

Cloud of Dust

Alice lifted the saddle onto Sal's broad back and bent to cinch the girth. Sal whinnied, and Alice looked up. Joyce was standing at the edge of the patio. "Hey," she called and waved. Alice rested her head on Sal's flank. Not again. With John off at one of his conferences, she'd been looking forward to a long canter on Sal. Had planned to fry some green tomatoes for supper, then spend the evening reading *Fanny* with just a glass of red wine for company. She unsaddled Sal, whispered "sorry" in her ear, and opened the corral gate.

"Christ, it's hot. Does it ever cool off here?" Joyce unbuttoned her suit jacket. The shoulder pads made her waist look tiny.

Alice swallowed a comment about the wisdom of wearing a wool suit in South Carolina before November. "Come on in." She slid open the glass patio door and stepped into the kitchen. Joyce followed her and sat down at the table. She set her large Gucci bag on the chair next to her. Alice envied her that soft butter leather every time she saw it.

"Would you like some iced tea?"

"Only if it's unsweetened. I've given up asking in restaurants here. They look at you like you're un-American. Joyce's nasal whine gave a whole new meaning to chalk on a blackboard. She took a pack of Benson & Hedges out of the bag. Alice wondered if she had them shipped from New York.

She grabbed the pitcher of tea from the refrigerator. Joyce was dropping in so often she'd been brewing it unsweetened. She didn't bother with the usual plate of cookies. Joyce wouldn't touch them and the waistband on Alice's jeans was getting snug. The day Joyce's husband, Barry, agreed to join John's department at Clemson, he came home crowing and told her Barry's new research on the human genome would bring in big bucks. Joyce wasn't happy about leaving New York, so John asked Alice to

befriend her. When Joyce walked into the first faculty cocktail party, her olive skin, sleek black dress and short, asymmetric haircut raised eyebrows around the room. Alice hoped she'd say something provocative, but she and Barry worked the room together like a pair of show horses.

Alice poured two glasses of tea and stuck a lemon slice on each rim. Playing politics wasn't her game—she kept her head down at the high school—but John was determined to be the Biology Department chair before he was forty. She missed the man who leaned across the table and drew diagrams on napkins, his beer forgotten at his elbow, his words tumbling over each other as he told her about the diseases they would conquer after the genome was mapped. He was happier the day Barry joined the department than she'd seen him in a long time.

Joyce sat sideways, legs crossed, foot swinging. Her black and red pump slipped off her heel. The red matched her suit exactly. “I'm never going near the dump again. Never.”

Alice set the glasses on the table. “Why? What happened?” She tried to imagine heaving bags of garbage in that suit. She liked Joyce's style, but she couldn't wait to pull on jeans and a t-shirt at the end of the school day.

“These two boys, they're playing with a deer's head. Tossing it back and forth. They scared the shit out of me.” Joyce lit a cigarette. The smoke floating across the table made Alice's eyes water. “The tongue was all purple and swollen. There was blood dripping from the neck.”

“If you lived in Clemson, you'd have curbside pickup.”

“If I had my way, we'd be living in Clemson instead of out in the boonies, but Barry loves that old Southern colonial. Says it's perfect for entertaining. Some kind of *Gone with the Wind* fantasy.” Joyce poked at the beads of moisture on the glass. “He can go to the dump from now on.” She stirred the lemon into the tea and the ice chinked against the glass. “The older boy is in your third period class. The one who stared out the window that time I subbed for you. Never opened the book. Not that the others were much better.”

Zach Weston. Every time Joyce dropped in, she brought up Alice's third period class. They could be boisterous, but they were a smart group, not afraid to speak up. They made her see things new.

“Alice? Are you there?” Joyce tapped one red nail on the table.

She had never thanked Alice for talking to Mr. Beaufort, her principal, about using her as a sub.

“Sorry. You're talking about Zach Weston.”

“He was trying to scare me. He didn't say a word, but he kept looking over at me.”

Alice stirred sugar into her tea. It never tasted right when you added the sugar later. “They're just being boys.”

“And he chased the younger one and kept bumping his butt with the antlers. What is wrong with him?”

“Their mother died in the spring. Lung cancer. Zach's the oldest. I imagine his father depends on him to help with the younger kids.”

Joyce frowned. “That's tough, but I still think it's weird that they were playing with a deer's head.” She looked down. “I miss teaching just girls. And I miss my school.”

Alice had left a school she loved in Louisville to follow John to Clemson. She knew what uprooted felt like. “Didn't you coach drama at your old school?”

“Yeah.” Joyce's foot stopped swinging and she smiled. “Last year we did *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. The girl who played Sandy was amazing, just the right balance of malice and hurt pride.”

“I do some set work for the Clemson Little Theater. Maybe you'd like to help out.” At first she'd acted in their productions. But when John decided he wanted to chair the department, he told her that having her cavort on stage embarrassed him.

Joyce lifted one perfectly plucked eyebrow. “Gives a whole new meaning to Off Off Broadway.”

“It'd be a way to get better known here.”

Joyce stared out the patio door. “I don't know if I want to be better known.”

Alice looked toward the corral. Sal whinnied and stamped her foot. “I'm going to do *West Side Story* at the high school.”

Joyce swung back to face her. “Are you crazy? All that choreography!”

“I thought we could have some fun after doing *Caesar* last year.”

“That must have been a treat. The Bard's words with all those soft vowels.”

As if the clipped speech of a New Yorker would sound more authentic. “The kids are excited. I want Zach to audition for A-Rab. He was great as Cassius.” That thin, lanky body. He always looked hungry and that spring, after his mother was diagnosed, his boy's face had become the face of a man who didn't sleep at night. She thought he could do A-Rab's icy not-quite-there look.

Joyce stubbed out her cigarette. “I guess you know what you're doing, but no way would I take it on.”

She wasn't sure she did know what she was doing. Zach's cheek had a bruise on Monday. She wondered again if she should call Social Services. Teachers were supposed to report that kind of thing, but when she asked Zach about the bruise, he told her he'd gotten in a fight with his brother.

Alice leaned against Sal's warm flank and lifted her foot. She didn't want to expose Zach's family to Social Services when she wasn't sure. Maybe she could talk to Zach's father. She'd never met him. It was Zach's mother who came to parent-teacher conferences. Now no one came. Zach's father wasn't at the play. Mary made it, but she was gaunt and her skin was grey. The hoof pick found a pebble and dislodged it. Sal shied and flicked her tail. The coarse hairs scratched Alice's cheek. She patted Sal's flank. “It's okay, girl. Steady.” She let Sal's foot go.

The air was still and heavy. From the hilltop, she could see rain trails to the west. Another thunderstorm on its way. When Zach's mother was dying, he'd appear at her classroom door after the

final bell. He scrubbed the blackboards and straightened the desks into perfect rows. Once he asked her if she believed in heaven. She said no, then wondered if she should have lied. After his mother died, he stopped coming.

The flies buzzed around Sal's head, one crawling toward her eye. Alice ran her hand down Sal's leg. At the funeral home, he stood, hair slicked down, bony wrists jutting out of shiny suit jacket sleeves, shuffling from foot to foot as the line of mourners moved past. Why did one kid always get to you more than the others? She dropped the pick and a little cloud of dust swirled up. She bent to grab the pick and Sal kicked out.

Alice woke to Sal's nicker and her head nudging her shoulder. Pain shot from the center of her face. She touched her nose and cried out. Sal whinnied and nudged her again. "Steady, girl." Alice rolled to her side, tried to push herself up with her elbow and fell back on the ground. She held her hand up. She had two right hands. A thick ooze across her cheeks and down her throat. She rolled up onto all fours, grabbed the corral post, and rested her forehead against the wood. Her teeth ached. She hauled herself to her feet, coughing. Blood dribbled down her chin. Vision blurring, she staggered to the house. She mopped her face with a dish cloth and then got an ice pack from the freezer. Holding it against her nose, she cried out again. Tears mixed with the blood. She dialed her neighbor.

Alice looked in the bedroom mirror. She'd always hated her pug nose. Now she wanted it back. The skin around her eyes had been six shades of purple. Now it was a bilious green-yellow. When John saw her, he recoiled, then gave her shoulder a perfunctory squeeze. Seeing her face in the mirror, she couldn't blame him. He ranted about Sal, even though she kept explaining that Sal was just stamping at the flies. When they moved to Clemson, John wanted her to leave Sal in Louisville at her mother's stable.

Two days ago, the doctor checked the swelling. She joked with him about giving her a different nose until she saw the instruments on the tray. The local dulled the pain, but it didn't help with the squishing, cracking noises. The splint and gauze made her feel like she couldn't get enough air. She looked out the kitchen window. The Darvon turned her head into a mushy melon. And she was worried about how her classes were faring with Joyce.

She slid open the patio door and went over to the corral. Sal was standing at the gate. She nickered and lowered her head to Alice's shoulder, blowing softly, tickling Alice's ear. Alice stroked her nose and let her nuzzle her fist where she'd hidden the wedge of apple, a game they usually played after their ride. She opened her hand, palm flat, and Sal's lips closed around the apple, lifting it gently, lips velvet against her skin. Alice leaned the side of her face against Sal's neck and cried.

"Alice?" She wiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand and turned. Joyce stood there, her face partially covered by a bunch of gold and rust mums and purple asters. "I probably should have brought chicken noodle soup, but I thought these might cheer you up."

"They're beautiful. You didn't have to do that."

Joyce studied her. "You look like shit. It's a good thing you're staying home."

"How were my monsters?"

"Oh, fine. They were fine." Joyce didn't meet her eyes. "They're not in love with Whitman, but they think he's easier to understand than Dickinson. They're sure she wanted to confuse everyone." She laughed. "Hey, we should get these in water. It's pretty hot and my Datsun isn't air-conditioned. Barry and I have been talking about replacing it if we stay here."

John wouldn't like that *if*. "Come on inside. I've got iced tea, but I'm afraid it's sugared." After the accident, Joyce said she was busy preparing for Alice's classes and would drop by if she could. Alice threw out the unsweetened tea, made some fresh, and stirred extra sugar into the hot liquid.

Joyce handed Alice the flowers and pressed her shirt sleeve against her forehead. "Anything

cold.”

Alice filled a vase with water and stuffed the flowers in it. “Something happened, didn't it?”

Joyce fiddled with the clasp on her bag, then took out her cigarettes. “It wasn't my fault.” She gulped from the glass Alice set in front of her. “It was that boy from the dump.”

“Zach.” Couldn't she even remember his name?

Joyce tamped a cigarette from the pack and lit it. She inhaled greedily. “He drove me crazy all week, muttering 'Yankee' when he passed my desk, sitting back in his corner, paying no attention whatsoever.” Joyce took another drag. “I called on him to read. He didn't even look up, kept staring out the window. That girl with the blond curls, the one all the boys watch—”

“Cecily Truett.”

“Yeah, her, she said he wouldn't read. I mean, he can read, can't he? Surely even here, he wouldn't just be passed on?”

“Of course he can read.” Sal had more common sense than this woman. Alice remembered the Zach of last fall, the boy who got it, the one whose papers she had saved till last.

“I went down the aisle. He was listening to a Walkman. How could a kid like that afford one of those things?” Joyce's foot swung. “It was playing some jangly rock crap. I told him to read the stanza or I'd confiscate his Walkman. I mean, he had no business bringing something like that to class, right?”

Alice pressed her fingers into the center of her forehead above the splint. Her whole face ached.

“I flipped his book open and pointed at the page. He closed the book and turned his head toward the window and I grabbed the Walkman. He made this noise, like I'd stabbed him.”

“You should have sent him to the office with it.”

“I wasn't thinking. I was fed up. All week, 'Yankee,' coming and going.” Joyce stubbed out her half-smoked cigarette.

“So you took it to the office?”

“Not exactly.” She picked up her bag.

“You kept it.” Alice closed her eyes. It wasn't time for her pill. She opened the container and popped one. “I thought you wanted a job at the high school.”

“Barry doesn't know.” Joyce's voice had a quaver. She took the Walkman out of her purse and laid it on the table. Its silver matte finish was scratched and the edges were dented. “I'm counting on you to get me out of this.”

Alice drove the winding red dirt road. Ten years in Oconee County and she was still amazed by the lack of neighborhoods. She eased off the gas. A trailer on concrete blocks sat in a weedy yard next to a ranch house with fresh paint and trimmed grass. She had cut back on the Darvon, but she still felt muzzy. She passed the house with the green-shingle roof caving in a crumbling V above the porch. There was an old gas pump in the yard and a tall wooden cross near the mailbox.

When she told John about the Walkman, he downed his scotch and told her to fix the problem. As if Joyce's behavior were her fault. Alice fingered the splint. Her nose felt huge. Joyce didn't give a tinker's dam about the students here, but she was right to wonder where Zach got the Walkman, even if it wasn't new. Maybe she should wait, talk to him at school on Monday.

Zach's street was on the outskirts of Clemson. The house was a tired-looking ranch, red brick and dirty white siding. The grass was patchy and overgrown rhododendrons blocked the windows. Several bicycles lay in the driveway. A white truck with dirt-splattered sides sat right in back of them. Alice drove by and circled round the block, trying to avoid the potholes that studded the gravel road.

She parked her truck in front of the house and got out. As she walked up Zach's driveway, loud barking came from within and a deep male voice shouted, “Shut up, Maggie.” She rubbed her forehead. Her nose hurt. She could just go home and down another Darvon. Take the Walkman to the office on Monday and let Mr. Beaufort deal with Zach. But there was that bruise. And a father who didn't come

to conferences or his son's play. She wanted to meet him. She rang the doorbell.

Zach opened the door. It was less than two weeks since she'd seen him, but he looked taller and thinner. He took a step back. She touched her splint. "Not pretty, huh?" He stared at her. "My horse kicked me—she didn't mean to—wrong place, wrong time." She tried a rueful smile. His blank expression, the one he wore now in class, didn't change. "I brought your Walkman back." She opened her purse.

"Zach, who's there?" A figure crossed the living room, taller than Zach and with broader shoulders. Zach shook his head, a quick jerk, and took another step back. Alice snapped her purse closed and extended her hand. "Mr. Weston? I'm Alice Benton, Zach's English teacher." His hand was rough, his grip weaker than she expected. He had Zach's dishwater blond hair and grey eyes.

"What's the other guy look like?" His laugh was a wheeze. His dirty jeans hung low on his hips as if he'd lost weight. The sweet strong smell of bourbon came at her. He swirled the amber liquid in the glass he held and took a swig.

"Dad." Two syllables, the universal teenage protest.

"What? Your teacher can't take a joke?" Mr. Weston clapped Zach's shoulder, a little hard, Alice thought.

"The other guy is my horse."

He snorted and took another swig. "Why're you here, Mrs. Benton?" He opened the door farther and made a mock bow.

Alice stepped inside. "I wanted to talk to Zach about auditioning for *West Side Story*. He did a great job last year as Cassius. I'm sorry you didn't get to see him."

"Left that kind of stuff to the wife." Mr. Weston rubbed the back of his neck. "Don't have time for foolishness working two jobs. Neither does Zach. He can't be staying after school for no play." He turned to Zach. "Right, son?"

Zach nodded but his hands were clenched. Mr. Weston kept talking. “Gotta get home from school and look after his sister and brother. Get supper on the table.” He sighed. “Sure wish he had his mother's dab hand with biscuits.”

“I remember a pecan pie she brought to a lunch meeting. It was better than my mother's.”

Zach's father grinned. “Better than my mother's, too.”

“Dad?” Zach's voice was up an octave.

Mr. Weston's grin disappeared. He rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. “We're done here.”

“Good to finally meet you, Mr. Weston.” Alice turned to Zach. “Maybe Zach could walk me to my truck. I wanted to ask him about his project.” She touched her nose. “Haven't been to school all week.”

“Guess that's okay, but no play. I need him here.”

Zach slammed out the door, Maggie slipping through with him. Alice struggled to match his stride. His face was red and he was muttering. He stopped in the shade of a persimmon tree and squatted next to Maggie, ruffling her ears. “It's not fair.”

Alice rested her hand on his shoulder. “Zach, I need to know about the Walkman.”

He looked up at her. “Why'd you let your horse kick you?”

She crouched next to him and rubbed Maggie's chest. “I didn't let her. It just happened.”

Zach picked up a persimmon and tossed it from hand to hand. Maggie lifted her head and pranced back yipping. “Somebody left it. I was late for English so I took it. I just wanted to see what was on it. And then she grabbed it.”

“Why didn't you tell her that?”

He dropped the fruit on the ground. It splatted like an overripe tomato. Zach stood up and started walking. Maggie looked from her to Zach and followed him.

She struggled to her feet, then stood light-headed. "Wait up, Zach." He slowed but didn't stop. She'd lost him. She trotted, her footsteps jarring her nose. She bent, hands on knees, waiting for the pain to stop thumping. Maggie padded back and lay down by her feet.

Zach turned and walked halfway toward her. "She thinks I'm stupid. Trying to make me read, make me 'participate'."

"Zach." She walked to meet him. "Were you trying to scare her at the dump?"

He kicked at the crack in the sidewalk. "She doesn't want to be here. Like, who'd want to live in New York where there's so many people?"

"Would you have taken the Walkman to the office?"

"Why didn't she take it?"

"I don't know, but we're talking about you now."

"I'm not a thief." He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I think it's Tom's."

Zach and Tom, unlikely friends. Tom all about basketball and cars. Until he appeared at the play tryouts. She cast him as Brutus and watched as he and Zach spurred each other on. After Zach's mother died, Tom bailed on him. Zach was an oddity. The cardinal sin when you were fifteen. She opened her purse and took out the Walkman. "Just give it back to him."

He took his hands out of his pockets but didn't reach for it. "What about the play?"

"I'll talk to your father."

Down the street, Maggie was barking at a squirrel. He whistled and she looked their way, then loped toward them. "Good dog," he said.

Alice held the Walkman out. "I will talk to him." He stared at her, then took the Walkman.

Alice smoothed the wrinkles out of Sal's saddle blanket. She lifted the saddle with a grunt. John thought she was being soft on Zach by not going to Mr. Beaufort, but when she pointed out that she

was keeping Joyce out of trouble, he shut up.

She stood on the block, reins in her hand, grabbed the saddle horn, and swung her leg over Sal's back. Sal danced one step sideways, then stood while Alice settled herself. She'd work with Zach during study hall. She slapped Sal's rump and they trotted around the corral. Her nose hurt, but the deep throb was gone.

She laid the reins against Sal's neck to turn her toward the corral gate and saw Joyce standing at the edge of the patio, her arm raised in a wave. Alice waved back, then clicked to Sal and headed away toward the trail.