



Chapter 7: Consolata

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CHAPTER SEVEN

CONSOLATA

In the deepest part of the cellar Consolata woke to the exhausting disappointment of not having died the night before. Each morning, her hopes dashed, she lay on the cot repelled by her slug-like life which she managed to get through by sipping, sipping, sipping from black bottles with handsome names. Each night she sank into sleep determined it would be the final one.

Already in a space that looked like a coffin, already in love with the dark, long removed from appetites, craving only oblivion, she struggled to understand the delay. "What for?" she would ask and her voice was one among many that packed the cellar from rafter to stone floor. Several times a week she left the cellar but only at night or in the shadowy part of the day. Then she would stand outside in the garden, walk around a bit, look up at the sky to see the only light it had that she could bear. One of the women, Mavis usually, would

set of his jaw as he faced them answered immediate questions of domain. The finger at the tip of his long black arm pointed left toward sky where a wall had collapsed, demanding quick exit from his premises. Near the pointing man, faintly etched on the ochre wall was a girl with butterfly wings twelve inches long. The opposite wall was inhabited by what Consolata thought were fishmen but he said No, more like Eskimo eyes.

"Eskimo?" she asked bunching her hair away from her neck. "What's an Eskimo?"

He laughed and, obeying the cowboy's order, pulled her away, over the rubble of the collapsed wall, back to the gully where they competed with the fig trees for holding on to one another.

Mid-October he skipped a week. A Friday came and Consolata waited for two and a half hours where the driveway met the dirt road. She would have waited longer but Penny and Clarissa came and led her away.

He must be dead, she thought. And no one to tell her so. All night she fretted --on her pallet in the pantry or hunched in darkness at the kitchen table. Morning found her watching the world of living

things dribbling away with his absence. Her heart, clogged with awfulness, weakened. Her veins seemed to have shrunk to clear cellophane tubes. The heaviness in her chest was gaining weight so fast she was unable to breathe properly. Finally she decided find out or find him.

It was Saturday. A busy day in these parts. The once a week Trailways bus honked her out of the way as she strode down the middle of the county road. Consolata skittered to the shoulder and kept on. Her unbraided hair lifting in the breeze of the tail pipe. A few minutes later an oil truck passed her its driver yelling something through the window. Half an hour later there was a glistening in the distance. A car? A truck? Him? Her heart gurgled and began to seep blood back into her cellophane veins. She dared not let the smile growing in her mouth spread to her face. Nor did she dare stop walking while the vehicle came slowly into view. Yes, dear God, a truck. And one person at the wheel, my Jesus. And now it slowed. Consolata turned to watch it come full stop and to feast on the face of her beloved.

He leaned out of the window, smiling.

"Want a lift?"

Consolata ran across the road and darted around to the passenger door. By the time she got there it was open. She climbed in and, for some reason--a feminine desire to scold or annihilate twenty-four hours of helpless desperation; to pretend, at least, that the suffering he had caused her required his apology, explanation to win her forgiveness--some instinct like that preserved her and she did not let her hand slip into his crotch as it wanted to.

He was silent, of course. But it was not the silence of the Friday noon pickups. Then the unspeaking was lush with promise, easy in its anticipation with certainty. Vocal. This silence was barren, a muteness lined with acid. And then she noticed the smell. Not unpleasant. Not at all. But not his. Consolata froze, then, not daring to look at his face, she glanced sideways at his feet. He was not wearing the black high tops but cowboys boots that convinced her that a stranger sat behind the steering wheel inhabiting the body of him, but not him.

She thought to scream, to throw herself out of the door. She would fight him if he touched her. She had no time to invent other options because they were approaching the dirt road that led to the house. She was just about to fling open the door when the stranger

braked and slowed to a standstill. He leaned over, brushing her breasts with his arm and opened the door. She stepped down quickly and turned to see.

He touched the brim of his stetson, smiling. "Anytime," he said. "Anytime at all."

She backed away staring at the exact face of him, repelled by but locked into his eyes, chaste and wide with hatred.

The incident did not halt the fig tree meetings. He came the next Friday wearing the right shoes and exuding the right smell and they fought a little.

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. He didn't even ask me where I was going. Just drove me back."

"Good thing he did."

"Why?"

"Did us both a favor."

"No. He was..."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"What'd he say to you?"

"He said, 'want a lift' and then he said 'anytime.'. Like he'd do it again. He doesn't like me."

"Probably not. Why should he? You want him to? Like you?"

"No. Oh, no, but."

"But what?"

"You talk to him about me?"

"Never told him a thing about you."

"Then how did he know I was coming to find you?"

"Maybe he didn't. Maybe he just didn't think you should be walking to town like that."

"He didn't turn the truck around. He was driving north. That's why I thought it was you."

"Look," he said, leaning on his elbow. "We have to have a signal. I can't always show up on Fridays. Let's think of something, so you'll know."

They thought of nothing that would work. In the end she told him she would wait the Fridays, but only for an hour. He said, if I'm not on time, I'm not coming at all.

The regularity of their meetings, before his twin showed up, had honed her hunger to a blunt blade. Now the irregularity knifed it.

not on time, I'm not coming at all.

The regularity of their meetings, before his twin showed up, had honed her hunger to a blunt blade. Now irregularity knifed it. Even so, twice more he carried her off to the place where fig trees insisted on life. She, at least, did not know it then, but the second time was the last. It was late in October. He walled a portion of the ruined house with a horse blanket and they lay on an army issue bed roll. The pale sky above them was ringed with a darkness coming which they could not have seen had they looked. So the falling snow that lit her hair and cooled his wet back suprised them. Later they spoke of their situation. Blocked by weather and circumstance much of what they thought about was Where. He mentioned a town ninety miles north but corrected himself quickly because no motel or hotel would take them. She suggested the Convent because of the hiding places in it everywhere. He snorted his displeasure.

"Listen," she whispered. "There is a small room in the cellar. No. Wait, just listen. I will fix it, make it beautiful. With candles. It is cool and dark in the summmer, warm as coffee in winter. We'll have a lamp to see each other with but nobody can see us. We can shout as loud as we want and nobody can hear. Pears are down there

insist on joining her. Talking, talking, always talking. Or a couple of others would come. Sipping from the dusty bottles with handsome names--Jarnac, Medoc, Haut-Brion and St. Emilion--made it possible to listen to them, even answer, sometimes. Other than Mavis, who had been there the longest, it was getting harder to distinguish among them. What she knew of them over the past years she had mostly forgotten and it seemed less and less important to remember any of it because the timbre of each of their voices told the same tale: disorder, deception and, what Sister Roberta warned the Indian girls against, drift. The three d's that paved the road to perdition and the greatest of these was drift.

Over the years they had come. The first during Mother's long illness; the second right after she died. Then two more. each one asking permission to stay a few days but never leaving. They stayed on living like mice in a house no one, not even the tax collector, wanted with a woman in love with death. Consolate looked at them through the bronze or gray or blue of her various sunglasses and saw broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying. When she was sipping she could tolerate them, but more and more she wanted to break their necks. Anything to stop the bad food, the unintelligible music,

the fights, the raucous empty laughter, the claims. But especially the drift. The fact that they not only did nothing, except the obligatory, they had no plans to do anything. Sister Roberta would have pulped their hands. Instead of plans they had wishes--foolish babygirl wishes. Mavis talked endlessly of crazy money-making ventures: beehives, something called "bed and breakfast"; a catering company; an orphanage. One thought she had found a treasure chest of money or jewels or something and wanted help to cheat the others of its contents. Another was secretly slicing her thighs, her arms. Wishing to be the queen of scars, she made thin red slits in her skin with whatever came to hand: razor, safety pin, paring knife. One other longed for cabaret life, a place where she could sing the pitiful little songs she wrote. Consolata encouraged these dreams, which seemed so silly to her, with padded, wine-soaked indulgence for they did not infuriate her as much as their whispers of love. One by one they would float down the stairs, carrying a kerosene lamp or a candle, like virgins entering a temple or a crypt, to sit on the floor and talk of love. As if they knew anything at all about it, she mused. They spoke of men who came to caress them in their sleep; of men waiting for them; of men who should have loved, would have loved, might have

loved them except. Except. Except.

On her worst days, deep in the cellar as well as the maw of depression, she wanted to kill them all. Maybe that was what her own pointless slug life was being prolonged for. That and the cold serenity of God's wrath. To die without His forgiveness condemned her soul. But to die without Mother's dirtied it. She could have given it freely if Consolata had told her in time, confessed before the old woman's mind faded to singsong. On the last day Consolata had climbed into the bed behind her and, tossing pillows on the floor, raised up the feathery body and held it in her arms and between her legs. The small white head nestled between Consolata's breasts and the lady had entered death like a birthing, rocked and sung to by the woman she kidnapped as a child. Kidnapped three children, actually; the easiest thing in the world in 1925. Mary Magna, although she was a Sister not a Mother then, refused to leave two children in the garbage they sat in on the street. She simply picked them up, took them to the hospital where she worked and cleaned them in a sequence of Ordorno's Baking Soda, Glover's Mange, soap, alcohol, Blue Ointment, soap, alcohol and iodine carefully placed on their sores. She dressed them and, with the complicity of her sisters, took them

with her to the ship. They were six American nuns on their way back to the States after twelve years of being upstaged by older, sterner Portuguese orders. Nobody questioned nursing sisters paying cut-rate passage for three urchins. For there were three now, Consolata being a last minute decision because she was already 9 years old. By anyone's standard the snatching was a rescue for whatever life the exasperated, headstrong nun was dragging them to it would be superior to what lay before them in the shit strewn paths of that city. When they disembarked in Curacao Sister Mary Magna placed the two small ones in an orphanage. But by then she had fallen in love with Consolata. The green eyes? the tea colored hair? maybe her docility? Perhaps her smokey sundown skin? She took her along as a ward to the post to which the difficult nun was now assigned. An asylum/boarding school for Indian girls in some desolate part of the American west.

For 30 years Consolata worked hard to earn and remain Mary Magna's pride, one of her singular accomplishments in a world of teaching, nurturing, tending in places her family had never heard of. Consolata slept in the pantry, minded students, scrubbed tile, fed chickens, prayed, peeled, gardened and laundered. One of her first

tasks was to help smash offensive marble figures and tend bonfires of pornography, crossing herself when a book sliding out of the fire opened to a page of undressed lovers. For 30 years she gave her body and soul to God's son as completely as if she had taken the veil herself. He of the bleeding heart and bottomless love. He whose way was narrow but scented with the sweetness of thyme. Whose love was so perfectly available it dumbfounded wise men and the damned. He who had become human so we could know Him touch Him see Him in the littlest ways. Become human so His suffering would mirror ours, that His death throes, His doubt, despair, His failure would speak for and absorb throughout earthtime what we were vulnerable to. But these thirty years of surrender to the living God cracked like a robin's egg when she met the living man.

People were building houses, fencing and plowing land some fifteen miles south of Christ the King. In 1954 they had begun to build a feedstore, a grocery store and, to Mary Magna's delight, a pharmacy closer than ninety miles. There she could purchase the bolts of antiseptic cotton for the girls' menstrual periods, the needles that kept them busy mending, embroidering, and the aluminum chloride with which she made deoderant.

On one of these trips, when Consolata accompanied Mary Magna in the school's banged up station wagon, before they reached the newly cut road it was clear something odd was happening. Something unharnessed was going on under the scalding sun. They could hear loud cheering. Instead of a dozen or so industrious people going quietly about the business of making a town they saw horses galloping off into yards, down the road and people screaming with laughter. Small girls with red and purple flowers in their hair were jumping up and down. A boy holding for dear life onto a horse's neck was lifted off and declared winner. Young men and boys swung their hats, chased horses and wiped their laughing eyes. As Consolata watched their reckless joy a dim memory of her birthplace yawned. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. A memory of just such skin and just such men, dancing with women in the streets, dancing to music she had forgotten, music beating like a panicked heart, torsos still, hips making small circles above legs moving so rapidly it was fruitless to decipher how such grace was possible. These men were not dancing, however; they were laughing, running, calling to each other and to women doubled over in glee. And although they were living here in a hamlet, not a city full of people black and glistening like birds,

Consolata knew she knew them.

It was some time before Mary Magna could get the pharmacist's attention. Finally he walked them back to his house, where part of the front porch served as a pharmacy, and let Mary Magna in. It was while Consolata waited on the steps that she saw him for the first time. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. A lean young man astride one horse, leading another. His khaki shirt was soaked with sweat and at some point he removed his wide flat hat to wipe perspiration from his forehead. His hips were rocking in the saddle back and forth, back and forth. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. Consolata saw his profile and a buried panic, undead, fluttered in her chest. He rode on past and disappeared into the feed lot. Mary Magna emerged with her purchases complaining a little about something, the price the quality, and hurried to the station wagon, Consolata, carrying the blue-tissued roll of surgical cotton, following behind her. Just as she opened the passenger door he passed again. On foot, running lightly. Eager to return to the festive knot of people further down the road. Casually, perfunctorily, he looked her way. Consolata looked back and thought she saw hesitation in his eyes if not in his stride. Quickly she ducked into the automobile. She did not see him again for two terrified

months. Months of fervent prayer and extra care taken with chores. Months of tension also because the school had been enjoined to close. The good, sweet Indian girls were long gone. Snatched away by their mothers and brothers or graduated into a pious life . For three years now the school had been accepting wards of the state: girls who clearly thought the sisters were crazy most of the time, sinister the rest of the time. Two had already run away; only four remained. Unless the sisters could persuade the state to send them more wayward Indian girls, the orders were to prepare for closure and reassignment. The property, a benefactor's gift on untaxable church land and, so far, without any discoverable natural resources, was impossible to unburden. The state had wayward girls all right, since wayward could mean anything from bedwetting to truancy to stuttering in class, but preferred to place them in protestant schools where they could at least understand the clothes if not the religious behavior of the teachers. Catholic churches and schools in Oklahoma were as rare as fishpockets. Therefore, with everybody distracted, Consolata's fumbling, dropping things, her sudden rushes into the chapel to pray were nuisances but not signs of alarm distinguishable from the rest. When asked she invented excuses so she would not

have to return to Ruby. In the end it didn't help. He came to her.

She was bent over weeding the vegetable garden with two restless students on a clear summer day when a male voice said,

"Excuse me, Miss."

All he wanted was some black peppers.

He was 29. She was 39. And she lost her mind. Completely.

Consolata was not a virgin. One of the reasons she so gratefully accepted Mary Magna's hand, stretching over the litter like a dove's wing, was the dirty pokings her ninth year subjected her to. But never, after the white hand had enclosed her filthy paw, had she known any male or wanted to, which must have been why being love-struck after 29 years of piety took on an edible quality.

What did he say? Come with me? What they call you? How much for a half peck? Or did he just show up the next day for more of the hot black peppers. Did she walk toward him to get a better look? Or did he move toward her? In any case, with something like amazement, he'd said "Your eyes are like mint leaves." Had she answered "And yours are like the beginning of the world" aloud or were these words confined to her head? Did she really drop to her knees and encircle his leg or was that merely what she was wanting

to do?

"I'll return your basket. But it may be late when I do. Is it all right if I disturb you?"

She didn't remember saying anything to that, but her face surely told him what he needed to know because he was there and she was there and he took her hand in his. Not a peck basket in sight. Sha sha sha.

Once in his Chevrolet truck, easing down the two lane track, the narrow dirt road and then gaining speed on a wider one, they did not speak. He drove, it seemed, for the pleasure of the machine. The roar contained, hooded, in steel. The sly way it simultaneously parted the near darkness and vaulted into darkness afar--beyond what could be anticipated at any speed. They drove for what Consolata believed were hours no words passing between them. The danger and its necessity focussed them, made them calm. She did not know or care where headed or what might happen when they arrived. Speeding ahead into the unforeseeable, sitting next to him who was darker than the darkness they split, Consolata felt as though she had just now been born, just now unstuck from the walls of a stone cold womb. Out here where wind was not a help or threat to sunflowers, nor the

moon a signal for time, weather, for sowing or harvesting, but features of the world designed for the two of them.

original

Finally he slowed and turned into a barely passable track where x grass scraped the fenders. In the middle of it he braked and would have taken her in his arms except she was already there.

One the way back they were speechless again. What had been uttered during their lovemaking leaned toward language, gestured its affiliation, but in fact was un-memorable, --controllable or --translatable. Before dawn they pulled away from each other as though, having been arrested, they were each facing prison sentences without parole. As she opened the passenger door and stepped down, he said, "Friday. Noon." Consolata stood there while he backed down the track. She had not seen him clearly not even once during the whole night. But Friday. Noon. They would do it do it do it in daylight. She hugged herself, sank to her knees and doubled over, her forehead acutally touching the ground. Rocking in the harness of pleasure that bound her.

She slipped into the kitchen and pretended to Sister Roberta that she had been in the hen house.

"Well, then? Where are the eggs?"

"Oh. I forgot the basket."

"Don't go soft headed on me please."

"No, sister."

"Everything is in such disarray."

"Yes, Sister."

"Well, move then."

"Yes, Sister. Excuse me Sister."

"Is something funny?"

"No, Sister. Not at all. But...."

"But?"

"I was wondering what day is today?"

"The twenty-second day after Trinity. Why?"

"I mean what day of the week."

"Tuesday, why?"

"Nothing, Sister."

"We need your wits, dear. Not your confusion."

"Yes, Sister."

Consolata snatched a basket and ran out the kitchen door.

Friday. Noon. The sun has hammered everybody back behind

stone walls for relief. Everybody but Consolata and, she hopes, the living man. She has no choice but to bear the heat with only a straw hat to protect her from the anvil the sun takes her for. She is standing at the slight turn in the driveway, but in full view of the house. If Sister Roberta or Mary Magna call to her or ask for an explanation she will invent something--or nothing. This land is flat as an iron, open as a baby's mouth. There is nowhere to hide outrageousness. She sees his truck before she hears it and when it arrives it passes her by. He does not turn his head but he signals. His finger lifts from the steering wheel and points further ahead. Consolata turns right and follows the sound of his tires and then their silence as they touch tarmac. He waits for her on the shoulder of the road.

Inside the truck they look at one another for a long time, seriously, carefully, and then they smile.

He drove to a burned out farmhouse that sat on a rise of fallow land. Negotiating blue stem and wolf grass, he parked behind the black teeth of a collapsing chimney. Hand in hand they fought shrub and bramble until they reached a shallow gully. Consolata spotted at once what he wanted her to see: two fig trees growing into each

other. When they were able to speak full sentences he gazed at her and said,

"Don't ask me to explain. I can't."

"Nothing to explain."

"I'm trying to get on in my life. A lot of people depend on me."

"I know you married."

"I aim to stay so."

"I know."

"What else you know?"

"That I'm way older than you."

"Nobody's older than me."

Consolata laughed.

"Certainly not you," he said. "When's the last time?"

"Before you were born."

"Then you all mine."

"Oh yes."

"I've traveled. All over. I've never seen anything like you. How could anything be put together like you? Do you know how beautiful you are? Have you looked at yourself?"

"I'm looking now."

No figs ever appeared on those trees during all the time the met there but they were grateful for the shade of those dusty leaves and the protection of the agonized trunks. The blankets he brought they lay on as much as possible. Later each saw the nicks and bruises the dry creek caused.

Consolata was questioned. She refused to answer; diverted the inquiries into a plaintive "what's going to happen to me when all this is closed? Nobody has said what's going to happen to me."

"Don't be ridiculous. You know we'll take care of you. Always."

Consolata pouted, pretending to be wild with worry and therefore unreliable. The more assurance she got the more she insisted upon wandering off, to "be by myself," she said. An urge which struck her mostly on Fridays. Around noon.

When Mary Magna left on business in September only Sister Mary Elisabeth and three, now, feckless students had to pack, clean and maintain prayer. Two of the students, Clarissa and Penny, began to smile when they saw Consolata. They were fourteen years old; small boned girls with knowing eyes that could go suddenly blank. They lived to get out of that place, and were in fairly good spirits now that the end was coming. Recently they had begun to regard

Consolata as a confederate rather than one of the enemy out to ruin their lives. And whispering to each other in language the Sisters had forbidden them to use, they covered for her; did the egg gathering that was Consolata's responsibility. The weeding and washing up too. Sometimes they watched from the school room windows, heads touching, eyes aglow, as the woman old enough to be their mother stood in all weather waiting for the Chevrolet truck.

"Does anyone know?" Consolata ran her thumbnail around the living man's nipple.

"Wouldn't be surprised," he said.

"Your wife?"

"No."

"You told somebody?"

"No."

"Someone saw us?"

"Don't think so."

"Then how could anybody know?"

"I have a twin."

Consolata sat up. "There are two of you?"

"No. There's just one of me."

September marched through breaking everything before it; acres of alfalfa, rye, barely tk. When October arrived and gourds were swelling in the places where tk had been, Mary Magna and Sister Roberta returned with news that was no news. Everyone's fate was being resolved in Saint Pere, except her own. That decision would come later. Mary Magna's age, seventy two, was a consideration but also there was the upkeep of the property. They could not simply walk off, could they? Mary Magna called them all together to explain. Penny and Clarissa listened in rapt attention as their future--the next four years of it anyway--which had taken shape in some old man in a gown's hands, was presented to them. They bowed their beautiful heads in solemn acquiescence certain that help getting out of the clutch of nuns was on the way.

Consolata, however, paid scant attention to Mary Magna's words. She wasn't going anywhere. She would live in the field if she had to, or better, in the fire ruined house that had become her mind's home. Three times now she had followed him through it, balancing on buckled floorboards and smelling twelve year old smoke. No one had tried to save the house. Out there with not even a tree line in view,

like a house built on the sand waves of the lonely Sahara, it had no chance against fire. Had it begun at night with children asleep? Or was it unoccupied when the flames first seethed. The husband sixty acres away, bundling, branding, clearing, sowing. The wife stooped over a wash tub in the yard. She would have thrown a bucket or two, then, yelling to the children, rushed to collect what she could. Piling everything she could reach, snatch into the yard. Surely they had a bell--something to ring or bang so the other would know danger. When the husband got there the smoke would have forced him to cry. But only the smoke, for they were not crying people. He would have worried first about the stock and guided them to safety or set them free, remembering that he had no property insurance. Other than what lay in piles in the yard, all was lost. Even the sunflowers at the northwest corner of the house. Near the kitchen. Where the wife could see them while scrambling eggs.

Consolata ferreted in drawers where field mice had nibbled propane gas receipts. Saw how the wind had smoothed charred furniture to silk. Nether shapes had taken over the space from which humans had fled. A kind of statuary of ash people. A man, eight feet tall, hovered over the fireplace. His legs, sturdy cowboy legs, and the

and walls of wine. The bottles sleep on their sides and each one has a name like Duvve Cliquot or Medoc and a number: 1-9-1-5 or 1-9-2-6 like prisoners waiting to be freed. Do it," she said, "Please do it. Come to my house."

While he considered, her mind raced ahead with plans. Plans to cram rosemary into the pillow slips; rinse linen sheets in hot water steeped in cinnamon. They would slake their thirst with the prisoner wine. He laughed, a slow satisfied laugh and she bit his lip which, on retrospect, was her big mistake.

Consolata did all of it and more. The cellar room sparkled in the light of an eight holder candelabra from Holland and reeked of ancient herbs. None of which pleased him for he never arrived. Never felt the slide of old linen on his skin, nor picked flakes of stick cinnamon from her hair. The two wine glasses she rescued from straw filled crates and polished to abnormal clarity collected dust particles, then, by November, an industrious spider moved in.

Penny and Clarissa had washed their hair and sat by the stove combing it dry. Every now and then one of them would lean and shake a shiney black panel of it closer to the heat. Softly singing forbidden Algonquian lullabies they watched Consolata just as they

always did. Her days of excitement, of manic energy. Her slow change to nailbiting distraction. They liked her because she was stolen as they had been and felt sorry for her too. They took her behavior as a serious instruction about the limits and possibilities of love and imprisonment with them for the balance of their lives. NOW, however, the instant future of their own lives claimed privilege. Bags packed, plans set, all they needed was money.

"Where do you keep the money, Consolata? Please, Consolata. Wednesday they take us to the Correctional. Just a little, Consolata. In the pantry, yes? Well, where? There was one dollar and twenty cents on Monday alone. "

Consolata ignored them. "Don't pester me."

"We helped you, Consolata. Now you must help us. It's not stealing--we worked hard here. Please? Think how hard we worked."

Their voices chanting, soothing they swayed their hair and looked at her with the glorious eyes of maidens in peril.

The knock on the kitchen door was not loud but its confidence was unmistakable. three taps. No more. The girls stilled their hair in their hands. Consolata rose from her chair as if summoned by the

sheriff or an angel. In a way it was both, in the shape of a young woman, exhausted, breathing hard but ram rod straight.

"I walked here," she said. "Please. Let me sit."

Penny and Clarissa disappeared like smoke.

The young woman took the chair Penny had vacated.

"Can I get you something?" asked Consolata.

"Water, would you?"

"Not tea? You look froze."

"Yes. But water first. Then some tea."

Consolata poured water from a pitcher and bent to check the stove fire.

"What's that smell?" asked the visitor. "Sage?"

Consolata nodded. The woman covered her lips with her fingers.

"Does it bother you?"

"It'll pass. Thank you." She drank the water slowly until the glass was empty.

Consolata knew, or thought she did, but asked anyway. "What is it you want?"

"Your help." Her voice was soft, non-committal. No judgment, no pleading.

"I can't help you."

"You can if you want to."

"What kind of help are you looking for?"

"I can't have this child."

Hot water splashed from the spout to the saucer. Consolate put down the kettle and sopped the water with a towel. She had never seen the woman--girl, really, not out of her twenties, but there was no confusion from the moment she stepped inside about who she was. His scent was all over her, or his was all over her. They lived together close enough long enough to breathe flox and wet grass and tobacco and to exhale it in their wake. That and some other thing: the scent of small children, the lovely aroma of sweet oil, baby powder and a meatless diet. This was a mother here, saying a brute unmotherly thing that rushed at Consolata like a forked tongue. She dodged the tongue, but the toxin behind it shocked her with what she had known but never imagined: she was sharing him with his wife. Now she saw the pictures that represented exactly what that word-sharing- meant.

"I can't help you with that! Why would you think I could?"

"I've had two children in two years. If I have another..."

"Why come to me? Why are you asking me?"

"Who else?" asked the woman in her clear, matter-of-fact voice.

The poison spread. Consolata had lost him. Completely. Forever. His wife might not know it, but Consolata remembered his face. Not when she bit his lip, but when she had hummed over the blood she licked from it. He'd sucked air sharply. Said "Don't ever do that again." But his eyes, first startled, then revolted, had said the rest of what she should have known right away. Clover, cinnamon, soft old linen--who would chance pears and a wall of wine with a woman bent on eating him like a meal?

"Go away. Please, just go away. You didn't come here for that. You came to tell me, show me what you're like. And you think I'll stop when I know what you're willing to do. Well, I won't."

"No, but he will."

"You wouldn't have come here if you thought so. You want to see what I'm like; if I'm pregnant too."

"Listen to me. He can't fail at what he is doing. None of us can. We are making something."

"What do I care about your raggedy little town. Get out of here."

I have work to do."

Did she walk all the way home? Or was that a lie too? Was her car parked somewhere near? Or if she did walk, did anybody pick her up? Is that why she lost the baby?

Her name was Soane and when she and Consolata became fast friends Soane told her she didn't think so. It was the evil in her heart that caused it. Arrogance dripping with self-righteousness, she said. Pretending a sacrifice taught her not to fool with God's ways. The life she offered as a bargain fell between her legs in a swamp of red fluids. Their friendship was some time coming. In the meanwhile, Consolata threw a cloth bag of coins at Penny and Clarissa, shouting "Get out of my face!"

While the light changed and the meals did too, the next few days did not. They were all one long seige of sorrow during which Consolata picked through the scraps of her gobble-gobble-love. After stretching romance to the breaking point, it broke exposing the horror of mindless transfer from Christ, to whom one gave total surrender and then swallowed the idea of His flesh, to a living man. Shame. Shame without blame. Consolata virtually crawled back to the little altar (wishing fervently that He was there, glowing red in the tk).

Scuttled back, as women do, as into arms understanding where the body like a muscle spasm has no memory of its cringe. No beseeching prayer emerged, but Mary Magna followed her in and put an arm around her shoulder, saying "At last."

"You don't know," said Consolata.

"I don't need to, child."

"But he, but he." Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha, she wanted to say, meaning he and I are the same.

"Sh sh sh. Sh sh sh," said Mary Magna, "Never speak of him again."

She might not have agreed so quickly, but as the Reverend Mother led her out of the chapel into the schoolroom a sunshot seared her right eye announcing the beginning of bat vision where she began to see best in the dark.

Only Mother, sister Randolph were left. Penny and Clarissa had been taken east and, as they later learned, escaped from the bus one night in the Stop before Tulsa. Except for a money order, they were never heard from again.

The three women spent the winter waiting, then not waiting, for someone to send for them. No one did. So they kept their counsel and

bent the knees that she had
opened