

## Stupid-Talk

**I** T WAS THE strangest place for anyone to have a wedding, and whoever came up with the idea of having weddings there must have had a very sick mind. This town has to be the only town in the history of the world that has weddings in a cemetery.

Anyway, it was the first day of September, and we all stood there in the rose garden at the very edge of Shady Bluff Memorial Park, sipping punch from tiny cups and stuffing our faces with little cheese hors d'oeuvres, waiting for the wedding to start. Cheryl's mom was getting married.

Cheryl had been nervously chewing the lip of her cup until there was none of it left, and checking to see if her hair was still in place. She had good reason to be nervous, since it *was* her mother's wedding, and she was about to have a new father, but that wasn't the only reason she was nervous.

"I just know they're going to ask me to sing," Cheryl mumbled under her breath.

"Huh?" said Randall, her younger brother.

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"Sing. They're going to ask me to sing."

"Don't be dumb," he said. "People don't sing in cemeteries." (Which was a good point.)

"No, I mean later," said Cheryl, "at the house, during the party. They always ask me to sing."

Randall rolled his eyeballs so far back you could almost hear them turning in his head. "Like when?"

Cheryl thought for a moment, then a smirk spread over her face.

"Like at *your* birthday party!" she said triumphantly. She looked at me, but I knew better than to stick my nose in this one. My nose has been whacked too many times for being where it never should have been in the first place. This was *their* argument.

"Yeah, well guess what?" said Randall, "I got news for you—nobody asked you. You got up there and sang anyway, all on your lonesome."

"That's not true," said Cheryl. "Somebody asked me."

"Who?"

"I don't remember who, that doesn't matter. The point is that I was asked . . . and as I recall, everyone clapped."

"They clapped because I blew out the candles," said Randall.

"Well, that, too . . . but they liked the way I led 'Happy Birthday.' I kept them all in tune."

"You were louder than everyone else, you mean—and

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you didn't have to stand on a chair. That was embarrassing."

"Someone has to lead!" demanded Cheryl. "It's like the national anthem at a ball game. Someone has to lead it, or everyone sings at the wrong time, out of tune, and it sounds lousy!"

It was about this time that I forced my ears closed and tuned the two of them out. True, Cheryl and Randall were my friends, but there's only so much stupid-talk a human brain can listen to—and when Cheryl and Randall got started, they could stupid-talk each other till their mouths wore out. I turned off my brain whenever my parents did it, and I turned off my brain whenever my friends did it.

I was closer friends with Cheryl than I was with Randall. In fact, you could say that Cheryl was my best friend. She had been my best friend all of my life, or as far back as I could remember; back to the days when it was all right for little boys to play with little girls, because we didn't really know the difference, and through the time when everyone would make fun of us because boys were supposed to do boys' things with boys, and girls were supposed to do girls' things with girls. Now, no one much bothered us, because at fourteen everyone has more sense. Besides, people envied us, because everyone was so sure we were a lot more than we really were, if you know what I mean. Other kids always think that kind of thing if you're friends with a girl.

Anyway, neither Cheryl nor Randall knew when to shut

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up, or when to give up, since they were always so convinced that they were right. They argued like lawyers, which is something they both got from their mother, who is a lawyer. This time, however, I knew for a fact that Randall was right. No one had asked Cheryl to sing at that party. The only person that was asked to sing was Cheryl's cousin Rebecca, and luckily, Cheryl was out back when it happened, or else she would have been in an evil mood for the rest of the day. Cheryl hated Rebecca about as much as I hated Austin Pace . . . but I'll leave that for later.

"You just watch," said Cheryl. "Mom will come over to me and ask me to sing when she and Paul have their first dance. I'll bet you."

"You're on," said Randall. "I'd bet you money, but I wouldn't want to make you feel *too* bad."

"Fine. It's settled then," I said, just to shut them up. "The winner gets no money, but will get to hang their victory over the other person's head for the rest of their life, all right?"

"Fine," they both said.

"Good. Now both of you shut up, because it looks like they're going to start."

In a few minutes Randall and Cheryl left to join the bridal party, which would come down the aisle along with the bride. My parents found me and we went to sit in the rows of chairs by the little vine-covered gazebo in which the wedding would take place.

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The air was still warm that day, as if it had forgotten autumn was coming pretty soon—but the trees remembered. You could tell that they were just about ready to start turning colors. It was a nice day for a wedding.

Cheryl came down the aisle with the rest of the bridesmaids. I knew she hated all that makeup and hair spray, but I have to admit, I'd never seen her look so beautiful—even more beautiful than her mother did in her wedding dress. Of course I couldn't tell Cheryl that; she tended to punch people who told her she looked beautiful.

As the ceremony went on, I saw Cheryl's cousin Rebecca on the other side of the aisle. She sat there like a little princess, all four feet of her, pretending to be the cutest thing on earth, like she was taking Shirley Temple lessons or something. Even just sitting, you could sense that air about her. Like she was the one in Cheryl's family that everyone adored, and she knew it. I could see why Cheryl resented her; who wouldn't? All that pretend sweetness all rolled up into one tiny body. What made it even more irksome for Cheryl was that next week Rebecca would make her grand entrance into our junior high, and would, as always, set out to top anything Cheryl had ever done.

Well, the wedding went fine, and so did the first half of the party back in Cheryl's backyard. It was when the band started its second set that things started to change.

It seemed that Cheryl was having such a great time,

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dancing and jabbering at anyone who had an ear, that she forgot all about her little bet with Randall back in the old graveyard rose garden. It could have gone forgotten, and no one, not even Randall, would have cared . . . but something happened.

Cheryl and I were dancing quite a lot, since we both liked to dance, and were tiring ourselves out, when the lead singer ended the song and began talking.

"How we doin' out there?" he asked the guests. A few people mumbled "Good." "Great!" said the lead singer. "Now, we have a very special request. I understand there is a young lady here who is quite a singer . . ."

"I knew it!" said Cheryl, and she cleared her throat half a dozen times.

". . . and we have a very special request from the bride for her to come up here and give us a song . . ." continued the singer.

Cheryl cracked her knuckles, which made me wince, and cleared her throat again. Randall, from across the yard, caught her gaze, amazed that his sister was actually going to win.

". . . so, maybe if we give her a great big hand," continued the singer, "she'll come on up and sing for us!"

Cheryl bit her lip and leaned forward, sure that the eyes of the whole world were looking at her.

The singer put on a big smile. "Let's hear it for . . . Rebecca!"

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Cheryl took one step forward and then it hit her. You could almost hear her jaw drop open. People began to applaud, and Randall began to laugh. Then he turned to Cheryl, scratched his head, and gave her his best monkey impersonation. Cheryl ignored him and turned to me. For a split second she had that look in her eye that you only see in movies about people possessed by the devil, but the look faded. She sighed and said, "Well, that just figures, doesn't it?"

"You should go up there and sing with her," I said.

"Nope," said Cheryl, "I wasn't asked. Darned if I'm gonna make a fool of myself like she's going to."

Rebecca stepped onto the patio, where the band was. She was all of twelve, but looked more like she was nine. Even younger with the cutesy dress she was wearing. Shirley Temple lessons.

The band began to play the requested song, and Rebecca began to pretend she was a rock star. Personally, I thought that Cheryl sang a little bit better, but what do I know?

Needless to say, Cheryl and I didn't dance. We sat down at a table. I could feel all the food and dancing already taking its toll on my stomach. Or maybe it was just the song.

"You know, the second-best never get any credit," said Cheryl. "Not even from their parents."

"You're not second-best," I offered.

"I am. They're right, she does sing better than me." Cheryl played with a fork on somebody else's dessert plate

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that had been left there when the somebody else had gotten up to dance. "You know what really ticks me off," said Cheryl, "is that singing is the thing I do best. I mean, if there was anything else that I could really do well, it wouldn't be so bad, but I can't. All I can really do is sing, you know?"

She tapped the icing-covered fork a few times, and then a smile appeared on her face. "I wish we were back in the cemetery," she said.

"Why?"

"Because if we were, sweet-little-Becky would never make it out of there alive!" And then she laughed that sinister *Mwwaah-ha-haah* laugh reserved for mad scientists.

"Ahh, you wouldn't hurt her and you know it!" I said.

"Yeah, but I can have lots of fun pretending, can't I?" She put down the fork and thought for a moment. "Let's see . . . what could we do? We could . . . uh . . . wire her braces shut so she couldn't sing—only hum!"

"Pretty good," I said, smiling. "How about putting hydrochloric acid in her punch?"

"No, no, no," said Cheryl, getting excited. "We'll get an enormous cork, cover it with Super Glue, and drop it in the barrel on Halloween when it's her turn to bob for apples."

I laughed. "Wait . . . umm . . . We scare her so much that she screams so loud she could never sing again! No mess, no evidence!"

"What genius!" Cheryl laughed. "What genius! How

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about we send her in for a tonsillectomy, but we write on her chart to remove her vocal cords instead!"

"Echhh! You're sick, Cheryl."

"Look who's talking, Jared!"

We both laughed for a while, then looked over at Little Miss Golden Throat, holding the microphone like she was born with it in her hands, and we laughed some more.

"Don't you ever imagine doing nasty things to the people that really tick you off like that?" she asked. That was a question I didn't even have to think about.

"Like every day," I said.

"And I'll bet I know just who it is!"

She giggled. She knew who, all right. It didn't take much thinking to figure out. It was Austin Pace. My very good friend Austin Pace. My buddy. My teammate. My pal. It's kind of a weird feeling to hate a friend. You don't know whether to go and have fun together, or to punch him out. Not that I would ever punch Austin out. It's just that sometimes you like to think about it, that's all. Kind of like throwing darts at someone's picture.

The song ended and everyone applauded. Then the lead singer got on the microphone again and said, "Let's hear it for Rebecca!" The applause got louder. Cheryl grimaced.

"You wanna hear another one?" asked the lead singer. Cheryl looked at me with that please-God-no expression on her face, but the applause got louder. Rebecca mumbled

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something to the band, they nodded and started up again—another big dance number. Rebecca began to bounce around again, and strut across the stage, all proud, sticking her chest out (which was wishful thinking on her part, if you know what I mean). Then Cheryl and I watched some old relative toss flowers at Rebecca from the floral centerpieces on the tables, and she put one behind her ear.

"I think I'm going to be sick," said Cheryl as we watched a scene that was beginning to resemble a freak show.