



"She came in there and solved all their problems..."

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2.

She ^{came} got in there and solved all their problems: mice, embarrassing dreams, ^{he pair?} locked drains, outrageous ancestry and the simplest and cheapest way to clean diamonds. She was never able, however, to mend the silence and the two women who had not spoken more than the purely ^{as though their} perfunctory and absolutely necessary in twenty years continued their mute argument ^{lungs depended on it.} during all the time she was living there.

The day she came was novel for that part of the state--cold and scratchy. Chafing winds depressed the temperature and the sun was helpless to move thermostats more than a few degrees above freezing. The houses on Post Road were recently built so, pretty as they were, trees and shrubbery ^{and unaccustomed} were too young ^{such} to halt the wind's icy lick. Dogwood and ^{could protect} birch ^{nothing from its} arched to breaking as she marched along sidewalks still rough from the trowel. She should have bent her head and closed her eyes to slits in that weather, but being a stranger ^{in that part of town} in that part of town, she stared wide-eyed at each house searching for the address that matched the one in the advertisement. 1 Old Post Road. No house on the street had a single digit number. Finally, her knees and thighs stinging from the cold that her mini skirt exposed them to, she turned into a driveway where an elderly man ^{from} ripped the seam of a sack of Ice-off.

"You sure?" he asked when she told him the address.

She glanced at the square of paper and nodded.

He scanned her legs then looked carefully at her face. "That's the Cosey place. But it ain't been number one for a long time now. But you can't tell them that; can't tell them nothing. It's 1410 or 1401, probably."

Now it was her turn to question his certainty.

"Trust me, he said. "Go on up that a way. You won't miss it. Big as a church."

She thanked him but did not turn around when he hollered at her back, "Or a jail house."

She did not miss it and he was not wrong. The white house was gracefully imposing, and its peaked third story roof did suggest a chapel. On either side of the walkway old trees

confronted the blasting wind with the careless dignity that came with a century of triumph.

Seeing no bell, she started to knock; then, noticed a brightly lit window below, to the right of the porch. It had ^{the} to look of what was called by some a garden apartment—by others a basement one. She went back down the wooden steps, followed a narrow path and descended a flight of iron stairs leading past the window to the door. Pausing at the ^{pane} window she saw a stout woman seated at the table. Before her were a colander, newspapers and a mixing bowl. She ^{The girl} tapped on the window and smiled when the woman looked up. [tk dis.]

“What is it?” The door opened just wide enough to expose one brown eye.

“I came about the job,” said the girl. A marine odor eased through the crack.

“Then you’re lost,” said the woman and slammed the door.

The girl banged on it, shouting, “It says ^{here} 1 Post Road!. 1 Post Road!”

There was no answer so she went back to the window and pecked the glass with the nails of her left hand while pressing the tiny ^{piece of newspaper} advertisement square flat against it.

The woman came to the window, her eyes flat with annoyance as she stared at the girl’s face. Slowly she moved her eyes from the young face and its pleading smile to the piece of paper. She squinted at it, ^{then away} and looked again at the face but not before something like panic glinted then died in her eyes. Motioning toward the door she disappeared from the window.

When the girl ^{was} inside, the woman offered ^{ed} neither a seat nor a greeting. She ^{took} the advertisement ^a and read. A pencil circle separates the few lines of one help wanted notice from others. ^{above and below}

Companion, secretary sought by elderly woman. Light but highly confidential work. [Apply to Mrs. H. Cosey. 1 Post Road.]

“When did you see this?”

“Yesterday.”

“In the tk Harbor Journal?”

“Yes, Mam.”

She handed back the advertisement. “Well. I guess you better sit down.”

“Are you Mrs. H. Cosey?”

She gave the girl a look. “If I was I’d know about that little scrap of paper wouldn’t I?”

"Oh. Of course, I. Sorry."

The both sat and the woman returned to the ^{work} task of de-veining shrimp. ^(over) *

"What's your name?"

"Toby, Mam."

"Toby what?"

"Skye. Toby Skye."

"You from around here?"

"Used to be. I've been away."

"Who're your people? I never heard of any family name of Skye."

"They're not from here."

"Where, then?"

"Can I help you with that? I'm a pretty fair cook."

"No. Needs a certain rhythm."

"Is Mrs. Cosey here?"

"Where else?"

"May I speak to her?"

"Let me see that thing again." She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and reached across the table. "'Highly confidential,' huh?" Silent laughter roiled in her chest and curled her lips. "I believe that. I sure do." She dropped the paper with thumb and forefinger as though she were depositing a used diaper into a soak pail. She wiped her hands again and picked up a shrimp. ^{Under} The tender rose and white arc she held in her fingers ^{crept} showed a black line. Deft as a jeweler she removed it.

"Can I see Mrs. Cosey now?"

"Sure. Sure. Up those stairs, then some more stairs. Bedroom at the end of the hall."

Toby stood up and turned toward a flight of stairs in an alcove near the stove.

"Miss Skye? Miss Toby lying Skye? You not interested in my name?"

Toby turned back, her face a study in embarrassment and ^{muddle} self-criticism. "Oh, yes, mam. I am. I'm just so nervous."

"Christina. If you get the job you'll need to know it."

"I hope so. Nice meeting you, Christina. Really." *

* Twelve rings snatched light from the ceiling fixture; two on three fingers of each hand - a collection that seemed to elevate the task from drudge drudgery to surgery.

Second floor you said?"

Her boots were loud on the stairs and Christina grimaced. Gathering the shrimp shells she plopped them into a pot of heating water and adjusted the flame. Returning to the table she picked up a garlic paw and, enjoying as usual the dazzle of her hands, peeled away the tissue from two of the cloves. These she diced and left on the cutting board. The old Philco refrigerator hummed and shook a little. Christina gave it an encouraging pat on her way to a wall of cupboards. She bent to a bottom cabinet thinking, what's she up to now? Must be scared or fixing to make a move. What, though? And how did she manage to get a notice in the paper without stepping out the door? Christina glanced at the rice steamer. Its warming light was on. She took out a silver tureen with a fitted glass bowl, sighing at the stubborn tarnish in the crevices of the ~~initial~~ C on its cover. Like every carved letter in the house the C went beyond ornate to illegible. Except for the one on the spoon in her apron pocket, its handle so worn ~~down~~ the initial was trace. It was tiny, a child's first spoon, but Christina ate every meal with it to hold the child it was given to close, to hold also the pictures it ~~kept~~ shimmering. How she ^{had} scooped peach slices ^{reminded her of} with it from home made ice cream, admiring its shape, the slide between her lips, never minding the grains of sand blowing over the dessert—the whole picnic for that matter. Soaping and rinsing the bowl Christina let her thoughts skitter from beach picnics to Silver Dip and Q-tips to the interview being held in the bedroom of the vilest woman in the world. While sitting across from the lying Miss Skye, Christina had set her own body of thirty years ago next to the girl's and ^{won,} ~~was triumphant~~. Toby had okay legs (well, knees and thighs were all she could see in those tall boots) and the white woman's flat behind that was all the rage these days. ^{But} Nothing to rival her own self in the fifties when the beach was the color of cooked shrimp but glittery and the sucking waves reached out from water so blue you had to turn away lest it hurt your eyes. Nothing to rival that self, the one that walked inside. It was the face that rang bells of envy. That and the Amazon hair. At first Christina had stared at her, then, a bit rattled, concentrated on the newspaper clipping. The shrimp work gave her ample reason to sustain a lowered gaze because she did not like the heart jump that came when she looked in ^{to lying} Toby's eyes. Clear, they were, and full of-what? What was that? Yearning? Trust? Something frail under those double lashes. Like the unnerving look of a beautiful, under fed child.

Christina stirred the garlic into butter softening in a skillet. After a moment she added the shrimp then set about making the roux. She drained a little stock to loosen the paste, whisking it to creamy perfection. "I'm a pretty fair cook," is what that Toby had said, while reaching with unwashed hands for the bowl of cleaned shrimp. And "Used to be" from around here she said when Christina knew every black ever born from Niggerhead Rock to Sackers Point, from tk to tk and half of the ones in tk City as well since that was where she had spent (or wasted) twenty years of her life. Skye. Toby Skye. She could have gotten that name from True Confessions except she was too young to have even heard of it. So what was the heartskip for? She ^{had} felt she would blush any moment and sharpened her voice to a razor to stop it. What did Heed want her for? How had she got to the newspaper without a telephone? Whatever was going on was a trap laid by a ^{she} devil. Some new mess. Some new way to get rid of her. Hurt her. Take away her future just as she had taken away her past.

"I'll be damned," she murmured. "I be good and damned before I let her win again."

Spreading and turning her fingers, loving loving her diamonds Christina assembled the rice, the shrimp, the sauce, ^{layering} ~~arranging~~ each meticulously, ^{artfully} ~~beautifully~~ in the tureen.. It would remain warm while she tossed a light salad and then, in a little while, arrange it all on a silver tray, take it up two flights of stairs where it would be eaten by the meanest thing on the coast.