

# Gibbon's Decline and Fall

Sheri S. Tepper

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Sheri S. Tepper



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SHERI S. TEPPER  
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NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.

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“... the most incredible stories are the best adapted to  
the genius of an enraged people ...”

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*Edward Gibbon*

*The History of the Decline  
and Fall of the Roman Empire*

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PROLOGUE



SUMMER 1959

THE AUNTS HAD CAUGHT CAROLYN, dragged her to the side of the boat, figuratively speaking, and were forcibly attempting to Crespimize her, while she, Carolyn, twisted on the hook in desperation.

“I don’t think it’s proper,” she murmured politely, hiding panic, hoping the idea of propriety would make them pause. Fond hope. Hope betrayed.

“Albert is perfectly reliable,” said Aunt Clotilde with a dreadful clatter of large, too-white teeth.

As, oh, indeed he was. Perfectly reliable. Perfectly self-satisfied. Perfectly capable of taking any ordinary weekend and turning it into the Worst Experience of One’s Life. Carolyn, gritting her teeth, stared through the screens of the summer porch at the stretching blue of Long Island Sound and focused on the radio sounds in the background: “Mr. Sandman,” being sung by who? Whom. Mr. Sandman. Send me a dream. Not Albert.

Aunt Atrena, who always spoke immediately after Aunt Clotilde, did so now in a tone that said, Pay Attention, Child. “Albert thought it would be a treat for you, before you start college. You know he would never do anything to embarrass you.”

Aside from the embarrassment attendant upon being seen with him, that was probably true. And since she knew no one in Washington, D.C., chances are she could go down there for the weekend, take the tour through the FBI building (a signal honor, according to Albert, not allowed to Just Anyone), see the Smithsonian, go to the opening of whatever show it was at the National Gallery, and be returned home unscathed.

“He will be so hurt if you don’t go,” said Aunt Livia, whose function it was to have the Last Word.

“Yes, Carolyn. He would be hurt,” said Mama.

Which clinched it. What Mama meant was, if Carolyn didn’t accept Albert’s invitation, Mama would be hurt. The aunts would eat her alive. Albert and the aunts, including Albert’s mama, Aunt Fan, had decided that Albert and Carolyn were to be a Crespin couple. Albert Crespin was Crespin through and through—a highly inbred member of the clan, Aunt Fan’s kind of cousin to Albert’s daddy and all that—unlike Carolyn, who was a Crespin only on her father’s side, her father having inexplicably married outside his ilk, then unforgivably up and died before he could inculcate proper Crespin values into his only child. Though that wasn’t supposed to matter, for Albert was Crespin enough for the two of them.

“Of course, Mama, Aunties, if you wish,” Carolyn said, smiling sweetly. It was what she said as a last resort. It solved problems. It quieted tempers. It got Carolyn off the hook, at least temporarily, though she had a sick pain in her stomach that did not feel transitory.

Aunts Clotilde, Atrena, and Livia exchanged superior glances. There, the faces said. One had

only to be Firm With The Child. Mama was looking into her lap, her lower lip quivering ever so slightly. She was frightened of the aunts; she was well and truly hooked and gaffed. Carolyn's father had left an annuity for his widow, an annuity that could be stretched to cover clothing and salary for Mama's maid and Carolyn's education and a few small charities, but it wouldn't stretch to such necessities as housing and heat and lights and taxes, so Mama and Carolyn either lived with the family or they didn't live. Unless Mama got married again.

Which, though Mama was quite young and lovely, she would never do. Clotilde, Atrina, and Livia believed that Mama's remarriage would be Unfaithful to Dear Roger's Memory. They'd won that one long ago.

And now that the matter of Albert and Carolyn was settled, they gathered up their needlework and went off to settle someone else's fate. Mama, with a grateful caress across Carolyn's shoulder, went in the other direction, toward the bathroom. She often spent hours in the tub, breathing moist perfumed vapors, safe in the only sanctum the aunts would not invade.

Carolyn was left alone on the summer porch, once shaded by huge old elms. She remembered summer-dusk games under the elms, herself leaning against a great tree, eyes hidden in her hands, slowly counting: twenty-nine ... fifty-six ... ninety-five ... one hundred. Ready or not, here I come! Here I come seeking something that has no name, something hidden, something wonderful. Here I come, with no idea where it is but needing so ... so much to find it. It was only her cousins, hiding out there, so why had she felt that she might find the other thing? Even now, when dusk came and she heard the voices of children playing, she remembered that feeling of mysterious anticipation. Marvel, just around the corner. Wonder, hidden in shadows, if she could only find it.

Everything had changed since then. All the elms were gone now. Once-shaded houses stood full in the glare of the August sun, as she herself now stood, no longer protected by leaves of childhood, alone in the baking heat and burning light of Crespin conformity.

The Crespin men went into banking and law. Crespin women did not work outside the home except for certain charities, and they did not join many of those. If one joined groups one might have to associate with persons one had not picked as acquaintances. One did, of course, practice one's religion devoutly, and one did entertain one's husband's business associates, but that was a different matter, akin to diplomacy. To prepare for that, one studied languages, one learned about opera and art, one even boned up on whatever esoteric a distinguished visitor was said to be interested in. In this Crespins were rather like royalty. Noblesse oblige, as a matter of course, but no damned familiarity allowed.

Crespin women, though not always pretty, were uniformly fashionable though not faddish, slender though not bony, aristocratic to a fault. They went to good Catholic prep schools after which they might spend a year or so perfecting French or German on the Continent under proper supervision, before attending college. At home they learned the Crespin vocabulary as they learned the catechism, and for the same reason. Salvation was dependent upon knowing What The Family Meant. There were patronizing words to remind inferiors of their proper place, there was inconsequential chitchat to keep strangers at a distance, there were courteous words for religious occasions and implacable phrases for inculcating Crespin consciousness in the young.

Carolyn did not fit. She made friends with the maids, she discussed anything at all with

people she met on the train, she argued with Father O'Brien about the catechism, and had so far remained stocky, untidy, ungraceful, willful, un-Crespinized.

"But, my dear child," Aunt Clotilde had said on a former occasion, "Crespin women do not Work Outside the Home. They certainly do not go into the professions."

"Crespin women do not go into anything but becoming interfering, arrogant old tyrants, so far as I can see."

Carolyn's mama, shocked: "Carolyn, apologize to your aunt at once!"

"Mother, I *am* sorry, but it's you and me I'm sorry for. You weren't born a Crespin, and I'm evidently a throwback or something. I don't want to be a Crespin woman! I want to be a lawyer." Was it just that Father had been a lawyer? Or was it a longing for the real, the true, the eternal, rather than whatever the Crespins were?

Though she was fifteen at the time of that outburst, she had been Sent To Her Room. It was typical of Crespin culture that single women even in their twenties might be Sent To The Rooms, and wives at any age likewise, though with a quiet word whispered into an ear. "My dear, you're overwrought. My dear, go lie down for a bit." It did no good to rebel. The custom predated the Victorian age and had all the power of tradition. Women, when in public, were always groomed, poised, gracious, and socially adept, and Carolyn would conform or else. There were inevitabilities at work; in the end the aunts would have their way. They were the spinners of history, the passers on of tradition, those who trimmed and chopped away all spontaneity. Even the temporary freedom offered by college, the exposure to ordinary people, was part of the plan.

As for Albert, he was an American hero in the postlarval stage, a lawyer with the FBI. Albert was devout; he worked indefatigably with the Knights of Columbus. Albert had Served in Korea, albeit (strings had been pulled) in the office of the judge advocate. Until the time a few years back when Senator Joe McCarthy had gone down in flames, Albert had been one of the senator's more ardent supporters. Even now Albert saw himself as standing between America and all those who would sully her purity.

On the night of Carolyn's graduation from St. Mary's, Albert had taken her out to dinner and told her all about their plans, his and hers: They would be engaged when she graduated from college and married six months later, to allow time for the various prenuptial festivities that the aunts would arrange. It was too soon for a ring, but he presented her with an eighteen-karat charm bracelet, announcing in a patronizing tone that he would add prettier charms over the next four years. Carolyn supposed it was a kind of option plan. One charm bought him a Carolyn foot, another paid for a leg, another gained him the left tit. By the time they were married, she'd be all paid for, the last charm claiming the necessary part for the wedding night.

So, all right, she'd go to Washington and be shown where Albert worked. One thing the aunts were right about. She was safe with Albert. Albert had never provoked in her the tiniest throb of lust. His kisses were chaste, his embraces perfunctory, and she might as well be on with Father O'Brien. As a matter of fact, Father O'Brien, for all his years and his cassock, had more of a twinkle than Albert did.

Washington was very much as Carolyn had supposed it would be. Hot. Full of tourists. Not the FBI building, of course, which Albert escorted her through in the manner of a high priest showing the ritual objects. How do you do, Mr. So-and-So? How do you do, Mr. So-and-So?

Else? Laboratories. Offices. Why in God's name would anyone look at this stuff? It was dull. Albert was dull.

"Carolyn, may I present my colleagues, Mike Winter ..."

Yet another. She offered her gloved hand, made the polite smile at Mr. Winter, smooth and slim and rather weary looking for a person only a few years older than she, midtwenties perhaps.

"And Hal Shepherd."

She turned to Mr. Shepherd, looked up into warm brown eyes, felt her smile broaden in response to the one on his face, felt her mind melt like ice cream, glow like summertime on the beach, like picnics and the Fourth of July. Hal ... Mr. Shepherd. Older than the other one by at least a decade. He was like a teddy bear, like a sea wind, like a glass of fresh lemonade. His hand was warm and firm in her own.

"Carolyn. You bring light into otherwise dusky lives. I love your hat!"

And Carolyn, who'd been more than a little self-conscious about the hat, crowed inside like a baby rooster. This was a feeling she'd never had before, a kind of airy euphoria, a bubble of joy, a smile stuck in her middle.

"Mike and Hal and their wives will be joining us for dinner this evening," said Albert.

And the bubble grew shrunken and chill, whirled on itself, became a dust devil, a withdrawing wind. Wives. Well, of course wife. Of course he was married. He was in his thirties, like Albert. Of course, of course. Still, his smile stayed warm as they went down the wide corridor, as he put out an arm to save her being trampled by a group of purposeful and oblivious men who were headed in the opposite direction.

"Did you see who that was?" Albert whispered to Hal, ignoring Carolyn, forgetting Carolyn. His voice was awed, almost worshiping.

"Webster," said Mike in a toneless voice.

"L. S. Webster?" asked Hal, his eyes angry. "What's he doing here?"

"It has to be important," breathed Albert reverently. He stared avidly after the group moving down the hallway. Carolyn, every perception sharpened, took in every detail: Hal's face, Mike's face, Albert's face, following their eyes to the men moving away down the corridor. The man at the center of the group was only a shape, taller than the others, when he turned his head to speak, displayed a classically elegant profile set off by pale skin and black high-arched brows. A killingly handsome man.

Albert whispered, "Lord, what an honor, just to see him..."

"Why's that, Albert?" asked Hal, one nostril lifted even as his eyes slid across Carolyn like a caress. "Why an honor?"

"Well, because. He's the founder of the American Alliance. The founder of the International Alliance. The richest man in the world!"

"Quite possibly," said Hal almost with distaste. He took Carolyn's arm, squeezing it gently. "Weren't you taking this young woman to lunch?"

"What? Oh. Carolyn. Yes. Sorry."

Hal and Mike went away, both of them frowning, though Albert didn't notice. Albert took Carolyn to lunch, and after too many moments of silence Carolyn reached for topics of conversation. "That man we saw, Webster? Who is he, exactly?"

Albert placed his finger across his lips to indicate he had heard her, then chewed

purposeful length, swallowed, and patted his lips with his napkin. "He's an international financier, Carolyn. An entrepreneur. In addition to the Alliances, he founded and supports the Institute of International Studies in London. He's enormously respected."

"Because he's so rich?"

He gave her an admonishing look. "Well, I'm sure there are some who respect him for that reason. I, however, respect his opinion, because he's right! He's also very powerful. He knows everyone, has access to everyone. If you want to see the pope, or the president of France or the king of Saudi Arabia, he can get you an appointment." A little laugh. "That is, if he wants to, of course."

Just to make conversation, Carolyn asked, "Does he have family?" It was a Crespian catechism question, always asked, about anyone.

"I haven't any idea," said Albert, rather startled. "I don't think he allows any public intrusion into his private life."

Including, it seemed, where he lived, what citizenship he claimed, where he'd been educated. Funny, Carolyn thought, that Albert could so obviously adore a man about whom he knew so little. Crespian men were usually more discriminating than that, or pretended to be.

"What do you think he was doing at the FBI?" she wondered.

"He was with the director," said Albert in the rather haughty voice Crespian men adopted when speaking to wives and daughters who had ventured too close to the boundary of Men's Business. "Which, in and of itself, makes it improper for me to speculate."

"The director was in that group of men who walked by us?"

He nodded dismissively, with a shadow of a smile, as though to say, "There, aren't you a lucky girl to have seen him." She felt an ambiguity, as if in a dream, where one should know where one is but does not. The director of the FBI had been in the group, but at the time Albert had commented only on Webster. Mike and Hal, too. How very odd.

That night Albert took them all to dinner in an expensive restaurant, where, so Carolyn thought, the menu had more flavor than the food. Mike's wife, Tricia, was sleek and dark and outspoken; Hal's wife, Barbara, was little and plump and quite witty. Carolyn tried to ignore the heat in her face every time she looked at Hal, and was able to admire the picture Barbara passed around, two toddler boys, rotund little staggerers with Hal's eyes and Hal's curly, lovely-looking mouth.

Then they all went to see the new Hitchcock film with Cary Grant—all that chasing about on Mount Rushmore—and Albert took her back to her hotel room, kissed her chastely on the forehead, and bid her good night. She showered and braided her hair and climbed into bed. The night was quiet, the bed comfortable, but something kept nagging at her. Eventually she fell asleep, only to waken repeatedly, her heart pounding at a sense of imminent peril. She knew all about these night terrors, though she hadn't had them since she was a child, after her father had died. Then they had been provoked by loss and pain. What had provoked them she couldn't imagine. All she could remember of the dream was a voice saying ominous and terrible words. It wasn't Albert's voice. It wasn't anyone she knew. Eventually, about dawn, she fell deeply asleep.

"Did you have a nice time?" Mama asked when she got back home.

She wanted to say, "I fell in love, Mama. With a married man who has two sons." She wanted to say, "I had this awful dream," or, "The funniest thing happened." A peculiar sense

of caution stopped her from doing so.

“It was very nice,” she said instead. “We had a pleasant supper with the Winters and the Shepherds, who are colleagues of Albert’s.” She didn’t say “friends.” The Winters and the Shepherds were obviously friends of one another, but even though they had chatted politely through dinner, she did not feel they were Albert’s friends, no matter what Albert believed. “We went to the movies, and of course I saw where Albert works.”

“That must be impressive.” An aunt, smiling, approving.

“Oh, yes, very impressive,” she responded, trying not to sound negative.

“And next week it’s off to school!” Mama, very jolly sounding, trying to make the best of it.

Carolyn couldn’t help but feel sorrier for Mama than for herself. Once Carolyn was gone, Mama would be there all alone among the Crespins.

## FALL 1959

The campus sprawled rosy brick over a hundred acres and buzzed with a thousand new students making their way through room assignments and registration. Extracurricular activities were posted on the bulletin boards in front of Old Main. Drama-club meeting on Saturday morning. Orchestra tryouts for non-music majors, also on Saturday morning. Women’s-chorus tryouts, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings.

Carolyn had an unencumbered hour on Tuesday, so she decided to sit in on the chorus tryouts. She sang some, and if the standard wasn’t too high, it might be fun to try out. She sat down next to a plainly dressed young woman with a strong, rather horsey face and offered her hand.

“Carolyn Crespin, from New York.”

“I’m Agnes McGann. I’m from Louisiana.”

An improbably perfect blond on the other side of Agnes leaned forward. “Hi, I’m Bettiann Bromlet, from Fort Worth.”

She smiled, rather shyly. Carolyn, looking at the careful grooming and wealth of tumble curls, wondered what she had to be shy about.

“Sopranos,” called a woman in gray from the front of the room. “Please pick up a copy of the audition music from the table to your left. Contraltos, the table to your right, please. The accompanist’s music is clipped to yours. This is for reading ability, ladies—we’ll do you alphabetically. Be sure your name is on a sign-up card.”

“I’ll be near the front,” said Bettiann. “Just for once I wish they’d do it backward. It makes me nervous, being first.”

“Bound to be a few Adamases or Abrahams before you,” Agnes McGann muttered.

But there weren’t. Bettiann was called first. She handed the piano music to the person at the keyboard, went to the front of the dais, and sang competently. She read the music easily, and though her voice was small, it was true. Considering the shy smile, and the nervousness, Carolyn was surprised at the amount of personality she displayed, a bit too much pizzazz for Carolyn’s taste. If Bettiann Bromlet was the general standard, Carolyn herself might decide to try out.

“Very nice,” said the woman in gray. “Lily Charnes?”

“You’ve done that before,” said Carolyn when Bettiann returned to her seat.

“Beauty contests,” Bettiann murmured, flushing hotly. “My mom was all the time entering me in these pageants. Last time around I won a scholarship.”

“Congratulations,” said Carolyn.

The blond shook her head. “It’s crazy that I won. I’m not that good-looking. It’s all pretending....”

Carolyn found this an interesting idea. She hadn’t thought before that one could pretend to be beauty, though of course it made sense. Certainly Bettiann’s stage personality was not the same as that of the rather hesitant girl sitting beside her.

It was a while before they got to McGann. Carolyn asked her if she was nervous, but Agnes said no, not particularly. She’d had a good voice teacher at St. Monica’s. They’d had a choir that they were proud of and paid a good deal of attention to.

“Catholic school?” Carolyn asked. “Me, too.”

“Really? I’ve been in boarding schools since I was six. My family was killed when a truck hit their car, and the settlement was put in trust for my education and keep. I’ve spent most of my life in Catholic school. Too long, Mother Elias says. She’s the abbess at the Sisters of St. Clare near New Orleans, where I’m going to be a nun. I wanted to enter right away, but she wanted me to get through college and take an M.B.A. first.”

“An M.B.A.? For a nun?”

“They want to start an oyster farm, to make money for the abbey school, but there’s no one in the order with business training—”

“Agnes McGann?” called the woman in gray.

Agnes had a voice better than Bettiann’s, with a good deal more range. She, too, sang competently, though almost without emotion. Carolyn identified the style as churchy: angelic voices conveying as little human emotion as possible.

“Very nice,” said the woman in gray. By this time Carolyn had it figured out. “Very nice” meant you were in. “Thank you very much” meant you were out. Hmm, “thank you” meant “maybe.” When Agnes returned, the three of them went on sitting, curious about all the other putative singers.

“Faye Whittier,” the woman called at last. The final one.

Faye was colored—tall, graceful, with her hair cut very short. Agnes had never seen hair worn like that, just a cap of it, natural. She thought colored people straightened their hair. The maids at St. Monica’s had. The pianist tinkled through an introduction as Faye clasped her hands loosely in front of her, holding the music almost negligently. Either she knew the composition or she’d already memorized it.

The voice came like velvet, smooth throughout its register, organlike on a low note, whispering on a high one, easy, fluid, capable of infinite shading and power.

Carolyn decided she would skip trying out for chorus.

“Oh, God,” whispered Bettiann. “If that’s what they want! I’ll never make it. I shouldn’t even have tried....”

Agnes shook her head, put her hand firmly atop Bettiann’s hand and said, “No. You and I are fine for the chorus, but that girl will get all the solos.”

When Faye had finished, “Oh, my, yes,” said the woman in gray, conveying a fourth degree of judgment, one heretofore unexpressed.

Agnes, who was on the aisle, had a little fight with herself as Faye came from the dais. C

the one hand, she was colored, and Agnes had no experience with colored people except for the maids and cooks at school. On the other hand, she was colored, and there'd been the recent Supreme Court decision on equal education. One should err, if one did err, on the side of friendliness—especially a nun should, or a person intending to become one. Besides, Faye was elegant looking.

Agnes offered her hand. “You have a beautiful voice,” she said. “I’m very envious.” Which was perfectly true, and she’d have to confess it, too.

“Don’t be,” Faye said with a flashing grin. “So far all it’s done is get me in trouble.”

Fifteen minutes later the four of them walked out together, down the sidewalk, turning the same place toward the same dormitory, found they were all living in Harrigan Hall (Harridan Hall, said Faye, laughing) and were even in the same wing.

“Must be the new-girl wing,” said Agnes. “Who’s your roommate, Bettiann?”

“I haven’t met her yet. Her name is Ophelia Weisman, and she’s from New York.”

“And yours?” Agnes turned to Faye.

“I thought they might put me with Jessamine Ortiz, because we already knew each other from school in San Francisco, but they didn’t.”

They met Ophelia, Bettiann’s roommate, in the dorm lounge, a skinny gamine with dark, tattered hair and enormous gray eyes behind huge glasses. Faye introduced them, first name only, to her friend Jessamine Ortiz, a slender Eurasian girl with a face so calm and shuttered it did not seem as lovely as it was. Jessamine was majoring in science and math, and so was Ophelia: Jessy had a landscaper father and a passion for biology; Ophy had a physician father and a passion for medicine. Both their fathers thought it was silly to waste college education on girls.

“Dr. Dad thinks I should go to nursing school,” Ophy announced, wrinkling her nose. “My mother was a nurse. She put Dad through med school, and then he divorced her and married a girl about my age. I do not like my father.”

“Interesting,” said Faye. “I think that must be a white thing. With some black people, it’s the men who think they don’t need an education.” She turned to Jessamine. “All through high school we knew each other. You never said anything about your father’s not wanting you to come to college.”

Jessamine flushed. “My father is a really nice man, but he has this sort of traditional picture of women’s place in the world. He says men are made to take care of women, that women are happier not knowing very much, because if they did, it might make them dissatisfied being wives and mothers.”

Agnes silently agreed. Men should take care of women. They were stronger and larger and it was their proper role. And there was entirely too much fiddling about with women’s proper roles. Still, women doctors were needed. So much more ... modest to be treated by a woman physician.

Faye snorted, a sound that could have been outrage, or simple amusement.

“So how’d you get here?”

Jessy laughed, too, rather wryly. “My mother wasn’t educated, but she’s still dissatisfied being only wife and mother, so she started saving up for my education the day I was born. She had a father who felt the way my father does, and she always hated it. We never told my father. He thinks I won a scholarship.”

“So who’s your roommate?” Faye asked.

“She’s from New York. Her name is ... let’s see, Crespin.”

“I’m it,” said Carolyn, offering a hand.

“And yours?” Faye asked Agnes.

“I haven’t met her yet. I can’t pronounce her name. It’s spelled S-o-v-a-w-a-n-e-a a-T-e-s-u-w-a-n-e.”

They puzzled over that for a moment, deciding it was probably Hawaiian. “Who’s rooming with you, Faye?” Jessamine asked.

“They haven’t assigned anyone,” she replied, her eyes very watchful. “I been asking myself whether that’s because I’m black or because I’m majoring in art.”

“I doubt it’s because you’re an artist,” Carolyn said matter-of-factly. “I suppose it could be because you’re black. Or it could be they just haven’t assigned anyone yet.”

All of which made the subject of blackness all right to acknowledge, along with advanced education for women, which joined other subjects of conversation when Agnes invited them all into her room. They were still there, chattering away, when someone came to the open door and stood shyly looking in as their heads came up, one by one.

She was the most unusually beautiful creature they had ever seen, beautiful in a way they could neither dismiss nor envy, any more than they would dismiss or envy a glorious sunrise.

“Is one of you Agnes?” the beauty asked in an enchanting voice, low and rich, with a slight indefinable accent. “Agnes McGann?”

Agnes raised her hand, gargled, could not get the words out.

The new arrival smiled. “I’m your roommate. SOvawah-NAYah ah’TAYsoo-ahWAH nay she said. “Please, call me Sova.”

Jessamine was invited to a fraternity party by a boy she’d met in biology class. He told her to bring her friends.

“It’s a Halloween party, let’s all go,” Jessamine suggested to Aggie.

“I don’t know,” said Agnes doubtfully. “We weren’t invited.”

“They said bring friends. You’re my friends. Ophy talked Bettiann into coming.”

“Doesn’t Bettiann like parties?”

“She’s got this eating problem. She thinks she’s fat.”

“Bettiann?” Agnes laughed.

“Right, but don’t laugh. Ophy says it isn’t funny. It isn’t logical, either. It’s a psychological thingy that comes from trying to stay thin for all those contests her mother put her in. She feels guilty about eating. Sometimes she eats and then makes herself throw up. Or she starves herself. Anyhow, Ophy’s read up on it, and she’s made Bettiann into a project. Part of the therapy is to go places and act normal. Carolyn’s coming. And I’ve asked Faye. Come on, Aggie, Sophy.” They had tried calling her Sova, but it had inevitably become Sophy as all their names had transmogrified. The ABCs: Aggie-Betti-Cara. Plus Ophy-Sophy and Jessamine and Faye.

Oh, very well, Agnes grumbled to herself. She hated parties, she always ended up by herself in a corner. Still, the others were going, so come evening she went with them. It was the first time all seven of them had gone anywhere together, but there was such a mob at the party, they didn’t add appreciably to the crowd. There was beer. There was punch, which was

made of brandy and several kinds of wine, had peaches in it, and didn't taste as lethal as was. By eleven most of the people present were either unconscious, very drunk, or well on their way.

At which juncture two young men decided to escort Sophy home after the bash.

"No, thank you," she murmured soberly, though she'd had several cups of the lethal punch. "I will walk back with my friends."

But they wouldn't take no for an answer. One thing led to another, and a fight broke out. Agnes, who was always abstemious, pulled Sophy away from the fray, went in search of the others, gathered them up—even Carolyn, who was inclined to stay and see what happened—and the seven of them departed while the two combatants were still rolling around amid spilled punch and broken crockery. They were well down the block before the police cars pulled up in front of the frat house, and soon thereafter they were all in Agnes and Sophy's room, drinking cocoa, eating popcorn, and laughing immoderately at nothing much.

"You certainly made a hit," said Faye to Sophy. "Cut quite a swath through the male population, you did."

"I don't like it," said Sophy. "It's really very disturbing." Her voice sounded more than merely disturbed; it quavered with outrage or shock. "I don't understand men."

"Do any of us understand men?" Jessamine asked in a faraway, cold voice. "I never have."

Carolyn glanced curiously at Jessamine and said, "It's not just men. Do any of us understand people? Including us? I don't understand me!"

That started them all off. Agnes, in a sober confessional mood, told them she had first decided to be a nun when Father Conley had told her she was fortunate to be plain and gawky because she would not therefore be an occasion of sin. Though calmly pale during the telling, she became flushed and agitated when the others told her she was not gawky, and this led to a discussion of female beauty, during which Bettiann told them about pretending to be beautiful, how it often worked just to pretend, and about judges who looked at little girls like so many pet puppies and tried to put their hands down her panties.

Faye erupted in outrage, saying the judges must all be Humbert Humberts, like Nabokov's book *Lolita*, the one that had been banned, and Jessamine started to tell them something about herself but then broke off, very pale, and ran for the bathroom. Sophy told about her father's not wanting to pay for her education even though he could afford it, and how her mom had to go to court to make him do it, and Carolyn picked up the thread of confessions, tipsily telling them about Albert. Somehow she got off onto Hal's infectious grin and warm brown eyes. She couldn't put him out of her mind, she said, which wouldn't do, of course. Catholics did not get divorces or break up other people's homes. Neither did Crespins. In any case, she, Carolyn, was already promised to Albert....

"Who promised you?" Faye asked, jeering. "I don't remember your saying you promised you."

Carolyn paused woozily, trying to remember who had promised her to Albert. "I don't know," she confessed with a pixilated giggle. "He's just ... he's always been there. I don't want Albert, but I guess I think I will want Albert, because everyone always tells me I'll want Albert."

"You know what they're doing to you, don't you?" Faye asked, her voice slurred velvet and furry at the edges from the punch they'd all drunk. "They're cutting and pasting you, Car-

line. They're taking everything that pleasures you and cutting it off. There's a thing they do to girls in Africa, cutting off their little clits so they can't ever get any pleasure there. It's mutilation. Maybe yours dohn hurt so much right now, but it's the same thing. That's what they're doing to you. Mutilation."

The word was only a word, but it stayed with Carolyn like a mantra. She told herself later it was just that she was drunk, very un-Crespinly drunk, so drunk she hadn't even been offended by Faye's vulgar language, but it wasn't only that. It was true. The aunts were trying to mutilate her, and so was Albert. It was a revelation. Damn the aunts. Damn Albert.

The conversation went on to other things, and during all of it Sophy listened and listened very much, Carolyn thought, like an anthropologist in a native encampment, her ears positively quivering.

"Where were you brought up?" Carolyn asked her during a lull in the conversation.

"Oh, here and there," Sophy said, flushing a little. "Nowhere in particular."

"Country or city?"

"Oh, country! Yes, very rural, my people. My upbringing was all very ordinary and dull really. Farm life is very much the same from day to day. That's why I'm so excited about being here, learning all your stories."

"Our stories?" Carolyn laughed. "We don't even have stories."

"Oh, you do! You've been telling them tonight! I want to hear everything, all about you, and about women everywhere...."

She gave a similar answer every time they asked about her. Sometimes she looked uncomfortable, sometimes she smiled, but she never said anything definite. Carolyn thought she was probably part European, part Native American, or even South American, basing this idea on the panpipes Sophy sometimes played—a very Andean instrument. Jessamine remarked that Sophy played the drum, too, which was Indian or maybe Asian. They asked Agnes, who, being Sophy's roommate, should know, but Agnes only shrugged. "She won't tell me. She meditates sometimes, usually early in the morning. She says she's invoking a guardian spirit, but that's all she'll say."

In anyone else it would have been infuriating. In anyone else it would have led to suspicion, or ill feeling. In Sophy it was part of her charm. Her drumming and piping were mysterious, her meditative exercises unfathomable, but they were part of Sophy, whom they loved, even though they did not understand her. They particularly did not understand why Sophy was constantly so troubled over men.

The defining incident happened in early November. Despite Faye's marvelous voice, she wanted a career in art, not music, and even so early in her studies she visualized things as artworks. This defining incident was remembered as a painting—perhaps of the Dutch or Flemish school, dramatically sidelit: *Interior with Figures*. The interior was the room that she and Sophy shared, full of the golden light of an autumn afternoon, amber sun-fingers reaching toward dark corners and along dusky walls. The figures were themselves: Carolyn crouched on the window seat, the slanting light making a ruddy aureole of her hair, the dormer sprawled bonelessly across her lap. Faye herself, wild hair bushing upward, walnut skin, eyes glittering like a jungle creature, catching glimpses of herself in the mirror as she stalked back and forth. Sophy, heaped on a corner of the bed like a disjointed marionette, wide mouth pulled into a jester's gape. And Agnes, sitting solemnly, straight-legged, against the door.

staring at the trio before the mirror: Jessamine's sleek olive-brown presence at one side, Bettiann's tousled blondness at the other, and between them, staring into the mirror as into a crystal ball, Sophy.

She was like a rising star, lovely as the morning. Where had she come by that lovesome body, that perfect face? Doe-eyed Sophy. Night-haired Sophy. Sweet-lipped Sophy. Close-mouthed Sophy.

Sophy at that particular moment with swollen eyes, an angry mouth, and burning cheeks. "What do I say to discourage him?" she cried into the mirror at their reflected presence. "Think of something."

Sophy threw up her hands. "Sophy, he's the best catch in the whole school! He's good looking. He's rich! Have you seen that car of his? Besides, he didn't try to rape you! All he asked you to do was go on a date with him!"

Sophy's head went down, her eyes spilling, while Agnes sprang to her roommate's defense. "What *he* wants isn't the point. Sophy doesn't want to go on a date. That's the point. She doesn't want to be asked to go. That's the point. She doesn't want to be begged, harassed, chivied, or wooed. She wants to be let alone."

"Then she should have gone to a religious college," opined Bettiann. "Or some girls' school."

"My ... my scholarship was to this place!" cried Sophy, tested past endurance. "I didn't have a choice!"

There was a metallic quality to her voice, rather like a hammer striking an anvil to make first a clang, then a lingering reverberation that faded slowly into silence, an inhuman hardness coupled with an all-too-human desperation, as though two people ... two creatures spoke at once. Faye stopped pacing; Ophy stopped grinning; Carolyn's stroking hand stilled. Even the lazy cat looked up, suddenly alert to a tension, a presence in the room that had not been there a moment ago. They all ceased breathing as they searched Sophy's tear-streaked face staring at them from the mirror, surprised to see only her face when that Gorgon's voice should have come from another, more terrible creature.

In later years Carolyn occasionally awakened from a sound sleep or turned from a present task, thinking she had heard the clang of that voice, like the door of a distant vault being closed, shutting something in, or out, a ringing adamant, weighty as fate itself. Yet, so she told herself, the sound was not unnatural. It had force, like the roaring of cataracts or the spume of a geyser, and it was earthly, not alien. So she felt when they heard that voice for the first time, when Sophy cried woe into the mirror:

"I don't want men to ask me out. I don't want them to think of me that way. I can feel their thoughts. It's like being raped inside their heads, little pieces of me ripped off and taken into them, used up. I want them not to think of me, not to discuss me, not to make bets with each other, can they get me to go out with them, can they kiss me, can they take me to bed!"

A silence came while the reverberations stilled. Then Bettiann said:

"It's only words and thoughts, Sophy. Words can't hurt you."

"Words can't hurt?" Sophy cried. "Why do you believe they can't? Words have hurt all of us! It's your mother's words that make you throw up your dinner almost every night, Bettiann. Words made you believe you're unattractive, Aggie! Words may make you marry a man you don't love, Carolyn! Words are as powerful as weapons, as useful as tools. They can

injure like a flung stone, cut like a knife, batter like a club. They can open heaven or they can ruin and destroy!”

“Shh, now,” Carolyn cried in sudden inexplicable terror, afraid to let silence settle upon that outcry, afraid to let it go on to another word, phrase, sentence. That voice, that particular voice of Sophy’s, had to be stilled, quieted, put at rest, or it could destroy them. “You don’t need to fight with us, Sophy. We’re with you. Just explain what you mean.”

Sophy wiped the tears angrily, using the back of her hand. “I ... look at the lives of those who are greatly desired. I see pretty girls who burn hot, with sunny faces, their bodies like flame. They sing. They dance. They appear on the covers of magazines. I ask myself if it is merely coincidence that so many of them have such great troubles, so many die so young. It is as if they are eaten up alive, their souls nibbled away by all those who have fantasized about them, leered at them, used words and thoughts on them. In my people’s stories maidens lean against the dragon’s great scaled side under the shelter of a wing and learn secrets. In your stories maidens are chained to a stake for the dragon to burn or devour! The maiden may be mythical and the dragon invisible, but there is still truth in that. I don’t want your dragons devouring me.”

Agnes, lost, ventured, “Like ... when someone takes a picture of a primitive person. They’re stealing the soul?”

“Like that, perhaps,” said Sophy, shaking her head in confusion. “If you cannot feel it as real, then pretend for my sake that it’s real. Pretend it’s possible. I don’t want them using me that way.”

Carolyn nodded. “Then you want to be invisible.”

“Exactly,” Sophy whispered. “Oh, if I could be invisible.”

Carolyn rose to her feet, hands on hips, jaw jutted. “Then we’ll help you become so.”

It took the others a few moments to catch up with her.

“She doesn’t have to be beautiful,” Carolyn said scornfully in the face of their doubt. “No law says she has to be beautiful.”

And she gathered the five of them up into her hands like a deck of cards and dealt them out again: You go here, you go there, fetch this, fetch that, supervising Sophy’s makeover without a moment’s hesitation. Clothing first, baggy skirts and too-large tops, shapeless and of indeterminate colors, borrowed from Carolyn herself; a little liquid makeup on the lips and brows, fading them into the face; a little more on the lashes, making her eyes look bald. Fay saw to that. Hair pulled straight back into a knot, Bettiann’s contribution. A touch of olive base, Jessamine’s, to take the bloom from those cheeks. Ophy provided the glasses, framed only at first.

It was Agnes who suggested the book. “You need a heavy book,” she said. “You can carry it up against your chest and walk sort of bent over. You’ll look like a brain, armed with the shield and buckler of the female intelligentsia.”

“I’ve got a thick book,” said Jessamine. “I found it in the bottom of the cupboard in my room, with about fifty years’ worth of dust on it. I’ll get it.”

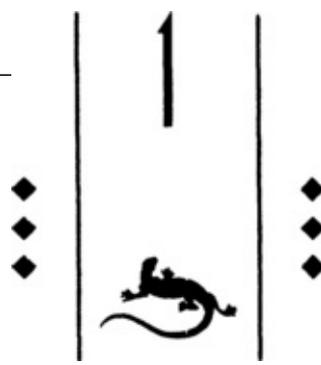
She returned moments later bearing Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, volume one. An old leather-bound library book, checked out years before by a feckless student, never returned. Sophy rose, took it into her arms, stooped slightly over it and shuffled across the room. They all burst into laughter, even Sophy, though hers was

sound of honest joy floating on the sea of derision. What the rest of them took as a joke  
Sophy accepted as a reprieve.

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In time her new self became familiar to them. With them, after a shower, her robe belted  
loosely around her, she was lovely as the dawn, but in public Sophy wore borrowed clothing  
was camouflaged like a hermit crab, no longer the object of male fascination and desire.

It was a shared secret, one that made them more than merely friends. They became a club,  
the Decline and Fall Club. They swore an oath to one another. Even after they left school  
they would stay close to one another. They would meet every year, and each of them would  
find a place to stand where she could be woman as woman was meant to be, and thereafter  
she would never decline or fall from that place.



## SPRING: THE YEAR 2000

IN THE BARN WHERE CAROLYN Crespin Shepherd knelt, the muted grays of hay and sheep blended indistinguishably in shadow. Outside, the field and woods glistened in a day's-dessert sunset, a sky like a split melon that oozed bright juice over every greening twig and unfolding leaf. Out there was a fete, a carnival, puddles from the departing thunderstorm throwing su around like confetti, but here were more serious matters, a murmuring woolliness beneath the cob-webbed beams, the tidal smells of birthing.

Light and shadow. Brilliance and dark. Chiaroscuro.

The word popped out of nothing, a printed word, not an oral one, not one Carolyn could remember using. Still, there it was, stored away in her mental attic along with all the other pack-rat bits and pieces of mind-furniture: old affections, old fears, old games. Hide-and-seek in the summer dusk, shrubberies making monster-shadows amid polygons of lamplight from windows, clarity and mystery, reality and possibility, *Ready or not, here I come!* Well, now that the word had been dragged out, use could be made of it.

"Chiaroscuro," she said to the watchful young ewe who stood pressed against the rough boards of the pen. "A good name for a black-and-white lamb, Mama. First lamb of the new century and first lamb for you. We'll call her Chiaro, for short."

The ewe's amber eyes remained fixed, the oblong pupils glaring. She raised one forefoot and stamped, thrusting her body as far from Carolyn as the pen would permit. Pressed between her mother and the timbers, the lamb protested weakly. The ewe only pressed them harder as it stamped again.

Carolyn drew a deep breath, caught suddenly between laughter and tears. The ewe was threatening her, warning her away. Sixty pounds or so of fangless, hornless sheep, incapable of any real defense, and still she stamped, still she protected, still those yellow eyes glared with primordial defiance. Behind her the lamb complained once more, a fretful baa while the mother stamped: Live or die, this lamb is mine!

It was so uncomplicated for sheep! "All right, Mama," Carolyn murmured. "That's all right. I'll look at your baby tomorrow."

The lamb had been licked dry, it had nursed, it had crouched to pee as female sheep and goats did and as rams and bucks did not. So much sufficed to tell Carolyn that all parts were female and functioning. No need to take this one up to the nursery box in the kitchen; no need for bottle feeding. Except for the shawl of white around the bony little shoulders, it was inky black. Chiaroscuro. A fancy name for a wee ewe-sheep.

Clutching at the top rail of the pen, Carolyn rose, pulling herself slowly upright, waiting for her bones and muscles to accept the change of position. Not as easy to get up as it had once been.

not as easy to get down. Things changed. Bodies changed. People changed. Thank God for sheep, who seemed always the same. Hal had taught her to love the timelessness of them, and lately she had lost the count of years in the slow movement of sheep grazing; in the incurious but watchful gaze of yellow eyes; in this annual ritual of birth, she and Hal making a fuss over the first lamb while the ewes stared and munched, muttering among themselves, "Lambs. Lambs. Me, too." They'd all have babies by the end of April, mostly twins: lambs that skip and race the pasture boundaries, black and gray, brown and white, playing lamb games. One could discover centuries in lamb games, so Hal said. One could discover aeons in the foolhardy and joyous, in life abundant and wasteful, running for the sake of life itself, no matter what fanged demons lurked beyond the fences.

There would be foolhardy life itself until there was no more grass, no more room for games. A year ago there had been scant room. This year there was none. All these lambs would have to go—to someone else, or to the slaughterer. There was no more pasture here.

She left the pen laggingly, conscious of pain in her right arm where she'd bruised it over the weekend shifting hay. At their ages neither she nor Hal should be shifting hay! Hal kept urging her to hire someone to live on the place, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. When Carlos's family had got too big for the little house and moved away, the resultant tranquillity had been wonderful. She had heard birds she'd never heard before, seen little animals she hadn't known lived there. Having anyone else around night and day seemed an intrusion on the quiet she treasured. Carlos came five days a week. That was enough.

She shut the gate firmly, double-checking the latch, assuring the protection of wood and wire between the vulnerable ewes and the wild dogs that roamed the river bottom, onetime partners in the primordial covenant, betrayed and abandoned to their own history, now become creatures contemptuous of man and all his works.

Hal had been brought up on a farm; he believed in the covenants. The wild covenant that destroys no habitat and hunts only to live, as the wolf or the puma hunts. The farm covenant among mankind and those he houses and feeds. Out of millennial history, each owed to each, though the animals kept their accounts better than man did. Milk and meat and wool on the animal side, food and care and a life kinder than that of the wild on man's side. In return for a place by the fire and the leavings of the table, stalking cats owed surveillance of the granary, and horn-throated hounds paid their way with keen ears and keener noses, assuring that no traveler, of whatever intent, should approach unheralded.

As now, from up the hill, a sudden ruckus of dogs!

She could distinguish Fancy's yap, Fandango's bay, Hector's deep roar; an announcement fervid but without rancor; a canine alarm signifying someone they knew. Thank heaven it was friend or relation, for she was sick to death of the strangers who'd been haunting the doorstep lately: millenarians, trumpeters of Armageddon, Bible-thumpers by the pairs and half dozens, all determined to share their message.

Presumably tonight's visitor knew enough about the place either to wait for her or to come looking. She moved toward the barn door, stopping momentarily to fill her pocket with rolled grain. When she went out, a dark shape materialized against the fence across the lane. She fished in the grain pocket, held the rolled oats between the wires, felt them snuffled up by soft lips that went on nibbling after the oats were gone. Hermes. A wether. Orphaned at birth, hand reared, kept as a pet, both for his lovely fleece and for his peoplish habits.

She leaned over the fence and scratched his head between the horns, murmuring in her secret voice, sheep sheep—sheep sheep, peering across the shadowy form at the crouched blots near the watering tank. The rams: one pitchy black; one not so pitchy, the dark-copper moorit; one light, the white one; and two intermediate shades that daylight would reveal as gray and a dark-faced tan. Five. All.

A voice from the top of the hill: “Mom? Are you down there?”

“Coming,” she called, brushing her hands together and turning her back on the sheep...

... the sheep, which became amorphous, like a cloud, like a rising pillar of mist, fading, tenuous, expiring on the air with a whisper of sound, like an echo of a door closing in some far-off place. Carolyn, unseeing, stopped suddenly, rubbing her brow fretfully, as though by some elusive but shocking thought, then shook her head and trudged up the hill toward her daughter.

Stace came toward her, huge glasses making an owl face in the last of the dusk, threw his arms around Carolyn, and squeezed. Carolyn carefully extricated herself, getting the sore arm out of reach.

“Lord, Mother, you look like a witch. Or a Norn, or something.”

“I just washed my hair,” Carolyn confessed, running a hand down the flowing gray tresses. “I didn’t want to braid it while it was wet.”

“And you were drying it in the barn?”

“There’s a lamb...” Her voice trailed off as she turned, peering back down the hill. Something. One of those elusive ideas that disappears before one can grasp it. A minnow thought, glinting, then gone.

“Now your hair smells like sheep,” Stace said firmly, bringing Carolyn’s attention back to the moment.

“It doesn’t, really. It’s my jeans.” She looked ruefully at the sodden knees. “Let’s go in. I’ll change.”

They went through the side door into the mudroom, where Carolyn shuffled off her sandals before leading the way past the kitchen and pantry into the small one-time maid’s room she had been using for a bedroom since Hal had attempted to scale the woodpile and broken his leg in the process. During the lengthy, complicated healing process he had slept restlessly, getting up and down several times in the night, tiptoeing ponderously, tripping over his feet or the crutches because he didn’t want to waken her with the lights. She’d moved herself into the little room so he could get up and down all he liked without worrying about waking her. He had been sleeping better as a result, the healing was progressing, and she was looking forward to their reunion. The temporary room was merely utilitarian, though the bookshelves held a few of her favorite photographs: Stace as a baby, toddler, child, adolescent; Hal and his boys, her stepsons, at various times in their lives; her friends in the Decline and Fall Club, when they were young and when they weren’t so young.

“Where’s Dad?” Stace asked, seating herself in the wicker rocker.

Carolyn answered from the bathroom door. “Your uncle Tim picked him up and took him down to Albuquerque. He’ll spend a night with his brother and have X rays in the morning. He’ll be back tomorrow afternoon.”

“How’s his leg doing?”

“For a man of his age, as well as can be expected. Actually, he is better. He’s almost qu-

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