

All parents should read this book. Those who do must leave it with the conviction that they are derelict in their duties if they abandon their responsibilities toward immature girls and boys, and expose them to the indifferent care of outsiders without sufficient moral preparation or mature direction.

Whisper Their Love is a tragic but touching portrait of a conflicted younger generation, and the painful consequences arising from sexual disorientation and adolescent rebellion.

That youth is normally in a state of rebellion most adults come to accept. But without genuine concern and understanding – without the means of communicating love and acceptance to those lost in the bewildering jungle of adolescent feelings – the destructive congeals into behavior patterns which can lead only to isolation and perpetual mutiny. The crushing loneliness of those who have set themselves apart from the world is dramatically illustrated in this story.

– Dr. Richard H. Hoffmann

Chapter One

She took a taxi from the railroad station to the campus. That was the last thing Mimi had told her, in the drugstore where Ferndell people waited for the bus. "Take a taxi, sweetie pie. This isn't any Community High School you're getting into; this place has class." She looked wistful, as if she had been the daughter and Joyce the mother. "It makes me feel good, you getting a break like this."

It didn't make Joyce feel good. Not at this stage of the game, anyhow. The meter registered thirty cents before they even started. Thirty cents was a lot of money to throw away. The rear-vision mirror gave back a small pale face with big eyes and an unfamiliar mouth, Mimi's Pink Passion smoothed on with a brush. Somebody else's face. She caught the driver's cynical eye in the glass and leaned back, trying to look as if she rode around in cabs every day. He grinned. "You going up to the Female Factory?"

"Pardon me?"

"The Louisa Henderson Hicks Junior College, kid." He turned halfway around. "Any time you want a hack, call and ask for Scotty. Any time at all."

"Thank you."

If this was the town of Henderson, it didn't look like much. But then, railroads always ran through the dirtiest part of town. Streets away, there were probably tree-shaded lawns and big white houses with pillared porticos. She had lain awake in the farmhouse bedroom nights, picturing it. The streets they were passing through now were more citified than Ferndell, but dirtier too, and mostly

given over to small taverns and cheap eating places.

A small kid on a bike skidded to a stop in front of them. Scotty rode his brakes. “Little bastard wants his neck broke,” he said. The kid made the sidewalk all right and thumbed his nose at the cab.

Railroad arch. Out in the sun again, Scotty ran the red light at a four-way stop and pulled up alongside a stretch of sunburned grass and fall-browning trees. “This is her. Take a good look.”

This was her, and how urgently she wished it weren’t. There was the library, stone, with ivy or something crawling up the front of it. All the other buildings were of dark red brick, set among clumps of trees and tied together with red brick sidewalks. There was the Civil War cannon pointing at the railroad arch which for some reason cut one corner off the campus. There was the marble statue of a Confederate general on a horse. For all the neglected grass and encroaching train tracks, the place wore a look of what she considered historical elegance.

Scotty came around and jerked the door open. The meter read eighty-five cents. She dug in her new handbag with slippery fingers and unwadded a dollar bill. “Keep the change.”

“Thanks, Miss Moneybags.”

The gravel was hot and gritty under her thin soles. Scotty, sliding back under the wheel, pointed. “That there one over there.”

“Thanks.”

Up the drive was as far as from Atlanta to the sea, and her feet felt glued to the ground, but there was nothing to do but plod toward the three-story building with pillars and the wide circular steps so overlaid with sitting and sprawling girls that she didn’t see how she was going to get to the door. Nobody stopped talking, or batted an eye her way, or indicated by the turning of a head that her approach had been noticed. And she knew that nobody was missing a thing, from the way Mimi had cut her hair to the shiny toes of her new pumps.

They were all beautiful, or carried themselves as if they thought

they were, as if they'd spent hours every day since the age of twelve just practicing up on being beautiful. Blondes, brunettes, a smoldering redhead in purple shorts. The new girls stood out from the rest, chic but hot in suits. The redhead looked at Joyce without a flicker of interest, as if she couldn't possibly offer any competition, and then moved over the least possible bit. Joyce had no choice but to edge past. It was a relief to get indoors, out of the hot sun and the cool stare of glamorous Southern womanhood.

There were more stairs inside, with a long hall at the top, chintz-curtained windows and cushioned seats at both ends. The inside steps were marble too, or almost. At the top was a woman in sheer black, whale-shaped and whale-sized; if she came unzipped she would have spilled over. She had pneumatic-drill eyes in a face creamed and massaged, rouged and powdered almost into youthfulness. Her voice was so elegant and cultured Joyce wouldn't have been surprised if she had taken it out like an upper plate when she went to bed at night.

"Good evening, dear. I am Mrs. Abbott, your housemother. Now may I have your name and home address?"

Joyce told her, and she recorded notes in a small, neat hand.

"Joyce Cameron, what a delightful name. Let's see, you're in with Mary Jean Kennedy, one of our sweetest girls. I just know you'll love her, she comes from Charlottenorthcarolina." Her eyes gimleted into Joyce's face, which felt as if it had Ferndellillinois printed all over it. Me and Abe Lincoln, she thought, then remembered that this was a Southern state and it might be more tactful not to mention Lincoln down here. "All of our girls are high caliber," Mrs. Abbott said. "Very high caliber, indeed."

Joyce smothered a giggle and followed Mrs. Abbott past an empty lounge with flowered curtains, a fireplace and a concert grand; past a row of doors with typed name cards; up another flight of stairs, wood but carpeted. Her new pumps were pinching badly. She damned narrow toes and pinpoint heels. The dirty loafers that had seen her through her senior year in high were in her closet at home.

She'd write tomorrow and ask Aunt Gen to send them.

Room 205, three doors from the stairs and almost across the hall from the bathroom, had been hit by a cyclone. It was a boxlike room looking out on the front campus and the railroad arch. Bleached wood furniture in pairs: two single beds, two chests of drawers with metal pulls, two desks, two straight chairs. Now a trunk stood open in the middle of the floor and somebody had evidently been interrupted in the midst of pulling out the contents and throwing them around.

Mrs. Abbott ignored the mess, like a lady. "Make yourself at home, dear. I'm sorry you are seeing our lovely campus when it isn't quite its prettiest, but you know we've had a dry summer. I'm sure you'll just love it here."

Joyce pushed back a white buck flat and a pair of pleated nylon panties off the nearest bed and sat down, a little dazed.

After Mrs. Abbott left, Joyce walked to the bathroom. So this was what it would be like. The door stood open and she went in. An unstoppered bottle of nail polish was drying out on the window sill, wet footprints crisscrossed the tile floor, and tiny hairpins sprinkled over the basin suggested that someone had been combing out a home permanent. I wish Aunt Gen could see this, Joyce thought. Uncle Will had put plumbing in the farmhouse during the early years of the war, when corn and hog prices were high, and one of Aunt Gen's maxims was that you could judge a housekeeper by her bathroom and kitchen.

The room door was shut when she got back. She hesitated, then pushed it open and walked in. A naked girl was bending over the trunk, back to her, throwing more things out on the floor. She turned. "Hi. Are you the perfectly delightful character Abbott put in with me?" She threw a net crinoline on the bed. It slid off with a whispering of ruffles. "Were you in the john? Anybody else in there?"

"No, it's empty."

"Good. Gotta do some first aid, but quick." She scowled, dark eyes angry under black arched brows. "I told the fool I wasn't fixed,

we'd better wait, but no, he can't hold off till tonight." She bent over the trunk again, sweat beading her back. "The little monsters travel an inch every six minutes or something, Butch told us in Hygiene, though I don't know how she'd know." She found what she was after and straightened up, draping a terry robe around her. "Be right back."

She can't mean what I think she means, Joyce reassured herself. There wasn't anything to do but stand there, looking at the cream plastered walls, until Mary Jean came back into the room.

"I didn't mean to be rude," Mary Jean apologized. She pulled off the robe and dropped something into a gaping drawer. "The big lug makes me so mad, coming at me like he's been starved all summer." Her cheeks creased into a dimple. "I can't say no to him either."

"Well—" Joyce could feel her face getting red. Of course she had sat in on enough washroom sessions about whether a girl should or not, and whether you would if you really loved a boy, and whether certain other girls had. The consensus at Community seemed to be that it was pretty darn sophisticated to Go All the Way but simpler if you waited, especially if you ended up marrying a man who wanted his wife to be without experience. Certainly it was better not to admit anything, except maybe to your best girl friend.

Mary Jean was simmering down now that she had fixed things, or hoped she had. She began taking piles of clothes out of the trunk and laying them in piles on her bed, slips here and balled-up nylons there. She moved quickly and well – tennis or maybe ballet lessons. "Excuse me," she said politely, "are you a Vee?"

"I don't know –"

"Virgin, silly. One of the girls Kinsey missed."

"I guess so," Joyce said, humiliated. If you could believe the little blue-paper booklets Aunt Gen left on her bed, the autumn she was thirteen, *not* being a virgin was something to blush for. And according to the copies of romance magazines the girls bought at the corner drugstore and passed around at school, as soon as you quit being one

you got pregnant and full of remorse. Only to wind up with forgiveness and the pure love of a good man, which evidently took up all your time and energy for the rest of your life, since that was where the stories ended. She guessed the truth was somewhere in between.

“Don’t let it get you down.” Mary Jean had finally reached the bottom layer of the trunk. Jewelry, gloves, a wad of tissues. The room looked like a rummage sale. She stepped into a doll-size puckered panty girdle, found her wristwatch and put it on, pulled on flat beaded moccasins. “Now where in hell is my pink honan?” She found it under a pile of books and put it on, shaking out the pleats. “Abbott likes us to dress up for dinner. Our delightful dinner. The first night doesn’t matter, though; your suit’s all right.”

“My trunk isn’t here yet, anyway.”

“I love your hair,” Mary Jean said dreamily. “It’s the exact color of molasses taffy.” She moved over and made a place at the mirror for Joyce. Her own hair was ink-black, cut short and feathered against her cheeks.

“My mother cut it,” Joyce said proudly. “She’s an executive for a cosmetic firm.” That was one way of putting it – well, it took brains and personality to sell; Mimi said so herself. All those postcards she had saved, even if Aunt Gen did think it was silly, written on trains, in cheap hotels, waiting in small-town Beauty Shoppes whose harassed owners might or might not buy, pencil propped against the sample case. “She’s getting married again, though. To her boss.”

“My mother went away when I was a little kid,” Mary Jean said, measuring with her hand from the floor. She looked intently into the mirror. “I’m going to be a photographer’s model. You’d make a cute sub-deb model yourself, that little round face and dimples. Ever think about it?”

“They say it’s hard work.”

“All work is terrible. The pay’s good, though.”

The thought of being a model and making wads of money lasted all the way down the two flights of stairs, into the dining room at

the end of the first-floor hall. There awe overtook her. The room was long, and lit by candles as well as an overhead chandelier with dangling prisms, and it was full of talking girls. The second-year students had changed to Scarlett O'Hara type dresses, only mostly ballet length, and the new ones stood around singly or clinging to their roommates, trying to look aloof but only looking alone. Mrs. Abbott swam, whale-smooth, through all this femininity, still in her black but with rhinestone glitter added and new make-up. "Let's see, you will be at Miss Bannister's table the first six weeks. I know you'll see that your delightful little roommate meets all the girls," she told Mary Jean, smiling sweetly. Mary Jean smirked back. Joyce felt about five years old, likely to wet her pants or start sucking her thumb any minute.

"Go screw yourself," Mary Jean muttered after Mrs. Abbott's broad retreating back. "Don't look that way, honey. She makes me sick, too."

"Which one's Miss Bannister?"

"Dean of Women. That's a silly name for it. What is there to be dean of in this nunnery?" Mary Jean steered her around clusters of talking girls. There were six or seven long tables, each set for twelve, and they were something: damask shiny with ironing, hanging in folds to the floor; candles burning with straight flames; silver bowls with pink roses in them. She gave a worried look at the line of flat silver alongside her plate and stood behind her chair, like the others.

Miss Edith Bannister, Dean of Women, was at the head of the table. The only dean she had known was Ma Henneberry, unmarried, at Community High, who lectured the girls about purity and was built on the lines of Uncle Will's morris chair. This one was like tubular steel. Slender, erect, rather pale, all in beige, with one big splashy ring. She turned her head and looked the length of the table.

Something stirred in Joyce. She looks like Mimi. No, she doesn't either. Maybe if Mimi wore her hair like that, plain. Still, there's

something. The old longing rose in her. She was caught and held by smooth-lidded eyes, neither gray nor brown but something between. Miss Bannister smiled a little, turning her hand so that the light winked on her ring.

Somebody rattled off a blessing, and chairs scraped on the parquet. Joyce sat down, copying the others. A dark-brown hand reached over her shoulder and set down a glass of tomato juice, and suddenly she was hungry.

Miss Bannister was listening to one of the girls, her head bent. She didn't exactly look like Mimi, but still – Joyce reached for her glass without looking, and tipped it over. The girl next to her squawked and jumped up, shaking out her flounces. Joyce got mixed up in a flurry of apologies and pushed Mimi out of her mind, the first time since the news of her engagement to Irv Kaufman had come to the farm.