

MISS PRITCHARD'S

HOLDING HER HOBBLE SKIRT against herself, Rosalind swayed and sang, "COME- ON - A - LONG, COME- ON - A - LONG, - ALEX - AN - DER'S - RAG - TIME - BAND." Cordelia's hobble skirt lay ironed and ready on the bed, a perfect outfit for a perfect September day. The skirts made bending, walking, sitting awkward, but Rosalind wanted them to look fashionable. At noon, they were leaving Kenosha, eleven-year-old Cordelia on the southbound train to Chicago, Rosalind on the northbound to Milwaukee.

"Ben Benjamin says they've just installed long distance telephone connections between Milwaukee and Chicago. We'll talk once a month. You'll spend school vacations with us. Ben says Milwaukee has museums and theaters." Ben flavored Rosalind's conversation like salt and pepper. Ben owned a clothing store in Milwaukee. She was going to be Ben's head buyer and start a ladies finery department. It was Ben who'd suggested the Chicago boarding school for eleven-year-old Cordelia. Ben was paying the tuition.

"Thanks to Ben you'll be associating with girls from the finest families. Honey girl, don't frown, hand me the Elizabeth Arden's." It was a present from Ben, the new face cream New York ladies were using. Rosalind rubbed some into Cordelia's forehead, and smoothed Cordelia's hair which like hers, thanks to Ben, had been *marcel-waved* at the corner salon.

"Just remember, Cordelia, if any of the young ladies ask you about your family, you explain it exactly precisely the way I told you—the tragic accident—you lost both your parents. I'm your Aunt. You left England when you were very young, too young to remember details, but someday you're going to live in the family manor on your family's estate."

"And my last name is Benedict."

"Emphasize the I - C -T. Nobody will ever know it isn't your real background. Miss Pritchard was very impressed—Ben's been to England and knows the important family names and places. Don't mispronounce any words. If you're fabricating something like this, you can't make any slips. Honey girl, when I was your age I'd have given anything to be able to attend Miss Pritchard's Academy. Cordelia Benedict is going to be educated and firsthand acquainted with all the finer things in life."

Miss Pritchard's smile looked as if she were sipping extremely hot tea as she said, "Your Aunt requested our best accommodations. You'll be in the North Wing. She and your uncle told me how you lost your parents, Miss Benedict. Very tragic indeed." ..

Hearing it on someone else's lips made Cordelia's heart pound as if she'd been running.

A colored maid helped her unpack.

The pink and white neatness of the room made Cordelia feel as if she were in a picture Rosalind clipped from one of her magazines.

As she arranged her dolls, Pa's globe, her almanac and wampum beads on a shelf, three girls in bathrobes appeared. The smallest girl, white paste on her face, said, "I am Aileen Pendelton. This is Faye Harralson, and this is Mims Abernathy."

Mims, chewing her thumb nail, looked like a boy. Faye looked like a store-bought doll, head-to-toe pretty dainty perfect.

Aileen stared at Cordelia's dolls and her hobble skirt. "How old are you?"

"Eleven and three-quarters."

"You play with dolls?"

Quickly Cordelia said, "On no! They belonged to my mother!"

"Charming mementos. What a sublime skirt you're wearing! I'm twelve and 'Aunt Jane,' the monthly bane of every female's existence, visits every month. I'm the leader of our trio because I'm the most sophisticated, most astute. I'm sure to get the Best Student Award when we graduate." Aileen turned to the maid. "Run along Agnes.

We'll help the new girl get settled."

The maid frowned. "I'm supposed to get the new girl her things."

"You can leave, Agnes!" Aileen dismissed Agnes with a wave. "Impertinent creature. That's what happens when you abolish slavery. Miss Pritchard told us to be nice to you."

Mims explained proudly, "We call ourselves the Trio du Nord."

Faye whispered proudly, "We're a secret exclusive clique."

Aileen said, " 'A unity of death,' like the Black Hand Society. You've heard of them I presume? The girl who had this room last year died. Let's see girls, what should our friend wear tomorrow?" At the closet Aileen pulled out a yellow print which Mama had made last year. "This is truly sublime, don't you agree, Faye? Mims?"

As they nodded, Aileen took their hands and moved to the door. "We'll escort you to breakfast. The girl who died had diphtheria. You have been vaccinated I hope? If you hear anything odd, don't worry. The North Wing has strange noises. You'll get used to it!"

*Vaccinated* was something new in the world, a word for **CB's Almanac**, but if there were strange noises Cordelia didn't hear them. Almanac open, pencil in her hand, she fell asleep. It was happiness. She'd never had girls for friends before.

In the morning in her yellow print dress, on her way to breakfast with her new friends, Cordelia realized she was the only girl who wasn't in a blue skirt, white blouse and blue necktie. By the time she was seated at the table, girls were giggling, whispering and staring. It was like Kenosha, only worse.

Miss Pritchard rapped on her glass. The room got quiet immediately. "Miss Benedict, was there some difficulty with the uniform the maid gave you?"

The room started buzzing. All eyes were on Cordelia.

"Ladies!" Miss Pritchard rapped on her glass again. "I want to hear Miss Benedict's explanation. Perhaps she finds our uniform not to her taste?"

"I have to confess, I was feeling homesick." It was easy to make tears come to her eyes. "My mother wore a yellow dress for breakfast. . ." Tears were rolling down her cheeks. "At our manor house in England."

"I see." Miss Pritchard's tone softened.

"I was tired." The tears poured. "When Agnes said she'd get my things I told her to go. It's my own fault."

"We understand, my dear." Miss Pritchard turned to Agnes. "Kindly escort Cordelia to the housekeeper and see that she's given the necessaries."

During the rest of the day, girls waved and called hello. There wasn't time to figure out if they were being nice or nasty. There were many new things, faces, names, protocol for classrooms, washrooms with cubicles that had doors, and toilet paper on rolls!

After vespers as Cordelia started to do her homework in her room, the Trio du Nord appeared.

Aileen flopped on the bed. "Do you have any cigarettes?"

Though she was shocked, Cordelia smiled and shook her head no.

Mims sat cross-legged on the rug. "Beth Kingsley got caught smoking in the bathroom."

Aileen, flat on her back, examined her toe nails. "I warned her. Beth is a know-it-all."

Faye, at the mirror studying her smile, making it broader, making it narrower, nodded. "She's pushy. Mumsie says Beth's mother colors her hair."

"I wish I had blonde hair like Cordelia's or golden-brown shiny like yours, Faye." Mims patted her mousy brown mop.

Aileen twirled a lock of her own dark hair. "Down through the ages, concubines were mostly brunettes." She gave Cordelia a long look. "I read a lot."

Faye whispered, "Pater Pendelton has a private collection of books in a locked cabinet. Penny knows where he hides the key."

"There's a book called *Reproduction in Mammals*," said Mims, chewing her thumb nail.

Faye's eyes were huge. "There's a photo of Catherine of Russia doing it with a horse!"

Aileen smiled. "Want to hear some of my sex words?"

It sounded wicked. Cordelia nodded. She figured if Penny was going to be her friend, she had to nod when Penny said or did wicked things.

"Pederast. Necrophilia. Cloaca. Clitoris. Cunnilingus. I imagine you gleaned a few interesting words in England?"

"It was so long ago, it's hard to remember." Realizing it was a test, Cordelia avoided a pushy know-it-all tone. "My Aunt in Milwaukee sometimes says, 'Dammit prick.'"

The three girls exchanged looks.

Aileen said, "I thought you handled Pritch astutely this morning."

"Everybody thought you were very brave," Faye said.

"Let's go to my room and have some hot water cocoa," said Mims.

Aileen led the way. "I'll get my Lorillards. Amy Lowell smokes them, you know."

"You mean Miss Amy Lowell? The famous poetess?" Cordelia asked.

"The Lesbian! You can call me 'Penny.'" Aileen linked arms with Cordelia.

"You've got to learn to smoke, Cordy. You never know what kind of sophisticated people you'll meet later on in life at cocktail parties."

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"THIS IS MY FOYER, honey girl. Don't you love my wallpaper?" After ten months of not seeing each other, Cordelia was going to spend the last two weeks of June in Milwaukee. Rosalind was glad she'd worn her new floral-print housedress.

Twelve-year-old Cordelia, in her green taffeta, stepping out of the green Pierce Arrow limousine with a polite dismissive nod to the chauffeur seemed very grownup.

"This is my parlor. The couch is exceptionally comfortable. You'll sleep like a log."

Rosalind puffed the pillows though they didn't need it. Thrilled by the invitations her daughter had received, she'd insisted that Cordelia say yes and spend Christmas with the Pendeltons in Evanston, Easter with the Harralsons in Glencoe, the first two weeks of June with the Abernathy's in Winnetka.

"So, did you have a heavenly time with Mims in Winnetka? You thanked Mr. and Mrs. Abernathy and tipped the maid?"

"I didn't use the maid, Mama." During the drive, the world outside the Pierce Arrow's windows seemed like a silent movie unrolling for her in her private theater. Now her mother, like the chauffeur, seemed to be addressing her through a glass partition and a speaking tube. "I had a fine time. Mims is teaching me tennis."

"Honey girl, when you're a house guest you're supposed to slip the maid at least a dime. Did Mrs. Abernathy say anything about you coming back?"

"Yes, for the July tennis tournaments. End of July Penny's expecting me in Evanston. Faye's counting on me in August for an excursion on the Harralsons' yacht."

"Your girlfriends understand that you can't reciprocate, that your Aunt travels?"

"Yes Mama." The lies were still like cherry pits in Cordelia's stomach.

As Rosalind led the way upstairs, Cordelia was aware that Ben's six-room house would fit easily into the Abernathys' ballroom.

"I suppose the Abernathys have a huge garden. The Rockefellers' mansion in Pocantico Hills has a four thousand acre lawn." Rosalind straightened the bedspread. "Ben bought me this chenille spread just last week. Chenille's the very latest thing, you know. Don't you love the way the bedspread goes with the bed lamps?"

"It's a charming chenille bedspread, nice lamps, a charming room, Mama."

Irritated by the compliment though she wasn't sure why, Rosalind said, "I made you a charming new dress. Very stylish. It looks like I'll have to alter the front."

Cordelia gave her mother a poised polite smile and didn't let herself look down at the little mounds on her chest which were beginning to show.

"You're already prettier than Irene Castle. I imagine you've made friends with

some of the boys in your dance class."

"Boys from Bishop's Prep attend the class. They're not very interesting, Mama."

"Well, boys from fine families can be tricky. " Not sure how to proceed with the subject, Rosalind glanced at the clock. "We'll have plenty of time to talk later. It's time to put up the potatoes. Ben's very fond of potatoes."

At dinner, Cordelia sat straight, left hand in her lap with the napkin, right hand holding the fork the way girls did at Miss Pritchard's. Miss Pritchard said a refined young lady should take small bites and pause between each bite. Cordelia found that it worked with food and with conversation. If she didn't say much, spoke with delicate pauses, adults filled in the blanks.

Rosalind kept a steady stream of food and conversation going. "Mims Abernathy's parents are on the board of directors of Chicago's Art Museum. Faye Harralson's family is in the social register. Faye's mother, 'Mumsie,' shops in Paris. Penny's father owns eight stores, not as many as the Woolworth family owns, but Pendelton's is classier. When business picks up, I'll be expanding the women's section of Ben's store into a very classy women's department. Cordelia dear, please pass Ben the potatoes. Ben, kindly pass Cordelia the beans."

Rosalind used her knife to push the food. Cordelia had never noticed that before. Ben Benjamin's teeth clicked when he chewed. He tucked his napkin in like a bib. He seemed older than Pa Benedek. Without saying "Please" or "may I," Ben reached for the food at the other end of the table and piled seconds on Cordelia's plate.

Cordelia ate everything. After so many meals with butlers watching, she was ravenous.

After dessert Ben picked his teeth with a toothpick and declared, "Education's important. Keep up the good work, missy. I'll be going upstairs now. Coming to bed, Rosalind dear?"

"In a jiffy, Ben dear!" As they cleared the table, Rosalind said, "There's a hundred things to discuss."

" 'Aunt Jane' visits every twenty-eight days. I get my monthlies, Mama."

"You do? You wash the rags thoroughly, I hope? And you don't do sports?"

"A girl can do sports. The nurse gives us gauze pads."

"Well, Ma never told me things." Rosalind smoothed her housedress. "When Ma was my age she wore the same dress every day, same dress every Sunday. I'm not old. Still in my twenties. Did I tell you about my plans? When business picks up, I'm planning to renovate, and decorate. I've got a lot of ideas." Rosalind tied her sash a little tighter.

Cordelia manufactured a small yawn which turned into a real one. "I really will sleep like a log. The facilities are. . . ?"

"All modern. I forgot to show you." Rosalind opened a door and gave Cordelia a peek at the water closet. "It's got a flusher but we don't use it at night. The plumbing makes a racket, so at night—"

"I see the bucket, Mama." In the genteel tone a Pritchard's girl used with parents and servants, Cordelia said, "I'm looking forward to seeing the store and the women's corner. Mr. Benjamin is very friendly and the dinner was delicious. I'm looking forward to seeing all the interesting sights."

As they kissed goodnight, Rosalind couldn't help feeling that her home, the store, the sights weren't very interesting, Cordelia couldn't help thinking it was going to be a long two weeks

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LIKE THE SCHOOL'S VICTROLA playing popular tunes, one platter after the next, one crisis blended into the next and the next. Thirteen-year-old ninth graders heard about the famine in Russia and floods in China. They knew who Chang Kai Chek, Gandhi, Lenin and the Kaiser were, knew about the horribly costly new income tax, and the extravagance of Henry Ford who was paying men \$5.00 for an eight-hour day. With the rest of the nation, they wept whenever there were further details of who died when the *Titanic* sank last April, but they had current worries and woes—pimples,

cramps, their changing shapes, how they were going to look in the latest fashions, and what grade they were going to get on the next test.

Faye was flunking Latin. Cordelia drilled her every night until she passed the exam. It was fun. Mims brought in hot water cocoa. It was tricky. Penny, being the leader of the Trio du Nord, didn't like it when Faye said, "I don't know what I'd do without you, Cordy."

Penny was the cleverest, most generous, confusing person Cordelia had ever known. She said, "I love you Cordy, you're my best friend." She gave Cordy gifts, little things Mater Pendelton had given her—Belgian lace hanky, gold hairpin, silver barrette, a hand-tooled pencil case—Penny handed them to Cordy without even opening Mater's fancy wrappings. But then Penny criticized Cordy. "You're too polite. You say 'thank-you' and 'please' all the time! You smile too much. You ought to talk in an alto register, it's more cosmopolitan."

"Don't be such a know-it-all!" Penny said because Cordelia knew facts like the birth dates of Lenin and the Kaiser and how much Roosevelt Dam in Salt River, Arizona cost to build. When Cordy explained about Nicky Kovaky and facts being like Indian head pennies for your piggy bank, Penny wanted to know when and why she socialized with a boy with a piggy bank. Cordelia couldn't mention Pa loving facts or *being somebody*, or her almanac. She hadn't opened it in months. She didn't have time to write about yesterday when so much was happening, but after Penny's criticism she didn't put her hand up in any class until the teacher called her name.

The first time Cordelia got all A's on her report card was definitely tricky. Penny was usually the only student who got all A's. But then Penny got an A++ on a current events essay about the suffragettes, five thousand women marching past the White House, ignoring a jeering crowd of men who spit at them, poked them with lighted cigars. It gave everyone goose-bumps when Miss Pritchard read the essay in assembly and said, "Let us bow our heads and thank the Lord for giving Miss Pendelton such a talent, and ask the Lord to watch over us and keep our country free

from strife and war."

There were just a few vague whispers about the possibilities of war over there, but over there was getting closer.

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IT WAS CHRISTMAS 1914. Cordelia heard the guests arriving as she put on her Kimono costume. They were about to perform a skit that Penny's Mater had written for the Pendeltons' annual party. Cordelia, playing a Chinese bride, was binding her feet. Penny was winding paper chains over her grandmother's hoopskirt dress. They were supposed to break the chains and bindings as they recited Mater's lines.

Penny grumbled, "Mater's utterly behind the times. For a dime you can get a pamphlet on birth control from Margaret Sanger. I feel like a decadent ninny saying Mater's lines. Her plays are. . ." Penny mouthed *penile envy*." She'd been reading Freud's latest new book and memorizing Nietzsche. "Penile envy," "decadent" were her latest favorite terms.

"Well, I love the way you say your lines. I think your mother's skit is quite profound!"

Neither of them noticed Mater in the doorway.

Mater chuckled. "Thank you for the compliment, dear." Mater helped Cordelia tie the bindings. "I wish my daughter Aileen had a touch of your grace. Now my dears, when you hear the gong, start down the stairs and talk loudly."

As Mater left, Penny muttered, "I hate her!"

"You don't mean that."

"Goody-goody Cordy. You should have been her damn daughter. The way you suck up to Mater makes me want to vomit!"

Cordelia didn't know what to say.

The gong resounded. Penny grabbed her hand as they had rehearsed. They started down the stairs.

The guests, even the children and servants were riveted. Everyone cheered when

they finished their performance. Mater hugged them and said, "You darlings, you both made me very very proud!"

Penny whispered in Cordelia's ear, "You're lucky you're an orphan!" and put a loud kiss on Cordelia's cheek, so Cordelia knew Penny wanting to vomit was just stage fright.

Somebody put a record on the Victrola and Penny's cousin Jonathan asked Cordelia to dance. He was a tall gangly college freshman. Stepping on her feet, he talked about the mathematical theories that a scientist named Einstein was working on. It was trickier than dancing with one of the Bishop Prep boys who talked about sports. She had to pretend she understood what the "fourth dimension" was. But when the music ended, Jonathan asked for her address. Telling him, "Write me at Miss Pritchard's," Cordy felt like she'd passed an important test.

Mater sat down at the piano. Everyone gathered around. They sang "Keep the Home Fires Burning," and Christmas carols. The men with their deep voices, shaving soap and cigarette smell were on one side of the piano like a clump of tall trees in their black cutaways. On the other side of the piano the women with their soaring sopranos were like a garden of wild flowers, no corsets, ankles showing in the latest style silk tunics. Under the Christmas tree, hugging their new toys, the children with their piping voices were giggling and rosy. Cordelia felt their shine and glow on her own skin. She wanted to join them but because she'd grown two inches since last year, she stood with the women and sang and sang.

Was it a dream? Mater was shaking her. Cordelia sat up in the bed in the guest room, rubbed her eyes. Mrs. Pendelton was hovering over her like a real mother.

"Cordy, there's a phone call for you from your Aunt." With gentle hands, Mater led Cordelia to the phone and held it to her ear.

It had to be a dream, Mater's peach silk robe, her lilac perfume and Rosalind saying, "Ma is sick! Get on a train! Come home quickly!"

"Home?"

"Catawba Lake. Say it's a deathbed request from a friend. Say it's a cousin, your dead mother's side of the family. And don't cry. Just get here!"

In Catawba Lake, Pa Benedek was waiting at the station. He didn't say anything but when he hugged her, Cordelia knew that Ma Benedek was dead.

At the church, Rosalind was in a purple coat and hat trimmed with an ostrich feather. She sat up very straight. She didn't cry. She didn't stand up, or kneel, or bow her head in prayer when everyone else did.

When it was time, Rosalind took Cordelia's hand and they went up to the coffin together.

Standing side by side, looking down at Ma, Cordelia realized she was taller than her mother now.

Ma lying there in her Sunday best looked like she was taking her Sunday nap. Cordelia kissed Ma's cold cheek hello, goodbye. Then two men closed the coffin.

At the cemetery on the hill, if Rosalind hadn't said, "Stand next to your brother Kent," she wouldn't have known who he was. He looked like a tall toy soldier. It started to snow. The priest said a prayer. Holding on to ropes which were around the box, men lowered it into the grave. The man with the shovel started his work.

Pa began to weep. "Clara, my Clara, don't leave me." Each word was like the muffled thud of snow and earth on the coffin.

Cordelia had worn gloves but her hands were ice. Her eyes felt as if they were glazed like the duck pond. She wanted to run through the maze of gravestones to the road, run till she got to Chicago and her pink and white cozy dormitory room. As the earth thudded on the coffin, her brain ticked like the clock at night. She saw tears streaming down Pa's cheeks and wondered if they would freeze and make permanent tracks. She watched blank-faced Rosalind, never bowing her head, just staring straight ahead. She saw Kent square his shoulders like a soldier at attention as tears leaked out of his eyes. It was funny that men who never wept were weeping and the two of

them, Mama and daughter were standing there like two icicles. Stalactites or stalagmites? Cordelia tried to remember, couldn't remember which went up and which went down.

Back home, Pa retired to the bedroom. They sat at the kitchen table and ate the turkey with holiday fixings which the Quilting Bee Ladies brought over. Rosalind picked at a turkey wing and sipped wine from a bottle that had been in Ma's cupboard.

Kent said, "I'm learning a lot at Military School in Oshkosh. Maybe I'll join the army. My father thinks it's a good career for a man." He explained why very thoroughly. At seven o'clock he said, "That's about it. I reckon I better be on my way." And headed for the door.

"On your way where?" Standing near him, Cordelia felt almost like his sister.

"Kent stays with his father at his father's hotel," Rosalind said. "He's been adopted. His father told the wife a fancy story about Kent being the son of a dear, long lost cousin!"

"What do you call them, Kent?" Cordelia dreaded hearing him say *Dada* and *Mama*.

"I call him Father. I call her Mrs. Goldman." Kent gave Cordelia an awkward fast hug.

Mother and son stood in the doorway. When a hug didn't happen, Rosalind said crisply, "Take care of yourself." Kent saluted, did an about-face exit out the door like a real soldier.

They went up to the attic bedroom. Lacy frost decorated the window. The winter bare branches of the cherry tree wore a ruffle of snow. Rosalind sat in the rocking chair hugging the wine bottle, resting her shoe-boots on Ma's white quilt, the boots with the Louis XVI heels that they both wore.

"Ma was so proud of her hope chest linens," Rosalind said, taking a sip of wine.

Cordelia got into the bed and pulled up the blanket. She couldn't stop shivering.

"I think I'll stay here, Cordelia, and take care of Pa for a while."

"You're not going back to Milwaukee?"

"When you write me, address it to me here in Catawba Lake, honey girl. You still get postcards from your dada?"

"On my 14th birthday I got a card from him from Louisville. He sent me a card with a note at Easter."

"What did the note say?"

"He's the go-between, between the owners and 'George Pullman's boys,' that's what they call the porters. The owners pay them \$6.88 a week because they're colored, wrong side of the tracks. Even with tips, it's not enough to live on."

"I hope Jeorg wears a suit and shoes when he goes to work, not pig farmer boots."

"Mama, what about you and Uncle Ben?"

"He's old. I've got places to go, things I want to do! When you're older. . .hell, you're old enough." Rosalind took another sip from the bottle. "Ben couldn't do it unless I did all the work. Oh, I tried, three times a week for three years, 3 x 52 times. . .don't they teach you mathematics at Pritchard's?"

"Yes, Mama."

"Hey diddle diddle, cat and the fiddle. . . .' Did ever I tell you about Saul the plumber?"

"I'm very sleepy Mama."

"When the flusher broke. . .mm, that was nice. Uncle Saul thought I was an intellectual because I had Marcel Proust's bestseller on the table next to the bed. I never did get around to reading it." Rosalind closed her eyes.

As Cordelia drifted off, Rosalind murmured, "Only thing Ma read was the bible and the advertisements, all the ads in *Collier's*. . ."

The next morning nobody said "Good Morning." At the station when Pa hugged her and murmured I love you very much, Rosalind said, "You're about to lose a button on your coat. Back at school, you be sure to fix it with a double thread."

Nobody mentioned Ma or the fact that it was New Year's Day, that Cordelia had

turned fifteen at midnight.

At the school, Miss Pritchard summoned Cordelia. "Mr. Benjamin, your uncle sent your tuition for next year and a very generous gift honoring your cousin."

Cordelia smiled politely and nodded even though she was surprised.

"I thought you'd appreciate seeing this, my dear." Miss Pritchard handed Cordelia a piece of stiff paper. It was a bookplate, fine parchment trimmed in gold leaf, embossed and illuminated with elegant, distinctive letters:

I n Memoriam:

Clara Benedict 1864-1914

Cordelia felt as if she were enclosed in glass like a statue at the museum. She continued to nod. After an appropriate pause she said, "Uncle Ben has a deep affection for my family. I'm grateful that the young ladies who borrow books from our library will hereafter have a sense of the sterling character of my beloved cousin." It felt like someone else was talking, saying those words. But she knew it was what Miss Pritchard wanted to hear from a refined young lady in the 10th grade.

Up in the North Wing, Faye looked very glum. Penny calmly explained, "The ambulance just arrived. They're taking Mims to the hospital. The nurse won't say why. I'm sure Pritchard told her to shut up. Pritchard doesn't want rumors circulating."

"Taking Mims to the hospital? What's wrong with Mims?"

"Polio-mye-litis!" Penny emphasized each syllable. "The symptoms are fever, sore throat, headache, stiff neck and muscle pain."

"If Mims has. . .we're. . . ." Faye couldn't get the words out.

Cordelia said, "You don't know for a fact that Mims has it. It might be something else."

Penny squinted thoughtfully. "Poliomyelitis isn't as ghastly as cancer. Sarah Bernhardt had her leg amputated because of cancer."

"I'm going to phone Mumsie!" Faye cried as she ran from the room.

As the door closed behind Faye, Cordelia heard someone wailing in the hall.

Penny scowled. "Now Pritch will cancel *Romeo and Juliet*. I was planning to audition, more or less counting on playing the lead in the school play."

"You'd have been a perfect *Juliet*, Penny. I know the teacher would have picked you!"

"I'd have been brilliant! I have to tell you, Cordy, I honestly don't think you'd have gotten the lead in *Alice in Wonderland* last year if you weren't a blonde!"

There was the sound of wailing again.

"All this commotion is very annoying." Penny picked up her cigarettes and headed for the door. "I'm going to phone home, and have them send the car for me."

Cordelia arranged her school books and sat down. She adjusted the lamp, and began to copy the Algebra homework.

The room was hot. Her neck felt stiff. After a few moments she got up. Her calf muscles hurt. At the mirror, Cordelia examined her tongue and her throat. There weren't any red spots. She said, "Oh for goodness sake!" out loud. The tone was Ma's from a long time ago saying, "Oh for goodness sake child, sit down!" Suddenly she knew that she'd never be that child again. Suddenly she understood that Ma was really gone.

Cordelia put a pillow over her head to muffle the sobs and cried herself to sleep.

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CORDELIA CARRIED A MIRROR in Penny's hand-tooled pencil case. Like most of the fifteen-year-olds at Pritchard's, she checked herself in the mirror at least five or six times, sometimes ten times a day. At night, brushing her hair, she talked with Mama in her mind: "The teachers love me. The girls argue over whom I'm going to visit when. The Harralsons treat me like I'm family. Mims' father said I have a genuine instinct for the arts. Penny's Mater has said more than once that I ought to be in pictures."

It was hard, almost impossible to sit down and write a letter to Mama. Mama's

letters from Catawba Lake were just a sentence or two. Obeying Mama's instructions, Cordelia opened them in the lavatory and flushed them down the toilet.

Age fifteen was different from age fourteen. Every day there were significant changes. Metal slide fasteners were being used to "zip" the plackets of the new school skirts, short skirts now, 10 to 12 inches below the knee. Cordelia was relieved to see that she wasn't the only one getting hair on her legs as well as under her arms. Her eyebrows all of a sudden needed plucking. One morning she discovered pores on her nose. Every day the pores grew larger. Some became blackheads that had to be squeezed, sometimes probed with a pin so a pimple wouldn't develop. Pimples were a major calamity.

Where not so long ago her hips and waist were up-and-down straight, now they were somewhat curved. Her little mounds had become "baby oranges." Penny called them that, delighting in her own "grapefruits." Penny boasted about putting a mirror between her legs and scrutinizing her private parts. Cordelia thought about doing that but couldn't shake the feeling that Ma was looking down from above, and watching. At least her oranges weren't "pancakes," but Faye who'd gone on a date with a Yale junior spent a lot of time trying out silk stockings, bunching, rolling, squeezing them to see if they felt real when stuffed in the brassiere Mumsie bought in France. Penny was the first girl at Miss Pritchard's who really needed to wear one.

Faye was checking her mailbox in the office twice a day. She was writing love letters, getting love letters from her Yale junior. Faye asked, "Cordy, who is 'Zerega'?" when she brought up the mail and handed Cordy a postcard from Jeorg.

Cordelia tucked the card in her skirt pocket and adjusted her blouse and hair with the crooked pinkie finger that the girls, like high society ladies used at teatime. Pritchard girls fussed with their outfits and hair. Primping was feminine and graceful. It also gave one time to collect one's thoughts.

"Someone I met on a train." Cordelia said.

"What fun. You spoke him first, or did he spoke to you first?" Penny asked.

"Is he handsome?" Faye wanted to know. "I couldn't help but notice the postmark. Does he go to school in Louisville, Kentucky?"

"When did you meet him?" Penny wanted to know.

"It might have been when I went to visit you or Faye. I was traveling so much this summer. It might have been when I was visiting my Aunt."

Penny stared at her. "I thought you said your Aunt was in Europe."

It was a slip. Cordelia's heart beat so loudly she was afraid Penny could hear it.

"Yes, I visited Aunty briefly before she left. Anybody heard from Mims?"

Whenever the subject of Mims came up, there was always a pause. It was a moment when the girls, each in her own way, reflected on life and death.

"Poor Mims," Penny sighed, "If I were in her shoes, I'd get some doctor to prescribe a painless permanent exit potion."

"Poor poor Mims," Faye echoed, thanking her lucky stars it wasn't her.

Mims was still in the hospital, paralyzed "temporarily" they said, from the waist down. It haunted Cordelia. It jolted her awake early in the morning. It made Cordelia study harder than ever. It was why, though it was more refined to walk with a wiggle, Cordelia started walking with masculine long strides.

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"HOW MUCH IS A TICKET to. . . . Oshkosh?"

Rosalind put down a fiver. She hadn't decided where to go. It had to be someplace new and it couldn't be Chicago. She didn't have the clothes that *Aunty* would need if she arrived for her niece's graduation on June 1st.

"One way?" the ticket agent asked. "Round trip to Oshkosh saves you 25¢."

"One way will suit me just fine." It was a spur of the moment decision. Rosalind told the ticket agent, "My son's in Military School there. After I visit him, I'll most likely continue on to New York City."

Rosalind took a seat by the window. A nice-looking, nicely dressed gentleman who was sitting across the aisle helped her put her carpetbag on the overhead rack. It

was natural to start a conversation. Mr. Jones worked for the North Central Telephone Company.

She was wearing her "summer" black dress, remodeled, shortened to fit with the very latest wartime fashion, hem an inch below one's calf. She noted him taking in her bosoms. At thirty-four, on a good day she could pass for twenty-five. It wasn't a good day so she didn't lift her veil. It was one of those grey, blank, nowhere days when there was nothing to hope for, anticipate or wonder about when she was awake, and sleeping just made her sleepier.

By the time the gentleman got around to asking about her destination she had a story ready about being a widow—the family's hotel, investments in a shoe factory, a men's clothing emporium, her traveling to check on various businesses. It was easy to fuse Jeorg, Ernest, Maximilian, Charlie and Ben. Together they added up to one almost real husband.

When the train was pulling into the station in Oshkosh Mr. Jones suggested they dine together. Even before he offered to show her around the North Central Telephone Company offices, Rosalind knew they were going to *do it*. She needed to do it with a man, not a memory. She knew the dates, times, routines of five men. Six was a reasonable number. She didn't want to ponder "is it ladylike, is it right or wrong?" or "will I burn in hell?" Mary Mother couldn't object to a woman doing something that made a woman feel special, important, alive.

At his office Rosalind accepted the drink of bathtub gin Mr. Jones offered and clinked glasses with him. When he pushed her back against the desk and kissed her she didn't unbutton her dress front. She didn't want him getting diverted, oohing and aahing over her breasts. She pulled down her under-drawers, started arching, rotating her hips, moaning "please, oh do me" deliberately, wantonly, invoking a memory of Ernest. The first time she'd moaned like that, Mr. Ernest Goldman had cried out, "My sunshine girl, I adore you."

As Mr. Jones' private part poked into her, Rosalind laughed triumphantly.

Suddenly, Mr. Jones became Jeorg. The bright light from the bulb overhead, noises from the street, Mr. Jones' murmurs, the hard desk against her flesh faded away. It was Jeorg, but no sense of sin. No anger, fear, or painful stretching of the ring of muscle down there, just velvety sweet friction that took her up and up, up up, didn't stop, went on and on the way she'd always wanted it to.

All aglow, Rosalind opened her eyes and chuckled softly. She was thirty-four and it was the first time she'd - - - ? Even in the privacy of her mind, she wasn't sure what word to use.

Mr. Jones was gentlemanly. He offered to escort Rosalind to a respectable boarding house. He let Rosalind use one of the North Central telephones to phone her daughter.

"Cordelia, it's Mama. I'm visiting Kent in Oshkosh. I won't be there tomorrow. Call me *Aunty*. Can you talk?"

"Aunty, I'm so sorry!" Cordelia said, letting Mama know she couldn't talk. "I was hoping you'd attend my graduation tomorrow. Mims will be here. Mims wanted to meet you."

"Cordelia, what are your plans? In your last letter you didn't say what your plans were?"

"Like you suggested, college, Aunty. I applied to Vassar, along with my friends."

"Then you'll be in Evanston or Glencoe this summer? Write me and tell me everything. My address in Oshkosh is. . . . Hold on a minute."

Cordelia could hear a man's voice in the background.

"Honey girl," Rosalind said with lilt in her voice, "More than likely I'll remain in Oshkosh, c/o General Delivery' for the time being!"

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IT WASN'T PATRIOTIC to have elaborate graduation exercises. The country had entered the war in April. Men between 18 and 30 were lining up to register.

In her commencement address, Miss Pritchard spoke about women's patriotic

duty, selling war bonds, Red Cross work, keeping up the morale of the fathers, brothers, husbands who were enlisting. "But never, never lose sight of woman's essential destiny as wife and mother, nurturing her spouse and offspring while expanding her own knowledge of the world and sharing it with her family."

Some girls nodded solemnly. Others applauded. Some wiped their eyes.

Miss Pritchard cleared her throat. "Now, ladies and gentleman, I am pleased to present the award for excellence in scholarship to the Best Student in the class of 1917."

Everybody looked at Penny who started to stand up.

"Miss Cordelia Benedict," said Miss Pritchard.

Cordelia jumped up, sat down, not sure for a second why her name had been called. The looks, the smiles told her. Blushing, acknowledging applauding schoolmates and the beaming Mims in her wheelchair, Cordelia proceeded down the aisle to the platform.

As Miss Pritchard placed the bronze plaque in her hand, Cordelia sent a thought north to Mama in Oshkosh, west to Pa in Catawba Lake and south to Jeorg in Louisville: . . . I did it! I'm somebody! I wish you were here!

The joy, the thrill put a big immodest grin on her face that wouldn't go away, even though she tried to shrink it down while diplomas were handed out.

Everyone had extra special plans for the summer. As the Trio du Nord huddled around Mims in her wheelchair, Faye bubbled over. "I'll be rolling bandages for the Red Cross, planning my coming-out party, addressing tons of invitations—don't forget—Bastille Day, July 14th. You'll meet my Yale man—he's going to medical school."

In a blasé tone Penny said, "I shall be spending my summer with Tagore, and Millay, perusing the poem that won Edna the sponsor who sent her to Vassar—studying the writings, the Bengalese slang that won Rabindranath his Nobel Prize, washing it down with sips of illegal booze from Pater's endless supply. And of course,

I'll be yachting on weekends with Cousin Jonathan and his friends."

Cordelia nodded enthusiastically. "Tell him I'm practicing my dance steps!" and added lightly—"Rabin-dra-nath!"—that's a heavy-duty first name Tagore's carrying around!"

Penny looked at her. No smile, no nod, she didn't even blink. Just turned to Mims..

"Nothing heavy-duty for me, no bandages, no war bonds," said Mims. "I'll be swimming in the miracle waters of Warm Springs, Georgia. If we're going to be the Trio du Nord quartet at Vassar in the fall, I've got to learn to get around in braces!" Letting go of her wheelchair, Mims made a bulging biceps gesture that got everyone laughing, air-kissing goodbye.

"See you at my party, Cordy," Faye called as she rolled down the window of the Harralson's Towne car. Mumsie waved. Popsie tipped his hat in Cordy's direction.

Penny blew a kiss to Mims and disappeared into the Pendeltons' limousine where Pater was giving directions to the chauffeur. Mater waved as the car pulled away from the curb.

Mims asked, "What are you're going to be doing, Cordy?"

"A hundred things." It was the first summer that visits with the girls hadn't been planned— they assumed she'd be busy the same as they were. "I might go to Chicago Teachers College instead of Vassar so I can be near Aunty. Mims, do you think. . .is Penny upset?"

"Because of the award? Cordy, she wanted you to win! Penny said at least two times— 'it means more to Cordy than it does to me. ' My goodness, Cordy, I bet your Aunt will be proud. You'll phone me? Maybe we can all travel to Vassar together."

"What a nice idea." Cordelia smiled.

"Have a pleasant summer, dear! Do have a relaxing summer, Cordy," Mr. and Mrs. Abernathy called to her, after Mims was settled in their car.

Cordelia stood there until the green Pierce Arrow turned the corner. The sun was

burning hot. The wool graduation robe was suffocating. She pulled off her mortarboard cap. Passersby glanced at her as they hurried by, heading someplace. UNCLE SAM NEEDS YOU said the poster on the telephone pole. But Uncle Sam didn't need her. Nobody needed her. There was no car waiting, no family expecting her home, just c/o General delivery for Rosalind in Oshkosh. The farm hadn't been her home for a long time.

The traffic light blinked and turned green.

Cross the street? Go left? Go right? Turn around and go back to her pink and white dormitory room and finish packing to go where? To Catawba Lake? Vassar required tuition in advance. Teacher's college was free but where to live, how to pay for books and clothes? Get the money pouch from the attic? It wasn't enough money for tuition. She could take a train and visit Pa . . .

It was like the town square after the race for boys only, roads like so many spokes in a wheel.

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