake was very tired and he slept. Oppie Etting yawned in the deserted lobby.

Mrs. Buff was the last one in, returning from theatre and after-theatre supper, just before one A.M. After she had gone by to her own place with her gracious good night, Oppie fixed the telephone, locked the entrance door, and left, yawning . . . mooching through the silent patio where the trees shook their uppers, where his feet made a lonely echo within the walls. Above, the widows’ windows were all dark.

Old women—without men. Oppie wasn’t feeling sorry for them. Is this what becomes of the little girls? Oppie was thinking, sleepily. Their dear little narrow waists, their smooth and lively little hips, the fresh skin on their faces, sweet as their sweet young breath. Their lips. Their good white teeth. The luxury of their hair that glints and lives on their young heads, these heads that ride so gracefully on their clear smooth graceful little necks.

Lovely little girls, so lithe and wonderful and refreshing.

What becomes of a man’s desire toward them? When he is pushing forty, and the belly rounding out, the legs spindling, the hair receding . . .

Nothing becomes of the man’s desire toward them. It remains. Oh, a man could make a fool of himself. He doesn’t, he isn’t let, unless he has the money. No, he hobnobs with an old crow like Harriet Gregory, all sinew and tension, as soft and appealing as a coil of barbed wire.

He went under the Spanish arch where blossoms hung from the vine. A man would like the freshness of something flower-fresh. Especially when he himself is past his bloom. But he wouldn't get it. Oppie felt sad. He was forty-one. He had no money. He had never had any money, or any luck, or anything very fresh. He had never married, either. He thought, If you don't grow old together you grow old alone. This seemed to him to be very sad and profound. It cheered him a little to have had such deep thoughts. He shook off philosophy and mooched toward his own one-room apartment. The seventeen widows of Sans Souci were not the only lonely people in the world.

A feeble tap-tap, two walls and a corridor away from Daisy Robinson's ear, did not disturb her, in the night. As a matter of fact, she was snoring, and her snores were much louder than the puny unusual sound. She did not waken.

Marie Gardner heard it and started up in her bed. It wasn't anything, was it? No, no, it couldn't be anything. It was nothing at all. . . . She sank back. She knew better. Oh, yes, knew better . . .

Tess said, "Oh, Nona, stop it! You are driving *me* crazy."

So Nona climbed down, again, from the rim of the tub where she had been standing in order to tap with the tin Band-Aid can as near as possible to that vent.

"Everyone must be asleep. It's late. Well . . ."

Looking grim and determined, Nona began to root into the hamper. She found two towels and a few articles of clothing.

She spread the bath mat on the narrow floor space and heaped what clothes there were under one of the towels. She climbed up to unfasten the shower curtain from its pins. She told Tess to lie down on the floor and be covered. "You can rest a little. You can't sit *there*, all night."

"How about you?"

Nona said, "I'll just wedge myself in the corner. I can doze. Someone will surely come in the morning. Now, please, Tess. This is all my fault."

Tess looked at her shrewdly; then she demurred no more. She put her old bones down on the improvised pallet and Nona spread the shower curtain

over her. “It’s not too bad,” said Tess with a sigh. “Quite an adventure. Like camping.”

“Are you a countrywoman?” said Nona suddenly.

“I don’t know what that means.” Tess yawned. “I was born and brought up in Boston.”

“Boston!” Nona wanted to laugh.

“Liam took me to Maine. A very nice small city. Lived in a house in the middle of town, but there were trees. Seemed country to me. Good night, Nona.”

“I’ll turn off the light.” Nona was feeling better. “Good night, Tess.”

She huddled into the corner of wall and wooden door. She was barefoot, to have been able to stand more safely on the slippery rim of the tub. She wrapped her skirt over her bare feet. Upon her back the wooden door was soon warmer than the tile of the wall.

Now, in the dark, how strange to be sitting on the floor of this tiled box, away from the air! Although the air in here was not stale. It held a faint soapy smell, but it was fresh enough. The room was not too cold. She was not too uncomfortable.

Her eyes were tired, so that the darkness was welcome. So was the silence. It was not complete. The old woman breathed lightly.

Not too bad, thought Nona. (She was very glad that Tess could stretch out and rest.) But so strange, so crazy! Outside of every expectation, to find herself locked for a whole night in a bathroom. An adventure? Well, that was a point of view.

Her body heat began to seep away. She knew she would be getting colder and stiffer. But she was still the younger and the stronger, and must take care. Courage and endurance were required of her, and a perverse streak of pleasure in that, after all. Tomorrow they would get out, of course.

At eight o’clock on Friday morning, Marie Gardner looked up at the trickling of water down the upper inside wall of her bathroom. Curious. It didn’t really matter. Perhaps it wasn’t real. She wasn’t afraid. She no longer had to pay attention to the world in which she had so often been so thrillingly afraid. She had another world now, a place of mists, half memory,

half dream. Restful. Only sometimes, when the mists shifted and laid reality bare, for a moment, did she feel the old fear.

But she was tired of that fear. So tired. She knew how to pull the mists over. It was better . . . oh yes, much better . . .

Above, Nona knelt, bailing water from the washbasin with the plastic glass and pouring it down around the base of the pedestal.

Tess said, "I don't think it's any good."

Nona sat back on her heels. She didn't think it was any good either. Every one of her bones ached. All her flesh felt bruised from the night's ordeal. "If we flood the whole floor . . ." she began.

"We'll get our feet wet and be miserable," Tess said cheerfully.

"I don't intend to wait for Wednesday," said Nona indignantly. "This can't happen to us."

"It's happening," said Tess calmly.

"Shall we scream again?" Nona took in breath. They had screamed in concert several times. The noise had reverberated and bounced in upon them. It had sounded mad. It had felt embarrassing. One wanted to blush for it.

No one had heard. At least, no one had come.

Tess shrugged.

"Are you very hungry?" Nona asked.

"Let's each have a vitamin pill," said Tess briskly. "It's lucky we have water."

Nona got up with creaks and groans. "They'll miss us."

"Oh, they may," Tess said. "If we hear anything, that would mean we could be heard. That would be the time to yell."

"Very logical," said Nona, calm and brisk. She opened the cabinet and got out the vitamin pills. "One for you and one for me."

They took them solemnly, in almost a businesslike manner.

Georgia Oliver was a bit worried about Mrs. Fitz that Friday. The old lady was still so very tired, when Georgia came in early, that Georgia urged her to keep to her bed. Georgia fixed breakfast and brought it on a tray,

everything dainty. She plumped pillows, fetched this or that trifle the old lady seemed to require.

It was the strain, they agreed. A reaction. Now that Robert was better, naturally, Mrs. Fitz felt let down. It *had* been a strain to keep up and be cheerful during the crisis. Oh, it told on the nerves. These ordeals had to be paid for. So Mrs. Fitz must simply rest and not worry about a thing.

About ten o'clock, Georgia helped her to her bathroom, where Mrs. Fitz proposed to have a sponge bath. "Not the tub, today, dear." Georgia placed soap, towel, everything as conveniently as she could and then (for they were ladies and they had their reticences) Georgia delicately retired. As her hand was pushing upon the bathroom door Mrs. Fitz called out sharply.

"No. Don't."

"What is it?"

"Just"—Mrs. Fitz was breathless—"Don't quite close the door. Not all the way, please?"

"Of course not," said Georgia reassuringly. "Now, if you begin to feel the least bit shaky, remember I am right here."

"Thanks, dear."

So Georgia closed the door upon the old lady only three quarters of the way and, herself, sat down in the bedroom prepared to be patient.

Mrs. Fitz, however, did not take long.

"That was quick," said Georgia when the door began to move outward. She went to take the old lady's arm.

"One must make allowances, I suppose," said Mrs. Fitz rather irrelevantly, when she had achieved her bed again, "but it puzzles me that Daisy Robinson—who is quite the blue stocking, wouldn't you say so?"

"Oh, yes."

"She has so little *savoir-faire*. So little tact. After all, a lady . . ."

"Poor Daisy means well, I imagine," said Georgia soothingly. "Does Lily come in today?"


"Who?"

"The maid? Well, of course not. Or she'd have come by now."

“The maid?” Mrs. Fitz’s head was back upon the pillow. Her eyes were closed.

“I’ll just straighten up a *little*,” Georgia said softly, and tiptoed away.

Chapter 29

 To be locked in for a night was one thing. To be locked in by day was another. By day, one is accustomed to moving and doing. One is accustomed to eating.

The bathroom seemed smaller and a stricter prison, now that they could tell, by Nona's wrist watch, that time was sliding them later and later into Friday.

Nona kept feeling waves of emotion—anger, panic—that would rise and then sink back to troughs of apathy.

Panic, because they could hear nothing, or at least no specific noises. There did seem to be some rustling of wakeful life that was different, being day. But this might have been purely subjective. If they could not hear, was it then possible that they could not be heard, even when they were screaming?

They had tried screaming three more times.

No one had come.

“Where are the maids, today?” Nona wondered aloud. “Where is Lily, do you know?”

“I don't . . .”

“But . . . Elise does my apartment on Fridays! *She'll* miss me. Of course!” Nona sounded confident. Nevertheless, she went on working at that door. Winnie Lake would have missed me, she thought sadly, if I had not cast her off.

She had found a way to tilt that hamper so that Tess, half-lying on the floor, could use its yielding wicker side for a back rest. Nona herself was scraping at the wood around the lock with the nail file. Tedious. Slow. She didn't even know what good it would do to expose more of the mechanism. It was just that she had to do something.

“My lights must have burned all night,” Tess said. “We're not on the patio side, or someone . . .”

Nona said, “There *is* no light in your bedroom. We could have seen it. The cracks . . .”

“That’s so.”

Nona’s hands kept scraping. Hunger was scraping at her insides. A wave came . . . fury. Her heart raced. Something to do with the light and Ursula Fitzgibbon. Nona didn’t dwell on that. She began to try to hack with power. The file slipped on the smoothness it had already made. The futility was infuriating. Nona took a deep shaky breath and looked behind her.

Tess Rogan was propped there, calm as could be, her eyes closed.

Nona shook with rage. “This damn door!” she burst out. “How can you be so calm!”

“No use to be angry with a piece of wood. Would you be annoyed with a tree?”

“I’d like to see a tree.” Nona let the rage out. “And I’d like to get out of here. I’m tired and I ache and I’m hungry.”

“I’m sure you are. So am I.” Tess’s voice was neither soothing nor angry.

Then Nona discovered, to her alarm, that she was hating the old woman, and her ugly feet, her face, her eyelids, her body, her presence—and especially her maddening calm. But this was not right. Nona fought it for a devil in herself.

Meanwhile Tess went rambling on, quite as if she lay in a deck chair on some leisurely voyage. “I have a theory about travel. You know, it’s supposed to be restful? Why is that? Well, you are passing by strange places where you are neither required nor able to *do* anything, and nothing much that happens there pertains to you personally. So you are forced to observe, and you can’t be annoyed. That’s what is restful.”

“You are *observing*?” burst Nona. “Well, *I’m* trying to get out.”

Tess opened her eyes and Nona knew that her own were sending the news of her hatred (which was so evil and unjust). She tried to cover it. She said prettily, “One thing, it’s good you’re not locked in alone. At least, I’m with you.”

The old woman’s eyes held hers with calm, but no affection. “I’m not particularly glad of that,” Tess said clearly. “Think it over. If you were free you’d have found me before this, I think. Or vice versa.”

The direct clash, the acceptance in it, at first made Nona’s heart leap for battle. But then some iron recognition of these remarks as facts came into her.

She looked at the nail file in her hand and threw it violently down upon the tiles. The tiles—those ancient little hexagons—were dirty.

“All right,” said Nona. “We’re both stuck . . . and stuck with each other. But I don’t intend to stay stuck in a pigsty! I’ll tell you that!”

She went to the medicine cabinet and ripped it open. Took the scouring powder. Took up a washcloth.

Then she put them down upon the basin and carefully removed her lightweight blue wool dress and hung it upon the shower rail.

In her slip, she began to scrub. At first she worked furiously, but then more and more meticulously, seeing the tiniest of stains. She found places that Elise, the maid, had never yet found in any bathroom of Sans Souci.

At first, Tess moved without fuss to keep out of her way as she went. Then Tess took up a piece of cotton batting and began to polish metal and glass. They worked without speaking.

Hours later, this bathroom gleamed. It was perfectly clean.

Nona sighed. “That’s that. Now, *I’m* filthy.” She began to run the water in the bathtub. Tess Rogan sat on the W.C. and turned her face and closed her eyes, while Nona stripped, took soap, stepped into the tub, cleaned herself thoroughly.

Afterwards, there was nothing to do but put on the same clothing. Still, Nona felt better. Much better. She had expended the anger, hatred, panic. Used it up, temporarily at least. Now she felt relaxed, and almost comfortable. Without a word she retreated to her own particular corner, sat down upon the floor, drew up her knees, rested her head upon them. She could hear Tess Rogan running the water now.

At least we won’t smell, thought Nona. At first this was a bitter thought, and ugly. But slowly it changed over and she knew it was just a simple fact. It began to take on comedy.

“At least we won’t smell,” she said cheerfully, out loud.

“We smell something sweet,” said Tess’s voice, calm and amiable, amid clouds of dusting powder. “We won’t stink, I guess.”

“People are no damn good,” said Nona hugging her knees.

“We could have a game of chess,” said Tess, “in our heads. I can’t play chess.”

“Recite Shakespeare to each other. I can’t remember any.”

Nona sighed. She didn’t lift her head but she was smiling. This was absurd. Life was absurd, altogether. Which was good reason to love it. In fact, an irresistible reason.

Morgan Lake, at his post in the lobby this Friday, watched the widows come and go, and doled out the mail. Midafternoon, he noticed that a couple of mailboxes had not been emptied.

He had not heard that Mrs. Rogan was ill. Or Mrs. Henry either. He usually did know when a tenant was ill. He knew, for instance, that Mrs. Fitz was abed, today. Georgia Oliver had come down and collected mail for two.

When Kelly Shane came up from the basement with one of the lobby lamps he had been rewiring, Morgan Lake asked him whether he had seen Mrs. Rogan or Mrs. Henry today.

“Oh, oh,” said Kelly Shane. “I forgot. Elise says Miz Henry’s bed wasn’t slept in. She didn’t know if she ought to say anything. Mama not being here . . .”

“How is your mother?”

“Ah, she’s doing O.K., Mister Lake. Thank you.”

“Mrs. Henry wasn’t in, last night?” Morgan Lake frowned.

“Looks *like* it.” Kelly wasn’t worried. He fiddled the lamp into place and stepped backward to see the effect.

“Has Mrs. Rogan gone away, do you know? She hasn’t come for her mail. I wonder where she is.” Morgan Lake permitted concern to sound in his voice.

“I haven’t seen . . . oh, excuse me, Mrs. Milbank.”

Ida Milbank, scurrying through, had bumped into Kelly Shane. She was making a wide and wary curve around the desk and Morgan Lake. Under her left arm she was hugging an aluminum tin of some kind, tight to her side. She squealed, on the run, “Isn’t this a lovely day?”

It was not a lovely day, but rather one of those Southern California days plagued by what weathermen on radio and television called “High Cloudiness.” This means that the light, the marvelous light that so often makes everything appear to be sparkling, clean, fresh, colorful and

charming, was dimmed down. Everything seemed dull. Rustiness showed in lawn and shrub. Barrenness showed on the mountains. Shabbiness showed on the buildings. Dirt and litter became, obviously, just what they were.

As Ida Milbank scooted around the corner to the elevator, hopefully but with no success trying to conceal something, Morgan Lake shook his head, Kelly Shane rolled his eyes.

What the dickens am I going to do about her? thought Morgan Lake. Wait for the police?

Upstairs, Agnes Vaughn said severely, “Now, Ida, where did you get that muffin tin? You better tell me.”

“I just picked it up,” said Ida evasively. “Isn’t it a *good* one?”

“You need a muffin tin like a hole in the head,” Agnes said rudely. “And you better watch it.” (Ida didn’t fool *her*.) “You are taking terrible chances.”

Poor old Ida Milbank didn’t want to be scolded. After all, she was doing so *little* harm. She had the cunning to know that if she could produce a tidbit for Agnes Vaughn, the scolding might be averted. So she gasped out, “Did you know Mrs. Rogan’s *gone*? Mr. Lake doesn’t know where she *is*!”

Agnes looked sour. “I *know* she’s gone,” she said scornfully. “Now, Ida, you don’t want to get into trouble, do you?”

Ida’s jowls trembled pitifully.

By the time Felice Paull barged in, Agnes had Ida Milbank in tears.

Felice Paull immediately looked tearful, too. She lowered her weight to a chair and began to speak, in a voice of doom, about the majesty of the law.

Ida, however, wasn’t much fun to scold. Oh, she wept and repented and made vows. But she didn’t take the fine points they made. And her vows meant nothing. She would forget.

After a time, when Ida Milbank (sniffing) was in the kitchen making tea, Agnes Vaughn said to Felice Paull, “Well, Tess Rogan got out from under, I see.”

“What’s this?”

“Oh, she left. I saw her go, last night around five o’clock. Hadn’t come back by one A.M. Hasn’t come back yet, to my knowledge. Morgan Lake is having a fit, I understand.”

“You mean she didn’t tell him she was leaving?”

“Looks as if she took the notion and lit out,” said Agnes Vaughn. “She has a right. She’s over twenty-one. I don’t blame her, myself. Hand me the box, will you?”

Felice handed the box and Agnes rummaged for the kind of chocolate cream she preferred. “Did she have many suitcases?” Felice inquired.

“I couldn’t tell,” admitted Agnes. “Fact, I almost missed her entirely. I just saw that red coat—you know?—going out under the arch.”

“If you ask me,” said Felice Paull, “poor little Nona Henry is getting the worst of it. It’s a wonder *she* doesn’t run away.”

“I haven’t seen *her*, in or out, today, either,” said Agnes Vaughn thoughtfully. “Oh, that Mrs. Fitz! She’s taken to her bed. Notice?” (Agnes, of course, knew this.)

“Well!” said Felice Paull.

When Mrs. Paull came down to cross the lobby at about a quarter of five, she said to Morgan Lake with one of her pained smiles, “Mrs. Rogan has been driven away, I hear.”

Morgan Lake put on his strongest armor, his most courteous mien. “I beg your pardon, Mrs. Paull?”

“Oh, Mrs. Vaughn saw her leaving. Can’t miss that red coat she wears. It was about this time, yesterday.” Felice Paull swiveled her huge eyes toward the glass door. “And just as dark! An old lady—to have to slip away *after dark*.” Felice was working herself up. “A shame, Mr. Lake! A disgrace! When it was that Fitzgibbon man who behaved disgracefully and Mrs. Rogan and Mrs. Henry simply did their best . . .”

Morgan Lake’s fingers shifted some papers. He would not discuss the issue, of course.

“I’m really not surprised that she has run away from the nastiness here,” said Felice Paull. “I am shocked! She didn’t even tell you she was going?”

Morgan Lake was thinking, Oh, Lord, Lord, now we’ll have rumors of exile and persecution.

“Why, yes,” he said smoothly, “Mrs. Rogan told me that she was going away.”

“A woman of her years—” Felice went on the momentum of outrage, and checked herself almost comically. “Oh? I hope she’s not gone forever.”

“Not at all,” he purred.

“Where did she go?” Felice was taken back suddenly enough to become even more blunt than usual.

But Morgan Lake leaned over the counter and said, “Mrs. Paull, I wonder if I might speak to you . . . confidentially?”

He had her.

“About Mrs. Milbank,” he went on. (Oh, he knew how to use diversionary tactics.) “I believe you are a close friend, and I am sure you must be as concerned as I. . . .”

After he and Felice Paull had carried on an oblique dialogue about Ida Milbank in which neither one used the word “steal” or the word “thief” or even the word “shoplift” and Felice had gone tearfully away, Morgan Lake’s thoughts went back to Mrs. Rogan.

It was true. She *had* hinted to him, at least, that she might go to San Francisco to visit a son. Perhaps, having hinted, she thought no more needed to be said. Still . . .

When Oppie Etting came at five o’clock Morgan Lake said to him, “When Mrs. Rogan left, last night, did she say anything to you about how long she’d be gone?”

“Said nothing to me,” said Oppie. “I didn’t even see her.”

Morgan Lake said coldly, “I left you on the desk at five exactly.”

“Yes, sir. Yes, sir.” Oppie was afraid of Mr. Lake, Mr. Lake did not like him.

“You stayed on? You didn’t, for instance, think you needed a cigar?”

“No, sir, no sir.” Oppie Etting had not realized that Morgan Lake knew how he, once in a while, sneaked down to the basement to have a cigar—as was forbidden on duty. So Oppie swore now to the truth. “I stayed right on. Right here.” His pop eyes swore it; his ears swore it.

But Morgan Lake, who left without further comment, had received distinct intelligence of Oppie Etting’s fear.

So he rather supposed that Tess Rogan had left the building, just a bit after five, last evening. It was Agnes Vaughn's reputation that she did not miss much.

As he stepped into his own apartment, Rose Lake attacked. "So!" she cried. "She *did* get out! Did you talk to her?"

"To whom?" Morgan Lake saw that Winnie was sitting on the sofa in the living room, looking very lonely.

"Oh, that *nice* Mrs. Henry, of course," spat Rose.

"Why, no, I haven't spoken . . ."

"Then she got away." Rose let a wail into her voice.

"Oh, Mom," said Winnie tiredly.

Morgan Lake said, "But I thought you wanted her to go away, Rose. I don't see what's the trouble . . ."

"I wanted her thrown out," said Rose viciously, "and not let come back. She's gone off, but her clothes are there. Lily told me. Elise says her bed's not been slept in."

Winnie put her arm over her eyes and Rose saw this and stopped speaking.

Morgan Lake thought, with the mental equivalent of a finger snap, I forgot to ask Etting about Mrs. Henry.

"When did *she* leave, I wonder?" he murmured.

"Even Winnie doesn't know *that*," said Rose nastily.

Winnie Lake sat on the sofa alone. (She had called Dr. Huffman. He would see her on Tuesday. She was scared, all right, but she was not *going* to be scared. She was going to find out and then she knew what she would have to do . . . and if Mrs. Henry had gone, as she had said she might go, well, probably it was for the best that Winnie would have to do all this alone. Her sad and frightened heart was loyal still.)

She took down her arm and said to her mother, with tired dignity, "Mrs. Henry has her own life, Mom, and her own family. If she wants to go to Seattle to see her son-in-law and her little granddaughter . . ."

"Oh, *so!*" pounced Rose. "So you *do* know! And *how* do you know all this?"

“I know because she told me,” said Winnie sadly.

“Oh, so you’ve been *up* there.”

“I don’t see why,” said Morgan Lake, buffing, “you keep talking about her if she’s gone away. What’s that I smell cooking? Winnie’s special?”

“Yes, it is,” said Rose, sullenly. “Southern fried chicken.” She was reluctant to abandon her gloomy anger. “But Winnie doesn’t even notice.”

Winnie summoned all her strength to tell a lie. “*Ooh!*” she said. “*Ooh*, Mom, did you really?”

“I know what you like to eat, don’t I?” Rose bridled.

“*Ooh, I lo-ove* it!” said Winnie Lake. Her heart was like a stone, and in her stomach fear wiggled its worm tracks, but she did her very best to force the old stars into her eyes.

Morgan Lake perceived the fortitude this took, and his heart was toward the liar.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rose turn silently toward the kitchen and he received the news that, this time, Rose Lake also perceived the lie. She knew the stars in Winnie’s eyes were fakes.

So now, what would happen? he wondered. Something was changing in his household. Something hung over it. He knew that this was so. He did not know what it was that so hung. He felt that something would break. Trouble would fall.

Winnie said nothing. He sighed.

But Rose and Morgan Lake had asked a couple in for bridge, that Friday evening.

The one place Morgan Lake had any fun was at the bridge table. There, and there alone, he shucked off the worries of Sans Souci, or any other worries, in the exercise of considerable skill. Not only to understand the problem of the hand and play the cards, but to do so with Rose as his partner, compensating for her ineptitudes and even, on occasion, anticipating and using them.

At the bridge table Morgan Lake was no buffer. There he permitted himself to be a fox. His bidding that seemed erratic, by ignorance or impulse, was actually keen and bold. On offense, blandly and oh, very

innocently, he would outfox the enemy, for he had an almost psychic intuition of enemy strength or weakness, and located missing honors as if the key in which a throat was cleared spoke to him of a king or the sheen on the enemies' fingernails winked intelligence of the queen-jack, there or not there.

On defense, how he ripped and tore and undercut! Oh, then he was a spoiler!

Fun was so rare and so very precious!


Afterwards Rose said, as she almost always did, "Well, Morgan is just plain lucky at cards, and you can't fight that."

The evening's enemies ruefully agreed. (And so did Morgan. That fox!)

Going to bed, if he thought of Tess Rogan at all, it was to imagine her in San Francisco. (Etting was *not* reliable. Agnes Vaughn *was*.) If he thought of Nona Henry it was to imagine her in Seattle, for he was satisfied that Winnie Lake, promise or no, would have seen Mrs. Henry and been told where she had gone.

He didn't worry about either of them.

Chapter 30

 Nona's head was aching, while at the same time it felt strangely light, so that the ache had no locus. By her watch, they were well into another night, and had had no food all this long day.

They had allotted themselves more vitamin pills, at meal hours.

"When we get out, Tess," she said gloomily, "Ursula Fitzgibbon is going to get it! *She* left us locked up. *She* heard me! Don't you think so?"

"If she did," said Tess, "she didn't let herself know it. I think it's too late to tell her—much."

"You'd spare her, I suppose? You'd cover up? I can't *understand!*"

"I can't see how I could save her," Tess said, wearily.

The lights were still on. Nona thought that Tess's high cheekbones were looking lean, and her eyes had gone deeper into their sockets. Nona felt frightened. "Are you too awfully hungry?" she asked.

"Fasting won't hurt us."

Nona stretched her aching back. "You know what you said about travel? I remember Mrs. Fitz, at San Juan Capistrano. She took her shell right along with her."

"Shell?"

"*Her* foibles. *Her* kind of food. *Her* naptime. At least, that's nearly all she thought about. *She* didn't rest, because everything was unusual. She endured it."

"There are people who do that."

"But that's not traveling."

"No," said Tess rousing a little. "We can travel here, where we are, better than that."

"Around the world?" said Nona, dreamily.

"Farther."

In a moment or two, Nona, feeling restless and uneasy, got up, put both hands up to the high shower rail, and arched her back. "I've got a misery," she explained.

Tess said, "Give me a hand. I'll do that too. That's good."

So they stretched, using the high bar.

"This might make us hungrier," Nona said.

"We *are* hungrier." Tess grinned.

Nona let go abruptly. "You know, I don't approve of you, altogether. You're too detached."

Her head was light. She could say a thing like this.

"Do you think so?" Tess said.

"Observe," teased Nona, "with detachment, what I say."

"In what way am I too detached?"

"Well, it isn't *human*," said Nona, "to think of letting Ursula Fitzgibbon get away with what she did. Isn't *human* to just say 'Well, here we are then.' Until Wednesday! Or *human* to say 'We are hungrier' . . ."

"May not be human," grinned Tess Rogan, "it's accurate."

"No," said Nona, with that lightheaded release, "too detached. *I* think you *should* raise a little hell. I don't have your temperament. No martyr's blood."

"You *have* changed," Tess Rogan murmured. "This makes me too dizzy." She sank down.

Nona thought, But who is talking in my voice? Who am I?

She sank down in what had become her own corner. "I don't know what I'm talking about," she murmured. "Or what I'm doing, half the time. Or who I am."

"Tell you what would have been detached," Tess said in a moment, "—if we *had* called Mr. Etting and washed our hands of Robert Fitzgibbon."

Nona said, thinking of Winnie Lake, "I concede. But then, I say, as long as you *didn't* wash your hands, then you should have *done* something—helped the man, *told* him what to do."

"Does it occur to you," said Tess, "that I might not be wise enough?"

“No,” said Nona impudently. “I think you’re plenty wise and you could tell plenty. But you don’t. You’re too detached. What did you mean—what did he mean—by the ‘pit’? I couldn’t understand half you did say.”

Tess considered. “Pretense, I guess, is the best word. Sinking into it . . . you see? Getting lost in it. He’s seen his mother pretending all her life. So he knows it when he sees it.”

“What *he* observes is the lack of pretense,” Nona mused. “Don’t you *ever* pretend, Tess?”

“I may have lost the trick,” Tess confessed. “Best I can do, when I see I’m heading for trouble, is shut my mouth.”

“Is that why Harriet Gregory says you are odd?” mused Nona. “Of course, you *are* odd.”

Tess said, “Oh, I made a guess about her. She was offended.”

“I’ll bet it was a good guess.” Nona’s voice was rippling out with her very light head seeming not to be involved with what the voice was saying. “What did you ever do to Mrs. Fitz that put her back up? Before the party?”

Tess did not deny that this had happened. “I’m not sure. Let me see. We talked about children one day in the patio. And devotion.”

“Um hum.”

“I said it was no bargain and no reward. Love is for free, I said, by definition.”

“Ouch!” said Nona.

“I told you I talk too much.” Tess sighed. “Let’s be quiet. Turn off the light.”

“Shouldn’t we yell some more? Maybe Daisy Robinson is in the hall, right now, for all we—”

“No, no, just be quiet,” Tess Rogan said. “Do us more good to pray.”

Nona got up and turned off the light. She hunkered down again in darkness.

“This shower curtain is long enough. Pull it over you, too,” Tess said.

“All right.” The canvas curtain rustled loudly in the dark.

Nona said in a moment, “Have you been praying, Tess?”

The old woman's voice came, sharp, from her invisible mouth, "Sometimes I think you are the one who is detached, Nona. Haven't you *any* connections?" she snapped. "*Of course* I've been praying."

The dark sweet-smelling air swirled and settled.

Nona said, "I hesitate . . . I mean, to pray only when in trouble . . ."

"How vain you are!" said Tess, like a whiplash. "Take note of this, oh God. If *I* can't handle it, why, I am much too proud to ask *you*. What kind of God do you pray to, anyhow?"

Nona's cheek burned against her knee. "Let's be quiet," she said.

Six o'clock, Saturday morning, Nona sprang up and turned on the lights. She had dreamed . . . or else she had analyzed. Either way, she knew now, there was no use baring the metal casings of the lock or the lock's tongue. She knew that she could not excavate the hinges from the wood, either. But it had occurred to her that the door was paneled. The three sunken panels were surely made of thinner wood. What if she could cut through enough so that a hard kick, say, could break off one piece, another, more and more? The vision of success was clear in her imagination. *This* was the thing to do. And not with the nail file. In that medicine cabinet there was a packet of razor blades.

She got them out, stepping over Tess who looked up sleepily.

"Idea . . ." Nona said.

She went to the door and began, very carefully and gingerly, to try to nick the panel, just in a corner, where it was framed with thicker wood.

All went fairly well, for ten minutes or more.

Tess stirred behind her. "What time is it?"

"Six o'clock."

"Still dark?"

"Yes," said Nona. Now it came to her forcefully that there was no light to gleam through any crack *because* Mrs. Fitz had turned off that bedroom light! Who else? And *why*?

A wave of anger came upon her. Her hand shook, and suddenly her blood poured down the white wood of the door.

They had the means to dress the cuts that the naked razor blade had made in the first two fingers of Nona's right hand. The cuts were deep but clean. Nona held her hand under the cold water and watched it swirl pink into the basin. Tess got out the antiseptic. Finally, the hand was bandaged and the bleeding seemed to be under control.

Nona sat down upon the floor, feeling weak. The hand throbbed some. It would not be much use until it had healed awhile.

"Saturday?" she said aloud. It was a name for a day. It had no particular meaning. It was a word.

Saturday at Sans Souci was different from the days of the working week even if, for most of the widows, this was only a reflected difference.

For Joan Braverman and Kitty Forrest, of course, it was their day off.

This Saturday, however, Joan Braverman was in a state of shock. She didn't believe it! She didn't *believe* it! It didn't seem possible. If possible, if true, then the basic ground of her life had shaken and fallen in.

Kitty Forrest, the worrying kind, said all she could. Joan would get another job, a better one. With all *her* experience—and so on. Joan Braverman had been fired.

The two of them were holed up in Kitty's apartment and in a spiral, round and round, they went. Joan's shock and disbelief, Kitty's brave words, and around again. Over them both hung fear. Joan Braverman was fifty-six years old. Kitty herself was fifty-nine. (And did not have cancer, yet; sometimes she also wondered about her heart, her liver, her gall bladder.)

And how long? They would not die of want. There was Social Security. The children would sacrifice. There were Homes. If they would *rather* die, they could not choose. And how long would Fate allow . . . how many more weeks in this lovely place, dear Sans Souci?

Neither would speak of *this* trouble. Nobody needed to know what specter haunted them.

Nobody yet suspected that Mrs. Braverman had been discharged.

Morgan Lake had certain suspicions. He knew that the Gadabouts and Harriet Gregory were off to the Farmers' Market. They, who could go any morning, perversely went on Saturday. What he suspected was that Bettina Goodenough was financially embarrassed. She had not yet paid her rent for

March. She had been laughing her way through the lobby for days, now. Morgan Lake knew what he was supposed to think. (She had forgotten. It had slipped her mind.)

What he really thought was that she would pull out of it, by some method of her own. He had a shrewd idea of her income. It should be adequate.

Bettina Goodenough, however, was racked between pride and panic. She must appear to be as gay and carefree as ever. It would be too humiliating if anyone knew. Just the same, she was edgy. Sarah Lee Cunneen had wanted to go to the Farmers' Market. Bettina Goodenough had not refused but *she* had invited Harriet Gregory.

She knew she had enough gasoline in her car to get there and back again. But she knew very well that she dared not buy anything, and this was going to be difficult in that seductive place. She thought that Harriet Gregory would buy, and if so, perhaps Sarah Lee Cunneen would make little of it when Bettina pretended not to see anything she really wanted.

Nobody must know in what desperate straits she was. Not the family. She would not write or ask for help. She was too proud. She would not give up her prize corner apartment and settle for something less expensive. She would not give up her car.

No, she would squirm through this trouble. She would turn and she would twist and she would economize and catch up and nobody would ever know.

Meantime, she could not give up her image of herself—the Merry Widow.

Morgan Lake thought that he could feel already, that Saturday morning, a certain letting down of tensions as far as the feud was concerned. After all, the principals on one side had gone away. This left the Unholy Three in opposition to the rest of the house, but they were that, normally, by temperament alone.

He also felt a certain emptiness. Sans Souci was lacking how many? Leila Hull, Elna Ames, Nona Henry, Tess Rogan.

Then, about nine thirty in the morning, down came Daisy Robinson, suitcase in her hand.

"I'm off for the weekend," said she, "and I'm going to walk around to Hunt's for breakfast. May I leave this here?"

"Of course, Mrs. Robinson."

She would make five missing, out of seventeen, he thought.

By noon, Kelly Shane and both the maids would go off duty. Morgan Lake anticipated a very quiet Saturday and Sunday.

When Daisy Robinson came back from breakfast, Georgia Oliver was sitting alone in the patio. It was strange to see her there, alone. She looked somewhat forlorn. Daisy approached, glanced at her own wrist, sat down beside Georgia. "How are *you*, out so early in the morning?"

"I'm just fine," said Georgia who did not look fine. "Just for some air."

"And Mrs. Fitz?" Daisy raised her unpruned eyebrows.

"Oh, she is resting."

"And your 'intended' is better, is he?"

"Much, much better. He'll be out of the hospital soon."

"You'll want to take care of him," said Daisy Robinson benignly. "I suppose you'll marry. Will Mrs. Fitz live with the two of you? I must say, you seem to be compatible."

"We haven't quite decided," said Georgia, vaguely.

Daisy Robinson had been seized by the impulse to comfort Georgia's loneliness, to indicate human sympathy for Georgia and her patients. But now Daisy zoomed off into theory; she couldn't help it. "You know, in our grandmothers' day, the elders lived with the middle-aged, quite naturally. (There was nowhere else for old people to go, for one thing.) What occurs to me . . . they used to combine the generations in one big house, quite early. Before the elders became decrepit. Therefore, everyone was thoroughly accustomed to the combination before there *was* any physical problem. So a family decayed gently, all in one place." Daisy showed her teeth. "Interesting?"

Georgia Oliver was staring, a little stupidly, straight ahead.

"Oh, well, other times, other manners," said Daisy Robinson. "But I was, only this morning, thinking of the rearing of children, too. Now you take the sixteenth, seventeenth century (as I was just reading). Children, of

the noble class at least, almost never even saw their own parents. As infants they were turned over to servants. Who simply swarmed. Servants, by the way, make the difference, of course. Well, then, when they were a little grown, they were sent off to be raised in some *other* noble house, to be pages and so on. I wonder what that did to their psyches?" Daisy chuckled. "It may have been psychologically healthy, for all we know." Her shrewd eye knew that Georgia Oliver wasn't following. Oh well, Daisy was used to ignorance. She rattled on.

"James the Sixth (he was the man whose life I was contemplating). Now, *there* was a childhood and an upbringing for you! His father helped assassinate his mother's lover before her eyes, while she was carrying our James. Afterwards, *she* did the father in, or so one suspects. Blew him up. Remember? Certainly son James didn't find it too difficult to accept the chopping off of mother's head."

Georgia said, "What *dreadful* things you read, Daisy!"

"History? James the Sixth of Scotland? James the First of England, of course."

Georgia Oliver looked as if she had never heard of him.

"Not that you could call James psychologically healthy," Daisy continued. "Funny thing, this morning I was thinking about his belief in witchcraft, you know? I was thinking about Macbeth, and about Hamlet's father's ghost, and wondering what effect the stage device had on an audience who *believed*—you see? And just then I heard a sound. Just suddenly, a very weird, very peculiar, far-off, wailing sound. I must admit that I suffered a 'cauld grue.'" To Daisy this was hilarious.

"You heard a sound?" said Georgia politely. "Where was this, Daisy?"

"Right here. It came so pat into my mood," explained Daisy. "For a minute, then, I think you could have convinced me that Sans Souci was haunted." Daisy tipped her tousled head and looked up at the stucco walls. "However, I doubt that we shall ever see a ghostess trotting in these halls, with her 'head tucked underneath her arm.'"

Georgia was staring at her.

"Has it ever occurred to you how well-born most specters seem to be?" asked Daisy. "It's like reincarnation. Almost nobody, in an earlier life, was *less* than a princess of Egypt."

Georgia didn't return her grin. Georgia had been left behind, long ago. Oh well . . . Daisy sighed. Too bad to waste this mental fun on this desert air. Georgia just wasn't following. Now, Nona Henry would have followed, thought Daisy. She got up.

"Well, I'm off. A goodish drive, out to the end of the valley. I won't be back until tomorrow evening."

"Do have a nice weekend," said Georgia. "You heard a sound, you said? But what was it that you heard? You say, a *wailing* sound?"

"Oh, somebody turned up her television set, I presume," said Daisy. "Gave me a turn." Daisy laughed. Her laugh was a loud gasping in of air. Then Daisy barged off, in her own abrupt way, to go in and pick up her suitcase, bid Morgan Lake farewell, descend into the garage, and sally forth.

When Georgia Oliver came in, Morgan Lake looked at her sympathetically. "You are very busy these days, Mrs. Oliver, with two patients to look after. How is Mr. Fitzgibbon?"

"Much better. Almost ready to be discharged from the hospital."

"Ah, that's good, isn't it?"

"The question is," Georgia drew in her breath, "where shall he go? He will need some care. I had thought, perhaps—isn't Apartment 111 vacant still?"

"Yes." Morgan Lake felt a bit of a shock. A *man* in Sans Souci! Or even a married couple?

"However," he went on apologetically, "the oven in there needs some work and unfortunately we haven't been able . . ." He was thinking resentfully of Avery Patrick's wild economies which were just as unsound as his extravagances.

"Dear Mrs. Fitz depends on me a great deal," said Georgia. Now her blue eyes did look troubled.

"I do see," said he at once. "It would be simpler for *you*. The same building. Perhaps, even if the oven is not yet in condition . . . it will be, of course."

"That's true," said Georgia. "I will talk it over . . ." But she did not leave the desk. "Mr. Lake, may I ask you something?"

“Certainly, Mrs. Oliver.”

“Mrs. Henry and Mrs. Rogan are away, I hear. Have they *moved* away?”

“Why, no—not that I . . .”

“Then, it’s awkward,” said Georgia Oliver. “Mrs. Fitz is very happy here. Or has been.”

“I am glad to hear you say so.” Was Georgia Oliver threatening something? He couldn’t *imagine*! He said courteously, “She is feeling better, today, I hope?”

“We had Dr. Nelson in, you know. There is nothing really wrong. A bit run-down.” Georgia Oliver looked through him. “Her right hand has a weakness.”

“Ah . . . ?”

“She can’t seem to turn off a light switch. There’s some muscular weakness. The doctor can’t quite understand.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he murmured.

“Yes.” Georgia was still looking through him.

He viewed her fair hair, her sweet face, and thought that Georgia Oliver had always seemed to him to be the merest nonentity. In fact, he preferred Rose Lake, with all her sudden tempers and all the difficulties she made, to this pallid soul in whom he had never seen until now a spark of human bewilderment.

“She feels she can go to the hospital this afternoon,” said Georgia. “She is so anxious to see Robert.”

“I can understand . . .”

Still, Georgia Oliver did not go. She seemed to shudder.

Morgan Lake said, and he could not prevent himself though he was ashamed of it afterwards, “Everything will work out, I’m sure.”

Georgia did not recognize this mocking of her own phrase. “Oh yes, thank you,” she said vaguely. She turned away.

Morgan Lake busied himself as best he could.

Winnie Lake was studying in her own room, with her door shut. Rose Lake was prowling, outside that door.

But everything was quiet.

Elise had a husband who did not have to work on Saturdays, at all. So, although he was yawning mightily, he was there when she trudged up the incline from the basement of Sans Souci, with the week's work over.

He met her, on time, each Saturday. Weekdays, she always had to wait twenty or twenty-five minutes for him. In seasons when her quitting time was daylight, she waited on the sidewalk. Only in the winter months did Elise dare wait inside the patio where she knew a bench that was hidden.

She got into the car beside him, careful of the folds of her long red coat.

"Why you poking out your mouth?" he asked after they had gone a block.

"I'm going to go ahead on and get me another job."

He said nothing. He waited for the reason.

"I got to do Miz Shane's work. That Mr. Patrick, he yell at me." Elise's voice now went hard and shrill. This was her idea of mimicking a white person's voice. Any white person. "'You ain't coming in here with no vacuum cleaner. I'm trying to *sleep*,' he say. Ten in the morning!"

They rode along, silently. This was not the reason.

"And I ain't going in Miz Gardner's apartment ever' day no more," said Elise. "Because she ain't *right*." Elise's voice went high to put quotation marks around the next phrase. "'Cain't take my bath. Voices,' she say. 'Screaming at me,' she say. 'Ever' time I go to wash myself.' So she dirty. She's a crazy woman."

Her husband strangled a yawn, and kept waiting. He did not think this was the reason, either. He was subtracting Elise's wages from their joint income, in his head.

Farther on still, Elise burst out again, "Poor Mrs. Henry—she ain't coming back no more."

He rolled his eyes. This was it. "How you know?"

"She ain't taken her brush. She ain't taken her comb. She ain't taken her pocketbook. She dead." Elise put her hands over her face.

"You say anything?"

She shook her head.

He said no more. They drove on. He did not advise her, nor did she intend, to advance an *opinion* about a white woman to a white person.

Not their business. Best for them to seem less perceptive and less intelligent than they were. The whites forgive a stupid Negro. A smart one they do not so easily forgive.

After a while he said, “You tell that Lily?”


“I tol’ Kelly Shane her bed ain’t been slept in. I didn’t tell that Lily *nothing*.”

This was just as well. Lily thought she was smart.

“If Mindy Shane don’t be back soon . . .” said Elise darkly. But her husband knew, now, that she wouldn’t quit her job, quite yet.

Felice Paull might have seen, from her windows, the red coat come up out of the basement in full daylight on Elise’s back. But Felice Paull was, at that moment, around the other side of the building in Ida Milbank’s room, taking a firm inventory of the myriad of *things* there. Felice Paull had been impressed by her talk with Morgan Lake. Felice was plunging into her manifest and not unpleasant duty. She would rehabilitate Ida Milbank. Oh, very quietly, she would save her friend.

Chapter 31

 There were times when everything was quiet.

There were times, now, when the gnawing and the nagging seemed to cease, and one did not feel hungry at all.

Times when they talked. Listened.

Nona was telling about herself, her childhood, schooling. Tess listened.

Nona had listened, in her turn. She knew about Tess Rogan's childhood, schooling, life. Middle-class, moderately well-to-do, the same excitements of children, business, family, community—illnesses that came and went. Nothing odd.

"I went to the great city," Nona was saying, in her own turn, "as soon as I was old enough, because I was young. Oh, the world was my oyster. I didn't know exactly how I was going to open it and get the pearl, but I was going to do it. It seems to me, now, that I knew who I was, in those days."

She brooded a while; then went on. "I fell in love. Married Val. I thought, I don't know what. It wasn't going to be an ordinary marriage." She fell silent.

"I wonder what that is," mused Tess. "An 'ordinary' marriage? A man and a woman—some, you know, do get in touch with each other. They let each other be and are let be. One-plus-one is more than two. It's not arithmetic."

"No," said Nona. (Oh, what a little *fool* I was in those days, she thought, writhing.)

"Some are deeply divorced from the beginning," Tess mourned. "They pretend. They never touch, never add up. And some do, only sometimes. I don't know what is 'ordinary.'"

Nona had begun to weep. "When you have been half of two and a good two and he dies—then you are *less* than half," she sobbed. "You are *nothing*."

Tess said, "Well, you can't go back. You won't be that girl who thought the world was her oyster. Never that *one*, again."

“I know. I don’t want that. But then, who am I?”

Tess didn’t answer.

“Don’t detach,” wept Nona. “Help me. Tell me.”

“How can *I* tell you?”

“You believe in God?” flared Nona. “Why does God *do* it? Leave the women? Seventeen widows! Leftover. Nothings. Did He make us tougher because we had to bear the children? And so we survive? Is *that* it?”

Tess said, “What kind of God sets loose some rules and then is helpless and surprised at the way they turn out?”

“But what is the *purpose*?” Nona cried.

“I’d have to say ‘God knows,’ whatever ‘to know’ may mean in the divine context. ‘Purpose’ may be just a human idea, too. Incomplete.”

“You’ve gone off in a cloud.” Nona wept.

“We are ideally set up, here at Sans Souci . . .”

“Oh, what are you saying? Ideally!” Nona mopped her face with her skirt.

“We certainly are not to bear and raise children,” Tess said. “We’ve done all that. Obviously, most of us are not going to contribute to the economy or produce many goods. Not any more. Well, but there are some poor old women who aren’t so lucky. They still have to earn. Or, by some tragedy, they must raise babies when they are not really spry enough.”

“I can’t *understand* you. You are too detached. That isn’t *human*!”

“Whereas *you*,” snapped Tess, “want to draw a map of the whole universe and spot yourself on it, and understand just where you are, just who, and just why. You are going to *create* a universe? *That* isn’t human, if you ask me. *I* say that to see, flat and plain, what is—that’s a good deal *less* detached than what you try to do. All right, my dear. Certainly you are what you see and hear, that is so. In so far as it is so, you do create your universe. But I say the real universe *is* there and *is* real, all the same. One should take notice.” Tess brooded.

“I want to do right,” Nona sniffled.

“You want to be able to figure out what *is* right,” Tess corrected.

“Yes, and I *can’t*. I don’t seem to . . .”

“Don’t get the Laws of Man mixed up with the Laws of God.”

“What do you mean?”

“Man says you mustn’t walk down the street in your underwear,” grinned Tess. “Do you think God would mind?”

Nona’s tears turned to laughter and made hysteria. “. . . not a s-sin,” she sputtered.

“Three things I’m sure we ought to strive against,” murmured Tess. “Anxiety is one.”

“Anxiety! A *sin*?”

“Jesus advised against it.”

Nona was stopped. She couldn’t reply and her mind did not seem to be moving. People didn’t speak of Jesus, like this. Not people she knew.

“Anger, that’s another,” Tess went on. “Three A’s. Makes a way to remember them. The third A is Acting. Play-acting. Or, in the King James’s, hypocrisy.” Tess massaged her arm. “All those three keep nagging at the young,” she added in a moment. “But the seventeen of *us* might conquer them. Now. We don’t need to invent for ourselves a role. Or try, as the young must try, to fit ourselves into the patterns of man’s devising. We don’t mind if we do, either. We’ve *had* all that.”

They were silent for a long time.

Nona stirred. “Tess, what is faith?”

“Not facing yourself to believe against the evidence or without any,” said Tess promptly. “Faith *is* the evidence. It *is* that-which-stands-under—the substance, you know.”

“St. Paul?” said Nona.

“I think you’ve hit it,” said Tess warmly. “That’s what we are after, now that we have been through the regular mill. *We* needn’t succeed or get money or win foot races. We really needn’t be too terribly respectable, either. We are free.”

Nona stared at the white floor.

“The pearl isn’t in the oyster,” Tess said. “Not the pearl of great price.”

Nona huddled there. She felt crushed and numb and stupefied.

“The Gospel according to Tess Rogan,” said Tess loudly, “and all mine and not necessarily yours. I feel *very* ill, Nona. My legs ache, and my back . . . forgive me . . .” She did not finish.

Nona’s mood peeled off and fell away and she sprang out of it as if she had dropped a cloak behind her. “Now, Tess,” she said bossily, “you lie back and relax as best you can. Turn a little. There. Let me massage where the ache is.”

She thought, It must be getting toward night. *Again!*

“Your hand?” Tess murmured.

“I have another hand,” said Nona.

About four P.M. that Saturday afternoon, the Unholy Three appeared in the lobby all together. They were going out. In the opinion of Felice Paull, Ida Milbank needed entertainment. Her mind, what there was left of it, must be fed something to think about. So they were going to a motion picture. They were going to catch the last show before the prices changed.

Agnes Vaughn had been uprooted for this purpose.

The three of them, all clad in black, were proceeding past the desk. Felice Paull swayed along with her usual majestic tread, Ida Milbank shuffled her feet, and Agnes Vaughn, the Dean of these, waddled. In through the glass doors just then came two clad in light. There was Mrs. Fitz, the opposition Dean herself, all in soft mauve, her white hair shining, and Georgia Oliver (so fair), in palest pink, attended her.

Morgan Lake found himself bracing for the impact of this meeting. But nothing happened.

The two in light colors came slowly in. The three in black stood aside. The impudent curiosity in Agnes Vaughn’s eye was ignored by Mrs. Fitz, who moved in her private serenity on her own path. The air billowed. Auras clashed. But nothing really happened.

Then Felice Paull’s weight wagged the glass door. Ida nipped through with her silly giggle. Agnes Vaughn, with a rather surprising air of sadness and resignation, hobbled after.

Mrs. Fitz bowed to Morgan Lake with Victorian graciousness as she went by. Little adorable old lady. Morgan Lake found himself compelled, by


the power of suggestion, by tradition, by he knew not what, to return her bow by a most respectful inclination of his head.

But when the lobby was empty again, he found himself shaken by a strange question.

An Angel of Light had passed by an Angel of Darkness.

But—which was which?

Chapter 32

 The following morning, Sunday, not one person from Sans Souci went to church.

Caroline Buff, of course, never did. She went to Temple on Friday nights. But ordinarily, at least some of the widows went to some church on a Sunday.

Leila Hull, who was a Catholic, used to go. She was not here. Elna Ames had gone faithfully. Ida Milbank had been a Catholic once, but she had lost track of all that.

Agnes Vaughn professed to be a Baptist, but she very seldom got out. Felice Paull was, in her own opinion, a most pious woman but she could not approve of some of the things that went on within an organized religion. So the Unholy Three did not go.

This Sunday, Bettina Goodenough did not “feel like” going to church. She had bought some silly little things at the Farmers’ Market, after all, and she could not *imagine* sitting in a pew and handing the collection plate along, having dropped in *nothing*. No. She would be ashamed!

Sarah Lee Cunneen said, lazily, that if Bettina wasn’t going she thought she’d sleep in, too.

Harriet Gregory who sometimes was able to attach herself to one churchgoing group or another (without much discrimination) wasn’t going alone. And nobody had asked her.

Joan Braverman and Kitty Forrest were still spiraling around and around. Church didn’t even occur to them. One went, well-dressed, to church, to be seen and be counted.

Ursula Fitzgibbon was not feeling quite strong enough this morning. It was rather an ordeal to dress, to go, to sit so long. Georgia Oliver, of course, would not leave her. She would fix a dainty brunch. They would just relax.

So Sans Souci was dead as a doornail, Sunday morning. Between its walls were worries and fears, sloth and boredom. There were the fat Sunday papers.

“The mercy of God . . .” Tess Rogan was saying in a voice that frightened Nona Henry.

“Yes,” Nona said softly. She touched the old woman’s forehead. She had not used the clinical thermometer. To know whether there was fever, or how much, was not useful. Nothing could be done about it except what she had already done.

“By the mercy of God, there’s such a thing as healing.”

“Hush.”

“With all your heart and all your mind and all your strength and all your soul,” Tess murmured on. “How I used to worry at that! When I was your age, Nona. How I struggled!”

“I imagine,” Nona said. She had heated the room by the simple expedient of filling the bathtub with hot water. It was not chilly, at all, and Tess was lying down.

“How do you make yourself love God?” Tess went on. “And what is it that you must love? What did He mean by ‘love’? And how to *do* it? Oh, I struggled . . .”

“I know,” said Nona. (She did not know. She was afraid.)

“Then one day”—Tess turned her head—“I just quit. I can’t understand, I said. I don’t know anything about it. God or love or *how*. I just can’t do it. I’ve tried and I won’t try, any more.”

Nona’s jaw felt tight. Tess smiled at the wall. “After that,” she said, “you know, Nona, it just seeped in, just came into me. I did . . . and I just did. I do . . . and I just do. But there is no telling anyone how it is done.” The old woman sighed and her mouth seemed to begin to chew on nothing.

“How about loving thy neighbor?” said Nona almost flippantly, because she was so frightened. “That’s a problem. How about Harriet Gregory? Darned if I’d know how to go about loving *her*.” She smoothed back a tuft of the old woman’s hair.

“She doesn’t want you to,” said Tess sadly. “She just wants to be admired.”

“So does Mrs. Fitz,” said Nona rather sharply.

Tess said, “Forgive me?”

“Oh, mercy,” said Nona. “What are you saying, Tess? There is *nothing* . . .”

“Then you do forgive me,” Tess said with satisfaction. “You’ve forgotten how I chose to go and stay in your apartment. And I did choose.”

Nona felt pleasure.

“But do you see what it *is* to forgive?”

“Tell me,” said Nona. She wasn’t sure whether the old woman ought to be talking so much. But what else was there to do?

“Not enough to say to the one who did you harm, ‘I am willing to bear the pain.’ No. No. Vain. Vain. To forgive is just *to be healed* of the hurt given. It’s *you* who have to give up being hurt. Then, as you forgive, by the mercy of God you *are* healed. It’s all tied together . . .” Tess fell to mumbling.

Nona discovered herself to be in a fierce, silent dialogue with Whatever might hear and respond. “Don’t let her be sick! Please heal her!” (Nothing spoke but she somehow answered.) “No, I *don’t* mean to remind You to be just, although *I* can’t see that she deserves to suffer.” . . . “No, I’m *not* vowing that if You do this for me I’ll do something for You.” Nona was going through a series of peelings-off, layer after layer. She didn’t call this prayer. “I *can’t* do anything for You!” she cried silently into and unto the Unknown. “How could I? It’s all Your mercy that I even am!”

A clamp in her mind let go, suddenly. “Have mercy on Mrs. Fitz. Have mercy on me. Oh Lord, have mercy on Tess Rogan and heal her. Because . . . No cause . . . Mercy’s for no reason. It is free. It is love. Yes, I see . . .”

The formed words sped off into distances inconceivable and then they were gone out of her.

Tess said, “I’m feeling sleepy.”

“Shall I turn off the light?” said Nona, immediately responsive. The gaunt old face was settling to serenity.

“Please.”

“All right.”

Nona got up from where she had been kneeling. She arranged the shower-curtain coverlet over Tess, a little higher. She turned off the light and

laid herself down upon the hard floor, and pulled her end of the curtain over.

Her cheek went down upon a towel.

In the dark Tess said, "Sleep well."

"You, too."

Nona lay still. Strange, that fierce prayer or whatever it had been, was over and done, and now here she was lying, a thinning hungry body in an extremity, and all was deeply familiar. A body. So, muscles forced to relax because the hard floor would not. So body, seeking rest . . .

Primitive. Direct. "Like camping," thought Nona, "and we are all countrywomen."

During the Sunday afternoon some of the widows stirred, in and out. Four of them met in the patio.

So it happened that Sarah Lee Cunneen cried out to Caroline Buff, "You mean to say you've never been to the Farmers' Market! Why, Mrs. Buff!"

"I have heard about it," said Caroline Buff. "I would *like* to go."

"Let us take you, then." Sarah Lee went bursting along, taking no notice of the slight stiffening of Bettina Goodenough's neck. "*We'd* just as leave go again. Why not? Listen! Maybe tomorrow?"

"It would be good of you," said Mrs. Buff with some enthusiasm.

"Monday's a good day. Not so crowded, either. Let's make a date. Bettina has a car. No trouble at all."

"I'd be free to go tomorrow," said Mrs. Buff glancing at Bettina. Her fine cool eyes went on to look at Harriet Gregory. "Mrs. Gregory too?"

Harriet said, "I don't think so." Her face formed the travesty of a smile that was "good breeding" plastered over a distinctly projected standoffishness. "Excuse me." Harriet swung away, nose up.

"How about it?" said Sarah Lee in her husky voice. "The three of us, then . . ." Her hand moved, indicating that Harriet Gregory never mattered. "About ten o'clock, say?" Sarah Lee didn't *quite* kowtow to wealth but she was, nevertheless, rather pleased to think that there was something they could do for and with Caroline Buff.

"Perhaps, since you have only just been there . . ." Caroline Buff looked at Bettina Goodenough again. "Some other time?"

“Listen!” But Sarah Lee’s voice died.

“I am already obliged to you ladies,” Mrs. Buff said smoothly. “Will you let me take you both to dinner, tomorrow evening?”

“O.K. by me,” cried Sarah Lee in her vulgar way. “But I don’t know what you mean, obliged.”

“I did appreciate the invitation to your party,” said Caroline Buff, “even though I wasn’t able to be there. Now, shall we meet in the lobby, say, about a quarter of five? I suggest an early hour because I have in mind a very delightful restaurant on La Cienega.” She glanced at Bettina once more. “We can take a taxicab.”

“Ye Gods!” cried Sarah Lee. “That’s ridiculous! All the way to La Cienega? Would cost a fortune! Bettina has a car.”

Bettina began to laugh. “Of course, I have a car. Very glad, Mrs. Buff. Ha. Ha.”

“How very nice that you run a car,” said Caroline Buff. “How very kind of you to say you’ll take us. It *would* be more convenient.”

“Listen!” howled Sarah Lee in joy.

“No trouble at all,” said Bettina. “Ha. Ha.”

“You know, she’s very nice,” said Sarah Lee confidentially, a bit later. “Say, maybe she’ll ask us in, eh? I’d like to see her place. They say she’s got carpets *that* thick.”

Bettina kept laughing.

Bettina Goodenough knew for a fact that there was not enough gasoline in her car to take them all the way to the great cluster of fine restaurants on La Cienega Boulevard, in Los Angeles, and back again. She had no credit card. She had no money. What she had was a bit of ham in her refrigerator and other odds and ends of food that she surmised would last until her next dividend check came in. She did not know what she was going to do.

One thing she would not do. She would not ask Caroline Buff to buy the gasoline. Another thing, she would not explain to Sarah Lee Cunneen, either. She did not want to do that. Sarah Lee would be so quick, too quick: “Well, for Pete’s sakes, why didn’t you tell me? Listen!” Bettina Goodenough did not want anyone’s charity.

She *did* want to go out to dinner with Mrs. Buff. Oh yes, she wanted that!

Her mind went around and around the cage of her desires.

Sunday rolled quietly on.

The Unholy Three were nibbling at scraps in Agnes Vaughn's apartment — fashionably, this time, since on Sunday nights nobody cooked. They had long since extracted the last bit of juice from the experience of the motion picture. Agnes Vaughn hadn't been crazy about it. She could make up better plots herself. And had.

"Daisy Robinson's away. You notice?" she said, restlessly. "Hasn't come back yet."

Felice Paull said, "*I* told you she went away. *I* saw her car go out."

"It's funny, you know, that nobody saw Nona Henry leaving."

"Mr. Lake knows all about it," said Felice, mashing a sardine between two crackers.

"She must have gone away awful early in the morning," said Agnes. "Awwful early. Friday morning." Agnes uncrossed and recrossed her little feet. "I don't like it."

"Don't like what?"

"If she went early in the morning on *Friday*, then she made up her bed. On *Friday morning*, when Elise was coming in to change the linen? Now, that's funny!"

"She forgot," said Felice, unimpressed.

"I have a hunch . . ." began Agnes. "Somebody ought to look into it." Felice looked up. "Some one of these days," said Agnes accusingly, "*somebody* is going to faint or fall or get sick in this building and be left lying there."

"Nona Henry isn't *in* her apartment," said Felice. "Elise would know."

"I wonder," said Agnes Vaughn.

"Don't look at me," said Felice Paull, "*I'm* not going to do anything. I made a fool of myself, once, over Marie Gardner." The two of them stared at each other. Felice belched. "Oh, they'll be back, maybe tomorrow. Once the weekend's over." She put food into her mouth.

Ida Milbank said wistfully, “The stores will be open.”

Felice Paull said, “You are going with me, tomorrow.”

“Where?”

“Wherever I go,” boomed Felice. “For your own sake, Ida.”

Agnes Vaughn wiped her mouth on a piece of Kleenex. (Nobody could find the paper napkins.) Her small eyes were narrowed. “This has been a funny weekend,” she said. “I don’t feel right.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

“Your digestion is off,” diagnosed Felice.

“My digestion is never off. Why should it be off?”

“You don’t eat properly,” said Felice. This was true. Agnes Vaughn had no proper meals but, like a cow in a meadow, grazed all day. “You don’t take care of yourself.” Felice had argued with Agnes on this score before. “Now, I have some pills that are really very mild . . .”

“You take too many pills,” jeered Agnes.

“There are occasions . . .”

“Oh, go on! Hoo! Hoo! If the good Lord runs my heart and my lungs, and a good deal else, with me bothering . . . Hoo! Hoo! Let *Him* run my intestines.”

Felice Paull’s big eyes began to water with earnestness. Felice had had her food-fad period. She began to expound as much as she could remember. When Ida Milbank’s claw nipped over and stole the sardine-cum-cracker off her plate, she didn’t notice.

Agnes did.

It was late. Or perhaps it was early. They had been asleep. The pattern of the clock was losing shape. It didn’t matter much whether day or night, early or late. There was nothing to do. Nothing to eat. Nona felt depressed. Perhaps it was six in the morning. It could equally possibly be six in the afternoon. Perhaps it was Monday. Nona suspected that, once, she had not wound her watch soon enough. She didn’t much care.

Tess Rogan was propped against the hamper. She looked better. Fine-drawn, but sound enough. “Does your hand hurt?” she asked.

“No, no.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh, I’m furious that I was stupid and cut it. I’m sick that I can’t get us out of here. I’m sorry that I shut the door and got us in.” Nona had fallen into the mood of whipping herself.

“My, my,” said Tess. “You don’t think *you* got us in, do you?”

“Well, of course, I did.”

“Nona, why won’t you look at the evidence?”

“That’s exactly what I am doing. I know it can’t be helped. Don’t cheer me. I’ll cheer up in a minute. Just leave me alone, Tess.”

Tess Rogan said in a moment, “When we get out of here we may rush apart in opposite directions, so sick we’ll be of the sight and the sound of each other. Then, we’ll let each other alone. But not now.”

Nona rolled her head. The back of her neck ached terribly. “I know what *you’ll* say. You’ve said it. This ‘happened.’ It’s ‘happening.’ So it did, and so it is, and I don’t deny it. But why did it happen? Because I was stupid. I can see that, you know.”

“Cause and effect,” said Tess. “I thought so. Will you open your eyes and look a little farther?”

Nona closed her eyes. “I can’t.”

“Do you want me to be quiet, then?”

Nona’s lids stirred. “No,” she said. “I like the sound of your voice, Tess.” She said it easily and rather flatly. But it was as if she had vowed a great love, in music. The little white prison was filled with emotion, enough to swell the heart and stop the breath.

Tess Rogan did not speak for a moment. Then she began, quietly, “I’d like to show you a—point of view. I’d like to give it to you. I wish I could. You are following one thread, your own life-in-time, aren’t you? So, you say to yourself that because you made this or that choice, here comes this knot or that twist in your thread. And so you blame yourself. Well, that doesn’t seem to me to be the way things really are.”

“How else?” said Nona, drearily.

“*Look*,” said Tess. “Here, and now, there *really* is a great complex, multiple threads, all crisscrossing in many dimensions. Some are human. Some animal. Some, like thunder and lightning. How can there be any ‘if only’? What can happen, at *any* moment, without several millions of ifs? Call it chance. Call it contingency. That’s a good word. I read it somewhere. I like it.” Tess had raised her torso.

Nona felt words rattling upon her ears, not sinking in.

“People look down their noses at coincidence in fiction,” said Tess, “but *look!* In *fact*, there is nothing but coincidence. It’s the meaning of time and we are in time. See how people happen to meet, and change each other’s lives?”

“I see that,” said Nona. (It was perfectly obvious. A postal card. So Sans Souci. A fire in the wall. So Tess Rogan. A look out a window. So Winnie Lake. One minute—sooner or later—she wouldn’t have met Robert Fitzgibbon at the elevator. Coincidence? Contingency? Lives changed. Once, by the mercy of God, she had met Val Henry.)

“Don’t you see that you, yourself, are a *wild* coincidence?” Tess pressed on, uncannily along the same line. “Nearly impossible! Think of the matings, male to female, the paths that had to cross for centuries behind you. And one germ out of millions that met one fertilizable egg. Why, the percentage against you having happened, at all . . .”

Nona had her head up. “But here I am,” she said defiantly.

“Of course! That’s *it!* *Here you are!*” Tess glowed. “So, see what you are doing when you put the blinkers on and follow one thread and take so much on yourself. Certainly, you are responsible . . . but not for everything. Get the proportion. See the *real* picture . . . so wild, so wonderful. That’s the fun of it. Things happen.”

Nona’s lips writhed. “I agree,” she said dryly.

“Can you presume to say how many ifs got us here? And keep us here?” Tess demanded. “Or how many will get us out again?”

“Elise will come on Wednesday.”

“*If* . . .” said Tess.

Nona was startled.

“Oh, come now, Nona,” Tess went on in a moment, “you can’t *know* what might be around the corner of the next second. Men break their nerves

assuming that they ought to be able to *know*.”

“I can pretty well guess,” said Nona. “I mean, there are probabilities, Tess.”

“True. Probabilities are very useful.” Tess fell silent and waited.

“There’s such a thing as luck,” said Nona, in a moment. “I’ll admit that much.”

“Do you know what good luck is?” inquired Tess.

“No,” said Nona, “I don’t know whether I know. I haven’t thought . . .”

“I’ll tell you what *I* think it is. It’s knowing that you can’t know, and so being ready to accommodate to the surprises. It’s the rigid who come unlucky to the wall. You cannot march. You have to dance. Don’t you see it, Nona? Balance is the beautiful and useful thing. Like a foot on a high wire. *That’s* why you should observe and be sensitive. Not so as to be finer than a clod, or cherished in a shell, too easily hurt to bear the brunt of ugliness. No, no . . . but just so that you can be swift and easy in the next figure of the dance.”

“I try,” said Nona, “to do the best I can.”

“Oh, stop that,” cried Tess. “You don’t even know what that is. Only God knows what your best might be. Stop *inventing* yourself. Your little design is bound to be too stiff and too small. *You* can’t make a pattern as rhythmic and beautiful and joyous as you can fall in with . . . if you just have the faith to fall.”

“I don’t dare fall,” said Nona, stung by a remembered fear. “I *have* to hold on. I have a devil!” She came forward onto all fours. Confession gushed out. “I was afraid I’d hurt the baby. Something crazy—I never told—but I have a devil. I have to keep it down.”

“The care and feeding of devils,” said Tess Rogan quietly. “Try to keep them down. Hm . . . I wonder what kind of play-acting you were trying to do at that time.”

Nona began to speak forth true, and bitter, words. “I was only trying to act the part of the noble, righteous, courageous”—her voice had started high in self-contempt—“uncomplaining, thoroughly respectable”—her voice was quieting—“most admirable.” She stopped and stared. She said in a voice of wonder, “Why did I think I wanted to be admired? I’ve *had* all that. Whom would I be fooling?”

Tess smiled at her.


Nona pulled her legs around and sat coiled upon the cold tile floor. She felt a strange settling, as if the whole world were settling snugly down around her. She felt it like a cloak or a warm arm enfolding her, taking her in, just as she was. “Here we are,” she said, with a feeling of contentment. She smiled at Tess.

She looked up. This was a small white room. Its furnishings looked very strange from this low eye level. It was all glare, hard, cold. “This room could be improved,” said Nona, “by some flowers. You know that? I think I would like to see something tall and graceful. A blue vase, I think, then some stalks of tall pink, lifting up, some gray leaves at the bottom. A spot or two of deeper blue. Set the whole thing right there, on the back of the W.C. Am I losing my mind?”

“I don’t think so,” Tess Rogan said. “As a matter of fact, it would be very pretty. Right there.”

“Yes, it would,” said Nona Henry. She was quite sure of it.

Chapter 33

 Everything that happened that Monday, at Sans Souci, happened within twenty minutes of time.

Up until the beginning of the series of events that tumbled one upon the other, that fateful day, the Monday had been very quiet. Not one of the widows had returned, not even Daisy Robinson, who had been expected.

At a quarter of five, Morgan Lake was anticipating the end of his stint at the desk. He was feeling a trifle uneasy on account of a bit of a mystery that had been puzzling him all afternoon. In Tess Rogan's mailbox there lay an airmail letter from San Francisco. It had been sent on Saturday. But if Tess Rogan had left for San Francisco on the *Thursday* night, it was strange that someone named Rogan in that city would have written to her at Sans Souci, on *Saturday*. There must be some explanation. . . .

At a quarter of five, Kelly Shane called him from the basement. (And it began.)

"Mr. Lake, I think you better come down here. I don't hardly know what to do."

"What is it?"

"Mrs. Goodenough. She's sitting in her car down here and she's crying, bad."

"But where . . . ?"

Kelly read his mind. "Mrs. Cunneen, she went with Mrs. Buff."

Morgan Lake realized that something extraordinary must have happened. "I'll be right down," he said. He rang the phone in his own apartment. "Rose, could you please?"

"I'm busy," she said brusquely.

"I'm afraid I must ask. Please?" His politeness was, nevertheless, firm and he hung up on her.

It took about one minute of time for Rose Lake to burst out of 103 and move rapidly (because she was annoyed) toward her husband. "I'm *trying* to

fix dinner,” she said. “Why can’t whatever it is wait for Etting?”

Morgan Lake did not say why. He opened the flap, came out and gallantly held it for her to enter.

“I’ve told you,” said Rose, “I don’t *like* to have to do this!” Her face was ugly with resentment. “I’ve *told* you!” Her brown eyes had the reddish light of selfish passion in them. They met Morgan Lake’s gray eyes.

“Thank you, my dear,” said he, and his eyes were calm and cold and relentless.

This was the last look that ever passed between them—husband and wife, so deeply divorced from the beginning.

Morgan Lake went to the elevator and down in it. He came out into the basement, a place of echoes and concrete and the subtle uncleanliness of such places. Bettina Goodenough was not sitting in her car, any more. She had emerged and was standing. Her eyes, he could tell, were red.

Bettina Goodenough was ruined! She had not been able to think of anything, compatible with her desires, that she could *do*. So she had come down with Caroline Buff and Sarah Lee Cunneen, all dressed to the brows for dinner out, on La Cienega Boulevard. She had turned the key to start her car and had deliberately, or in simple panic, done it wrong. The car would not, it seemed, start at all. Bettina had flubbed about, laughing almost hysterically, for a minute or two. “It won’t start,” she had cried. “Ha. Ha. Ha.”

“Then perhaps we’ll take a taxi, after all?” Mrs. Buff had said, unperturbed.

Out of Bettina’s mouth had come a sentence that she had never meant to say aloud. “That’s all right for you, Mrs. Rich Bitch,” she had said, laughing and laughing.

Once said, those words could not be unsaid.

Sarah Lee, the vulgarian, had stiffened with shock. But then, recovering, Sarah Lee had said to Caroline Buff, “Let’s you and me find a cab and go on to dinner. No use to spoil *all* the fun.” She had opened the door of the car and slid out and Mrs. Buff had scrambled to follow her.

“All right!” Bettina had cried after them. “All right!” So childish! Disgraceful! Oh, she was ruined!

Very quietly Sarah Lee Cunneen, her friend, her pal, had abandoned Bettina Goodenough. She had slipped her hand under Mrs. Buff's arm. The two of them had begun to walk up the ramp to the street. They had gone away. To dinner. To some delightful, expensive place.

Bettina, bowed over the steering wheel, had cried bitterly because she was ruined and there was nothing she could do to retrieve any part of her former position and prestige.

But, by now, she had pulled herself together sufficiently to get out of the car, and she stared at Morgan Lake.

"I haven't any money," she said to him, starkly. Ruined! So what matter?

Morgan Lake did not know what could have happened but he said gently, "I haven't pressed you, Mrs. Goodenough. Can I help you?"

Her face jerked. The contortion was misery. Misery. "Let me alone. Let the car alone." She stalked past him and into the elevator. All she wanted was to be alone. Morgan Lake let her go. He blinked and looked about.

Kelly Shane stood there. Tense. Truly concerned and at a loss. Beside him stood the two maids, who were just going off duty. Lily's mouth was agape and her brown eyes lit with curiosity. Elise looked frightened. Elise was wearing a long reddish coat.

Morgan Lake said, "Go along. Just go along."

So the two colored women went along, to the incline, and began to trudge upward.

"Wait a minute. Elise . . ."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lake?"

"When did Mrs. Rogan give you that coat?"

"You was there, sir," said Elise. "It was Thursday." Her voice trembled.

"Yes. Yes, I remember." Morgan Lake made himself smile. "It's all right, Elise. Good night. Good night."

The two women climbed away and he turned to Kelly Shane. He felt bewildered.

Kelly Shane said, in apology, "I didn't know *what* to do, Mr. Lake. Looked like she couldn't get her car started. Shall I try it and see?"

"Not now."

“Well, then, I got to straighten up, and get going,” Kelly said. He was young, strong, intelligent. He turned, on the beautiful muscles of his strong young legs, and went toward the corner which was his workshop.

Morgan Lake, who was neither young nor strong, and less intelligent than intuitive, drifted after him. “What’s that?” he asked. (But he knew! The knowledge hit his heart.)

“Mr. Lake, you told me, this noon, we were going ahead with some of the repairs,” said Kelly Shane reasonably. “The oven man was in 111. You said to get going.”

This was so. Morgan Lake had taken a half hour, in what was dawn to Avery Patrick, to argue with that elusive character the absolute insanity of holding up any more of the repairs that were overdue at Sans Souci.

“Yes, I did,” said Morgan Lake, with his heart and intuition still ahead of his consciousness.

“Well, that’s just the new door for Mrs. Rogan’s bathroom. I went and got it myself. We got to get a man in to fit it and hang it. But first, it’s got to *be* here.” Kelly Shane smiled, all sanity and reason.

“Right,” said Morgan Lake. (And he knew, in his heart!)

Three minutes had gone by since Kelly’s phone call. So soon, to Morgan Lake, had come what might be (but was not) only a terrible suspicion. “Get your tools,” he said to Kelly Shane, “and come with me.”

“What tools do you mean, sir?”

“Mrs. Rogan’s bathroom door.”

So Morgan Lake went, heart quaking, and punched the elevator button, and Kelly Shane gathered up certain tools very quickly, for he understood.

Out in the lobby, Rose Lake stood behind the counter, within the office. She was saying to Winnie on the phone, “Shut off the oven, sweetheart?”

“O.K., Mom.”

“Good evening,” a voice said, and Rose looked up.

“Oh, Mrs. Robinson.”

“I’m a day later than I had planned,” said Daisy Robinson. “I was involved in a bit of a collision.”

Daisy Robinson had had a shock. No intelligent person ought to take a metal monster out upon the streets without the mind being present and alert. Obviously. Now that she had seen the obvious, Daisy Robinson would have to practice the reform she perceived to be necessary. The car had been repaired. She was home safely. But Daisy was not quite herself.

“Too bad.” Rose Lake only mimicked sympathy.

“Not at all,” said Daisy. “It could have been worse and I think I have had a timely lesson. My key? My mail?”

Rose Lake handed Daisy her key and her mail.

Morgan Lake and Kelly Shane went gliding past the lobby floor in the little elevator. On the upper floor, they stepped fast down the east wing. Morgan Lake got out his pass key.

In the bathroom of 201, Nona said, “Listen!”

Tess Rogan said, quick as a wink, “Don’t frighten anyone.”

The world turned right over. They were as good as rescued and they must take care; they must consider the feelings of whoever this might be whose movements within the apartment they could now gratefully hear.

So Nona’s voice, calling from behind the wooden door, came to the ears of Kelly Shane and Morgan Lake with a gay and unalarming quality. “We’re all right. We’re just locked in here. Will you try to get us out, please?”

Kelly Shane surged to the door. His hands, and the tools in them, attacked with sure speed. Wood splintered.

Morgan Lake, however, clasped both hands to his breast and moved slowly, feebly, as bent as an octogenarian. He put his rump on the edge of one of the beds. He sat still, there, trying to still the uproar of his sickly heart.

Five minutes before five o’clock, Kelly Shane pulled powerfully at the damaged door and managed to scrape it open. Nona Henry and Tess Rogan were on their feet, inside, waiting to be released. They were both smiling.

At six minutes before five o’clock, Daisy Robinson, about to reach her own apartment door, paused to look and to listen. Something was out of

order. Tess Rogan's door was standing wide open and, from within, Daisy could hear something being broken.

She put down her suitcase and stuck an inquisitive nose in. Daisy had resolved to be more alert to things going on around her. She followed her nose and was at the bedroom door in time to see Nona Henry and Tess Rogan, looking strange, wearing smiles that were exalted in a curious way, coming slowly past a crooked door. Kelly Shane rolling his eyes. Morgan Lake sitting on the edge of a bed, holding his breast.

"What's going on?" demanded Daisy.

Nona Henry interrupted and canceled, in herself, the delicious weakness of relief. She said to Morgan Lake, "We are quite all right." She said to Kelly Shane, "Thank you." She said to Daisy Robinson, "Daisy, come help me in the kitchen, will you?"

Tess Rogan let go Nona's shoulder and sat herself down upon the other of the two beds. She smiled Tess Rogan's own wide smile at Morgan Lake. "No harm," she said. "Nothing terrible. Oh, my, how nice, to sit on something soft!"

Morgan Lake was, then, able to move his trembling lips. "So sorry . . . so sorry . . . *my* fault!"

It was Nona Henry who turned to say, "Now, that's nonsense, Mr. Lake. It just happened."

Tess twinkled at her.

As for Kelly Shane, he expressed himself by another whack or two at the bathroom door.

Nona Henry found she was well able to cancel that longed-for and most welcome weakness. She walked, instead, to where Daisy stood, clutched her and turned her. They stumbled across Tess Rogan's living room and around the half-wall into the kitchen.

"Open some soup," said Nona. "Heat it, could you please? We haven't had anything to eat . . ."

She let go of Daisy and Daisy, with a look of frantic appeal for explanation, yet began to bang and fumble around the kitchen, blindly opening cupboard doors.

Nona herself reached for a box of Saltines. “I’ll go back and see to them,” she said. “Please, Daisy, could you also phone the doctor?”

“Doctor?” said Daisy thickly.

“Dr. O’Gara. His number’s in Tess’s little book.”

“What *is* all this?” Daisy’s brain cried out, it starved, it thirsted, for information.

“Just call the doctor. Fix the soup,” said Nona. “She’s not very young. No food since Thursday. I’m afraid for Mr. Lake, too. Tell the doctor it’s an emergency.”

Nona herself, clutching the box of soda crackers (as plain food as could be), went, on her own feet, back into the bedroom.

Daisy Robinson, her brain awl and fiercely resenting its own condition, staggered to the phone. Daisy almost never acted without thinking. She scarcely knew how. No, this was not true. She drove a car without thinking, and she had resolved to *try* to be alert to the physical present. Now, she must do as she had been told. She didn’t understand. It was all so bewildering and upsetting. Everything went too *fast*!

Tess was resting against the headboard. Morgan Lake still sat on the other bed. Kelly Shane had knocked the door as far open as it could possibly go.

“Leave it alone, Kelly,” said Nona. “It’s all right, now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Nona sat down by Tess and undid the cardboard lid and held out the box of crackers. Tess took one. Nona took one. She looked at it curiously. She did not particularly want to put it into her mouth. But, when she did, it was ambrosia.

Down in the lobby, Oppie Etting had come in. (Three minutes before five o’clock.) He was inside the counter, holding the flap for Rose to go forth.

Winnie Lake had come into the lobby.

Winnie Lake had had a Monday! All the hours at school, she had not been able to think about classes or listen to the kids or notice what was

happening around her. She thought about her appointment with Dr. Huffman on the Tuesday. She thought about something that she ought to do.

The idea had come to her, so strongly, almost as if Mrs. Henry had told her in her ear. After school, she had kept turning it and turning it in her mind. It seemed to Winnie Lake that she *ought* to tell her mother everything, right now. There was something right about doing that. Not to wait any longer. Not to go alone. Let Rose Lake know what was hanging on this visit to the doctor. Give her own mother, the one who loved her, such a one's right to go with Winnie to that fateful appointment. Whether Rose Lake herself could bear it did not really matter. There were other considerations. Things right and things wrong.

But Winnie had not yet been able to open her mouth and do this right and proper thing.

Totally absorbed in her own problem, she had drifted out to the place where her mother was. Winnie had a feeling that there was not much time. If she were going to do it, and tell her, best do it before her stepfather was present. Let the worst be over. He wasn't well. Spare him some of it. Winnie knew that, whatever Rose would do, it was going to be unpleasant. A shock? A screaming? An uproar? Yet Winnie could not get it out of her head that she ought to tell.

She stood there in the lobby, looking at her mother.

Rose Lake said to Oppie Etting, not pleasantly, "Well, I'm glad to see *you*. I've got my dinner to fix."

"Sure, Mrs. Lake," said Oppie. "Go ahead."

A light came upon the switchboard and Oppie, taking over, plugged in.

Daisy Robinson's agitated voice was audible to all. "Get me Sycamore 23332. This is an emergency."

"Yes, ma'am." Oppie did the proper things with the plugs and the dial. He did not cut himself out. It was not in his nature.

Rose Lake could hear as well as he. Some girl said, "Dr. O'Gara's office."

"This is an emergency. Tell him to come, at once, to Mrs. Rogan's apartment at Sans Souci."

The girl's voice said, "Who is calling, please?"

“Mrs. Robinson. On Mrs. Rogan’s account. Mrs. Rogan *and* Mrs. Henry. Tell him, two patients. No, three. No, two . . .” Daisy was getting all mixed up. She said loudly, “It is a matter of life or death,” grimly and deliberately using a cliché. Then Daisy banged down her instrument.

In the lobby they heard the girl’s voice: “I’ll have him there as soon as . . .” Then she was gone.

Oppie Etting’s very ears turned red with excitement. His eyes bulged. The hours with Harriet Gregory, their many words, overpowered any discretion he might have possessed. “What’s she done!” he cried. “That Mrs. Henry! That murderess!”

“That what?” Rose Lake grabbed for the counter.

“That’s right. That’s what she is!” gasped Oppie Etting, carried completely away. “She was on trial for murder! Long time ago. Some woman, friend of her husband . . .”

“What are you talking about?” Rose Lake hung there.

“*Everybody* knows,” cried Oppie. “Oh my God, what did she do to poor old Mrs. Rogan!”

“What’s the matter with you?” said Winnie Lake in her young clear voice. “You can’t *say* things like that about Mrs. Henry. What’s the matter with you?”

Rose Lake, clutching the counter, turned her head.

Winnie had her hands clenched, her arms stiff at her sides. Her face had a look of singularly pure and exalted anger. “Mrs. Henry is just wonderful! You must be crazy! Don’t you *say* things like that!”

“I guess you never did hear,” said Oppie. He spoke to Rose. “We knew for a long time there *was* a murderess here in the building. Well, I mean, of course, she got off. Changed her name and all . . . but honest, they tried her for *murder*!”

“You’re wrong!” blazed Winnie Lake beside them. “That’s just impossible. Not Mrs. Henry! I don’t care what you think you know. She couldn’t—” Winnie was shaking. “What do you *mean*? Mrs. Henry would never, never have anything to do with anything dirty or horrible or bad. Not for one minute! You’re just crazy! Not Mrs. Henry!”

“She isn’t Mrs. Henry,” said Oppie. “Her real name is Mrs. Quinn.”

Rose Lake let go of the counter and slowly straightened her body. She turned it and took some steps.

“I hope . . . I hope the doctor gets here.” Oppie jittered. “Mrs. Rogan’s probably dying, up there. And maybe Mrs. Henry, too!” He was dancing where he stood with excitement.

Rose Lake was no longer listening. She walked toward her own door.

Winnie Lake was not listening, either. Winnie followed her mother. They moved like a pair of dancers in the same figure, both shocked, both tranced.

When they were inside the apartment Winnie half-closed the door. “Mom?” The one syllable asked for everything.

Rose Lake stood still, her head lowered a little, looking up from under her handsome eyebrows.

Rose Lake could have given Winnie the truth and then the lie. She could have said, “Yes, Winnie, yes, I *was* tried for murder once. But, darling, it was all because I loved you so. Your father got to running around and I fought him, not for myself, but on account of what he was doing to you. I fought him, and fought her, so that when she fell by accident one day, he blamed me. He suspected me. I didn’t hurt her. All I did do—all my fight, all the trouble I got into—was for your sake, because I loved my baby.”

Or Rose Lake could have given Winnie the truth and then the truth. “Yes, Winnie, yes, I was tried for murder once. And it was all because of you. Your father was very young. When he got to running around I fought him and fought her because *I* was very young and I wanted to run around, too. When she fell he blamed me. Well, I didn’t hurt her, but I would have liked to hurt her. I hated her for being free, when I was tied down. I hated you! *I* was young and full of fun as well as they. But you wrecked my life, being born so soon.”

Mercifully, Rose Lake gave Winnie nothing. She kept her mystery.

She said, “Excuse me a minute . . .”

Winnie said, “Mom, what was he saying?”


“Just a minute,” Rose said. She gave Winnie a strange smile . . . a smile that might have come from a stranger. Then Rose went into the bathroom of 103 (an interior bathroom), and she locked the bathroom door.

It was five o’clock, exactly.

Locked within, Rose opened the medicine cabinet. No use. No good. There was no more fooling to be done. Morgan Lake had tablets for his heart and Rose knew what they were. Rose Quinn had been dead for fourteen years. Nothing was any fun or ever would be. There was no fooling Rose Lake any more. Married to a man who gave her nothing but kindness; this was intolerable. Winnie was lost, no matter. For fourteen years, the woman playing the tiger-mother had been not Rose. Not the real Rose, but a crushing burden. Yet without that—what was she?

Rose put all the tablets into her mouth. A glass of water. A motion of the throat; then no more to bear.

Chapter 34

 Three minutes after five o'clock. The phone in Tess Rogan's apartment rang. Daisy Robinson, spattered with tomato soup because her body, lurching about trying to be helpful, still had no guidance from her painfully confused mind, went to pick up the phone. "It's for you, Nona," she croaked.

Nona Henry had eaten three soda crackers and felt a supernatural strength flowing into her. She rose and went into the living room to the phone. "Who in the world? I wonder if it's my daughter . . ." (Should she tell Dodie about this adventure?)

"Mrs. Henry?" It wasn't Dodie.

"Yes?" She caught the identity. "Winnie?"

"I'm so scared." The girl's voice shook. "I don't know what to do. Please . . ."

"What's the matter?"

"My mother's locked in the bathroom. She won't answer when I call . . ."

"Won't *answer*?" Nona lowered her voice and looked behind.

"I'm afraid for my dad . . . he's not here. But I can't call *him*. I know she fell. I could hear it. I think . . . I'm afraid . . . and I'm bleeding," said Winnie, "I'm bleeding, Mrs. Henry, just terribly."

"Try to be quiet." Nona's mind was supernaturally clear. "Your father is *here*, and all right. Just be quiet. I'll come myself. We'll see."

She hung up and saw Kelly Shane standing there, still waiting to be helpful. "Kelly, get those tools. Don't say anything to Mr. Lake. But then, you come with me."

She said to Daisy Robinson, "Give her the soup and be quiet. Don't say I've gone."

Daisy dithered.

"Mr. Lake's heart's not strong," said Nona. "Take care."

"The doctor . . ." Daisy mewed. If only all this were printed in a book!

“Yes, he’s coming. Kelly, you help me.”

“Sure will, Mrs. Henry.”

So Nona clung to his young arm and they went out of 201 and down the corridor.

Lo, Agnes Vaughn stood in her wide-open door. Agnes Vaughn must have had extrasensory perception. “What’s wrong?” she demanded.

“I’m not quite sure,” said Nona coolly. She looked at the dumpy little woman propped up on inadequate little feet. “There is nothing you can do.”

Then, to Kelly, she said, “We had better take the stairs. I’m hoping we will meet . . . ah! Doctor!”

Young crew-cut Dr. O’Gara was pounding around the corner, having run up the stairs.

“*They* are all right, for the moment,” Nona said to him quickly. “Doctor, I think you had better come with us.”

So the three of them got into the little elevator, leaving Agnes Vaughn frozen where she stood. (Nobody knew better than Agnes that there was nothing she could *do*. Agnes Vaughn had high blood pressure. She had better not do, physically. She could guess, quite clearly, how *she* would die, someday. She knew her limitations and her fate.)

In the same cage rode the young colored man, very steady and quick to obey, and the young doctor, reading emergency and ready for it. Neither of them blurted out agitated questions. There was Nona Henry, who said to them calmly, “Mrs. Lake is locked in her bathroom and has fallen.” She nearly fell, herself. They quickly steadied her. “I have had three soda crackers to eat since Thursday’s dinner,” she said giddily.

The doctor’s fingers went to her wrist. “You are fine,” he said. “I’ll look at that hand . . .”

“No, it’s fine,” she said.

Kelly Shane said warmly, “Yes, *sir*. Mrs. Henry, she’s *fine!*”

Nona scarcely heard.

They got out at the lobby floor. Oppie Etting was still dancing where he stood. “What is it? What’s happening?”

Not one of the three so much as glanced at him. Nona, peering, said, “The door seems to be open.”

So they crossed the lobby to the door of the Lakes' apartment and Kelly Shane pushed it wider.

The place was very still. Then a little whimper led them. Winnie Lake was in her own bedroom, sitting on the bed, so white in the face that for the first time Nona noticed four freckles along her cheekbone.

Nona said, "All right, Winnie." She sank down beside her. "Kelly, you had better open that bathroom door. Doctor, meantime, this girl . . ."

The doctor took in what was the matter with Winnie, at once. He pushed her back gently so that she was lying flat. They could hear Kelly Shane calling, "Mrs. Lake? Mrs. Lake?" The apartment was very still. Then, they could hear wood splitting.

The doctor poked a bit and said something reassuring. He fished into his bag for a pill. He glanced at the two females and rose, himself, to go to the kitchen for some water.

Nona touched the girl's cheek.

Kelly Shane made a strange moaning, keening sound. . . . The doctor darted in, handed Winnie a glass of water, and went back into the hall.

Winnie said drearily, "Mr. Etting was talking about some murder. . . . Didn't you go away?"

"No. Mrs. Rogan and I were locked in upstairs," Nona said, as if this were nothing worth much comment.

"He said you were Mrs. Quinn."

"Hush. Take that pill. Lie still. Whatever is happening . . ." is happening, Nona's mind finished.

They could hear very little sound. Soon, the doctor came back. He said, "I'm afraid she has taken something. Strychnine, I'm guessing, and I'm sorry . . ." He let a beat of silence tell them. Then, he told them. "There's nothing to be done."

Nona's hand held Winnie's tightly. "Poor thing," said Nona, "ah, poor thing. But now . . ." She braced up. "Doctor, her husband is upstairs in Mrs. Rogan's room. His heart is not supposed to be strong. He's had one bad shock already. Could you . . .?"

The doctor said, "Yes. Yes, I'll tell him. I'll take care." He was strong, and he was kind. "This is her daughter?"

“Yes. Winnie will be all right. I’ll stay.” Nona was strong, too.

“That sudden hemorrhaging,” said the doctor kindly, “isn’t surprising—tension and shock. Just keep her very quiet. She’s young. She’ll do.”

He went off.

There hadn’t been any baby.

Winnie said, “My mother . . . why?”

And Nona called out suddenly, “Kelly! Kelly Shane!” Kelly put his dark head in at the door. “You go out there and tell Mr. Etting to *shut* his *mouth*, and to shut it *tight*. You tell him he doesn’t know *anything*.”

“I’ll tell him,” said Kelly with relish.

“There isn’t any need,” said Nona half to herself. “Sans Souci doesn’t ever have to know who Mrs. Quinn was. Let them wonder.”

Winnie said, eyes closed, “My mother is dead.”

“Yes. And you . . . there wasn’t any baby . . .”

“I know,” said Winnie and sighed. “You were upstairs all this time, Mrs. Henry? I thought . . . I told Dad you had gone to Seattle.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Nona said softly. (Ah, she thought, the if-ish-ness of everything! If I hadn’t mentioned going to Seattle. How many ifs did it take, I wonder, for Rose Lake to die?)

The girl had opened her eyes and now Nona realized, with a bit of surprise and then with at least the promise of rejoicing, that those eyes no longer adored. They were thoughtful eyes, friendly to Nona Henry, eager to communicate, ready to trust and to respect, but they were the eyes of a person.

“About my mother . . .” said Winnie. “Do you know I feel, in a way . . . glad? I guess I’m sorry that it’s so. But it is so.”

“I can understand if it is so,” said Nona gently.

“Why did she?” Winnie wondered.

“You will have to remember that we can’t *possibly* know that,” said Nona slowly. “But it wasn’t because she ever murdered anybody, I’m quite sure. Your dad will be able to tell you about the trial, the whole thing. Do you know what I imagine?” She wasn’t preaching. There were two minds here, exchanging.

“I imagine,” Nona went on, “that it was something that happened to her, a very bad time she’d had, when she was young. A secret. There are lots of those.”

Winnie smiled wanly. “I was going to tell her.”

“Not now,” said Nona gently. “No need. I don’t believe that your mother, in herself, was very happy.”

“Never,” Winnie said. “She never was.”

“I think you must forgive her,” Nona said. “I think that’s all for you to do.” (Be healed, thought Nona.)

Winnie nodded. “Maybe,” she said in a moment, “all that bad time . . . that was why she was so, you know, abnormal about me. I think so.”


“It could very well be,” said Nona, fondly. “Try to be quiet, dear.”

“I’ll be O.K.,” said Winnie Lake. “I . . . kind of seem to understand. It’s a lot to get used to. Now she’s gone. And no baby. And Len . . . everything will be new, now.”

Twenty minutes. Tess Rogan and Nona Henry, discovered and released. Winnie’s question answered. Rose Lake dead. There was a widower, in Sans Souci.

Winnie Lake was crying. Silent tears slipped out of her eyes. Nona Henry understood. Weeping for what was gone. Pleasant or unpleasant, easy or difficult, loved (and for that reason?) hated—no matter. It was gone and it would be no more. Tears for the old needed to be shed, if only to wash the young heart ready for whatever new was to come.

Chapter 35

 So much was happening, there was so much to talk about in Sans Souci, that Agnes Vaughn not only did not need to invent a *thing*, but found herself panting on the heels of the latest advices, actually running with the pack (although, of course, she was among the first to know).

There was so much to know, indeed, that some tidbits were simply run over in the stampede and never did get the widow's full attention.

News came, for instance, on the Tuesday morning, that Elna Ames had died in that nursing home. Since, to all intents and purposes, as far as Sans Souci was concerned, she had already died, there was little lamentation and less discussion. A question or two about who might go to her funeral. . . .

(In fact, nobody from Sans Souci went to her funeral. She had been a quiet woman.)

That same Tuesday morning Leila Hull finally returned. She did not look like the same person. Her hair was white, now, and dressed neatly, close to her head. She had new eyeglasses. She was much thinner. Her manner was subdued. She came braced against the curiosity she expected to find besieging her. Nobody besieged her. Too much else was happening.

Then, also, Agnes Vaughn automatically noted that Joan Braverman was leaving the building later than usual and guessed that she must have lost her position. But Agnes found this deduction quite dull. So Joan and Kitty worried together in an astonishing privacy. In fact, it was rather deflating. Joan Braverman went in and out with large eyes, feeling invisible. She had begun to feel strange twinges in her body and to wonder about her health.

One more incident went down to oblivion.

Tuesday morning, Sarah Lee Cunneen knocked and at once opened, as was her old habit, Bettina Goodenough's door. "Hi! Feeling better?" Sarah Lee came in, just as she usually did, toes turned out, face a little red and shining.

Bettina Goodenough felt a boom of hope in her bosom and her entire attitude turned over. "I have been *worried* about *sick*," she confessed, tilting her head and looking strained. "But I'm O.K., now. I just called my

daughter, long-distance, and borrowed some money.” Bettina’s chin went up. As I had the right to do, it added.

“Well, for Pete’s sake, why didn’t you tell me?” cried Sarah Lee. “Listen! Why didn’t you *say* something?”

Sarah Lee didn’t seem to realize that pride could have been involved. Of course, she was sometimes a little crude, a little vulgar, not very proud. Bettina felt herself flushing.

“I said something.” Bettina let out an hysterical little toot, and in another second they were both laughing.

After a while, Sarah Lee hit Bettina on her forearm. “You didn’t miss much. Oh, the food was good. But she’s too stiff for me. Yatida, yatida—you know! No sense of humor. Didn’t ask me *in* to her place, either.”

“She’ll never ask *me*. Hah! Hah!”

“You should care!”

“Care?” shouted Bettina. “Life’s too short!” (*She’ll* never quote me, thought Bettina. Phooey on Caroline Buff!)

“Say,” said Sarah Lee, sobering and getting down to the business of the day, “have *you* heard . . . ?”

How Tess Rogan and Nona Henry had been locked up in that bathroom since last Thursday! Imagine! Terrible! Dangerous! Frightening! Why, Mrs. Fitz was back in bed, this morning, and no wonder. Why, it was enough to scare a person out of her wits! Who in Sans Souci would ever again be reckless enough or stupid enough (or brave enough) to lock her bathroom door? There were those who had always said . . .

Felice Paull was going around proclaiming that a lawsuit against the owner of Sans Souci was not only sure to be won, but a civic duty. She was right, too!

But guess-who was the owner! Avery Patrick! The man in 102! *He* was actually the *owner* of Sans Souci. Now it came out! Well!

(Chops were being licked. Felice Paull was going to have her kitchen painted or else. Agnes Vaughn was thinking about getting the heat to keep coming up much later into the night. Why not? Why should *she* go to bed early? Sometimes she didn’t feel like it.)

All this—shocking, exciting or promising as it might be—*all this* paled before the fact and the manner of Rose Lake’s death.

Rose Lake! Such a young woman! (Furthermore, a woman who still had a man!) It was terrifying; it was thrilling. To think that she had done it herself! Took something. Wished to die. And *nobody knew why!*

Not a word had gone around linking Rose Lake with Mrs. Quinn. Oppie Etting had his mouth shut so tight (in *his* terror) that he had thoroughly antagonized Harriet Gregory. She, in a state of frustration, fear and frenzy, ran in and out of her own place, taking pills, and then not able to bear the silence, haunting the patio, the lobby, the corridors, and ringing doorbells, hunting for someone to listen to her.

Poor Harriet was so hysterically repetitious nobody wanted to listen. Mrs. Fitz was not well, and Georgia had no time. The Gadabouts did not need her. Agnes Vaughn let her in but even Agnes said to her, “We *heard*, Harriet. Look, either sit down and keep quiet once in a while or . . .”

Harriet took offense.

Very quietly, that evening, she slipped downstairs. Her heart pounded. Elna Ames was dead. Rose Lake was dead. People died. She was afraid. People were punished. No one let off. But she, Harriet, had done no wrong. Nobody *understood*.

Caroline Buff opened her door.

“Mrs. Buff?” Harriet wished to be sweet as a dove’s coo, but her voice was more like the scrape of a knife upon a china plate. “May I come in? I want to apologize.”

“Oh, but I’m sure . . .”

“I think I was very rude to you the other day.”

“Why not at all, Mrs. Gregory. Will you come in?” Caroline Buff had been writing some letters, peacefully and quite happily.

Harriet came in and sat on the edge of a chair. She twisted her face into a most peculiar grimace. “Did you know,” said Harriet, “that my maiden name was Goldfarb?”

“Was it, indeed?” Caroline Buff’s fine gray eyes did not really care what Harriet Gregory’s maiden name had been.

But now Harriet, as if she had put in a claim upon the older woman's attention and proposed to collect, began to talk feverishly. Out came the story about her genius-husband, his manuscripts, her devoted far-off children. But she lost her grip on this old fantasy and plunged zigzag into denunciations and comparisons within Sans Souci. "So foolish to have locked themselves in. Really . . ." Her hands flew. She smoked violently. "With any breeding . . . Haven't you wondered how it was that they *both* . . . ? In a *bathroom*?" Her eyes glittered maliciously.

Mrs. Buff said, concealing her distaste, "Isn't it sad about the manager's wife?"

Harriet Gregory disapproved of suicide on moral grounds. She would *not*, she said, go to Rose Lake's funeral. She seemed to think that to do so might condone a sin.

Caroline Buff let her run on for almost half an hour. Then, if a little sadly, still very skillfully she rose and put poor Harriet out.

Poor Harriet Gregory. The loneliest widow of them all. Even Marie Gardner, in her hermit's cell, was less lonely than Harriet. In Marie's misty world she, at least, was meeting some of her selves. But Harriet Gregory had no self. There was nothing there—a blob, a throb of animal fear, nothing much more—behind the twitching ever-changing mask.

Rose Lake was dead! Suicide! The widows clucked and gasped. Poor Winifred! Poor girl, what would become of her? Poor Morgan Lake, his heart . . . ! Had they heard? Such a shock for him! (How thoughtless of Rose!) Of course he was *all right* . . . as far as anyone knew.

Young Dr. O'Gara had taken over. With no patience for half measures, he had dispatched Morgan Lake to a hospital for a three-week period of complete rest and some complicated tests. Morgan Lake was, in fact, forbidden any physical connection with his own tragedy. He had not been allowed to see his wife's body. And he was not to be permitted to attend her funeral on the Wednesday.

Who would go?

Mrs. Fitz was not strong enough; Georgia couldn't leave her.

Caroline Buff never even thought of such a thing.

The Gadabouts did not *want* to go. They said they hadn't *known* the woman. They *might* have gone for Mr. Lake's sake but if he wasn't going to *be* there . . .

It was Daisy Robinson who said she saw no use in making an empty gesture. This went like wildfire around the building and became very popular as an excuse.

Tess Rogan, who was not going, gave no excuse at all.

It was Nona Henry who went to Rose Lake's funeral and stood by Winnie Lake. With them was another girl, about Winnie's age. She was the daughter of Avery Patrick.

The only other person from Sans Souci who attended (for the colored staff had to stay on duty) was Avery Patrick himself. He managed to get through it, although sweat burst on his brow, for he was hung over. He was, also, betrayed and exposed and no one knew, better than he, that *his* life would not be the same again.

Winnie Lake was still asleep in Nona Henry's apartment when Avery Patrick rang the doorbell on Tuesday morning.

Nona knew who and what he was. Last night the police, called by Dr. O'Gara as was the law, had soon found out who owned the building. And where he was. And how to get hold of him.

"How is the little girl?" he asked.

"Asleep. Come in, Mr. Patrick." Nona took him into the living room, as far away as could be from the bedroom door.

"I . . . er . . . the thing is, Mrs. Henry, Lake's my cousin. Now, he's worried about the kid, naturally."

"Naturally," said Nona. "I'm worried, too. You do know that he's her stepfather?"

"Yes, yes." It made Avery nervous to know she knew.

"Where is her real father, do you know that?"

"No, I don't." His nervous eyes fled.

"Does Mr. Lake know?"

"I don't think so."

“Then, what is to become of her?”

“That’s what I thought we might have a talk about.” He stretched all the creases around his eyes. “I understand, in fact I *know*, that there is a sum of money put aside for her college education.”

“Ah, that’s fine,” said Nona. “But she has to finish out this year in high school and there’s the summer.”

Avery Patrick rubbed the dark spot under one eye. “Mrs. Henry, I . . . er . . . am divorced. Now, it happens I have a daughter, Elizabeth is her name, who is now in her first year of college. Well, she’s met Winnie Lake on occasion. Through the years, you know? She lives with her mother but she visits me. The fact is, Liz is in town right now.”

“In town? Here?”

“No, no, she’s at the Miramar in Santa Monica. No, I’ve never had her *here*. I talked to Liz on the phone this morning. She suggests . . . and it *may* be possible . . . that Winnie go east with her.”

“Oh?”

“For a visit. With Morgan in that hospital . . . Liz says she doesn’t see why not. Might be a good thing. She *could* transfer to a high school back there. My ex-wife . . . well . . . Liz says it’s quite all right. What do you think, Mrs. Henry? You have been very good to Winnie. Frankly, I think that you were wonderful last night.” Avery Patrick pushed out admiration. “I know you are fond of her,” he said, “but I don’t suppose *you* want to take the girl in permanently.”

In statement form, Avery Patrick was asking a question: “*Are* you going to take the girl in permanently? Or do *I* have to do something about her?”

Nona said, “You ask me what I think? All right. I think I’d like to meet your daughter, Mr. Patrick.”

“Well . . . er . . . I was going to suggest that I drive Winnie out to Santa Monica.”

“Couldn’t your daughter come here?”

“Here?” Avery Patrick looked frightened.

“Frankly,” said Nona Henry, “I would like to see what kind of girl your daughter is.”

Avery rolled his eyes. He despaired. What was the use? He was naked to the truth. The widows would now be at him, like a swarm of wasps. He might as well give up. Let Liz see how and where he really lived, the whole shabby makeshift texture of his life.

Besides, he wished to please this woman, this Mrs. Henry. He had a reason. He couldn't afford to take offense.

So he beamed, or thought he did. "That's an *excellent* suggestion. I'll call Liz. Yes. You can expect her, I'm sure, this afternoon. In fact, *I* have so much, so many problems, right here . . ." Avery Patrick looked helpless in a masculine sort of way. "I don't quite know what I am going to do, frankly. Morgan in the hospital. Well, of course, Etting is all right here at night. What am I going to do by day?"

"I don't know," said Nona pleasantly.

"What occurs to me, Mrs. Henry"—Avery bugged out his eyes with admiration—"would *you* consider taking the desk? Temporarily?"

"I?"

He was producing the male equivalent of stars in the eyes. "I couldn't help noticing how you took over last night. You are so capable. Of course, I know you don't *need a job*. But I would appreciate the lift. It would be doing me, and Morgan Lake of course, the greatest favor. There would be a salary . . ."

"Not I," said Nona.

"What am I going to do?" he said. His eyelashes had not given up yet.

"Frankly, I suppose you are going to hire someone."

"How can I get hold of someone, this minute?" Avery Patrick's voice showed a tinge of temper.

"Who is downstairs on the desk, this minute?"

"Kelly Shane."

"Why don't you let Kelly Shane take the desk, by day?"

Patrick rolled his eyes.

"He knows this place. He is an intelligent young man. I can't think who would be better. Is his mother back today?"

"Yes. Yes, she's in."

“Then let the two of them run Sans Souci,” snapped Nona. “They’ll do it quite well. As well as usual.”

Avery Patrick mopped his neck, gave her a hurt look, and got up and walked to the windows. He peered out upon the patio. Ralph, the gardener, was working down there. His rump was visible among the shrubs. “Frankly,” said Avery, “if I could sell this place in the next fifteen minutes I would get rid of it.”

“Perhaps you *should* sell it,” Nona said. “You don’t really run it, do you?”

He turned a world-weary smile upon her. “Mrs. Henry, no landlord gets any sympathy. Now, I know what the tenants would *like*. But I cannot afford some of the things . . . I can *not* put in modern kitchens, for instance. The remodeling expense!”

“Most of these women,” said Nona slowly, “have never had a modern kitchen.”

“Believe me when I *say*,” said Patrick, “if I did put in modern kitchens, and so on, I’d get higher rents and younger people.”

“These women have to live somewhere,” Nona said.

He did not produce the old gag line “not necessarily.” He said in a moment, rather darkly, “If I sell this corner, the building will be torn down.”

“Why don’t you run it?” she said, not belligerently but in a musing tone. “Modern kitchens aren’t necessary. This building was new when these women were—new. It is familiar to them. Maybe a building and its tenants should grow old together.”

He wasn’t getting her message.

“You *could* run it and make it pay . . .” she went on. “Oh, not a fortune. But a living. Of course, you would have to spend *some* money to make money.” (Who was saying this? she wondered fleetingly.)

Patrick mopped at his neck. “Frankly, running an apartment building isn’t my real business. I suppose . . . a couple for instance, man and wife, working together, *could* run it and get a fair living.”

His grasshopper mind had jumped. His nervous eyes were running up and down Nona’s body.

Oh no, no, thought Nona, vastly amused. Not I. Not again. What? Accommodate to another male personality and grope, *again*, for just and

pleasant compromises between a man's ways and my own? Not I!

“Well, that is *your* problem,” she said sweetly. “I’ll be happy to meet your daughter. And, thereafter, to say what I think.”

Avery Patrick was still thinking of Sans Souci. “Should I turn the whole thing over to Morgan Lake? I could move out. I could take . . . well, a kind of time payment.”

“You’d have to wait and see how his health is going to be,” said Nona judiciously.


She seemed to have the power to advise; this was strange.

“That’s right,” said Avery. “Well, then . . . thank you.” He put on a haunted look and scurried out.

When he had gone, Nona reflected. She hadn’t asked for power or any say in the management of Sans Souci. She didn’t want it. But she could not help wondering whether Morgan Lake was the man to take over, to run this place.

She hadn’t asked for power over the fate of Winnie Lake. But when it came upon you, what did you do? Nona would have a good hard look at this daughter. She would use all the judgment she had. Never mind the Laws of Men! She was fond of Winnie Lake and she was concerned about her and she would advise. And love was responsibility and, *therefore*, influence, and *that* was the law.

Chapter 36

 The confusion and excitement, the death of Rose Lake and Nona's involvement in all this, had kept Nona away from Tess Rogan until the Tuesday.

Just before noon, after Avery Patrick had called, Nona went around to see how Tess was.

Tess was fine. She seemed almost totally recovered. She moved around her rooms with her step nearly as light as it had ever been.

They sat down at the dinette table for coffee and a sweet roll. "Still hungry," sighed Nona. "Aren't you? Doesn't it taste delicious?"

Tess grinned. Nona, grinning back, discovered (with the promise of rejoicing) that while she felt a strong bond here, a complete confidence in the possibility of communication, yet she did not "adore" this remarkable old woman. Tess was Tess. Her ways were Tess Rogan's way. Nona Henry herself would have other ways. Not for Nona the same passivity or acceptance or what she had called "too much detachment." Nona herself (whoever she was) would behave differently. At least, she thought, until I'm seventy-one.

But how marvelous and delightful the communication between them. Now, Nona told her all about Rose Lake, Mrs. Quinn, and Winnie's secrets too.

"So now," she wound up, "all that is over and nothing is to be said, that I can see. The boy is dead. Her mother is dead. As Winnie says herself, everything is going to be new for her. But the practical question is, where can she go? Live? With whom? I doubt if living with her stepfather, here, is the best idea. Mr. Patrick seems to think that his ex-wife might let her visit indefinitely. Now it could be a fine thing for the poor child to get far away. But who knows what kind of woman? What kind of home? A divorcee? College is coming up in the winter and that solves that problem. It's the summer . . ."

Tess had no glib answers.

"How long is it going to take you to go around the world?" asked Nona impishly. "All summer?"

Tess said, “As long as I . . . fancy, I imagine.” She jumped a paragraph. “But I’m not going to take Winnie Lake with me, around the world.”

“No, I know.” Nona hadn’t really thought so.

Tess looked at her, smiling.

“I know,” said Nona. “Winnie has got to learn the first part of life, first. She isn’t ready to travel your way—and observe.”

Tess said, “How about you?”

Nona felt a great pleasure. She said, “Thank you, Tess. But no. Not I.”

“I thought not,” said Tess and her grin grew wider. “You’re too busy. You’re not old enough either.”

“I am learning the second part,” said Nona. “I’m in *that* kindergarten.”

They understood each other very well.

In the middle of the afternoon Miss Elizabeth Patrick turned up at Sans Souci. She breezed into Nona’s apartment. “Hi! I’m Liz Patrick. Hello, Mrs. Henry. Hi, Winnie. Look, I’m sorry about your mother. How are you?”

“Hi!” said Winnie feebly. “I’m O.K.” She was; the bleeding had subsided to normal.

The newcomer sat down on one foot and dangled the other. She wasn’t a pretty girl but she was smartly turned out. She had a brisk air and a friendly smile. She looked competent and she was not in the least self-conscious. “You’ve sure had a bad time,” she said. “Gosh, haven’t seen *you* for two years, isn’t it? Listen, *I* think you ought to just cut out of here. So why don’t you come home with me? I’m leaving Thursday.”

“How can I?” Winnie gasped. “What do you mean? Your mother has never even seen me.”

“The thing of it is,” said Liz, “you’ve got to go somewhere. Pop feels kind of responsible.”

(Oh, he does, thought Nona, silent, observing.)

“And my mother’s the hospitable type,” went on Liz blithely. “*She* wouldn’t mind, honest.”

“But, there’s school . . .” Winnie gulped.

“Heck, you could transfer to my old high school. Why not? I know all the kids. It wouldn’t be so bad. Might be fun. Then, who knows, probably you could get into Perkins in the fall. That’s where I go. It’s a real neat college.”

Winnie was dumb. Nona looked this girl over shrewdly.

“You are pretty free with your invitations,” she said bluntly. “You girls haven’t met often, have you? What if it turns out you don’t like Winnie? Or your mother doesn’t?”

“My mother lets people come and go,” said Liz, waving a hand. “So do I, I guess. Anyhow, what else is she going to do? Why shouldn’t she take a chance on us?”

Nona was compelled to smile. “What generation are *you*?” she challenged.

“I don’t see why it couldn’t be fun,” persisted Liz, brushing off a silly question. “I wouldn’t mind a kind of sister, you know. Under-the-wing stuff.”

Color was coming into Winnie’s face.

“She’s not an absolute drip, either,” said Liz judiciously. “She’s real cute. She turned out cuter than I am.” Liz, however, was not (one saw) afraid of the competition.

Winnie turned her burning face. “What shall I do, Mrs. Henry? I don’t want to be a bother . . .”

Nona sat straighter. “There is entirely too much thought and said about being a *bother*,” she pronounced. “Why shouldn’t we bother each other? So help me, Winnie, I am going to *tell* you what to do. Go with this girl. What you need in the worst way is some fun.”

She looked at Liz, “And I think *you* are the one to see to that. And I’m inclined to think . . .”

She swallowed back the end of the sentence: Someone, maybe your mother, maybe yourself, or maybe God, has raised you very well. Because *you* are somebody.

“The fact is,” she said, instead, “I’ve been giving this poor child the benefit of *my* advice and much too much. It’s a frailty of us older women. Enough is enough. She’s had a bad time, but it’s over.”

“So live already!” Liz moved one shoulder. “O.K., why not settle it, right now. We’ve got stuff to do.” Liz got up. “We better go over your clothes,” she pronounced solemnly. “That’s important.”

Winnie got up. “Thursday? Day after tomorrow?”

“It’s only sensible,” said Liz, “if we fly back together. A lot more *fun*, too.”

“She’s right,” said Nona softly.

Winnie said, “Then, I . . . Wait till I get some shoes on?” She ducked away into the bedroom. She moved, Nona perceived, as if she had shed five years in five minutes.

Nona looked at Liz Patrick with open respect. “You amaze me,” she murmured.

“Why?” Liz Patrick cocked an eyebrow. “Because my father and mother got divorced, I’m supposed to be a crazy mixed-up kid? I’ll clue you. Not *everybody* from so-called broken homes goes to pieces. That’s a lot of mullarky.” Liz stretched. “Come on, Winnie. Where is your stuff? If we are flying you’ll have to express most of it.”

“I’ve never flown,” gasped Winnie.

“It’s real neat,” said Liz. “You’ll like it. Come on, Mrs. Henry; better give us the benefit of your advice.”

Nona, crowing inside with delight, followed them downstairs.

If tragedy haunted the silent Lakes’ apartment, two chattering girls sorting out petticoats and sweaters set it so far out of their path that Nona Henry forgot about it, too.

But on Wednesday at Rose Lake’s funeral, when Nona stood between the two of them for the ritual, recognition and acceptance of the tragedy, she could feel that Liz Patrick was perfectly composed. Tragedy was tragic. Death was dead. Liz was respectful. She was alive. And on the other side of Nona, Winifred Lake was perfectly steady.

The world *is* new, thought Nona. In the midst of death we are in *life*! By God’s mercy!

Afterwards, the three of them went to visit Morgan Lake in the hospital.

He was in the men's ward, lying quietly, looking very peaceful. When they told him Winnie's plans he gravely agreed. He was fond, but he was detached.

He was grateful to Nona Henry, but from far away.

Morgan Lake was in retreat. For him, life would now become all new . . . but not yet. A little later. First, he must get to the point of tears and weep for what would never be again. He had not wept, yet.

What he perceived, at the moment, was that he no longer functioned as a buffer. Wherever he had been the buffer, now he was there no longer. The widows of Sans Souci were meeting the owner, head on.

And Rose Lake, gone. Nobody could stand between her and the world. Nobody could stand between her and her grave. Or between her child and the world, any more. Winnie was free and running head on toward life.

He, Morgan Lake, was expendable. So he was let off. He could rest. (What am I? he thought, fleetingly.)

He could not know that Nona Henry was turning in her mind his future. Oh, he was a goodhearted man. But weak, she thought. No force. (She liked forceful people. Perhaps one tended to like what one *was*?) She wasn't sure that Morgan Lake had it in him to run—really run—Sans Souci.

It needed a good heart; yes, it did.

It needed strength, too. One must be strong enough not to be thoughtlessly kind.

But what was it to be kind?

Winnie and Liz went chattering off to spend the night together in Santa Monica where, as Liz said, the hotel was *neat*.

So Nona Henry was alone, on the Wednesday night. She reveled in the welcome solitude. About eight o'clock she thought she'd drop around and have a word with Tess.

"Tess?" She tapped again.

In a moment she heard movement and Tess Rogan's voice from the other side of the closed door. "Nona?"

"It's me. Can I come in?"

"Not just now," Tess said. "Would you excuse me? Another time."

“Well, of course,” said Nona surprised. Rejected, since the wood of the door remained flat and unwinking before her face, Nona turned to retrace her steps.

But she took no offense. It was strange, but all she felt was wonder. What was going on, that Tess could not let her in? So deep was Nona’s faith that she believed, quite simply, there must be some good reason.

Back at her own door, Nona saw the door across the hall wag open. Mrs. Fitz peered out. Her small pink face looked peaked. Her soft lips seemed to nibble. “Nona?” she said weakly.

“Yes, Mrs. Fitz?”

“I am all alone,” said Mrs. Fitz. “I’m feeling a little shaky. I wonder . . . could you . . . ?”

“What is it?” asked Nona. She felt no anger, whatsoever. She realized that she had forgotten it. (She must have *forgiven* it!)

“I wonder . . . if you could just . . . come in and chat a moment? I’m sure, my dear, that you and I can be good friends. Robert thinks so much of you.” (How much had Mrs. Fitz “forgotten”?)

The old lady’s voice was a bit high. *Weke, Weke*, thought Nona. What a whining little mouse we have here!

“I’m sorry,” she said with a smile, “I have things to do, Mrs. Fitz.” (I bear her no grudge, she thought, which is peculiar enough, but I will *not* pretend to subscribe to her legend.)

Still she couldn’t help saying in simple concern, “If it’s important—where is Mrs. Oliver?”

“Of course, if you are busy,” said Mrs. Fitz, vaguely. She began to pull back that small pointed pink face—mouse into hole. “It’s not important. You mustn’t let me keep you, at all. I understand.”

Nona Henry went into her own apartment.

She didn’t understand. She didn’t worry, really. What is happening? she wondered.

Inside 201, Tess Rogan went back into the living room where the fair-haired woman, on her knees, held the fair head wrapped in both arms where

it lay on the soft sofa seat. Georgia Oliver was sitting on the floor, weeping into the sofa.

“I can’t,” she sobbed, “fool myself. You won’t *say*. You won’t *tell* me. But I *know*! I *know* she had something to do with it. She knew, *all the time*, that you were locked in there. Why wouldn’t she ever let me close her bathroom door? Long ago. Before anybody had any idea, long before they found you. Why *was* that? And why wasn’t she surprised?” Georgia lifted her tear-stained face. “And why,” she almost whispered, “was she having trouble with the light switches? Oh, please help me! If she knew—that is evil! And she *did* know! Mrs. Fitz knew where you were. Didn’t she? Didn’t she? I’m sure she came here. Daisy Robinson . . . Don’t you see how I need to *know*?”

“I can’t tell you,” said Tess sadly, “whether she ‘knew’ we were locked in there—or not.”

“I *know*,” breathed Georgia. “I know. And that is terrible! What am I going to do? I can’t respect her, not any more. And Robert? Mrs. Rogan, he *was* drunk, that night. I know that, now. All you said, all Nona Henry said to me—it was the truth.”

She sobbed bitterly and Tess waited.

“So now, what am I to do?” wept Georgia. “How can I marry a man I can’t respect? Who never loved me? How can I go on? I am sick in my heart, Mrs. Rogan. Yet how can I abandon them? They depend on me. Both. So I don’t know what to do or where to go. I have tried. I have tried, so hard. Not to see evil. Not to let it *in* to my life. But now . . . what shall I do? Can you help me?”

Tess Rogan put her right hand on the weeping woman’s shoulder. She looked at her own hand. How gnarled it was! Why was it given power? For it had power, now. Her voice had power. The words lay in her throat. What must *she* do?

Take up her hand? Wash it?

Nona Henry had said, “If you *don’t* wash your hands, then you *must* do something.” Tess Rogan remembered this and considered it, gravely. She was not too old to learn.

Georgia sobbed, “I have always done the very best that I could think to do. But now . . . *tell me*. Is it enough that they need me? No matter what they are? *Is it*?” She was fierce and must be answered.

Tess said to herself, Maybe. Aloud, she said sharply, “Does your married daughter need you?”

“No.” Georgia’s sobs had ceased. She looked up. “No, she has her baby coming, and her husband . . .”

“She is like you? *She* wants to serve, not to be served?”

“Yes.”

Georgia sighed and put her cheek down on the sofa, like a child seeking the pillow. “I’ve tried so hard to be good and to do good.”

“What it *is* to be good—that bears a little thinking over,” Tess said. Her hand tightened. “It only takes a lifetime. Mere thinking won’t do it, either. Sometimes . . . you try an experiment, you might say. And observe . . .”

Georgia did not move. She seemed to be waiting.

“There may be,” said Tess slowly, “something you could do for me.”

The widows of Sans Souci almost went out of their minds at the *new* news that crashed upon the news on Thursday.

Georgia Oliver had split with Mrs. Fitz! She was *not* going to marry Robert—Wonder-boy! Georgia Oliver was going to Honolulu with Tess Rogan! *What?* Yes, and not in June, either. Flying. Next week! And maybe on around the world!

Georgia Oliver!

What was *this*? What *happened*?

Well!


There was so *much* to talk about, nobody had a minute to get anything done. The widows nibbled leftovers, and met and parted, and the house boiled along.

Kelly Shane ran the desk by day, modeling his behavior after the courteous ways of Morgan Lake.

That Thursday, Winnie Lake had gone back east with Liz Patrick. With fond farewells for Nona Henry. But farewells. The widows, in their feverish state, barely noticed that she had gone.

Nona Henry recognized both her freedom and her loss.

Chapter 37

 Dodie and Si were due on Friday, in the late afternoon. Nona was not to go to the airport. About three o'clock, Kelly Shane phoned her. "Mrs. Henry? Mrs. Gray is here."

"I'll be right down," Nona said.

She had promised to help Kelly Shane out, if ever he needed her. Where had she got this responsibility?

Nona walked down the stairs and there in the lobby stood a woman. A woman in a gray suit, with a hat on, and a small train case in her hand.

"This is Mrs. Henry, Mrs. Gray," Kelly said. He was doing very well, really. His slight nervousness was apparent to Nona but not, she felt sure, to this new tenant.

"I'll take you around to your apartment, Mrs. Gray," said Nona pleasantly. "We are a bit shorthanded. Our manager is in the hospital, I am sorry to say. I am Nona Henry. I live here myself."

"I am Victoria Gray," said the newcomer, unbending just a little.

"Did you have a pleasant journey?" Nona asked, leading her. Leading her down the north wing, first floor, past Harriet Gregory's sad door, past Ida Milbank's lair, to the door across from Sarah Lee Cunneen, of the generous heart.

"I flew," explained Mrs. Gray. "Most of my luggage was sent by express. The . . . er . . . man at the desk says it has come."

"Then it has come," said Nona reassuringly. "Here we are. 111."

She unlocked the door and let the new tenant by. 111 was bearing the full flood of afternoon sun as it was going down the western sky.

"Very . . . cheerful," said Mrs. Gray. She moved quickly. She was tall and thin, and quite smart. She peered around the half-wall, stepped far enough to see into the kitchen and made a small grimace.

"I rented this, sight unseen," she said to Nona. "I'm from Chicago. You live here? Please, tell me frankly . . . how is this place?"

"Are you a widow, Mrs. Gray?" asked Nona gently.

“Yes. Why yes, I am. My husband died, five years ago.”

“This is not the newest building, as you can see,” said Nona. (Mrs. Gray, she estimated, must be in her fifties.) “But it is kept clean. The maids are fairly efficient. It *is* convenient, especially if you don’t drive a car. The patio is pleasant. What more can I tell you?”

(I could tell you plenty, Nona thought.)

She rather liked the looks of this one.

Victoria Gray wore a slight crease between her brows. “I took it for a month. I can try, I suppose,” said she. “Thank you.”

Nona said, “There are many women alone in this part of the world.”

“I can imagine . . .”

“There are seventeen widows, here in Sans Souci,” said Nona, smiling.

Victoria Gray looked at her with blue-green eyes. “I wintered in Florida, last year,” she said. She knew.

“Well, I hope you will be comfortable here,” said Nona courteously. “Excuse me, now?”

Seventeen. Was that right?

Going through the corridors, Nona counted up. Yes.

Agnes Vaughn. Felice Paull. Ida Milbank. *Three.*

Mrs. Fitz, Georgia Oliver, the two Gadabouts. *Four.*

Harriet Gregory. Daisy Robinson. And Leila Hull, returned. *Three more.*

That’s *ten.*

Then, Marie Gardner. (And how is she, in there, poor soul?) Oh yes, Joan Braverman and Kitty Forrest. *Three more.*

That’s *thirteen.*

Tess, of course. And myself. *Two more.* Makes *fifteen.*

Poor Elna Ames is gone, but Mrs. Victoria Gray is with us.

Sixteen.

Who else? Oh yes, Caroline Buff. One always tended to forget her. She was apart, somehow. Detached? Or attached elsewhere? Anyhow . . .

Seventeen.

Would Joan Braverman get another job?

Would Ida Milbank be arrested, one of these days?

Would Leila Hull *stay* sober?

Would Marie Gardner survive, in there?

What would Agnes Vaughn invent to explain Rose Lake?

Who would move in when Tess and Georgia went away?

What would become of those two? “We’ll change each other,” Tess had said cheerfully. (Nona was *not* jealous of Georgia Oliver. Which was odd.)

What would become of Nona Henry?

Nona went up to her own rooms to watch for the taxi.

What would become of Nona Henry?

There were all those possibilities still. She could sight-see, gad about. She could go in for good works. Or study and read. Or go back where she had been, at least to the *place*.

Become?

Nona was sitting at the window looking down over the patio in a state of waiting, quite relaxed. Her thoughts moved easily. What is the meaning of the word “become”? Doesn’t it signify to have arrived?

So be *here*? Be *now*. Where space crosses time.

And be *this*, she thought with an extra pulse of her heart. This, just existence, is the third dimension which defines.

She experienced that settling, the sense of being tucked in snug to the whole world, with as much right to be there as a mountain or a flea.

There was something delicious about the mood or the vision, a taste of rest and of peace. Then, like a line from a fourth dimension, piercing sweet, came a stab of something that was restful and also invigorating, peaceful but at the same time thrilling. A touching off of a deep cry from her center. *How wonderful! How marvelous! How wonderful!*

It faded, quickly. Nona had not known that she had been stabbed to tears until she felt the moisture drying on her cheek.

It was gone. She would not think about it or try to remember or recapture. Whatever the vision meant, it had been something given. She did not need to understand.

After a while, she saw the taxi and went flying down.

“Dodie! Ah, good to see you, darling! And Si!”

Nona embraced her own, knowing, as they did not know, that the eyes of Sans Souci were seeing all.

She walked them through the patio, arms in theirs.

“Mother, you look wonderful!” Dodie said. “But what happened to your hand?”

“Cut it. Stupidly,” said Nona gaily. “It’s fine.”

“You look just great, Mom,” said Si.

“Well, I am so *doggoned* glad to see you!” Nona used Val’s word. She was feeling many pangs of love. She whirled them inside, introduced them, gaily, to Kelly Shane but without stopping took the stairs, let them in to 208.

“This isn’t bad,” Si said. “Up to your old tricks with flowers, eh?”

Dodie was hugging her mother, again.

“Sit down. Sit down. You can stay right here,” said Nona. “All nonsense about a hotel. If you’re here so briefly. I have two beds in there, for you. And I can do nicely on the sofa.”

“Mother, we wouldn’t *think* of making you sleep on the sofa.”

“I shall sleep on the sofa if I please,” said Nona saucily. “What’s so bad about that?” (Even a bathroom floor is possible.) “How is the baby?”

(Her arms ached for the baby, and God bless the darling baby!)

So they told her how the baby was.

When the chatter died a bit, Nona said, “One thing I want to get straightened out, right quick. About those bonds.”

She could tell that Dodie flinched.

“Val promised them to you, I know,” said Nona.

“Yes, he did, Mother.” Stiffly.

“I know this, too,” Nona went on. “It was *my* fault that I wasn’t told all about it. He knew I’d be stuffy. And I would have been, too. There wasn’t time to talk me around. Well, people get *themselves* lied to, you know. But I understand, now.”

Si settled his length in a chair and all of it seemed to sigh. A smile broke on his good-looking young face. “Let me tell you how we’re doing at the store, Mum.”

“I want to hear.”

“*I* want to hear about this place,” interposed Dodie. Her female eye had been checking. “This is kind of . . . old, isn’t it, Mother?”

“It suits us,” said Nona. “There are sixteen other widows living here.”

She saw Dodie’s body ripple and flinch. (Whatever do they do with themselves? Dodie would be thinking. How pitiful!)

Nona realized that, to her, Sans Souci wore a different aspect. To her, it seemed a roaring hive: women alive, women who hoped, women who despaired, women who clung, women who fled, women who were going senile, suffering, dying . . . and women who were still seeking, yearning, learning . . . even a few who were *being*. (Agnes Vaughn, she thought with a little shock, is *herself*!)

“What kind of widows?” Dodie asked.

“All kinds,” said Nona. “Now tell me about the store.”

Nona took them out to dinner, to a nice place (not Hunt’s). They went late, after all the chattering, and Dodie said she had a bit of a headache, from waiting too long for her meal. Nona, who felt fine, noted how her own routine had been loosened and lost. (Odd? Not at all.) “I’m sorry, dear. I should have hurried.”

“It’s all right. *You* look like a million,” sighed Dodie. “You really do. Have you lost weight?”

“A pound or two,” said Nona. (No need to explain about that long fast in that bathroom. One told the truth and nothing but the truth but, when you came to the *whole* truth, who could know it and tell it? And there was no use upsetting conventional-minded people.) “Mmmmmm,” said Nona, “I’m hungry now. Shall we have wine with dinner? Why not?”

“I guess Southern California agrees with you,” said Dodie. “But what are your plans?”

“Why should I have plans?” said Nona amiably.

“Well, I . . .” Dodie’s eye sought Si’s eye. This was odd! “You really want to stay here?” asked Dodie.

“Oh, for a while,” said Nona. “Until a . . . valuable friend goes away, at least. Then I *do* want to go see Dane Mercier and small Milly. I must do that.”

“Mother . . .”

“Yes, dear?”

“What about Dane’s new wife?”

“What about her?”

“You *said* . . . I mean, you *always said* . . .”

(How the young long for consistency, thought Nona.)

The waiter brought the wine.

“You always *said*,” resumed Dodie, “that you didn’t think you *wanted* to meet Milly’s stepmother.”

“Well, I’m going to meet her,” said Nona, “and see what’s what. Oh, I’ll try to keep my mouth shut, and I *may* . . .” Her eyes twinkled. “Or, I may not,” she admitted. “Perhaps I tend to be bossy.”

“That’s not so,” chided Dodie.

Nona flicked her a glance. She put her left hand on Dodie’s hand. A caress. For no reason. She lifted her fork over the green and yellow loveliness of lettuce. “Isn’t this delightful?” she said, looking around the restaurant.

(At the same time she was noting the current fashions of delight. Very dim light. A rotisserie. A piano-bar. She thought, What a pity to blow up such a civilization! In some ways, it is so adorably absurd!)

“Mother, you *said* . . .” Dodie was speaking earnestly. (What a tense young woman she was. Well, of course, being young . . .)

“You did say it might be less painful if you didn’t *know* and didn’t see how some other woman was raising our Milly’s baby.”

“Did *I* say such a silly thing?” Nona speared the lettuce.

(It was ridiculous! A piece of wide grass, coated with possibly a dozen spices, swimming in oil, *plus* Roquefort cheese!)

“How could it ever be better not to see?” said Nona gaily. “*Look* at this innocent lettuce! How absurd . . . and how delicious!”

“Mother . . .” Dodie said, nervously.

(Nona thought, Why, she doesn’t know me. She has never known me. Well, I can’t help that now. She’ll have to *get* to know me as we go.)

“To *you*,” said her son-in-law, lifting his wine.

Nona looked at this young man. She didn’t know him, but the communication was shocking. Of all people, *he* . . . ! How odd! But how marvelous! Why, you just never could tell *who* would suddenly understand you. Or what was going to happen, in the next second of time, as long as you were alive!

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Seventeen Widows of San Souci*, by Charlotte Armstrong.]