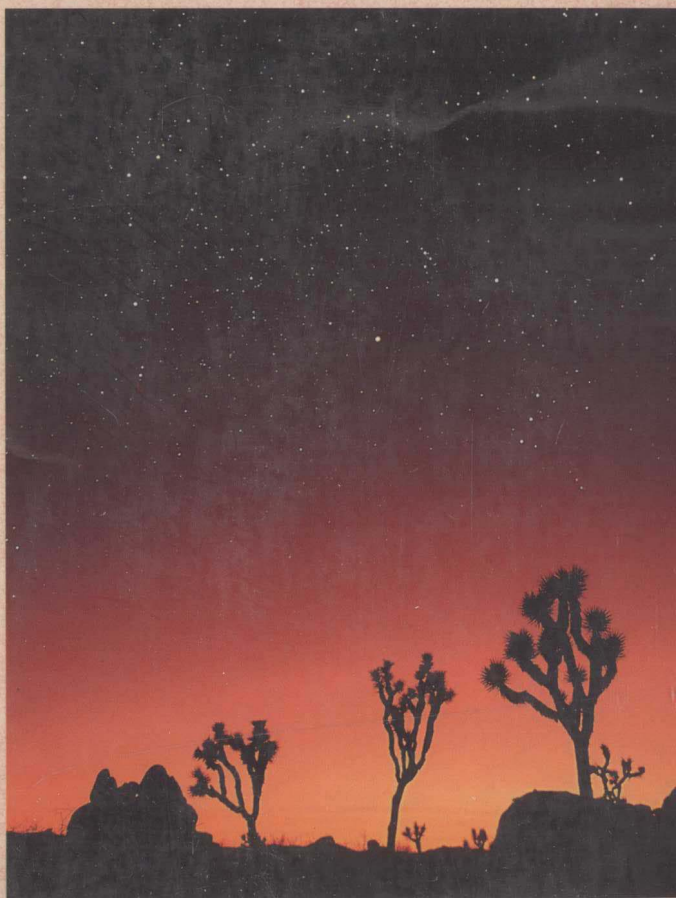


Ellen Gilchrist

Starcarbon

A Novel



*"Perceptive, stylish and idiomatic — a rare
and potent combination."*

— Times Literary Supplement

STARCARBON

A MEDITATION ON LOVE



A NOVEL BY

ELLEN GLITCHER

江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章



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For Henry and Carolyn and Buiji and Kathleen and Patty and David and Sivagami. "The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral. . . . For the law of writ and the liberty, these are the only men."

“ . . . and leave you, (inexpressibly to unravel)
your life, with its immensity and fear,
so that, now bounded, now immeasurable,
it is alternately stone in you and star.”

Rainer Maria Rilke
translated by Stephen Mitchell

Anna and Pierre Connell

Anna Elizabeth m. James Debardeleben Hand

Anna Helen m. Spencer Abadie James m. Putty Hester Daniel m. Summer Wagoner / m. Sheila McNeice Niall Louise

DeDe Winifred Stacy Kenny James III Christian Katherine Olivia Jessie m. King Mallison

Lynley
(twins)

Kingman Theodore

Charles and Louise Clark Manning

Ariane Aurora m. Dudley Garth Manning

Dudley Rhoda Alford Ingersol James

Phinnessy m. Katherine Hand

Leland

Phelan Crystal m. King Mallison / m. Emanuel (Manny) Weiss

King m. Jessie Hand Crystal Anne

Kingman Theodore

CHIVAS AND WATER





IT was still winter in Boston. The day before, the skies had dumped three feet of new snow on the city, turning it into a wonderland. Helen and Mike were in bed listening to jazz and telling stories. "You all complain about Daniel's drinking," Mike was saying. "But I never see him do anything to hurt anyone. He's always a gentleman around me."

"You don't know what it was like over there at night."

"Tell me." He pushed the pillow behind his head, turned on his side to listen. He loved Helen's stories about her family. They were fraught with danger, passion, glory, struggle. He would wake the next morning with his head full of the stories, completely caught up in them, as Helen's life had been.

"I used to go over there nearly every night to see about the girls. When Olivia first got there and Momma was going crazy worrying about them. She'd send me over to make sure Jessie was all right. The music would be blaring out the front door. Whitney Houston and Madonna, that's all they listened to. And Daniel would be in the den throwing logs on the fire and drinking Scotch. Margaret, or whoever was his girlfriend at the time, and Jade would be cooking dinner and the television would be on, some stupid program. Every Sunday night they'd be watching *Murder, She Wrote*."

"The telly would be on?"

"And the stereo. Noise all over the place and in the midst of that Jessie would be trying to do her lessons."

"Where would Olivia be?"

"Upstairs in her room. When I came in, Daniel would yell up the stairs and make her come down and speak to me. Then we'd all sit around the den while the girls and the girlfriend fought little skirmishes for Daniel's attention. He'd keep on drinking."

"Doesn't sound so bad to me."

"The tyranny of it, Mike. Because he'd be getting drunker and drunker and it was less and less possible to reason with him or cross him on anything. It was not a proper atmosphere for study. How could anyone learn anything with all that noise? No wonder Jessie had to have a tutor."

"I still don't see why you're so mad at Daniel. He stayed there and took care of them, didn't he? Doesn't that count for anything?"

"It was the atmosphere. That endless glass of Scotch and water."

"He loves them."

"Love isn't enough. Children have to have order. Well, I gave mine order and where did it get me?"

"They'll come around." He pulled her into his arms and kissed her on the hair. "No one could stay away from you."

"Oh, Mike."

"In the morning, light will be all over this bloody snow. The dawn will be so beautiful we'll forget everything else." Now it was his turn to tell a story and he told her about the sun on the snow when he was a boy and went to Norway with his mother.

"He got drunk every night," Olivia was saying to her psychiatrist. "At five o'clock every afternoon he'd start filling glasses with Scotch and water and after that anything could happen."

"What would happen?"

"Usually nothing. Except maybe getting yelled at. We stayed out of his way. Well, he'd make us come sit in the den if anyone came by. Aunt Helen came by all the time."

"Did he ever hit anyone?"

"God, no. Dad wouldn't hit us. He just made everyone do what he wanted them to do. He'd just sit there and we couldn't talk on the phone on school nights."

"So you think that's why Jessie didn't do well in school?"

"It bothered her more than it did me. I was fifteen before I went there to live. I'd known another life."

"What was it like at your grandmother's in Oklahoma?"

"Just like it is now. Everyone just does what they want and no one bitches about it."

"That's how I like it," the psychiatrist said. "That's the way I think life should be."

"Dad loves me so much," Jessie was saying. She was over at her mother-in-law's house watching Crystal and Traceleen making gazpacho for a symphony benefit. The kitchen was full of tomatoes and celery and green peppers and basil and olive oil, the sound of two blenders going full force around the conversation. "So I don't see why he won't come see our house."

"He'll come see you when the baby gets here." Traceleen turned off a blender and cleared a space beside her. "Cut up these peppers for me. The busier you stay the last month, the better."

"He keeps saying he's coming but he never does. He thinks I ought to fly up there. But I can't now. I can't even go out of town in the car. How big do you want the pieces?"

"The smaller the better."

"He's spoiled rotten," Crystal said. "Your grandmother spoiled him. But he was so cute. He was the cutest little boy in the world."

"He's a good-looking man," Traceleen added. "They get spoiled."

"I miss him so much. I worry about him being all alone in that house."

"Call him and tell him to come on down. Keep on inviting him."

"He and King don't get along too well." Jessie began chopping peppers, cutting them hard and expertly on the chopping board. Inside her uterus the six-pound baby boy was listening to their voices. Sirens, he might have been thinking in some watery language. Siren songs.

Jessie chopped harder, her face squinted into a mask of concentration, cutting the peppers into squares for Traceleen to throw into the blender.

In Charlotte, Daniel was drinking Chivas with one of the bankers that he used to buy and sell. The banker was talking about the new golf club that was being built in Clover, South Carolina, just across the state line. "You better join now, Daniel. Get in on the ground floor," he was saying, but he was thinking about how much it pleased him to

have Daniel on the ropes, begging for a loan. Good-looking Daniel, who had hogged up all the pretty girls when they were in high school.

"Call me when you get an afternoon," Daniel was saying. "I'll come over and walk the course with you. Hell, maybe we can play a round." Daniel smiled and motioned to a waiter. I may have to borrow money from your daddy's bank, he was thinking, but I sure as hell don't have to play golf with you. "Get that waiter over here," he added. "Let's see if we can get him to freshen up these drinks."

BIG DADDIES,
A THANKLESS TASK





CHAPTER 1

CHARLOTTE, North Carolina, May 1, 1991. Mr. James Hand, Senior, got out of his old Mercedes and walked across the soccer fields to the small wooden stands and took a seat by his daughter-in-law. He was wearing a seersucker suit and a starched white shirt and a blue and red striped tie. He was wearing black silk socks and handmade leather shoes. He lowered his tall frame and kissed his daughter-in-law on the cheek. He spoke to several people sitting nearby and stopped to admire a pink pinafore on a three-year-old. He was loved in the world in which he lived. He was trusted and he was loved. He took a seat beside his daughter-in-law. The Trinity Blue Devils' second-grade team took the field. Among them was a chunky blonde with fierce gray eyes named Katherine Elizabeth Hand. She was only seven years old, but already she had the thing that had made Mr. Hand, Senior, an Olympic gold medalist in single sculls. She saw him in the stands and nodded. She did not wave. She was going into battle on the soccer field. No time for frivolity. Mr. Hand watched her with a kind of wonder as he pretended to be interested in his daughter-in-law's conversation. A tear formed in his eye as Katherine took the ball in her hands and marched out to begin the game. "So you've all recovered from your colds?" he asked.

"Not really. She's still on amoxicillin, but she had a fit so I let her come. Have you heard anything from Daniel? Has Jessie's baby come?"

"Not yet. We called last night but nothing's happening. Daniel's going there tomorrow to await the birth. Well, the game's starting. Let's watch the game." He patted his daughter-in-law on the shoulder. She reached up and covered his hand with her own. The argument she had had with James that morning was still running around her head. Her head was like a racetrack where the contending anxieties moved at top speed competing for first place. You need to lose weight. You're too fat. Get someone to clean that garage. She shouldn't be allowed to go to

the game. You look ridiculous in those pants. Why did you let her get sick? How can I love you when you look like that. Fat, fat, fat. Do this. Do that. Don't eat.

I'm sorry. So sorry. I'm trying. I'm trying as hard as I can.

Katherine raced down the field, got into position, received the pass with her left foot, and with her right kicked it into the goal. The small crowd of mothers rose to its feet. "Oh, my goodness, gracious me. Oh, Putty, what a child. What a miraculous child. What a good mother you are to give her to us." Mr. Hand, Senior, clapped and smiled. Clapped and smiled. Putty Hand leaned into his tall kind side.



CHAPTER 2

JESSIE'S baby was due on Sunday. On Thursday Daniel Hand' drove out to the Charlotte airport and got on a plane and flew to New Orleans to await the birth. He checked into the Royal Orleans and changed shirts and got into his rented car and drove down Saint Charles Avenue to Webster Street and found the house where his daughter lived and got out and stood looking up at the porch. He had not seen her in five months and he had no idea what to expect. His Jessie, the jewel in his crown. His beautiful child, his skater, bike rider, acrobat, swimmer, dancer, about to deliver a child. Well, he was a man and he could take it. He started up the stairs to the house. She came running out to meet him. "Oh, Daddy," she was screaming. "I'm so glad you're here. I'm soooo bored. It's taking forever. I can't wait to get it out. I'm going crazy waiting to see my baby." She hugged him fiercely to herself, and somehow the fact that she was swollen with a baby was irrelevant. She was Jessie, making anything she did look good.

"You need anything?" he asked. "Is there anything I can get for you?"

* * *

At four Daniel's son-in-law came home from Tulane and they sat in the living room and almost had a conversation. "Your momma says you're going to engineering school?"

"Next year. We'll have to move to Baton Rouge or somewhere else. Tulane doesn't have what I need."

"You could come to Charlotte. The university there has a program."

"We'll see. I have to finish this year first and get that baby here." Jessie came into the room carrying a small photograph and pressed it into Daniel's hand. "Here's the latest sonogram," she said. "See, you can tell it's a boy. We're naming him Kingman after King but we aren't going to call him that. King won't let me call him that. He's going to be K.T. For Kingman Theodore. I'd name him after you, but I can't. I'll name the next for you."

"The next one. My God, baby, don't do that to me." Daniel took the photograph Jessie had handed him. It was a folded up fetus floating around a womb. It had a discernible penis floating between its legs. It had hands and feet and eyes and a mouth and a wavy-looking umbilical cord. One hand floated near its face as though the thumb had just left its mouth. Jessie stood above him, beaming with pride. She was wearing a pair of white shorts and a long red garment that looked like a pajama shirt. "Isn't he great looking?" she asked. "Isn't he the cutest thing you've ever seen?"

Four days later they were still sitting around the living room waiting for the baby to come, for the "waters to break" or the "pains to start." Crystal was there nearly every hour or so. King came home between classes at Tulane. Traceleen had moved in and taken over the kitchen. Jessie kept walking up to the corner to the drugstore and bringing back magazines and ice cream. They rented movies. They watched television. They went shopping and added things to the crowded nursery shelves. No one was sleeping and nothing was happening and tempers were getting short.

Six days later, nothing had begun to happen and Daniel kissed his child goodbye and got onto a plane and flew on home. "I got to go and save my business, honey," he kept saying. "I sure do hate to leave you, but somebody's got to mind the store."