

Needlework

A Novel

by

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Chapter 7

At five-thirty I went to the cafeteria and brought back tuna sandwiches and coffee.

At five forty-five, the patients' food cart came by. The orderly left a tray for Uncle Clete and picked it up twenty minutes later.

At seven, visiting hours started. People carrying flowers and books and newspapers walked by us. Three of Uncle Clete's friends came in. I introduced myself by name, but that wasn't the information they wanted. "I'm Jimmy Ray's girl," I said. These men whispered with Daddy in the hall, looked at their feet, moved their big Stetson hats round and round in their hands, shook hands and left.

At seven fifteen, the nurse who'd helped Daddy turn off the oxygen the night before came in wearing blue jeans and a western shirt. Daddy sat and talked to her in the waiting room. When he came back to Aunt Baby and me, he said, "That's really something. She's off duty tonight, but she came in to see about Clete. She married Junior Brickle. Baby, you remember him, don't you? They had two kids, but they're divorced now." Almost five minutes passed without anyone talking. Then Daddy said, "That's a real nice lady."

Aunt Baby looked up from her knitting and then back down. I felt queasy. One of the worst things about loving Daddy was that you could see him getting into trouble but you couldn't see how to stop him. Daddy was right. The nurse was a nice lady. I couldn't blame her for liking Daddy, and I certainly couldn't tell him to watch out. But she was

after him even if he didn't know it. Mother's warning came back, "Don't let him out of your sight."

About seven-thirty, Aunt Lila came in. She hugged all of us, then went into Uncle Clete's room. When she came out fifteen minutes later, she was wiping her eyes. Daddy was back looking out the waiting room windows. She sat down. "Has that Barbara been in?" she asked Aunt Baby.

"Not that I've heard. For sure not since I've been here."

Aunt Lila sighed, "She's probably lost interest." She lit a cigarette. "I don't want to run into her again, that's all." She picked a piece of tobacco off her tongue with a bright red fingernail. Aunt Lila was tall and lanky. Her nails were always manicured, her hair a perfect bouffant frosted champagne over honey. At home, she wore silk tuxedo lounging pajamas. When I thought of Aunt Lila, I pictured her on her burgundy sofa in green silk pajamas, her long legs pulled up under her, smoking a slim, unfiltered cigarette. She couldn't touch my mother on looks, but she had style.

Tonight she looked old and tired. "You know, Ida," she said. She was the only person I knew who called Aunt Baby "Ida." "Nobody knows this, but when he had his heart attack, I came to the hospital to tell him he could come back home. When I got here, that woman was in his room. She'd sneaked in a bottle of whiskey, and the two of them were drunk as skunks. Clete hooked up to monitors and tubes, and she was pouring whiskey down him. She saw me in the door and said, 'Come on in. Join the party.' I just turned around and left. I don't think Clete even remembered that I was there. To this day, he doesn't know I was going to take him back."

"You're here now. That's what's important," Aunt Baby said. "Did you talk to him?"

"He opened his eyes. I think he knew it was me. He tried to smile. And he asked about Pauline."

"Maybe he'll last till she gets here," Aunt Baby said.

"Maybe. I know Pauline would feel better if she got the chance to mend some fences." Aunt Lila ground out her cigarette in the metal ashtray she was holding. "Well, I guess I'll go on home. An ex-wife doesn't have to sit through this. That's a blessing, at least." On her way out she stopped beside Daddy. They stood together looking at the parking lot in twilight. Then she hugged him and left.

Through the long evening I knitted with a vengeance, knitting all my energy, anxiety, and grief into that afghan. The panels were only eighteen inches wide, so they grew quickly. I could knit and listen to Uncle Clete breathe. When he faltered, my own breathing stopped, but my needles kept going, even speeded up. People commented on how fast I was going. A woman leaving her husband's room asked if it was the same piece I'd been working on

when she came in two hours earlier. It was growing so fast, Daddy timed me. I was doing an inch every ten minutes. The pattern was complicated, but I had it down. The refrain ran through my head, “purl three, yarn over, knit two, yarn over, purl three, three on cable to front, knit three, knit from cable, purl three, yarn over, knit two. . . .” And behind it, Uncle Clete’s breathing. In. Out. In. Out.

He was sleeping most of the time now. When we came and went it not longer roused him. Every twenty minutes a nurse would check on him. She’d shout in his ear, “Mr. Hopewell? Clete? Can you hear me?” and shake his shoulder until he opened his eyes. Then she’d write on his chart and leave. Sometimes he opened his eyes on his own. He didn’t talk to us, but we thought he knew us. He squeezed our hands. At least his hand fluttered. After Aunt Lila left, we tried to make sure someone was holding his hand all the time. Once he opened his eyes, looked up at me, and said, “Pauline?”

“She’s not here yet, but she’s on her way,” I said.

His hand fluttered. “Oh, Jan,” he said. “Good.” He closed his eyes.

We were all in the room at eight-thirty when the nurse came in to rouse him. After she left, Daddy said, “I think she’s scaring him. Did you see his eyes?” He left the room and paced the hall. The third time he walked by, he kept on going to the nurses’ station. When he came back, he said, “They’ll ask the doctor when he calls in if they can stop waking him up.” He jingled the coins in his pocket. “I just don’t think there’s any sense in scaring him.” He walked to the door and stared out into the hall. “Maybe I should keep out of it. They know what they’re doing.”

Aunt Baby said, “You did the right thing, Jimmy. Don’t worry about it.”

But it didn’t matter, because when the nurse came again at eight-fifty, she couldn’t wake him up. “I won’t bother him again, Mr. Hopewell,” she told Daddy. “He won’t wake up again now.” She wrote something on the chart and left.

Daddy went to the window and looked out. Aunt Baby stayed in her chair. I let go of Uncle Clete’s hand and went to the hall. The lights had been dimmed now that visiting hours were over, and the hospital seemed deserted. I leaned against the wall and cried. Uncle Clete was gone. He was still breathing, but he wouldn’t be back. It was the way the doctor said it would happen. He was asleep for good. Nothing would hurt him or scare him now.

After half an hour, Daddy and Aunt Baby came out of the room. Aunt Baby and I sat in our chairs and picked up our knitting. Daddy leaned against the wall and smoked. We talked about the last time Uncle Clete seemed conscious, the last time he talked. We wanted to pinpoint the last time he was with us.

All our watching and waiting hadn't held him. Maybe another family would have refused to accept that he was gone, would have shaken him themselves, shouted in his ear, pulled him back. But we weren't that kind of people. It wasn't just that forcing him back would have hurt and scared him, it was that causing a scene would have embarrassed him. We acted the way he would have wanted us to. We cried, and we talked. We let him sleep, and we listened to him breathe.

At ten o'clock, Daddy and I went to the cafeteria. Most of the lights were off but the coffee machine was turned on and a tray of pastries sat under a plastic dome. "Maybe we're just supposed to take them?" I said.

Daddy walked to the cash register to see if there was a place to leave money. "No. I don't think so," he said. "I'll see if there's someone in the back." He walked into the kitchen and I sat at a table in the corner. I had to worry about him cheating on Mother and maybe killing someone driving drunk, but I'd never have to worry about him stealing a cup of coffee.

When he came back he had coffee and donuts. "They had fresher ones in the back. The janitor sold them to me," he said. "I got you a pink one. I thought you'd like that."

I hated strawberry frosting. If he didn't know that, had he ever noticed anything about me?

Daddy hunched over his coffee, not moving. The cigarette in his hand burned down until the ash fell off. "Daddy?" I said. "Would you like for me to rub your shoulders?"

He jumped at the sound of my voice. "Sure," he said, shaking his head to clear it.

His muscles were hard. When I moved my thumbs between his shoulder blades, he winced. He reached up and stopped my hands. "That's enough," he said.

"No. Let me try. I'm good at this, I can loosen you up."

"I said that's enough."

For as long as I could remember, he could make me feel like this. Gigantically out of place and awkward, with no place to hide. I sat down, stared at a picture on the wall, some vague pink shape, a bird maybe. This was not something to cry over. A strawberry donut was not something to cry over.

Daddy leaned back in his chair. "You wanted to know about me," he said. "Now tell me about you."

"What do you mean? What is there you don't know?" Except that I hate strawberry frosting.

“Are you happy?”

It wasn't a question I was expecting. Wasn't a question I wanted to think about. “I'm as happy as anybody else, I guess.”

“You think that's a good answer?”

“It's my answer.” Since when do you worry if I'm happy?

Daddy studied his cigarette. “I guess I never saw you ending up like this. I thought you'd want something more, something that'd use that brain of yours. Like teaching, or something. You know, your mother always said she wished we had enough money that she didn't have to work, but she likes work. She's just too stubborn to admit it. I thought you were like that, ambitious like her.”

“Well, you never liked that much about Mother. I didn't think you liked it about me.”

“Wait a minute,” he said. “We're not talking about what I like or don't like here. We're talking about what you're doing with your life.”

I was too tired to weigh my words. “What you like, or what you don't like has always been what we're talking about. My whole life I've never done a single thing that you were proud of.”

“That's nonsense. I've always been proud of you.”

“You never liked it when I was smart. You were never proud of the things I did best. You said — you didn't know I heard, but I did — you said, ‘I'd be proud if she had some common sense.’”

“I said that?”

“When my picture was in the paper for being the top student in ninth grade, that's what you said when people asked if you were proud of me.

“Ninth grade? You've been carrying that around for a while.” He took a drink of his coffee. “I don't remember saying that, but I do remember when your picture was in the paper. I was proud. But what did you expect me to do? Brag on you?”

“Why not? What would have been so awful?”

“I don't brag.” He got up to refill his coffee. He moved slowly. He was tired. He was sad. What kind of daughter would give him more grief at a time like this? A selfish daughter. A daughter who didn't love him enough. He sat down and stared at the floor. “Look, I didn't want you to think that smarter meant better. Maybe I didn't say the right

things, but you were getting attention from everywhere. I didn't want you to think you were better than other people. I didn't want you to get a big head."

I took a deep breath. Be a good girl. He'll love you if you're a good girl. "I understand." A lie. "I'm sorry I brought it up." The truth. Change the subject. Make a joke. "You never liked it that I was left handed either."

Daddy looked startled. I was surprised, too, at the anger in my voice. I tried a laugh to show it was a joke, but it came out bitter. The memories rose sour in my throat — Daddy forcing me to throw a ball right handed, glaring at me because I used the wrong hand for my iced tea glass, trying to make me cut my meat like everybody else. I still started sweating if anyone suggested tennis or miniature golf or softball or bowling — things that Daddy had shown me how to do, insisted that I do right-handed. "I couldn't throw a ball to suit you."

"Little Girl, I don't even know what you're talking about." He walked out leaving me with cold coffee and half a strawberry donut.

I waited half an hour to give him and chance to cool down. When I got back to Uncle Clete's room, Daddy said, "Your Aunt Baby's leaving. She'll drive you to Granno's."

"I'd like to stay with you."

"No, you go on." It was an order. For a while yesterday and even that morning it had seemed like Daddy and I could talk, be comfortable together, but I'd ruined it. I wanted to help him through Uncle Clete's death, and all I'd done was make the barrier between us stronger than it had been in years. The Hopewells were right. It wasn't good to talk about feelings. It was better to keep things bottled up.

When Aunt Baby and I pulled up outside Granno's house, the lights were on and we could see Granno moving through the curtains. Aunt Baby said, "Looks like Mama's still up. She should be resting. Make her get some rest." I snorted. "Try to make her get some rest." She reached over and patted my hand. "I'm glad you came. You're helping Jimmy."

I'd been waiting for her to notice how miserable I was. "He won't let me help him. Pauline's the one he wants. He always wanted a daughter like her, not like me." I waited for Aunt Baby to take me in her arms and "shush" me like she did earlier. Instead, she pulled her hand away.

“Now listen to me, Jaynice Ray Hopewell. I’m only going to say this once. Your dad loves you. You’re doing as much as anyone can to help him now. No one could do any more. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And I think you’re a little old to be quite so jealous of your cousin. It’s high time you outgrew that.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I said again. It was too much, to be criticized by Aunt Baby who never criticized anybody. Tears welled up in my eyes and I cried out the words I’d lived by as long as I could remember. “I try to be a good girl.”

“You are a good girl, Jan. Just because someone points out how you could be better, that doesn’t mean you’re not good. But you’re not perfect. Nobody is.” She wasn’t done with me. “You have to understand that your dad can love you and still love your cousin. His feelings for Pauline don’t have anything to do with you. You don’t think Clete’s stopped loving Pauline just because he loves you.” She took a deep breath and nodded twice. “Well, I’ve said enough.” She leaned over and pecked me on the cheek. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

The couch in Granno’s living room was covered with Uncle Clete’s clothes. She came out of his room with another armload. “Thought I’d get these things sorted out,” she said. She held up a plaid shirt, “He got this for Christmas and only wore it once. Your Daddy can have it.”

“Daddy and Uncle Clete aren’t the same size, Granno.”

“Well, Othel then.”

“Uncle Othel’s a lot bigger than Uncle Clete.”

“Someone can use it. It’s perfectly good. It would be a sin to waste it. What size is that boy you’re marrying?”

She pulled out a set of onyx cufflinks. “Pauline will probably want these. They’re nice enough for Fred.”

“Maybe we should wait until Pauline’s here.” Maybe we should wait until Uncle Clete’s dead. How would Daddy feel if he came in and she started offering him Uncle Clete’s clothes? “If you let her take what she wants, then you only have to sort the rest.”

“Maybe so.” She sat down, and picked up her crocheting. “We could sell those cufflinks. They might bring something.” She jabbed at the lace in her hand. “That ring will bring a pretty penny. I don’t know if it’ll cover the funeral, but it’ll go a ways.”

“Daddy should get Uncle Clete’s ring.”

“I don’t think your daddy will be so selfish that he’ll insist on that.”

“But you can’t sell Uncle Clete’s ring. It’d be like selling, I don’t know, like selling part of him.”

“Well, we’ll be burying all of him soon enough. And I’m not going to get all weepy about some ring that’s just a piece of vanity anyway.”

I didn’t know what else to say. I looked at my engagement ring. I’d sell it in a minute to keep Uncle Clete’s ring in the family, but I knew how much a 3/8 carat grade 2 diamond was worth. “Daddy should have the ring,” I said under my breath.

At eleven o’clock I got Granno to go to bed by lying. “I can’t stay awake any more,” I said. “Can I make up the couch?” In fact, I lay awake for hours. Was Daddy mad at me? And Richard — I’d barely thought of him all day. Sixty-two, no sixty-one days till the wedding. Uncle Clete said he loved me, but he was gone. David Baxter, I had to make an impression on David Baxter. Uncle Clete told Daddy to give me a whole can of worms. I felt awake, but I must have been asleep, because Daddy and Uncle Clete and Richard and David became one person, one man who was angry at me. He was dying and I was knitting a transfusion. The blood ran off my needles, through a tube and into his arm. If I could knit fast enough, he wouldn’t die. I kept dropping stitches and forgetting the pattern, all the while going faster and faster. Aunt Baby whispered in my ear, “Nobody’s perfect, just think about what you’re doing,” but I knew that if I was perfect I could save him. If I was good enough, he would love me.

I sat up. My heart was pounding and I was soaked with sweat. Daddy had opened the door. “Is there enough blood?” I asked. “Should I keep going?”

He sat down next to me, and put his arm around me. “You’re dreaming,” he said. “It’s just a bad dream.” He rocked me back and forth. My heart slowed and I knew where I was. “What time is it? How’s Uncle Clete?”

“It’s three-thirty. It’s all over. He passed about thirty minutes ago. He never woke up again.” He blew his nose. “Nothing else can hurt him now. That’s good, isn’t it?”

I pulled my knees to my chest and hugged them to me, trying to cancel out some of the pain with pressure. “Maybe there’s some peace for him now.”

Daddy shuddered, cleared his throat. “He never had much of that. I tried to help him, tried to be a good brother, but I couldn’t do anything.”

“You did all anyone could,” I said. The same thing Aunt Baby had told me.

I walked across the room in the dark and brought back an ash tray for him.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

“Well, I’m going to let your Granno sleep until she wakes up. That’s probably another half hour or so. Then I’m going to have some coffee and some breakfast. Then I’m going to wait until seven o’clock, and I’m going to make some phone calls. Then, I don’t know.”

“What about the -- ” I didn’t know what word to use. “What about Uncle Clete?”

“The hospital called the funeral home. It’s all slick as a whistle. He’s already been moved. They do this every day. Zip. Zap.”

We sat in the dark, staring across the room. “About earlier,” Daddy said.

“I’m sorry about that. I was just tired.”

“No, don’t be sorry. I’ve been thinking about it. Here’s what I want to say.” He lit another cigarette. “I don’t understand why you’re marrying Richard. It doesn’t seem like the right thing to me. I never thought he could make you happy.”

“Why haven’t you said something?”

“I didn’t feel like I should butt in. You were always your mother’s girl. She wanted me to keep hands off. And it didn’t seem right to come in when you were eighteen years old and start giving advice.”

“I would have liked to have known how you felt.”

He seemed to study the ceiling. “You talk about this like it’s over and done, like it’s too late to change things.”

“Of course it’s too late. We’ve spent a lot of money already. I’ve had two showers. My picture was in the paper. How would it look if I backed out now?”

“Those don’t seem like good reasons to get married. Your picture’s in the paper. Some people threw you a party.”

“Of course that’s not the real reason. The real reason is that I love Richard. I want to be his wife.”

“Oh. I see.” He leaned his head back on the couch and was quiet so long I expected him to start snoring. But he wasn’t asleep; he was thinking about what to say next. “It seemed to me you went off to that college ready to take on the world and by Christmas time you

were home whipped. I'd hate to think you're marrying Richard as a way to hide from whatever scared you."

I was glad it was too dark for him to see the tears I was blinking away. I never knew he watched me to figure out how I was feeling. "It's not as simple as hiding," I said finally. "Richard will keep me safe. He won't let anything hurt me."

"What happened to you at that college?"

No one, not Mother, not anyone, had asked me that. I started to cry in earnest. "Oh, Daddy, they were all so rich and smart. I didn't fit in at all."

"Were they mean to you there? Did they make fun of you?"

"No. It wasn't that." I wiped my eyes with the sleeve of my nightgown. "I just wasn't anything special there, not to anyone. And Richard wrote me every day and called twice a week, and I was still special to him."

"And that's it?"

I thought for a minute and realized for the first time that there was more. "No. There was you. You and Mother. I thought at Winchester I wouldn't have to worry about you, but it was worse there. I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know if you were fighting. I couldn't check the whiskey bottles every day to know if you were OK." I waited in terror. I had never, in my whole life, said a word to my dad about his drinking.

In the dark next to me Daddy chuckled. His arm went around me and pulled me to him. "Oh, Little Girl, that's a big burden you've been carrying, trying to keep me and your mother straightened out." He chuckled again. "Tell you what. You let us take care of ourselves and concentrate on doing the right thing for Jan."

"Are you telling me not to marry Richard?" It would be so easy if I could just be his little girl, if I could call Richard and say, "I want to get married, but my daddy won't let me."

"I'm not telling you to do anything about anything. But it's a long sad life, unless it's a short sad life, and you've got to make the best of your chances."

We heard the springs squeak in Granno's room, saw the light under the door, heard the toilet flush. Daddy stood up, ready to tell his mother that one of her children was dead.