



## Chapter 2

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Morrison, Toni. 1931-

Chapter 2

1 folder (partial)

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Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:07:28 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/4b29bb580>

## CHAPTER TWO

Vida set up the ironing board. Why the hospital had cut out the laundry service for everybody except "critical staff"-- doctors, nurses, lab technicians-- she couldn't fathom. Now the janitors, food handlers as well as the aides like herself, had to wash and press their own uniforms, reminding her of the Cannery before Bill Cosey hired her away for the first work she ever had that required hosiery. She wore hose at the hospital, of course, but it was thick, white. Not the lovely, sheer ones required behind the receptionist's desk at Cosey's Hotel. Plus a really good dress, good enough for church. It was Bill Cosey who paid for two more, so she would have a change and the guests wouldn't confuse the wearing of one dress as

a uniform. Vida thought he would deduct the cost from her pay, but he never did. His pleasure was in pleasing. "The best good time," he used to say. That was the Resort's motto and what he promised every guest: "The best good time you ever had." And it was no accident that famous people kept coming back. Even when little disturbances in the service or the atmosphere appeared, it didn't dissuade them from extending their stay or returning the next year. All because of the beaming Bill Cosey and the wide hospitality his place was known for. His laugh, his embracing arm, his instinctive knowledge of his guest's needs smoothed over every crack or stumble. From an overheard argument among staff or a silly, overbearing wife-ignorant as a plate-to petty theft and a broken ceiling fan. Bill Cosey's charm and L's food won out. When the lamps ringed the dance floor were glowing and turning in ocean air; when the band warmed up and the women, dressed in moire' and crepe and trailing jasmine scent in their wake; when the men with beautiful shoes and perfect creases in their



gabardine trousers held chairs for the women so they could sit knee to knee at the little tables, then a missing salt cellar or harsh words exchanged much too near the public didn't matter. Partners swayed under the stars and didn't mind over-long intermissions because ocean sound kept them <sup>happier</sup> ~~jollier~~ and kinder than their cocktails. Later in the evening, when those who were not playing whist, or telling <sup>big lies</sup> ~~stories~~ in the bar; when couples sneaked off in the dark, the remaining dancers would do steps with outrageous names:

<sup>1962?</sup> [boogie woogie, black bottom, jitterbug, sand, Lindy hop.] Names musicians made up to control, humiliate and excite their audiences all at the same time.

Vida believed she was a practical woman with as much sense as heart, more wary than dreamy. Yet she pursued ~~with pleasure~~ <sup>sweet</sup> the memory of those nine years, beginning right after the birth of her only child, Dolly, in 1962. Then Bill died and the <sup>Cosey</sup> girls fought over his coffin. Once again L restored order, just as she always had. Two words ("I'll tell.")

hissed into their faces stopped them cold: Christine closed the switchblade;

Heed picked up her ridiculous hat and moved to the other side of the grave.

Standing there, one to the right, one to the left of Bill Cosey's casket, their faces, as different as honey from soot, looked identical. Evil does that.

Burns off everything but itself, so whatever your grievance is, your face looks just like your enemy's. After that nobody could doubt the best good times were over. If Heed had any notion of keeping the place going the way it used to be, she was quickly disabused of it when L quit that very day. She lifted a lily from the funeral spray and never set foot in the hotel again—not even to pack, collect her chef's hat or her white oxfords. In Sunday shoes with two inch heels she walked from the graveyard all the way to Up Beach, claimed her mother's shack and moved in. Heed did what she had to and what she could to keep it up, but a sixteen year old disc jockey working a tape machine appealed only to locals. No one with real money would travel distance to hear it, would book a room to listen to music they had at



home; would seek on open air dance floor crowded with teenagers doing dances they never heard of and couldn't manage anyway. Especially if the meals, the service, the bed linen were no longer what they had been

Vida slid the iron's nose around the buttons, frustrated once more by the slot in the metal that some male idiot thought would actually work. The same fool who believed a three ounce iron was better than a heavy one.

Lighter, yes, but it didn't iron anything that needed it. Just things you could un-wrinkle with your own warm hands: T shirts, towels, cheap pillow cases.

But not a good cotton uniform with twelve buttons, two cuffs, four pockets and a collar that was not a lazy extension of the lapels. This was what she had come to? Vida knew she was lucky to have the hospital job. Slight as

it was her pay check had helped fill her house with the sounds of gently

helpful bells: time up in the microwave oven, the washing cycle, the spin

dryer; watch out there's smoke somewhere, the phone's off the hook. Lights

~~glowed~~ <sup>glowed</sup> when coffee brewed, toasts ~~toasted~~ <sup>toasted</sup> and the iron was hot. But the

good fortune of her current job did not prevent her from preferring the long ago one that paid less in every way but satisfaction. Cosey's Resort was more than a playground; it was a school and a haven where people debated death in the cities, murder in Mississippi and what they planned to do about it, other than grieve and stare at their children. Then the music started, convincing them they could manage it all and last.

She hung on, Heed did. <sup>\*</sup> ~~For the five~~ years before Cosey actually died, <sup>(over)</sup> ~~she~~ paraded around like an ignorant version of Jackie Kennedy—refusing advice, firing the loyal, hiring the trifling and fighting May who was the one who really threatened her air supply. She couldn't fire her step-daughter while Cosey was alive, even if he spent most days fishing and most nights singing ~~Nat Cole tunes~~ with tipsy friends. For it came to that: a commanding, beautiful man surrendering to feuding women, letting them ruin all he had built. How could they do that, she wondered. If they didn't love him, they had to love the place, what it had been. How could they let

\* Give her that credit but none other to a woman who gave torn towels and sheets to a burned-out family instead of money.



while he aged and lost interest in everything  
but Nat Cole and Wild Turkey, Heed



gangster types, day workers, cannery scabs and payday migrants in there dragging police attention along with them like a tail? Vida wanted to blame the new clientele for May's kleptomania—Lord knows what those day workers took home—but May had been stealing long before Vida got there. In fact, her second day at work, standing behind the desk, was marked by May's habit. A family of four from Ohio was checking in. Vida opened the registration book for their signature. The date, last name and room number were neatly printed on the left. A space on the right for the guest to sign. Vida reached toward the marble pen stand but found no pen there or anywhere near. Flustered, she rummaged in a drawer. Heed arrived just as she was about to hand the father a pencil.

"What's that? You giving him a pencil?"

"The pen is missing, Mam."

"It can't be. Look again."

"I have. It's not here."

"Did you look in your purse?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your coat pocket, maybe?" Heed glanced at the quests and produced a resigned smile as if they all understood the burdens of inadequate help. Vida was seventeen years old and a new mother . The position Mr. Cosey had given her was a high and, she hoped, permanent leap out of the fish trough where she used to work and her husband still did. Her mouth went dry and her fingers shook as Heed confronted her. Tears were marshaling to humiliate her further when rescue arrived wearing a puffy white chef's hat. She held the fountain pen in her hand; stuck it in the holder and, turning to Heed, said, "May. As you well know."

That's when Vida knew she had more to learn than registering guests and handling money. As in any workplace there were old alliances here; shifting negotiations, poisonous battles, wan victories. Mr. Cosey was royal; L, the woman in the chef's hat, priestly. All the rest: Heed, Vida, May,



waiters, cleaners were court personnel fighting for the monarch's smile.

She had surprised herself at the supper table bringing up that old gossip about Cosey's death. Hating gossip bred of envy, she wanted to believe what the doctor said: heart attack. Or what L said: heart chill. Or even what May said: broken-hearted by Civil Rights. But not what Sandler said: syphilis rampant. But Vida had seen the water cloud before he drank it and his reach not to his chest where the heart exploded, but to his throat. Yet those who might have wanted him dead—Christine, a husband or two and various white businessmen—were nowhere near. Just her, L and one waiter. Lord, what a mess. A dying body moves, thrashes against that sleep. Then there was Heed screaming like a maniac. May running off to the Post Road house and locking herself in a closet. Had it not been for L, the county's role model would never have gotten the dignified funeral he deserved. Even when Christine and Heed almost trashed it at the end, L stepped between those rigid vipers forcing them to bite back their tongues.

Which, by all reports, they had continued to do, while waiting for the other one to die. So the girl Sandler directed to their house must be related to Heed. She was the only one with living family. Of her five brothers and three sisters there could be fifty nieces. Or maybe she wasn't a relative at all. Vida decided to ask Romen to find out, discreetly, if he could; otherwise directly, although there was little hope of a complete answer from him. The boy was so inattentive, these days, so moody. Time for a furlough from one of his parents before he got into trouble neither she nor Sandler could handle. His hands hadn't gotten that way from yard work. He beat somebody. Bad.

Beneath the house under the light of a single bulb, Sandler chuckled. Vida was on her game. He had been struck by the girl's legs. In freezing wind, not a goose bump in view—just tight, smooth skin with the promise of strong muscle underneath. Dancers' legs: long, unhappy at rest, eager to lift, to



spread, to wrap themselves around you. He should be ashamed, he thought, as the chuckle grew into smothered laughter: an over fifty grandfather faithful to and in love with his wife giggling into a boiler dial in the cellar, happy to be arousable by the unexpected sight of young thighs. He knew his gruffness with her was a reaction to the feelings she stirred and believed she knew it too.

Sandler peered at the dial wondering if an 80\* setting would be likely to produce 70 degrees in his bedroom, since the current 70\* setting was equaling 60\* there. He sighed over the problem: a furnace seldom needed in that climate seemed as confused about its workings as he was. And sighed again as he recalled the freezing girl who must be a northerner indifferent to 30\*. He could not imagine what she wanted with either one of those Cosey women. He would ask Romen to check it out. Or maybe not. Asking his grandson to spy would introduce the wrong element in a relationship already burdened with mutual distrust. He wanted Romen

upright—not sneaking around women on some frivolous errand. It would undermine his moral position. Still, if the boy happened to report something, he would be as pleased to hear it as anybody. The Coseys had always been a hot topic. In these parts—Oceanside, Sooker Bay, Up Beach, Silk—their goings on drove conversation for fifty years. Naturally so, since the Resort affected them all. Provided them with work other than fish and pack crab; attracted outsiders who offered years of excitement and agitated talk. Otherwise they never saw anybody but themselves. The withdrawal of that class of tourist was hard on everyone, like a receding wave that left shells and kelp script, scattered and unreadable, behind.

There were cold spots in the Oceanside house, places the heat seemed never to enter. Hot spots too. And all of his tinkering with thermostats and base heating and filters was just that--tinkering. Like his neighbors', his house was built as a gesture: two inch nails instead of four, light weight roofing guaranteed for ten years instead of thirty, single



thickness panes rattling in their molding. Each year Sandler became fonder of the neighborhood he and Vida moved away from. She had been right, certainly, to leave Up Beach when they did, before the drought that ended in flood, and she never gave it another thought. As he did almost every day. Just as now, on a very cold night, longing for the crackle of fire in a stingy pot belly stove, the smell of clean driftwood burning. He couldn't forget the picture the moon turned those Up Beach cabins into. Here, in this government improved and approved housing with too much man made light, the moon did nothing kind. The planners believed that dark people would do fewer dark things if there were twice as many street lamps as anywhere else. Only in fine neighborhoods and the country were people entrusted to shadow. So even when the moon was full and blazing, for Sandler it was like a bounty hunter's far off torch, not the blanket of beaten gold it once spread over him and the ramshackle house of his childhood, exposing the trick of the world which is to make us think it is ours. He

wanted his own moon again releasing a wide gold finger to travel the waves and point directly at him, no matter where he stood on the beach it knew exactly. As direct and personal as a mother's touch, the gold finger found him, knew him. And although he understood that it came from a cold stone incapable of even indifference, he also knew it was pointing to him alone and nobody else. Like the wind-blown girl who singled him out, breaking out of evening wind to stand between garage light and sunset, backlit, spotlighted and looking only at him.

Bill Cosey would have done more. Invited her in to warm herself, offered to drive her where she wanted to go, instead of barking at her, doubting her accuracy. Cosey would have succeeded, too, as he almost always did. Vida, like so many others, had looked on him with adoring eyes, spoke of him with forgiving smiles. Proud of his finesse, his money, the example he set that goaded them into thinking that with patience and savvy, they could do it too. But Sandler had fished with him and while he



did not claim to know his heart, mind or wallet, he knew his habits.

They were lee, bobbing in a cove . Not on the deep sea as he had expected.

Sandler had been surprised by the invitation since Cosey usually shared his boat only with special guests, or, most often, the Sheriff, Buddy Silk—one member of a family that had named a whole town after itself.

Cosey had approached him in the road where Sandler was parked waiting for Vida. He aligned his pale blue Impala with Sandler's pick up and said, "You busy tomorrow, Sandler?"

"No, sir."

"Not working?"

"No, sir. Cannery's closed on Sunday."

"Oh, right."

"You need me for something?"

Cosey pursed his lips as though second guessing his invitation, then

turned his face away.

Sandler contemplated his profile which looked like the one on a nickel minus the hair do and feathers. Still handsome Cosey was seventy-four years old then; Sandler twenty-two. Cosey had been married over twenty years; Sandler less than three. Cosey had money; Sandler earned one dollar and seventy cents an hour. He wondered if any two men had less to talk about.

Having come to a decision, Cosey faced Sandler.

"I aim to fish a little. First light. Thought you might like to join me."

Working fish all day Sandler did not connect catching them with fun. He'd rather shoot than fish, but there was no way to decline. Vida wouldn't like it, besides he had heard that Cosey's boat was smart.

"You don't need to bring anything. I have it all."

You can say that again, thought Sandler.

They met at the pier at four a.m. and pushed off immediately, in



silence. No weather chat or wagers about the haul. Cosey seemed less hearty than the evening before. Sandler put the change down to the seriousness of handling the little cruiser, tacking into the ocean then landward to a cove Sandler knew nothing about. Or else it was the oddity of being alone together. Cosey didn't mix with local people, which is to say he employed them, joked with them, even rescued them from difficult situations. But none was welcome at the hotel's tables or on its dance floor. Price kept most of them away, but even when a family collected enough money to celebrate a wedding there, they were refused. Pleasantly. Regretfully. Definitely. There was some spotty rancor over the obvious rejection, but most didn't mind, thought it reasonable. They had neither the clothes nor the funds, and did not wish to be embarrassed by those who did. In those days it was enough to watch the visitors, admire their cars and the quality of their luggage; to listen to the distant music and dance to it in the dark, the deep dark, between their own houses, in shadow underneath

their own windowsills. It was enough to know Bill Cosey's Hotel and Resort was there. Otherwise how to explain the comfort available nowhere else in the county or the state, for that matter. Cannery workers and fishing families prized it. House maids traveling to Silk, laundresses, fruit pickers as well as teachers in broken-down schools; even visiting ministers who did not hold with liquor-fueled gatherings or dance music—all felt a tick of entitlement, of longing turned to belonging in the vicinity of a fabulous, successful Resort controlled by one of their own.

"Bonita come back in here," said Cosey. "Way station for them, I guess." He brightened and pulled out a thermos of coffee that, Sandler discovered, was so laced the coffee was more color than flavor. It did the trick. They were soon deep in the merits of Cassius Clay an argument that quelled and underscored one about Medgar Evers.

The catch was poor, the banter jovial until sunrise when the alcohol leveled and the talk turned gloomy. Cosey, looking at some lively worms in



the belly of a catfish said, "If you kill the predators, the weak will eat you alive."

"Everything has its place," Sandler replied.

"True. Everything. Except women. They're all over the damn place."

Sandler laughed.

"In the bed," continued Cosey, "the kitchen, the yard, at your table, under your feet, on your back."

"That can't be all bad," offered Sandler.

"No. No. It's great. Great."

"Then why ain't you smiling?"

Bill Cosey turned to look at Sandler. His eyes, though bright from drink, radiated pain like cracked glass. "What do they say about me?" he asked, sipping from the thermos.

"They?"

"You all. You know. Behind my back."

"You a highly respected man, Mr. Cosey."

Cosey sighed as though the answer disappointed him. "Damned if I do, damned if I don't," he said. "You know when my son died I felt a whoosh, know what I mean? A whoosh. Something gone, just gone. Problem was, I didn't know much about him. Still don't. And now I'm thinking I don't understand anybody. So why should anybody understand me?"

"Hard to know people. All you can go by is what they do," said Sandler wondering, is he trying to say he's lonesome, misunderstood? This man with more friends than honey had bees worrying about his reputation? With women fighting to love him up moaning about the burden? Sandler decided the whiskey had shifted Cosey to the crying phase. It had to be that, otherwise he was in the company of a fool. He could swallow hot rocks easier than he could the complaints of a rich man. Vaguely insulted, Sandler turned his attention to the bait box. If he waited long enough,



Cosey would skip to another subject. Which he did, after singing a few refrains of a Platters song.

"Do you know that every law in this country is made to keep us back?"

Sandler looked up thinking, where did that come from? He laughed.

"That can't be true."

"Oh but it is," Cosey said.

"What about..." but Sandler couldn't remember any laws about anything except murder and that wouldn't help his case. Everybody knew who went to prison and who didn't. A black killer was a killer; a white killer was unhappy. He felt sure most law was about money not color, and said so.

Cosey answered with a clown's grin. "Think about that," he said. "A Negro can have A one credit, solid collateral and not a hope in hell of a bank loan. Think about that."

Sandler didn't want to. His marriage was fresh, his daughter new.

Vida was all he knew of A one; Dolly was all he needed for hope.

That was their first of many fishing trips, confidences. Eventually Cosey persuaded Sandler to stop cleaning crab at the Cannery. With tips waiting tables at the hotel would put more in his pocket. Sandler tried it for a couple of years but in 1966, with riots all over in any big city you could name, a Cannery boss offered him a supervisory job, hoping the gesture would forestall any restlessness that might infect the all-black labor. It worked out. Cosey felt easier in a friendship between himself and a foreman than with one of his own waiters. But the more Sandler learned about the man, the less he knew. At times disgust overcame sympathy; other times admiration conquered ridicule. Knowing him, watching him was less a matter of changing his mind, more of an education. Cosey loved money above all else. At least people said he did and he certainly behaved as though they were right. Yet a year or so into those fishing trips, Sandler began to see Cosey's wealth not the hammer



of a tough-minded man, but more like the toy of a sentimental one. A childish love that could thrive only a meadow of girlish dreams. These days, after all those years, the feeling he was able to dredge up most often was a loose, un-focused sorrow.

Sandler climbed the stairs from the basement. When he entered the kitchen, Vida was humming along to some blues-y country music on the radio. Thinking, maybe, of those cracked glass eyes, he grabbed her shoulders, turned her around and held on tight while they danced.

Maybe girl tears, worse than the reason he shed them, were natural—a weakness the others recognized and pin pointed even before he punked out. Even before the melt had flooded his chest when he saw her hands, curving down from the snow white shoe laces that bound them. They might have been mittens pinned crookedly on a clothes line, hung there by some

slut who didn't care what the neighbors said. And the plum polish on nails bitten to the quick gave the mitten-tiny hands a womanly look and made Romen think she herself was the slut—the one with no regard for what people might think.

He was next in line. And ready too, in spite of the little hands and in spite of the mewling in her throat. He stood near the headboard charged by Theo's brays and his head bobbing above the girl's face which was turned to the wall and hidden beneath hair undone by writhing. His belt unbuckled, anticipation ripe, he was about to become the Romen he'd always known he was: chiseled, dangerous, loose. Last of a group of six. Three had left as soon as they were finished—slapping fives on their way out of the bedroom and back to where the party raged. Freddie and Jamal sat on the floor, spent but watching as Theo, who had been first, took seconds. Slower this time, his whinny the only sound because the girl wasn't mewling anymore. By the time he withdrew, the room smelled of vegetables



and rotten grapes and wet clay and only the silence was fresh.

Romen stepped forward to take Theo's place, then watched in wonder as his hands moved to the headboard. The knot binding her right wrist came undone as soon as he touched it and her hand fell over the bedside. She did not use it at all—not to hit nor scratch or push back her hair. Romen untied the other hand still hanging from the Pro Ked laces. Then he wrapped her in the spread she was lying on and hoisted her into a sitting position. He picked up her shoes, high heeled, an X of pink leather across the front—good for nothing but dancing and showing off. He could hear the whooping laughter—that came first— then the jokes and finally the anger, but he got her out of there through the dancing crowd and onto the porch. Trembling, she held on tight to the shoes he handed her. If either had been drunk earlier, they weren't anymore. A cold wind took their breath away.

He thought her name was Faye or Faith and was about to say something when suddenly he couldn't stand the sight of her. If she thanked

him he would strangle her. Fortunately, she didn't say a word. Eyes frozen wide she put on her shoes and straightened her skirt. Both of their coats, his new leather jacket and whatever she had worn, were inside the house.

The door opened; two girls ran out, one carrying a coat, the other holding up a purse.

"Pretty-Fay! What happened?"

Romen turned to go.

"What happened to you, girl? Hey, you! You do something to her?"

Romen kept walking.

"Here, put it on. He bother you? Well, who? Who? Look at your hair! Pretty-Fay!"

He heard their shrieks, their concern as cymbal clashes stressing, but not competing with, the trumpet blast of what Theo had called him: the worst name there was; the one word whose reverberation, once airborne, only a fired gun could end. Otherwise there was no end-ever.



For the past three days he had been a joke. His easily won friendship—four months old now—lost. Holding the stare of any one of the six, except for Freddie, was a dare, an invitation, and even when he didn't stare back or meet their eyes at all, the trumpet spoke his name. They gathered without him at the link fence; left the booth at Patty's Burgers when he sat down. Even the flirty-est girls sensed his undesirability, as though all at once his clothes were jive: T shirt too white, too pressed; sneakers laced all wrong.

On the first day following the party, nobody refused him court time but he never got a pass and when intercepted he had to try for a dunk wherever his position because there was no one to receive the ball. They dropped their hands and looked at him. If he made a rebound they fouled it away from him and the trumpet spat before he could see who blew it. Finally they just tripped him and walked off the court. Romen sat there, panting, eager to fight but knowing that if he answered the fouls, the

tripping, the trumpet spit, it would be the same as defending the girl again. Somebody he didn't know and didn't want to. If he fought back he would be fighting not for himself, but for her, Pretty-Fay; proving the connection between them—the wrong connection. As though he and her had been tied to a bed; his legs and hers forced open.

Lucas Breen, one of the white boys whose hoop skill was envied, dribbled and shot by himself at the far end of the court. Romen got up and started to join him, but realized in time there was another word in the trumpet's repertoire. He passed Lucas with a glance, muttering, "Hey."

The second day was miserable, lonelier. Freddie brought him the jacket he'd left and said, "Hey, man. Don't get shook," but didn't hang around to say more. After he saw Pretty-Fay's friends, the two who had come running out with her coat and purse, waving at him through the window of the school bus, he began to ride the commuter bus. Readily he chose the inconvenience of walking two miles to and from the stop to



avoid the possibility of seeing Pretty-Fay herself. He never did. Nor did anyone.

The third day they beat him up. All six, including Freddie. Smart, too. They hit him everywhere except his face, just in case he was a snitch as well, happy to explain a broken mouth or swollen eye; girl enough to point a weak finger at them if questioned. All six. Romen fought well; raised a lump or two, kneed deep into a groin, tore a shirt till they got his hands behind his back and tried to break his ribs and empty his stomach at the same time. That last was starting to happen when a car drove up and honked. Everybody scattered, including Romen who stumbled away holding his stomach, more fearful of being rescued than of passing out with vomit on his jeans. He threw up behind a mimosa tree in the woods back of Patty's. Contemplating his grandmother's cooking in the grass, he began to wonder if he could ever live his body down. He did not question Theo's contempt or Freddie's disgust. He shared both and couldn't understand

what had made him melt at that moment—his heart bursting like a pump for a wounded creature who a few seconds earlier had been a feast he was eager to gnaw. If he'd found her in the street his reaction would have been the same but in the company of and part of the pack who put her there—shit! What was that thing that had moved him to untie her, cover her, Jesus! Cover her! Cover her up! get her on her feet and out of there? The little mitten hands? The naked male behinds convulsing one after another after another after another? The vegetable odor mixed with a solid booming bass on the other side of the door? As he put his arm around her and led her away he was still erect, folding only as they stepped together out into the cold. What made him do it? Or rather who?

But he knew who it was. It was the real Romen who had sabotaged the newly chiseled, dangerous one. The fake Romen, preening over a stranger's bed, was tricked by the real Romen who was still in charge here in his own bed, forcing him to hide under a pillow and shed girl tears. The



trumpet stuttering in his head.