



Chapter 8 [Originally SW Chap 9]

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CHAPTER EIGHT [ORIGINALLY SW CHAP 9]

The hiking shoes, purchased with Anna Krieg's instruction, are what she needs. Completely unlit, the road to the Hotel is treacherous for an hysterical pedestrian on a chilly night in tennis shoes and no socks. The gifted Anna Krieg would have been prepared: ruck sack, water, flashlight, brod, dried fish, nuts. Christine had learned how to cook from her while both, wives of American soldiers, were stationed in Germany. Barely twenty, Anna was already adept with fresh vegetables, varieties of potatoes, sea food but especially voluptuous desserts. Cooking lessons and beer made the evenings cheery and postponed the collapse of Christine's marriage into a desolation exactly like the quarters they lived in. In return for the friendship, Christine agreed one day to hike with Anna. She bought the good hiking boots and rucksack Anna recommended and early one morning they set out. Halfway to the halfway point, Christine stopped and

begged to cancel, to hitch back to the base. Her feet were on fire; her breath gasping. Anna's face registered extreme disappointment but understanding too. "Poor, soft American, no stamina, no will." They turned back in silence.

When Christine opened the door she found Ernie locked in the arms of the staff sergeant's wife. She wanted to kick him but her feet hurt so she settled for six bottles of tk hurled in rapid succession at his head.

For the good of the other wives, she felt obliged to go through the motions of jealous anger, but she was actually just and simply dumbfounded. Puzzled as to who Ernie Holder thought he was, other than a ragged-y PFC who had offered devotion, a uniform and escape to another country in exchange for her own gorgeous well-bred self. She left him the next day, taking ruck sack, cooking skills and hiking shoes with her.

From the Boston air port ,she called her mother. May seemed relieved to hear from her and anxious to have her back. Her jumbled conversation held no curiosity about Christine's situation but was spiked instead with references to the "swamp wife" and a burned "freedom" bus.

Unwilling to re-enter the poisonous atmosphere May described, Christine lingered. After two nights not quite on the street (a bus station

didn't count), Christine moved into the Phillis Wheatley House. On looks alone she got a job in a restaurant waitressing until they discovered she could cook. It was a friendly, neighborhood place where she laughed at the ways customers found to hustle free food, and where she spent years lying to May and looking for a husband. She found three, none her own, before (at thirty one) she met Fruit. When she listened to him everything was suddenly so clear she spent nine years in his company. He was a fine-boned man, intense, with large beautiful hands and a mesmerizing voice. He clarified the world for her. Her grandfather (a bourgeois traitor); her mother (a handkerchief head); Heed (a field hand wannabee); Ernie (a sell out). And he outlined her own obligations. With apology for her light skin, gray eyes and hair threatening a lethal silkiness, Christine became a dedicated helpmate, coherent and happy to serve. She changed her clothing to "motherland", sharpened her language to activate slogans, carried a knife for defense, hid her inauthentic hair in exquisite gele's; hung cowrie shells from her ear lobes and never crossed her legs at the knees.

Her fears that she might disappoint such a man, fierce, uncorruptible, demanding, or that he might be forced to treat her like dirt were

never realized because Fruit liked dirt. His view of soil, earth, crops was a romance he shared with her. A farm, he said, if we had one, it could be a base for us. Christine agreed, but events were too swift, money, (collected, wheedled, extorted) was needed for other emergencies.

All over the country there were sleeping neighborhoods that needed arousing, inattentive young people needing focus. The hiking boots were broken in at marches; her ruck sack simulated comfort at sit-ins. Fueled by seething exhilaration and purpose Christine's personal vanity became racial legitimacy and her flair for acting-out became courage. She hardly remembered the quarrels now: informants galore, tainted money, random acts vs. long range plans, underground vs. dance with the media. What she relished was the work; who she loved was Fruit. Here, with him, she was in, not in the way. Not the interrupting wife, the troublesome mistress, the unwanted daughter, the nuisance granddaughter, the surplus friend. There was no reason why it could not last.

The beginning of the end, when it came, was unrecognizable as such. A small quite insignificant toilet flush. After a routine abortion, the last of seven, she rose, tapped the lever and turned to watch the swirl. There in

blur of congealed red, she thought she saw a profile. For less than a second that completely impossible image surfaced. Christine bathed and went back to bed. She had always been unsentimental about abortions, considering them as one less link in the holding chain, and she did not want ever to be a mother. So this seventh intervention did not trouble her at all. Although she realized she had conjured up the unborn eye that had disappeared in a beet red cloud, still she wondered, on occasion, who it was who looked up at her with such quiet interest. At the oddest moments—cloistered in a hospital waiting room with a weeping mother, dispensing bottled water and raisins to exhausted students—that non-committal eye seemed to be at home there. Had she paid close attention, perhaps she could have stalled, even prevented, the real end. Her grandfather died. Fruit encouraged her to attend the funeral (Family is family, he said, smiling, even if they are incorrigible Toms.) Christine hesitated. She would have to be in Heed's murderous company; her mother and she would continue to argue politics as they did on intermittent phone calls full of tears, rage, screaming accusations.

He was dead. The dirty one who introduced her to nasty and blamed

it on her.

He was dead. The powerful one who abandoned his own kin and transferred love and rule to her playmate.

He was dead. Well, good. She would go and view the ruin he left behind.

Nothing is watching now. It is long gone, that non-judgmental eye, along with the rucksack and the hiking boots which she desperately needs now if she is going to stop the snake and her minion from destroying her life. The two of them, Heed and Junior, are nowhere in the house. The garage is empty, the driveway clear. Nothing could make Heed leave her room but devilment and at night? There is only one place she could be interested in—the Hotel—and there is no time to waste even if she has to run all the way.