

Cordelia

Rita Black

The day was bitterly cold. No warm air seemed to have ever penetrated through this bleak coldness. Nowhere could a human creature be seen. It was this cold barren country that Cordelia Thorpe had grown to love and cherish. A country so big and so vast that it seemed to swallow one up.

"Breakfast's ready. Coming, Cordie?," asked her lovely, young mother.

"Just a moment, Syd," called Cordelia from her room. Mrs. Thorpe had always preferred that her children call her by her first name. As Cordelia descended the stairs, she almost collided with her brother who had arrived home the evening before to spend mid-year holidays with the family.

"Morning, Cordie," said Gregory.

"Morning yourself, chum," she said, sarcastically.

"My gosh, I just came home from State and you act as if you're bored with me already. What's the matter? Something been biting you lately?"

"No, of course not, Greg," she said, coolly.

"Well, if it isn't that, just what's...."

"Come, children, you mustn't fight already. Both of you have three whole weeks of vacation. Wait until later on when you won't be able to find anything really interesting to do—that is, anything except argue," said their mother, with a grin.

"Okay, Syd, we're coming," said Cordelia.

As Gregory, Cordelia, and Mrs. Thorpe all sat down, not waiting for Mr. Thorpe who was always expected to be late to breakfast on his day off, he walked into the dining room. "Bet you're all surprised I'm up so early," he said. "Since it's so cold and snowy, I thought I might as well get some skiing done." With this he sat down to a hearty breakfast. How, wondered Cordelia, can people be so happy and contented as the family is this morning? Seemingly there was not a care or worry in their minds. One can study another person so well over the breakfast table. And that is what Cordelia was doing. First her mother on the right. She was so very young-looking for being nearly forty-five; short, petite, with a straight nose, black hair, graying at the temples, deep blue eyes, and a lovely clear complexion; her mother was so sweet, so kind, and so vital to her family. But, reflected Cordelia, even she doesn't understand my problem.

To her left sat her father, tall, lean, and young looking, with nice brown eyes, a large nose, a ruddy complexion, and red-

brown hair turning white. My father, thought Cordelia, is so reasonable—yet why doesn't he understand my uneasiness?

Across from Cordelia sat her brother Gregory, a somewhat younger edition of her father...yet somehow different. Somehow she knew he would be able to understand her problem if only she dared tell him everything.

Cordelia was brought out of her trance by her father's voice. "More tea, Cordie, dear?"

"Why no, Father," she said and went on to say, "Oh!—oh! I'm sorry. I guess I was daydreaming, as usual."

They had developed a joke during the past three years that whenever one of the two seemed to be daydreaming, the other would ask about the "tea." This saying had originated from the time Cordelia had been about thirteen, and her father seemed to use it all the time.

"I'm so very tired of that bitter little joke we started," Cordelia said to her father. With a feeble excuse she left the table. "I have to get away from it all or else I'll get as nervous and high strung as I was yesterday," she murmured as she walked onto the glass-enclosed back porch.

"Cordie, what's the matter with you?" It was her brother.

How did he get out here so fast? He was eating breakfast when I left the table. Won't they let me be?

"You startled me, Greg. What do you want? Can't you let me alone?" She was near hysteria.

"I only want to help. Mom and Dad have been worried about you."

"You're no help. Neither are all the others. I know you all mean well. But no one can help, that is, no one except Tim...."

She must not think about him because that would bring only heartbreak. An outburst of tears would follow.

Cordelia went on to say, more calmly now, "When you came back from school, I found that you weren't the old self, understanding and kind as you'd always been. I guess college has made you grow up too quickly. You should have never gone. If you hadn't, you would have been able to help me. I can't seem to be able to pour out my heart to you like old times."

Like old times, she said to herself. Yes, just like old times. Tim, going steady, movies, parties, dances, and slow, quiet understanding talks. It's always like that when you're going steady. If only I had made the break, if only—

Gregory interrupted her thoughts, "Cordelia, I wish you'd tell me a little bit of what is bothering you. Is it a boy or your school work or what?" His voice was pleading.

She knew he wanted to help very much. She must tell him, ...she would. Maybe he had not changed after all. She

began slowly telling him about Tim. How she had met him quite by accident.

"Accidents do happen, don't they?," Tim had asked. He had stood ahead of her in the school lunch line that day when she had spilled her vegetable soup. Quickly he had got his handkerchief to wipe off the stain. She had thanked him for all his fuss and bother, and then he had repeated that funny quip. Somehow Cordelia felt that a true friendship had started. She had been right.

They found they were both signed up for Latin IV, second hour, and Trigonometry II, fifth hour, and, of course, lunch. He asked if he could walk her home. She met his parents, and he met hers. Their friendship developed into something more than that. Five weeks to the day they had met, she had accepted his bid for going steady. "Now and forever more," he had declared.

They went everywhere together. Her grades steadily improved because he had ranked first in the junior class and, of course, he helped her with her homework.

She found that he loved to eat. "The straightest way to a man's heart is through his stomach," Tim had laughingly explained. While he did her homework, she would prepare his favorite foods so they could have a gala feast in the evening around nine-thirty. She found out more and more about him all the time. He never really asked too many questions about her.

Then it happened. Every morning he had come to take her to school, but on one particular day he did not come. She phoned his home and got no answer. But when she got to school she found Tim. He explained to her then that he was awfully sorry, but as things stood she probably would not want to go with him any longer. He said nothing more; he simply walked away.

As Cordelia stood there talking to Gregory, she became more relaxed than she had been for a long while. After keeping her problem to herself, she felt much better for talking it over with someone. She still could not analyze why she had not been able to call upon her parents for help. There was always that doubt in the back of her mind that in such a matter as this, since they were quite a bit older than she, a barrier existed. She needed someone nearer her own age to turn to for help. That someone was, of course, her brother. In a way he reminded her of Tim. She could talk to him and did not have to talk down to him or up to him.

All through her little "speech" Gregory had said nothing. This made her muse on as to what would really annoy him and make him quit going out with a girl. She tried to think back. Had such a thing happened?

Then she began wondering about what would hurt a boy like Tim. Sometimes he seemed unduly sensitive, especially about joining a group of his friends when they were talking in the halls at school. He was not shy among people and got along more than well with them. It had to be something else. At times he seemed reluctant to disagree with others even though he was violently opposed to what they said. His was the complaisant attitude; he went along with someone else's opinions only so he could remain on the good side of them. How about the time when only he had not broken the spring training rules? The other fellows had not been severely reprimanded for it. Surely he would not have been. Instance after instance came to mind where he had worked hard to get credit for something at which another person scarcely worked at all. There had been something drastically wrong. She could sense it.

Of course, that was it. It all went back to the person he was. All at once it became quite clear to her!... Yes, the day before the break-up they had been leaving the Teen Canteen when she had overheard whispering voices. At the time they had not seemed important. Now they seemed so far away she could barely remember what they had been saying. "He's Jewish. You know his...." The rest had been lost in distance. Now she knew why he had colored so brilliantly.

As she finished, her brother said, "I feel that you know what to do now—the best thing for you and for him, too."

All at once Cordelia Thorpe felt relieved. For the first time in weeks she did not feel as if she were living in a black pit from which she would never be able to emerge. Spring had come; for her, at least, winter would never return.

Hurrying from the porch into the house, she picked up the telephone and dialed his number. Hesitatingly she began, "It's Cordelia, Tim."

In almost the same way he said, "Cordie, I hoped you'd call. I see where I've been wrong. I'm sorry! I should have made the first move since I'm the boy. That would have been the right thing to do, but in something such as this, very often what you think is the right thing is usually all wrong. We have to straighten things out. I've been a complete idiot to act the way I have not even letting you explain whether or not you wanted to go with me anymore. Forget what has happened."

"Sure, Tim, sure."

Almost shyly he asked, "Cordelia, can I come over to see you?"

"Oh, yes, Tim. Right away."

He hung up the telephone. But she did not make a move to do so herself. She just hung onto it as if she were on the edge

of a cliff from which she would fall if she were not holding to something.

At last she said in a clear, rich voice, "The rest doesn't matter."

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Earthquake

Kathleen Wilson

I had just remarked how strange the weather seemed. The day was heavy with heat, without a breeze to stir the stagnant air. The sun was out of sight behind a cloudy slate-grey sky which seemed to impart the same dull color to everything below. As I look back on that day now, I am inclined to describe the atmosphere as one of ominous quietude, but I had no forebodings then; I barely took notice except to grumble about my discomfort.

When I first heard the deep, distant rumble, I thought how strange to have a thunder shower in California, but this "thunder" had no lightning to accompany it—it didn't stop. The people about me stood wide-eyed, wondering and listening to the animal-like growl that seemed to come up through the ground on which we stood.

Then we pitched and shook as though the earth were rebelling against its dormancy. I was frightened and I thought of God—how strange it is that fear of tragedy brings one closer to God. So many thoughts tumbled through my mind: Men are such vulnerable beings—so soft and defenseless against the hard, mighty strength of nature. Neither science nor government can build a barricade against this sort of an attack. Surely this must be the most terrible of all natural phenomena. And, as irony would have it, just as I was creating grandiose visions of destruction and terror, the quaking stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

The ensuing quiet was deafening, and I had to resist the impulse to laugh hysterically and shout that this was my first earthquake, how admirably I had survived! And that was it. Night fell, just as though this day were like all others, with no deviation from the normal path of nature's routine.