

Susan Marcus

Bends the Rules



JANE CUTLER



Holiday House / New York

Text copyright © 2014 by Jane Cutler

All Rights Reserved

HOLIDAY HOUSE is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Printed and Bound in December 2013 at Maple Vail, York, PA, USA.

www.holidayhouse.com

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cutler, Jane.

Susan Marcus bends the rules / by Jane Cutler. — First edition.

pages cm

Summary: "As a New York-to-Missouri transplant in 1943, ten-year-old Susan Marcus discovers a world of prejudice right in her own backyard and makes a small but courageous

stand toward equality" — Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-8234-3047-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

[1. Friendship—Fiction. 2. Prejudices—Fiction. 3. Toleration—Fiction.

4. Family life—Missouri—Fiction. 5. African Americans—Fiction.

6. Moving, Household—Fiction.

7. Missouri—History—20th century—Fiction.]

I. Title.

PZ7.C985Su 2014

[Fic]—dc23

2013023665

For my grandson, Leo

CHAPTER



I was hanging as far as I could out of the third-floor window of my grandmother's Manhattan apartment and craning my neck to look west. I could see slices of the Hudson River through some trees, but across the river, the cliffs of New Jersey blocked my view of the rest of the country.

And I was yelling at Judy Wasserman who lives up on five through my empty soup can, connected by string to hers—homemade phones. I couldn't tell if they worked or not, because we were both yelling so loud we could hear each other just fine without any help.

“All I can see is New Jersey,” I hollered.

“I told you,” she hollered back.

Just then, my cousin Barbara tugged at the back of my skirt. “You're going to fall out and kill yourself,” she said. “And don't yell out the window. It's not nice.”

“I gotta go,” I yelled, letting go of my phone so Judy could pull it up.

“Okay, bye,” Judy yelled, letting go of her phone so I could pull it in.

The tin cans rattled down the front of the building and clattered onto the sidewalk. I ducked in fast in case anyone down below wondered who was throwing junk out of the window.

“Your dad is telling Grandma right now,” Barbara whispered nervously, once I was inside. “They’re in the kitchen.”

I started for the bedroom door, and she grabbed my arm. “Nobody’s in there but the two of them,” she warned.

“Barbara,” I said, “quit grabbing me.”

Barbara let go. She’s twelve, two years older than I am, but she’s afraid of me. I don’t know why. Anyway, she let go, and we tiptoed through the living room where two great-aunts and two great-uncles were dozing (we’d had our usual Sunday potluck lunch), and then through the dining room, where the bunched-up napkins were still scattered around on Grandma’s big, claw-footed table. We got to the kitchen door just in time to see Grandma sink to the linoleum, murmuring, “Cowboys! Wild Indians!”

Daddy folded a dishtowel and tucked it under Grandma’s head. Then he sat down cross-legged next to her on the floor.

“It’s the dratted war, Mother,” he explained. Grandma was my mother’s mom, not his, but he always respectfully called her Mother.

Grandma opened a teary eye and gave him one of her looks. Daddy continued, “My boss, Mr. Pollock, has a bad heart, and he’s been ready to retire for a long time. But he kept his dress-making factory open so his son, Dan, would have something to come back to after the war.”

Grandma’s eyes both were closed now, but she gave a tiny nod. “The thing is, Mother,” Daddy said quietly, “Dan was killed in action a couple of weeks ago.” He paused and cleared his throat. “So you see, now Mr. Pollock has no reason not to retire. Now he has a bad heart and a broken heart. He’s closing his business. And I am out of a job.”

My father had not been out of a job through the whole of

the Great Depression. He had not been out of a job since he quit school in the eighth grade and went to work to help his mom take care of his younger brother and sister. How could such a scary thing happen to him now, in 1943, when The Depression seemed so far away and the country was in the middle of a war?

“But I’ve been lucky,” Daddy was saying. “I’ve found another good job. There’s room for advancement, too, Mother. It’s not just a job, it’s an opportunity. Except it’s in Missouri.”

“In Missouri.” Grandma groaned again.

“In Missouri,” Daddy confirmed.

“Cowboys,” she stubbornly repeated. “Wild Indians.”

“Nothing of the sort,” Daddy assured her.

“Poor Grandma,” sniveled Barbara.

“Barbara,” I turned to face her, “don’t you know it’s wrong to eavesdrop? You better scoot before Grandma finds out you’ve been listening to every word they’ve said!”

“Oh!” she squeaked, her hand covering her mouth and her eyes opening wide before she fled.

“Now, Mother,” my exasperated father was saying, “remember what President Roosevelt said: ‘The only thing we have to fear is fear itself . . .’”

Daddy admired our President and quoted him whenever he could. “I can’t speak the way he does,” Daddy had told me. “But the President and I think exactly alike.”

CHAPTER

2

The next day, back home in the Bronx, I had to face a different problem with Missouri.

I was inside all morning, helping Mom sort through our stuff, when I got a message from Marv, my best friend, telling me to meet him later that afternoon.

Marv and I had different places around the neighborhood where we met. Secret places. Not that we needed them. We could just have met on the steps out in front of our apartment buildings and talked all we wanted. But we both liked secrets.

“In the alley,” his message said, and when.

Of course, Marv and I didn’t go into the real alleys, which were full of garbage cans and sometimes older kids. Our alley was a narrow passageway between two buildings with a fancy iron gate at the street end and at the other end, a big sink with a curly-headed baby that could spout water out of its mouth. Marv’s little sister Rose would stand guard on the sidewalk outside the gate while he and I whispered together down by the fountain, which wasn’t ever running.

We could always see Rose from where we were, dancing around and smiling. Anybody who walked by would know she wasn’t just standing there for no reason. She was a dead give-

away as a lookout. Still, she was part of the team. Lookout was her job. And she did it her way. That was one of the things I liked best about Marv. He didn't try to change anyone. If he gave you something to do, he let you figure out how to do it your own way. He might be able to do it better. He could do almost everything better. But he always let you do it your way if he wasn't going to do it himself.

That afternoon, my progress up the crowded avenue toward the meeting place was interrupted time after time. Friendly voices, some filled with emotion, telling me goodbye. These were people I'd known all my life—shopkeepers who had pinched my cheeks when I rode in my baby carriage. They truly hated to see me leave.

“And in the middle of a war,” said Mrs. Alexander from the doorway of her bakery, “when so many are going.” She sighed as she squished my face between her floury hands and kissed my forehead. “I wish you only good luck,” she said.

I hugged her aproned middle and then rushed on, past the kosher butcher, the candy store with its bins of penny candy, the bagel store with fresh bagels on sticks, the fruit and vegetable market with its colorful wares displayed in crates piled on the sidewalk, the fishmongers, the deli, and the hole-in-the-wall Chinese restaurant where Mom and I and Marv and his mom and Rose would sometimes go for lunch, it was that cheap! I passed the tiny Hebrew School where Marv had begun studying for his bar mitzvah, which now I was going to miss.

Finally, I turned the corner and, down at the end of the block, there was Rose dancing with excitement at the entrance to the alley where Marv would be waiting. She opened the gate for me, then closed it with a clang.

Marv and I tucked ourselves away at the very back. “You’re not going to have to worry about cowboys and Indians, Susan,” Marv said, when I told him about my grandmother. “You’re going to have to worry about Cardinals, and I don’t mean birds!”

“I know,” I said grimly. “I thought about that.”

The St. Louis Cardinals had beaten our beloved Yankees in the last World Series, four games to one. And now I was moving into the heart of Cardinal country. Me, a diehard Yankee fan.

“The Cards and the Yanks both have great teams again this year,” Marv said. “A lot of people are saying there’s going to be a rematch for the series. What will you do, living out there?”

“Well, I can tell you right now, I won’t be rooting for the Cardinals!” I declared. “I will always be a Yankees fan.”

“Even when you’re living in St. Louis?”

“Even when!”

“If there’s another World Series between those two teams, you’re going to be in a tough spot,” Marv said.

“I will be,” I agreed.

Marv looked down at his scuffed brown shoes and then at me. “It won’t be the same here without you, Susan,” he said.

“But no matter where I am, we’ll still be best friends, won’t we, Marv?” I asked.

Just then, Rose started dancing up and down like she had to go to the bathroom. “Hurry, hurry!” she called in an urgent voice. “I can see Daddy coming!” Their dad worked for the Post Office, and he got home early.

“Best friends forever,” Marv whispered.

He stuck out his hand, and we shook on it.

“Forever,” I whispered back.

Then we slipped out through the pretty gate, and Marv took the time to close it behind us.

According to plan, he and Rose went to the right, and I went to the left, even though we were all going to end up within half a block of one another when we got home.