

Louise, Truman Capote

Louise

I

Ethel opened the door stealthily and looked up and down the dark corridor. It was deserted and she sighed with relief as she closed the door. Well, that was one thing done, and the only thing she had found out was that either Louise didn't keep her mail or she burned it. The rest of them must be down at dinner, she thought; I'll say I had a sick headache.

She crept down the stairs and went quickly across the great lounge, across the terrace, and into the dining room. The room was filled with the sound of girls' laughing and talking. Unobserved, she took her place next to Madame at the fourth table in the quietly pretentious dining salon of Miss Burke's Academy for Young Ladies.

In answer to Madame's questioning eyes, she lied, "I've been suffering from a severe headache—I lay down to rest and I suppose I must have fallen asleep—I did not hear the dinner chimes." She spoke with the smooth perfection of wording and accent that Miss Burke so desired all her students to acquire. Ethel was, in Miss Burke's opinion, the epitome of all that she could ever hope to attain among her students. A young lady of seventeen with background, wealth, and certainly a most brilliant mind. The majority of the Academy girls thought Ethel rather on the stupid side—that is, about life. Ethel, in turn, blamed her unpopularity upon Louise Semon, a French girl of exquisite beauty.

Louise was generally acknowledged to be the Queen Bee of the Academy. The girls worshipped her, and the teachers jealously admired her both for her mind and for her almost uncanny beauty. She was a tall girl, magnificently proportioned, with dark olive skin. Jet black hair framed her face and flowed rich and wavy to her shoulders—under certain lights it cast off a bluish halo. Her eyes, as Madame of table four had once exclaimed in a rapture of admiration, were as black as the night.

She was dearly loved by everyone—everyone except Ethel and possibly Miss Burke herself, who somehow vaguely resented the girl's influence over the entire school. She did not feel that it was good for the school or for the girl herself. The girl had had excellent letters from the Petite Ecole in France and the Mantone Academy in Switzerland. Miss Burke had met neither of the girl's parents, who resided at their chalet in Geneva. All arrangements had been made through a Mr. Nicoll, Louise's American guardian, from whom Miss Burke received her check annually. Louise had come at the opening of the fall semester and had within five months put the Academy into the palm of her hand.

Ethel despised the Semon girl, who, it was rumored, was the daughter of a French Count and a Corsican heiress. She loathed everything about her—her looks, her popularity, the smallest detail of her person and mannerisms. And Ethel did not know exactly why—it was not altogether because she was jealous, though that was a great deal of it; it was not because she thought Louise laughed at her secretly or because she acted as if Ethel never existed—it was something else. Ethel suspected something about Louise that no one else would ever have dreamed of—and she meant to find out if she was right. Louise might not be so wonderful then. Maybe she hadn't found anything in her room this afternoon, not even a letter—nothing. But Ethel smiled across the dining room to the table where

Louise sat gaily laughing and talking, the center of attention—for Ethel had a little interview planned with Miss Burke for that night!

II

The grandfather clock was chiming eight in the reception salon of Miss Burke's quarters where Ethel stood nervously waiting. The lights were dim, and the corners of the room were in darkness—the whole atmosphere was cold and Victorian. Ethel waited at the window—watching the first snowfall of the year, the white mantling of the naked trees and the dusty, silver cloaking of the earth. "I must write a poem about this sometime—'The First Snowfall' by Ethel Pendleton." She smiled wanly and sat down on a dark tapestried chair.

The door at the other end of the room opened and Mildred Barnett emerged from Miss Burke's private sitting room.

"Goodnight, Miss Burke, and thank you ever so much for your help."

Ethel moved away from the shadows and crossed the salon quickly. She paused at the door of Miss Burke's sitting room and took a deep breath; she knew just what she was going to say—after all, Miss Burke should know what she suspected; it was all for the good of the school, nothing else. But Ethel knew she was lying even to herself. She knocked softly and waited until she heard Miss Burke's high voice.

"Come in, please."

Miss Burke was seated in front of her fireplace, drinking a small China demi-tasse of coffee. There was no other light in the room and Ethel thought, as she sat down on the soft cushion at Miss Burke's feet, that it was strangely like a scene of peace and contentment on a holiday card. "How nice of you to drop in on me, Ethel, my dear. Is there something that I may do for you?"

Ethel almost wanted to laugh—it was so funny, so ironic. In fifteen minutes this elderly, composed woman would be quite shaken.

"Miss Burke, something has come to my notice, which, I believe, warrants your immediate attention." She had chosen her language carefully and accented the words precisely in the manner that Miss Burke so heartily felt was correct and genteel. "It is in connection with Louise Semon. You see, a friend of my family's, a physician, called on me recently here at school and—"

Miss Burke put down her demi-tasse and listened to Ethel's story in shocked amazement. Her stately face flushed. Once during the recitation she exclaimed, "But, Ethel, this can not be true—I made all the arrangements through a person of obvious integrity—a Mr. Nicoll—surely he would know we could never allow such a thing—such a dreadful thing!"

"I know it is true," Ethel exclaimed, petulant at this disbelief; "I swear it! Call this Mr. Nicoll tomorrow, ask him—tell him the situation is intolerable and jeopardizing the standing of your school—if I am right. I know that I am. No—do not rely on Mr. Nicoll alone. Surely there are authorities—?"

And Miss Burke nodded. She was becoming more convinced and more shocked every minute. There was only the sound of Ethel's voice and the soft purr of the fire—and the gentle presence of falling snow, whispering at the window pane.

III

There was one pale light burning in the corridor when Ethel reached her room. The signal for lights out had been given a good hour before. She would have to undress in the dark. The instant she entered her room she knew something was wrong. She knew she was not alone.

In a frightened whisper, she said, "Who's here?" In sudden terror she thought, "It's Louise. Somehow she's found out—she knows—and she's come here."

Then, above the beating of her own heart, she heard the soft rustle of silk and a hand clutched her arm tightly.

"It is I—Mildred."

"Mildred Barnett?"

"Yes, I came here to stop what you're doing!"

Ethel attempted to laugh, but it stopped somewhere and she coughed instead. "I haven't the slightest—not even the foggiest notion what you're talking about. Stop what?" But she felt the falseness in her voice and she was frightened.

Mildred shook her. "You know what I mean! You saw Miss Burke tonight—I listened. Perhaps it's not the most honorable thing, but I'm glad I did if I can help Louise out of that lie you told tonight."

Ethel tried to push her accuser's arm away. "Stop it! you're hurting me!" "You did lie—didn't you?" Mildred's voice was hoarse with fury.

"No—no—it was the truth—I swear it. Miss Burke's going to find out if it isn't the truth; then you'll see. You won't think little Miss Semon is so wonderful then!"

Mildred released her grip on Ethel. "Listen, it wouldn't make one particle of difference to me whether it was true or not—you aren't even in a class with that girl." She paused for a moment and chose her words carefully. "Take my advice—go to Miss Burke and tell her you were lying—or I'm not responsible for your health, Ethel Pendleton. You're playing with dynamite!"

With that as a farewell, she opened the door and slammed it with a bang.

Ethel stood shivering in the terrible darkness. It wasn't because of Louise—she didn't care about that—it was the others. Mildred would tell them probably, and that was why she suddenly knew she was going to cry.

IV

Miss Burke lay on the sofa of her sitting room, her head propped up by a huge pink silk pillow. Her hands were pushed tightly against her eyes, trying to drive away the dull ache which gnawed at her fraught nerves.

Miss Burke thought, with a shudder, of what would have happened if Ethel had told the other students instead of her, and they in turn had told their parents. Yes, Ethel should be congratulated.

When Ethel entered the headmistress's private kingdom, the clock in the reception salon was chiming five. The feeble winter sun had disappeared, and the gray January dusk filtered weakly through the heavily draped windows. She could see that Miss Burke was in an emotionally disturbed state.

"Good afternoon, dear." Miss Burke's voice was tired and strained.

"You wished to see me?" Ethel sought to keep herself, in appearance, as innocent as possible.

Miss Burke gestured with annoyance.

"Let us come to the point at once. You were correct. I called Mr. Nicoll and demanded a full report of the girl's parents. Her mother was an American negress, a mulatto to be exact, from the West. She was a sensational dancer in Paris and married a wealthy and titled Frenchman, Alexis Semon. So Louise is, as you suspected, a person of color. Quadroon, I believe, is the technical term. Most unfortunate. But naturally the situation is intolerable, as I explained to Mr. Nicoll. I told him she would receive immediate dismissal. He is calling for her tonight. Naturally, I had an interview with Louise and explained the situation to her as kindly as possible—oh, but why go into that?"

She looked at Ethel as if she were seeking sympathy—but all she saw was a young girl's face, whose thin lips were stretched in a sardonic smile of triumph. Miss Burke knew with sudden realization how she had played into this jealous girl's hands. Abruptly she said, "Will you please leave me."

When Ethel had gone, Miss Burke lay there on the sofa remembering, with horrible clarity, all the things Louise had said in her defense. What difference did it make? She did not look colored. She was as clever and as charming as any of the other girls—better educated than most. She was so happy here; was not America a democracy?

Miss Burke tried to soothe herself with the thought that what she had done had to be done—after all, hers was a fashionable institution. She had been tricked into accepting the girl. But something else kept telling her that she was wrong and that Louise was right!

V

It was nine o'clock and Ethel lay on her bed staring at the ceiling—trying not to think of anything or hear anything. She wanted to fall asleep and forget.

Suddenly there was a soft knock on the door. Then the door opened and Louise Semon was standing there.

Ethel shut her eyes tightly—she hadn't counted on this.

"What do you want?" She talked up to the ceiling and did not turn her head.

The beautiful girl stood by the bed and looked down directly into Ethel's face. Ethel could feel those dark eyes on her and she knew they were swollen from tears.

"I came to ask you why you did this to me. Do you dislike me so?"

"I hate you."

"Why?" Louise was earnest in asking.

"I don't know—please go; leave me alone!"

She could hear Louise opening the door. "Ethel, you are a strange girl. I am afraid I do not understand—" And the door was closed.

A few minutes later Ethel heard a car in the driveway. She went to the window and looked out. A black limousine was turning through the stone gates, out of the school grounds. When she turned around, Ethel was looking into the face of Mildred Barnett.

Mildred said simply, "Well, Ethel, you've won and you've lost, all at the same time. I told you you were playing with dynamite. Yes, Ethel, of a certain type you've given a rather brilliant performance—shall I applaud?"

The End