

CHAPTER TWO

Alice watched as the driver didn't move but sat bolt-upright holding on to the steering wheel. He looked over at her and tried to smile, but the door of the police car opened. Sergeant Kelly got out and went to the point of contact on his car, stared at it, then looked at the Olds. Alice wandered over in time to hear, "Well, young fella, you've a nice new car, and naturally you had to drive it a wee bit fast." The sergeant went up to the driver to look him over. "It is new, isn't it?"

"Y-Y-Yes, of-of-... officer!"

"And next to this fine car, mine's a heap, wouldn't you say?"

"Y-Y-Y-Y...I mean, n-n-n..." The young man was struggling to talk.

"How fast were you going in this thing?" Sergeant Kelly demanded.

The driver tried to answer, but the first word caught. No sound came.

"Oh not fast at all, Sergeant Kelly," Alice said. "I saw the whole thing."

Kelly looked at her doubtfully. "Hello, Alice. You know this young man?"

"No, not at all. I only saw him go by, going kind of slow."

She saw that the driver was watching her. He started to get out of his car, then thought better of it.

"Might you be in possession of a license?" the Sergeant said.

The young man then did get out of the car to reach for his wallet. The license was presented and examined by the policeman, who raised an eyebrow. "Leonard Rhineland. That's an old name around here, you know."

"That's w-w-w-why I d-d-decided to come. My m-m-m-mother brought me here years ago because my f-f-forebears f-f-founded the

town in the s-s-seventeenth century, and....” Abruptly he went silent, then said, “I w-w-was just t-t-taking the air.”

Alice had never seen anyone work so hard to speak, and she felt a sudden sympathy. He looked exposed, his hair blown back and his being so thin and tall. “From New York?” the sergeant said.

The young man nodded.

“Well, Mr. Rhinelander, I have to say, you’re a lucky man that no damage was done and to be having a witness for your defense saying you were going ‘awful slow.’ Alice, please inform this young fellow that in New Rochelle, we don’t look kindly on those who plow into our police cars, particularly when the policeman sitting inside is enjoying his corn-beef sandwich.”

“I will, Sergeant Kelly.”

The policeman winked at her, then returned to his car. He started it up and drove away.

Leonard and Alice looked at each other from opposite sides of the Oldsmobile. He tried to speak. Breath caught in his throat. Other cars passed by behind him.

Alice smiled and said, “Hello.” She could feel her heart beating hard and fast. She wasn’t sure why, except that it seemed more than the excitement of the automobile accident. She thought of his smile just before he saw her, just before he hit the police car. It was such a pure thing.

The young man was dressed in a nice dark green tweedy suit. His glasses kept reflecting the sun as he turned from her to look at anything else, then turned back to try to say something, which he

didn't seem able to do. "Hello," he managed. "And th-th-th-th-..." He paused and then almost shouted, "*Thank you!*"

Alice drew back at the force of his gratitude, but then she smiled again. "Your welcome," she said. She wondered if she was making him nervous. Dressed like that, driving a brand new Oldsmobile convertible, what did he have to be nervous about?

"I mean," he said and took a deep breath, "I'm s-s-so grateful for your h-h-help."

"I didn't do a thing." She realized that it was more than him being nervous. Maybe he had that stuttering thing. "Just happened to be here."

"I'm v-v-very glad you w-w-were." Leonard looked around, and jammed his hands in his jacket pockets. "D-D-Do you live here in New R-R-Rochelle?"

"All my life," she said, and thought he'd probably been everywhere. "All my whole long life," she said again, "just waiting for a big red Oldsmobile to drive by and crash into a police car." She laughed to make sure he knew she was joking, but he just kept looking at her with his eyebrows raised up, as if he were surprised by everything she said or did. He seemed nice enough, but just awkward with talking.

"And h-h-here we are," he said, then shrugged, looking down as he leaned forward to grip the door and prop himself against the car.

She nodded. "Uh-huh, we sure are."

"May I g-g-give you a lift somew-where?"

She liked the car a lot, but said, "Naw, I don't think so."

“I s-s-see.” He looked crushed. He started to get back into the car, but stopped. “W-W-Why not? Are you just going to wa-wa-wa-wa....”? He gave up.

“Well, look-a-here, a girl doesn’t just jump into a stranger’s car.”

“N-N-No. Of course not. I’m s-so sorry.”

She waited. He seemed to be thinking about something, and then he forced out the words.

“You s-s-saved me getting a traffic ticket. I c-c-could drive you home.”

Not wanting to admit that home was about a thirty-foot drive, Alice considered. She didn’t think getting into his car was accepting the idea of fooling around like it did with Eddy Holland, or as it did with – she again cringed – Bobby Al Rose. “I don’t need to go home right now, thanks.”

“I s-s-see,” he said, his disappointment startlingly obvious to Alice. “I better be going.”

Well why not, Alice thought. He was interesting, in fact, kind of nice. There was something about him that she saw in that second before he hit the police car that she wanted to find out about. It was Thursday night. What else did she have to do? “Listen, you said something to Sergeant Kelly, something about ‘taking the air.’ That sounded... pleasant.” The word was one that Mrs. Sonderson used.

“We could do that!”

“What’s it mean?”

“Just driving around... taking big breaths.”

“Where’ll we go?”

“Anywhere you’d like... this side of hell.”

Alice was startled, but not as much as he was for having said it. She laughed. “Well,” she said, “there might be New Rochelle fire engines down there, so just don’t run into them.”

He let out a burst of hilarity beyond what the joke deserved as he hurried around to open the door for her. Alice took that in. He was opening the door for her. Eddy Holland never did that. Neither did Bobby Al, not even after, when she had to get out of his fish truck on her own, him driving up to the curb and saying goodnight, sitting there like a frog in the mud until she opened her own door and got out.

She stepped into the Oldsmobile and slid into the passenger seat. In so doing, her coat parted revealing to Leonard the shortness of her gold dress – above her knees! She saw his look, allowed it, then covered her legs again with her coat as he shut the door.

“You b-better hold onto your hat,” he said, and hurried around to the driver’s seat.

After a lurching start – “Have to g-g-get used to the c-c-clutch” – Leonard turned the car and made his way carefully out of New Rochelle. Alice, holding on to her cloche as advised, sat back in the seat, comparing it to any seat she’d ever ridden in before. They were all lousy. This one had a sweet pungent tang.

“Why does your car smell like this?”

“New l-l-leather, best smell in the w-w-world.”

“I’m awful bad with names,” she said. “D’you say Laurence?”

“N-N-No. Leonard. Umm, you s-seem to be dressed up to g-go somewhere. I’ll b-be glad to drive you.”

She considered making up something, but then didn't. Why? She'd probably never see him again so why would it matter? "Well, to tell you the truth, Leonard, when I got dressed up this afternoon, I had no idea where I was going. I just felt like dressing up. So maybe, without knowing any better, I was getting dressed up 'to take the air.' "

"Really? W-W-Well, how very f-f-fortunate I came along just at that moment and crashed."

They both laughed. "Where are we going?"

"W-Would you like to take a w-w-walk on a beach? We're perfectly dressed for it, you in a gold dress, m-me in a green suit. And the air there is v-very g-good for the taking."

He said "perfectly" as if there was no "r" in it, but not "poificly" like the boys from Brooklyn did at the resort last summer. "That'd be perfect," she said, without daring to imitate Leonard's accent.

"How amazing for you to admit," Leonard said, "in such an unhesitant way, that you'd gotten all dressed up w-without having anywhere to go."

"Well, I didn't. What's so amazing about that?"

"It's so, ...honest. I have a sister who'd never admit such a thing. She d-d-dresses up to brush her teeth. If ever she didn't have a reason to go out, she'd make up something like, 'I have to dress for the shopkeepers. They expect it of me.' "

A sister, Alice thought, dresses up for the shopkeepers. A different world. "You live in New York?" Alice said

"Yes, w-w-we've l-lived there a l-long t-t-time."

"Yeah, after you all established New Rochelle in the 1700's."

“It w-w-was the 1600’s. 1688 to be exact.”

“I thought you said...”

“Yes, I s-s-said the s-s-seventeenth century. That’s the 1600’s.”

“What? The seventeenth century is the 1600’s? Well, that’s just silly.”

He glanced over to see if she was joking. “It really is, isn’t it?”

She changed from one hand to the other to hold her hat. “Leonard, I gotta tell you, there’s a whole lot of stuff I don’t know.”

He glanced over at her again, then drove for a moment before saying, “You’re the only person I’ve ever known who was straightforward enough to admit it.”

She liked that very much. He obviously had more education than she ever had or ever would, and it felt good to just go ahead and admit her feeling kind of dumb. To get a complement back for being honest about it, yes, Alice liked that a whole lot. Then she realized: He hadn’t stuttered.

Leonard interrupted the thought. “Um, how d-d-do you know the p-police so well?”

So it comes and goes. Strange. She thought of making up another answer but it wouldn’t matter anyway. Last summer, she’d told the milkman who delivered to the resort that she was the illegitimate daughter of a Ukrainian princess. He’d believed her and she didn’t even know where Ukraine was. But this guy, “Leonard,” seemed to like the straight story. And sure: If she never saw him again, so what?

“My father started a taxi service in New Rochelle. Still does drive his regulars, but he owns some rental property now. He knows all the policemen pretty well. Sergeant Kelly’s an old friend, comes in for coffee on winter nights.”

“He started a taxi service!” Leonard said with wonder. “That’s so impressive, to start something on your own, something completely new. Everyone in m-m-my family has done the same boring thing for generations. Where does your f-f-family come from?”

“From England. My parents came here, oh, thirty years ago. March 18, 1891, they landed on Ellis Island. We celebrate it every year, have high tea and sing God Save the Queen, for Victoria. She was the queen back then.”

“So you’re English.”

“Well, they are. I was born here, so I’m American. My father started his taxi-driving when he saw all the men at the New Rochelle station coming out from New York on the train needing rides.” Should she tell him that Daa was a porter at the station when he got the idea?

“Filling a need,” Leonard said before she had the chance. “My family hasn’t ever done that.” He laughed again and she didn’t know why.

“Why’s that funny?” she said.

He stopped laughing and juttled his head forward toward the windshield. “W-W-What I meant was, what my family does, doesn’t do anything for anybody, except make more and more money for the family.”

“My golly, that ain’t so bad, is it? What do they do?”

He hesitated, then said, “They trade property, ...real estate.”

“You’re right,” she said.

“What?”

“That’s *booooooriing*.”

He took a quick glance to see her looking at him, smiling. He threw back his head to laugh, swerved on the road and steadied the car as she braced herself and yelled, “Hey, you ain’t Barney Oldfield, you know.”

“Sorry. It was your fault.”

“Mine?” She bristled.

“You distracted me with humor.” And he laughed again but held the car steady.

“Okay, I’ll go gloooooomy whenever you drive,” she said, “dragged down while I’m out here taking this air. You scared it all out of me back there anyways.” This is really fun, she thought. He’s really nice. “Do you come up from New York a lot?”

“Ah, well, I’m not l-l-living in ... I’m staying n-n-near Stamford now.”

“Oh,” she said. “That’s kind of closer.”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?”

They drove for another quarter of an hour, Alice with thoughts of the revealed geographical proximity, wondering if he might actually want to meet again, planning how to find that out, and if he did, inventing some kind of subtle, casual strategy to make it happen. So intense was her concentration that, when Leonard

pulled the car onto the shoulder of the road and stopped, she sat silently considering the next step.

“W-W-We’re here.”

“Oh. It’s beautiful.”

“Shall w-we walk?”

“What’ll we do with our shoes?”

“The b-back seat.”

“What if someone steals them?”

“I can d-d-drive barefoot, and w-w-we’ll go buy new ones.”

What a simple solution, Alice thought. Another world. Leonard hurried around to help her out, and they both sat on the running board to take their shoes off. Alice was so glad she had bright red nail polish on her toes, and noticed that his sox were striped up and down blue and green, the green close to the same color as his suit. He threw the sox with their shoes into the back seat and rolled up the legs of his trousers. He stood up, then suddenly seemed to freeze, looking off as if he didn’t know what to do.

Alice watched, deciding he might be worried about how they’d walk, whether to offer a hand, an arm. Well, they’d have to start walking first. She got up on her own and took off her coat, throwing it as casually as possible into the backseat with the shoes. The breeze off the Sound was a little chilly, but she wanted him to see her in that dress. She put her hand in his and said, “Let’s go,” as if it was the most natural, easy thing to do, which it was, but he looked at her as if she’d just performed a miracle.

Together they trudged through the soft sand until it grew hard approaching the low tide. Neither reacted to the coldness of the

water, but stood in it ankle-deep, gazing at the clouds that the late sun was turning into roiling burning coals.

“Red sky at night, sailors’ delight,” Leonard said.

“What’s that mean?”

“Oh. Um, I used to go sailing. It’s an old saying, ‘Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning. Red sky at night, sailors delight,’ meaning if it looks like this in the evening, it’ll be a pleasant night. But in the morning, a red sky means hard weather.”

She looked at him carefully. Again he said all that without a stutter. “So you’re a sailor?”

“No, no, a number of my relatives have boats, and....” He stopped abruptly, as if it was something he didn’t want to talk about.

“What kind of boats?” she said. “Floating-in-a-bathtub boats, or those big ones with sails all over ‘em? Come on, let’s walk.”

“W-W-With some s-s-s-sails.”

“You mean, yachts?”

“Ummm...”

“You ever sail over to the New York Athletic Club at Travers Island?”

“Yes, several times. Why?”

Could she tell him this? If she did, would he think she was white trash, drive off after leaving her out at the curb? No, he liked the truth. And he might as well know this. She’d probably never see him again anyway. “I worked there,” she said.

“You did?”

“A couple of summers. In the laundry.” She didn’t turn to see his response, but kept walking. She’d know how he felt soon enough. “I saw a lot of yachts. From a distance, of course.”

But he stopped, and still gripping her hand, turned to gaze at her. She watched him, figuring that was that. But he kept ahold of her hand and didn’t even try to say something, just looked at her until a high wave came in, probably the first of the changing tide. It hit above their knees and both leapt back to the dry sand.

“Be careful, Leonard. You’ll get your pants wet.”

“It doesn’t matter. Alice, you....”

“What do you mean it doesn’t matter? Do you know what salt water does to wool?”

“It’s all right, someone at home’ll take care of it. I meant...” They started walking again.

“Oh, you mean you expect your momma to....”

“No, my mother is dead. I meant that we have someone at home who....”

“I’m so sorry, Leonard. I didn’t mean any disrespect. That’s so, so sad.”

“You couldn’t have known. And yes, it was very sad.”

“What happened?”

He didn’t answer. She thought she’d been dumb to ask about something so personal. Then he said, “Alice, something’s happening. I don’t think it’s ever happened to me before.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Of being with someone, and talking... not just the surface chat, not just trying to say things to fill some dumb empty silence.” He stopped walking. “And I’m not stuttering.”

“I noticed that. How come, you think?”

“I don’t know. They tell me it’ll happen when I’m thinking harder about what I’m saying instead of how I’m going to say it. So I must be doing that.”

“You say things just fine. Better’n me. What are you thinkin’ so hard about?”

“Here and now? You’ve just told me about your father driving a taxi, about where you worked, which was so... truthful.”

“Sure. Why not? There’s no big secret. Just saves time getting to know somebody, families and all.”

“Yes. It does, doesn’t it?” He walked on, changing his grip on her hand, holding it tighter. “So this is what happened. My mother used a very bright alcohol spirit lamp on her dressing table when she fixed her hair to go out. One night, it exploded. She died two days later from the burns.”

“That’s ... horrible.”

“Yes. It was horrible. I can’t tell you how much I still miss her.”

“Course you do. How old were you?”

“Twelve.”

“Oh dear God. I can’t imagine that. Did your father look after you all right?”

“Not in the slightest. He got rid of me as quickly as he could.”

“What? How’d he do that?”

“He sent me away to school.”

“You mean, you lived there?”

“Yes. Boarding school.”

“That’s about the cruelest thing I’ve ever heard. My father’d never do that.”

“Know how lucky you are.”

“I do.”

“My two older brothers, one was already at another boarding school, the other at Harvard, and my older sister, well, she was becoming a debutante.”

“What’s that?”

“Ah, well, it’s when a young woman is introduced to society.”

“What society?”

“It’s a ritual, a lot of big dances that make up a season in the fall, and girls who are around eighteen dress up in white dresses to start the process of finding a husband.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“No. It happens every year.”

“What about your brothers? Were they debutantes?”

“No. Just girls are. My brothers attended a lot of the debutante balls, though. I did, too.”

“Oh, I get it: You guys were maybe going to be the husbands. Did your brothers ever marry anybody?”

“P.K., he’s the oldest, did. Nice girl, good family, the usual thing. She raises their two children and goes to the Colony Club.”

“Oh, she likes jazz?”

“Um, no, different kind of club. P.K. works with Father in the family business. My other brother, Oakley... w-w-well, he was killed in the war.”

“Oh no. Oh, God, I’m asking all the wrong things. I’m so sorry.”

“You said nothing wrong. It’s all about my family. Oakley was the only member of my immediate family that I think liked me. P.K. thinks I’m a jerk, Adelaide something worse, and my father just wants to be rid of me.”

“That’s so sad, Leonard. Doesn’t anyone in your family realize how, well, swell you are? That’s a complement.”

“I got it. Thanks. Well, I have an aunt, Aunt Lucy, a kind of fairy godmother who seems to like me.”

They walked quietly, forcing seagulls to run or fly opposite to their direction. “I guess I’ve been real lucky,” Alice said. “Our family’s never had any tragedies like that. It’s the best, strongest thing in my life. My father, I call him ‘Daa’, he’s just a fine man. He’s half West Indian, Spanish or something, the other half British, a real English gent. His Yorkshire accent sure does confuse people, him being so dark-skinned, but everyone loves him.” She never talked about this. Why did she say anything?

“That’s amazing,” he said. “Do you, I mean, well, you don’t seem to have inherited any of that.”

“Just his gorgeous looks, long nose, thin lips.” She made a joke of it but watched him carefully and struck a pose. “Judge for yourself.”

“Oh. Well, I think I already have. He must be a very good-looking man.” He smiled. “That’s a complement.”

“I got it,” she laughed. “Thank you.”

“Tell me about the rest of your family.”

“My Mum is as English as you can be, rules our little kingdom like a queen. I have two sisters, Grace and Emily – I’m in the middle. They’re a whole lot different from me. For instance, Grace is a show-off and just wild. And Emily, who’s the smartest I think, married a Negro.” She kept walking but knew the chance she was taking telling him that. “He’s a wonderful man, graduated high school and all. But it nearly killed Mum, and they still can’t come to the house.”

She waited for him to respond. He’d trusted her with all his family stuff and seemed to accept what she’d told him about Daa. But the world drew lines about marriage between races, particularly fancy people like this “Leonard” certainly seemed to be.

“We’ve had a family marriage crisis like that, not about race, but it was....” he said, then stopped.

Alice hesitated to ask anything more. “Every family does, probably.”

“No, not like this.” They walked silently for a short distance. “Alice, I find myself wanting to tell you everything. Maybe I will one day. My family had a predicament once that caused great pain and destruction.” He gazed at her. She wasn’t going to ask. She’d asked too much already. “Well,” he said, “this situation with your sister is completely different. It’s just sad that she’s forbidden to come home. I don’t know any colored people, but if he...”

“You don’t?”

“No, not one, not even a servant. All ours are either English or Irish. I’ve seen Negroes play jazz in clubs is all. I certainly understand how intermarriage is, well, an obvious problem. Our society seems able to find reasons to be prejudiced about almost anything. My family’s filled with it, to any degree of disgust and hate you can imagine. But if he’s a good man, I hope your mother accepts him for everyone’s sake. If she doesn’t, it’ll just cause even greater sorrow as time passes, it seems to me.”

“You think so? I wish you could tell Mum that. She won’t listen to us about it anymore.”

“Maybe I will.”

His implication was clear to both. Alice stopped and turned to him.

“Maybe.” There was his smile again, the one she’d seen while he was driving, of such huge happiness, of being free enough to do anything. Well, she’d not felt so happy in a long time, and hoped it didn’t show too much. Walking and talking on a beach with him seemed so, what was the word – uplifting! Yes, she felt like she was being lifted up. Whoever he was, what kind he was, she sensed he’d done something to her without him even knowing it. She didn’t know what it was, but wondered if she’d done something like it to him. She was so damn glad she’d worn that dress. “You know, I’m getting kind of cold,” she said.

“We lost the sun and a beach in late September....”

“I didn’t even notice. Oh, gosh, then I’m late for supper.”

“I’ll drive you home.” He took off his green suit jacket and held it for her to put on. She was dwarfed in it, the sleeves coming down to her knees. Turning back toward the car, they saw a flock of seagulls standing in front of them down the beach. Alice began running toward them making bird sounds, flapping the sleeves of Leonard’s jacket up and down. She thought, he might as well know I’m crazy.

Back at the car, she returned his jacket, replacing it with her own coat that again, he held for her. Daa did that for Mum but nobody else she knew did it. They put their shoes on and Leonard managed to put the Oldsmobile’s top up – amazed, he said, by how easy it was. The drive back to New Rochelle seemed to take no time at all. They spoke about places they’d been, Leonard describing as best he could exactly what a Venetian gondola was, and Alice describing the various Catskill delivery methods of illegal alcohol. They explored a shared excitement about going to clubs and listening to jazz, an experience that neither had the chance to do very often but allowed each of them to develop hopes for the future. Neither expressed more than the casual possibility, but Alice silently seized on the prospect with intense resolve.

When they turned onto Pelham Road, she dared to say in a rush, “Leonard, why don’t you come in, meet my parents, have something to eat. We probably missed dinner, but...”

“Your parents? ... It’s awfully 1-1-late to come in unannounced.”

“Unannounced? Hey, we don’t do that fancy introducing to society around here. People come in all the time. Oh my gosh!

That's Bob's car, Emily's husband I told you about. What are they doing here?"

Leonard parked the Oldsmobile just behind an old Model A Ford. "Is this your house? Up there is where I hit the police car."

"Oh. Yeah, just up there a little bit."

"So that's why you didn't want me to drive you home. You really wanted to come with me."

"Well, I guess so. The air, you know."

"Alice, I'm so glad..." and he lurched over and tried to kiss her. She drew back, and he instantly lurched right back to his own side of the car. "I'm so s-s-sorry...."

"Len, Len, we...."

"Oh!" He sat up straight. "Say that again."

"What? Len?"

"Alice, call me that. Will you? No one's ever called me that." Smiling in wonder, he collapsed back against his car door. "Alice, I haven't talked to anyone like we've talked in my whole life."

She believed him. Nor had she. That sense of release from her own bound-up life had allowed it. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. He turned and enfolded her, gazing at her a moment before kissing her on the lips, which she soon parted. Amazed, he copied her, and when their tongues touched, he seemed unable to breathe. The kiss went on, and on. Alice finally pulled back and said, "Len, we have to go in."

"Yes," he said, breathing hard. "I liked that very much."

"I liked it, too. A whole lot."

They looked at each other, not wanting to move. “We better...” she said.

“Yes, we sure better.”

Alice got out of the car without waiting for him to help her, and he joined her on the front walk. “I can’t believe Bob and Emily are here,” she said as she hurried to the top of the steps. Then she stopped and turned to him. “Oh my god, Len, I forgot your last name.”

“How wonderful! May I make something up?”

“No you may not!”

“It’s Rhineland. Yours is Jones, isn’t it?”

“Rhine what?”

“Rhineland.”

“That’s a mouthful. Okay.” She opened the front door and went in. Leonard followed, still breathless.

Their entrance silenced a very noisy room. Conversation at the dining room table was caught in the middle of high emotion. Alice saw that her mother was crying, Grace looking devilish, Bob Brooks amused, and finally Emily, coming forward and without any expression, saying, “Oh, hello. I’m pregnant,” then smiling with delight.

Alice screamed and grabbed her older sister in a bear hug. Everyone got up and started talking except Elizabeth, who cried some more with joy, as each over the other described how Emily had come in and said just those words, how each of them felt and reacted.

“Where’s Daa?” Alice said.

“You missed him,” Elizabeth said. “He had to...” Abruptly, she and the rest of the family noticed Leonard standing by the front door.

“Oh my gosh,” Alice said. “I’m so sorry. Mum, everybody, I’ve brought a friend to meet you. This is Len Rhineland.”

They all chorused wry comments about “friend.” As he was introduced to each, good-humored greetings were noisily made, allowing him the luxury of saying nothing. He made a little bow to Elizabeth, and finally said to Emily, “C-C-Congratulations.” No one but Alice caught the stutter. Then Leonard reached out his hand to Bob Brooks and said, “Hello, B-B-Bob, isn’t it?” That time everyone noticed.

Bob replied, “Yes, Len, the overlooked father.” They shook hands as everyone hooted derision except Alice who was watching Len. He’d probably never shaken a Negro’s hand. He seemed bemused and certainly curious.

Elizabeth assumed her usual primacy in her house. “My husband has gone off to drive the tenants of his buildings mad, so his place at the table is yours, Mr. Ringlander, if you’d care for some dessert.”

“Rhineland, Mum. He’s from New York.”

“Len Ringlander,” Leonard said. “I could be someone else.”

As everyone went back to the table, Grace said, “Alice, did you go all the way to New York to meet him?”

“No, I’m sure not,” Elizabeth said, enjoying Leonard holding her chair out for her. “Tell us, Mr. Rhineland, all about your good self, and how you happen to be here.”

Leonard took his place at the table, seeming to think what he was going to say. Alice watched him as he saw himself become the center of their kind and generous interest. “Alice’s honesty with m-me is my guide. F-F-First of all, you’ll n-n-notice that I stut-t-t- ... I’m at a p-p-place up near Stamford that’s sup-p-posedly curing me. It’s not c-c-completely...” he paused to think the words, “...*successful* so far.”

“You’re doing fine, Len,” Emily said.

“Thanks,” Leonard said gratefully. “That’s not the u-u-usual reaction. People usually g-g-get very nervous or embarrassed and actually f-f-flee!”

“I know what you mean, Len,” Bob Brooks said. “Try being black and walking into a white church sometime.”

“Yes,” Leonard said. “I can see it might be s-s-something like that, but how would I know?”

“Well, I’ll get you some blackface and you can give it a try.”

“You’ll h-h-have to teach me everything,” Leonard said. “Oh my gosh, how I’d love to shock my father with his colored stuttering son!”

“That’d sure do it,” Bob Brooks laughed. “You live in New York, Len?”

“W-W-Well, I suppose it’s where my home is, but I’m not there much, camps, boarding school. I w-w-was... *supposed* to go to Harvard this year, but my f-f-father thought the clinic for my stuttering w-w-would be time better spent. He could have made w-w-worse choices. -- Um, ‘w’ is my hardest letter.” He looked at Alice. “My family does grim things to members who disappoint

them. By stuttering, I've definitely d-disappointed them." Feeling he'd said too much, he smiled at everyone, embarrassed. "I w-w-was terribly disappointed about Harvard... until today."

He looked back at Alice. She looked startled. Everyone else gaped back and forth between the two, until they all joined in laughter. Alice smiled at Leonard, then did a mock looking-down-in-shyness. Elizabeth and Grace served the pie. The conversation turned back to focus on the future blessed event, the date of arrival, the names for either a boy or girl and which was preferred. "I'm pretty sure we're going to keep whatever kind of thing comes," Bob said.

Leonard sat and watched, enveloped in the banter and affection. Everyone considered Emily's firm statement that the baby be named for Bob whether a boy or a girl, Robert or Roberta. Bob suggested "Atlas," but was laughed down.

"Here's another piece of pie," Elizabeth said as she served it on Leonard's plate. "You're too thin for a man of your stature." He ate it with gusto.

As conversations continued, Grace strolled over to the Victrola in the living room and wound it up. She put a record on the turntable and switched it on, swinging the needle arm over to the outside edge of the record. The moment the music started, Alice stood up and looked around at the Victrola, but then didn't move.

Leonard hadn't heard the song, but the whole family grew quiet, and he found them one by one looking at him with strange smiles. Alice turned slowly toward him with a look he'd not seen.

...Dry each tear-dimmed eye,

Clouds will soon roll by.
Fate may try to lead us astray,
But dearie, mark what I say,
Love will find a way.

When the song was over and the needle was going around and around on the remainder track, no one said anything. All eyes were on him. He said to Alice, "I think that's about the loveliest song I've ever heard."

"And you didn't stutter!" Grace blurted as she turned off the Victrola.

"No, I didn't, did I?" Leonard said. "Grace, it must have been the song!"

"Or the pie!" Elizabeth said

Everyone started talking except Alice, who only smiled at him, and sat down again, as did Grace, filled with her musical triumph. Emily and Bob made coffee, and conversation flowed from group to group, each changing in number with every new story or old memory, until Leonard saw for the first time a Big Ben wind-up alarm clock on top of the upright piano in the living room.

"Good glory," he said as he stood up, "I'm very l-l-late. I'm so sorry, but I h-h-have to go."

Expressing their regret, everyone rose and went with him to the front door. Alice took his hand again.

"I c-c-can't thank you enough, Mrs. J-Jones, letting me intrude like this. It's been the most w-w-wonderful evening."

"We'll take credit for that," Grace said.

"Yes," Emily said. "Alice had nothing to do with it."

“Now Len,” Elizabeth hastened to add, “I wish to presume that you’ll come back to see us.”

“D-D-Did you make that pie?” Leonard said.

“Of course I did.”

“Then I’ll be back.”

The front door opened and George Jones saw Leonard. “Good gracious, who have we here? A door-to-door salesman of caskets, I’ll be sworn.”

“No, Daa,” Alice said. “This is my friend, Len Rhinelander. My father, George Jones.” George’s startled reaction and quick glance at Leonard’s shoes were visible to everyone, and certainly to Leonard.

“Good evening, sir,” Leonard said and put out his hand, taking in Mr. Jones’ dark, presumably Spanish West Indies coloring, his almost white hair and clipped moustache, the lilt of his Yorkshire accent. Leonard’s father had once had a valet from Yorkshire.

“Good evening, sir,” George said. “Hope they’ve looked after you. Would you be needing a car to the city, sir?”

“No, thank you, Mr. Jones. I have a car outside. I’ve had a perfectly wonderful time with your family. You’re so lucky.” He looked at all of them. “You’re all so lucky. I’m s-s-sorry I have to leave, sir, just when you came in, but I’m terribly late. Goodnight everyone, goodnight Alice.”

“I’ll walk you out.”

As they left, the family called out their goodbyes. Once the front door was shut and they were walking to the car, Leonard said,

“You’re going to hear a lot from your father, I think, about my family. Don’t let any of it change what you think of me.”

“I won’t. But why would it?”

“I don’t know. It seems to change everybody. May I see you again, soon?” He got into the driver’s seat and started the car.

“Very soon, I hope,” Alice said and leaned in to kiss him, at the same time reaching in with one hand to slip it inside his suit coat. When she stepped back, she said, “Taking all that air was real nice.”

“You know, all day I kept thinking that we’d probably never see each other again.”

“My gosh, Len! I did, too!”

“But I think we will, don’t you?”

“I think we have to.”

They kissed again.

“You make it impossible to leave.”

“Then come on back here, soon as you can.”

He reached to touch her cheek. The car lurched and he drove away.

Alice watched until the car turned the corner and she couldn’t see it. She smiled, then didn’t. She wished he’d turn around and come back. She missed him already. She felt she couldn’t wait to see him again. She had so much more to say to him. He certainly didn’t seem a stranger anymore, just nice, kind, so open, so ready to do things, so free to do them.

She ordered: Don’t think like that. Don’t wonder about anything. Don’t dream a minute about his world, or getting out of

mine. It'll be up to him, and it may have been nothing more than a nice day, a nice drive, a couple of kisses. So don't dare feel what you're feeling. Think about getting your uniform washed and ironed, about Emily's baby, about anything but him kissing me, talking about all those things that truly matter, and wondering about all the other things he obviously wanted to say.

When she went in, the whole family was watching her, not saying anything. She leaned back on the door, closing it behind her.

Then her father said, "*Do you know who the bloody hell the Rhinelanders are?*"

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Never having driven in the dark, Leonard was very careful on his return to the Orchards. He knew he'd be reprimanded, but it didn't matter. What had happened that day was worth any punishment. He had so much to think about, so much to wonder at. She actually seemed to like him without knowing anything about the Rhineland family. She was probably learning about it now; her father had given that familiar jolt of recognition. But she'd kissed him in a way he'd never been kissed. Not that any girl had ever kissed him before. How could they get to that point if he could barely talk to them? But Alice talked, and he talked – a lot -- and she kissed him.

In pure joy he yelled out loud as he drove, then yelled again and blew the horn. She also was the most direct person he'd ever met, with apparently no hesitance to tell him honestly about

everything she thought or about who she was. No one he knew, certainly no one in his family was like that. Well, except Aunt Lucy of course.

The moment he thought of her, Leonard remembered what he'd almost told Alice on the beach, wanted to tell her, but now doubted he ever would. How could he? It would surely terrify her, scare her away, and he wouldn't blame her one bit. It had horrified him when he first heard about it. But maybe he could tell her someday, when they were... What? What could they ever be? What would his family allow them to be? Could he ever dare tell Alice Jones about that? Should he even go on seeing her knowing what his family could – no, would do to her, if she and he...

The week before Oakley was killed in France, Leonard had a fight with Charley Stuyvesant at boarding school. He remembered it well, could still taste the dirt when Charley pushed his face in it. That's when Charley had shouted in his ear, "I heard about your uncle, William Copeland Rhineland. He was insane, Leonard! That's why you st-st-st-stutter, you see?"

Until that moment, Leonard had never heard of an Uncle William Copeland. The next week, Aunt Lucy arrived to tell him the horrible news about his brother and to drive him back to New York. It was a somber drive with little said, both lost in their own grief. But as Leonard and Aunt Lucy were walking into the house to join the family's mourning, he'd suddenly remembered. "Aunt Lucy, I m-m-meant to ask: Do I have an uncle named W-W-William Copeland Rhine...."

He didn't finish because she had turned so suddenly back on him. Standing very tall in her dancer's way as if poised for flight, one arm raised wing-like against what he'd just said, she stared at him as if he'd uttered something truly dreadful. Then she walked past him, saying, "Come back to the car with me."

He followed her as they confronted her chauffeur, Spencer, coming behind them carrying Leonard's bags. "Give the bags to Maxwell, Spencer, and have him take you down to the kitchen for some supper. You can get the steamer trunk after. We'll be in presently."

"Yes, Madam."

She didn't wait for Leonard to open the Packard's back door and threw herself across the seat, leaving room for him beside her. As soon as he shut the door behind him, she said, "Who told you about William Copeland?" Her voice had gone very deep. Leonard had never heard her speak down low like that.

"N-N-Nobody. I was in a f-f-f-fight with Charlie Stuyvesant and he s-said I had a c-c-crazy uncle n-n-named..."

"The Stuyvesants would gossip about God! How rotten of them to pass on such a thing to another generation." She sat silently staring ahead leaning forward in her seat, one hand gripping the door handle, the other pressed against the dividing window between the back and front seats as if expecting a crash. "You're fifteen," she said, reassuring herself. Leonard had already sent her a thank-you note for the check she'd sent two weeks before as a birthday present. She turned to him, still braced in place. "I have no business telling you this, except that I'm your Godmother, a

responsibility I take seriously.” She sat back in the seat. “I’m going to tell you about a matter that you must find out about on your own, but not from any other member of the family. You must never mention a word of what I tell you to them. You must promise me you’ll honor that.”

“I do, of course. I honor anything you tell me.”

“I must hurry; we can’t stay out here long. You know your Uncle Oakley, for whom your dear brother was named.”

“Yes. Father’s older brother.”

“They had a third brother. He was the oldest of the three: William Copeland Rhineland, named to honor *his* father, your grandfather.”

“I..., are you sure? I’ve never heard...”

“And you never shall, from anyone in the family. He’s been deemed nonexistent. You’ll find no official or Rhineland recognition of him. He was disinherited, denied by the family and of course, by society.”

“Why?”

“I think because he was outrageous and uncontrollable. I was a very young girl when all that happened. He was devastatingly handsome. And wild.”

“But...”

“Leonard, he ran off with an Irish maid who worked in his home, and married her.”

“Good Ch-Ch-Ch-...”

“It was shocking, outrageous, insane, and he was thrown out, legally disowned to sever his connection to any Rhineland

holdings. This was long ago, in 1876, and long forgotten by the public -- except in various pockets of malice around town.”

A scary idea locked into Leonard’s mind. “*Was he insane?*”

Lucy considered the question. “I never thought so. I met him twice, and he always talked to me as if I were an adult for which I thought he was wonderful. I think he was simply a wild force and couldn’t adapt to the Rhineland world in which he found himself. Any containment that the family used to control him, he battled it as if it were a prison – which of course to him, it was.”

“What happened?”

Lucy’s head sank forward. “After they married, they traveled as long as any money he had lasted. Sadly, there were two children. After a few years, it all started to collapse into poverty and his destructive indulgences, gambling, drink, too many to count. He tried to sue for more family money, and during one acrimonious meeting, he shot his father’s attorney.”

She looked over at Leonard, who sat open-mouthed and motionless. “The family then applied extraordinary legal pressure to have him declared insane, trying to commit him to an asylum for the rest of his life. The scandal of William Copeland Rhineland sold a great many newspapers while all that went on.”

“Did he go into an asylum?”

“No, but....” She sobbed. She had no handkerchief so she used her fingers to wipe her tears away. “It’s been a very long day,” she said. “Let me finish this. He talked his way out of both jail and asylum. He was, after all, a Rhineland. But, but, his little wife, after the years of struggle, after suffering all the viciousness our

family could use on her,” her voice rasped bitterly, “the little Irish girl went completely mad. For her trouble with us, she was allowed to rot to death over many years in a state institution.”

They both heard the bolt of the front door as it opened. Maxwell, the butler stood there, not wishing to intrude but available for service.

“Say nothing of this, Leonard. Do you understand?”

He nodded, and opened the door, holding it for her as she got out. Lucy walked up the steps and was about to greet Maxwell when Leonard asked, “What happened to the two children?”

She stopped and said over her shoulder, “I doubt if anyone knows. Probably the lawyers arranged something.”

The story of his uncle, his father’s own brother, his Irish wife and their two children had deeply disturbed Leonard. He hadn’t realized it right away. From the day he’d left school and come home to mourn Oakley, he spent his time grieving for his brother, then sleeping to stay away from the rest of his family. It soon became clear to him that he wasn’t going back to school. Instead he was sent to one doctor after another about the stuttering, to Dr. Pease about his “recessive behavior,” about his weight, about the pain in his stomach that they thought was either an ulcer or a spastic esophagus caused by stress, about his sudden height. One doctor, Dr. Jerome, even talked about his dreams!

All of it became part of the record for sending Leonard away to the Orchards two years later. But the story of William Copeland Rhineland and his family had haunted him ever since he heard it. As he steered up the drive to the mansion, he decided he’d never

tell Alice about his uncle, or his wife the Irish maid. Alice would see the comparison in a second. The less she knew about the Rhineland family, the better.