



Chapter 5: Lover

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

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1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

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Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:04:44 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/02871145z>

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LOVER

CHAPTER FIVE

June 3, 2002

Heed eased down into the froth, sideways, hanging on to the tub's rim with a practiced use of her thumbs. Once on her knees she could turn, sit and watch the lilac foam rise to her shoulders.

"This can't last much longer," she thought. "I'm going to sink or slip and not have the wrist strength to save myself from drowning."

She hoped Junior's list of things she was willing to do—"You want your hair fixed, I'll fix it. You want a bath, I'll give you one"--was honest, not the eager lies of a job hunter. Heed decided to test her on the hairdressing before asking for help with her bath. She needed both badly. July was the last time she had been able to hold the Clairol bottle and flood the silver

seams at her scalp with "Deep Walnut." How, she wondered, how had it happened that she, who had never picked a crab, shelled crawfish or conch ended up with hands more deformed than those of the factory workers who had. Ben Gay, aloe, Jergen's did little to help and regular bathing was needed to stop the sea life she had never touched from touching her. So the first two tasks for Junior would be to color her hair and help in the bath—assuming she could get her attention away from Romen long enough.

Heed didn't need to know what Junior had said to him. Watching the boy's face from her bedroom window the girl may as well have shouted. His grin, his eyes gone liquid. Soon the two of them would be coiled together right under her nose. In the garage under a quilt. No. Junior was bold. She would sneak him into her bed room, or some other room. Christine might not like it. Or maybe she wouldn't care. If she was feeling hateful or jealous she would tear them up. If her slut history reared itself, she might enjoy it. Nobody knew which way Christine would jump, the gray eyed cat. On her ninth life, Lord willing. Heed herself thought it a good thing, this baby romance, a way to keep the girl on the premises once she found out there was no way to steal. It was enough that Christine was

pilfering the household money to pay that lawyer. A little puppy love might loosen up Romen too. Yank him out of Vida's clamp. He was so tight around the mouth. "Yes, Mam. No Mam. No thank you. I have to be home by street lights." What had Vida and Sandler told him about her? About Christine? Whatever they'd said, it wasn't so awful they didn't want him to work there. Just don't get too familiar, Vida would say. Folks too cosey with the Cosey's, get hurt. But if Romen had reasons of his own to hang around, he could be very useful. Junior had thief-smarts and would teach Romen the strut he needed to manage Vida and stop treating everybody old enough to pay taxes as an enemy and old women, in particular, as fools.

Heed was used to that. Depended on it, in fact. Trusting that whoever answered her ad would need money, she'd been lucky that the first and only applicant was slick as well as greedy. They has postured for each other last night, and while Miss Viviane was busy casing the room, Heed was busy casing her; while she was busy taking control, Heed was letting her believe she already had it. Her insight was polished to blazing by a life time of being underestimated. Only Papa knew better, had picked her out of all he

could have chosen. Knowing she had no schooling, no money, no proper raising, he chose her anyway while everybody else thought she could be run over, tricked. But here she was and where were they? May in the ground, Christine penniless in the kitchen, L an Up Beach spook. Where they belonged. She had fought them all, won, and was still winning. Her bank account was fatter than ever. Only Vida had done fairly well with her life and that was because of Sandler who had never mocked or insulted Bill Cosey's wife. He had respected her even when his own wife did not. It was he who came to her asking if she would hire his grandson. Polite. Staying for iced coffee in her bedroom. Vida would never have done that. Not just because she disliked Heed, but also because she was afraid of Christine—as she should be. The knife flashed at Cosey's funeral was real and rumors of Christine's sloppy life included fights, arrests, torching cars and prostitution. There was no telling what a mind trained to roughlife would think of.

It was impossible that no one knew of the fights between them when Christine returned to take up permanent residence. Most were verbal: quarrels about whether the double C's engraved on the silver was an ornate rendering of one initial or the pairing of Christine's. It could be either

because Cosey had ordered the service long before his marriage to Heed. They argued about twice stolen rings and the real meaning of placing on fingers posed for death's rest. But there were also bruising fights with hands, feet, teeth and soaring objects. For size and willingness Christine should have been the hands down winner. With weak hands and no size, Heed should have lost every match. But the results were even at the least. For Heed's speed more than compensated for Christine's power, and her swift intelligence—anticipating, protecting, warding off—exhausted her enemy. Once, perhaps twice, a year they imploded, punched, grabbed hair, wrestled, bit, slapped. Never drawing blood, never apologizing, never premeditating, yet drawn annually to pant through an episode that was as much rite as fight. Finally they stopped, selecting devious more symbolic ways to demonstrate bitterness. Along with age, recognition that neither could leave played a part in their un-negotiated cease fire. More to the point was their unspoken realization that the fights had no cause, no motive other than allowing them to hold one another. Their grievances were too deep for that. Like love, hatred needed more than physical intimacy; it wanted creativity and locks to sustain itself. The first fight occurred in

1971, after Christine removed from Heed's desk the jewelry Bill Cosey had won in a card game—a paper bag of engagement rings he agreed to try to fence for a drummer with a police record. Rings Heed had refused to let Christine place on Papa's fingers in the coffin. Four years later she pushed her way into Heed's house holding a shopping bag with hands loaded with that collection of other women's hopes. Immediately the fight resumed and remained intermittent for a decade. When they searched for more interesting means of causing pain they had to rely on personal information, things they remembered from childhood. Each thought she was in charge. Christine because she was strappingly healthy, could drive, go about and run the house. Heed, however, knew she was still in charge, still winning, not only because she had the money, but because she was what everybody but Bill Cosey assumed she was not: smart. Smarter than the petted one, the spoiled one mis-educated in private school, stupid about men, unequipped for real work and too lazy to do it anyway; a parasite feeding off men until they dumped her and sent her home to gnaw the hand she ought to be licking.

Heed was sure she knew Christine better than she knew herself. And

not withstanding an acquaintance merely twenty-four hours old, she knew Junior too, and now she knew what the soon to be lovers were thinking: how to fool an arthritic old woman, how to use her to satisfy and hide their cravings. Heed knew all about that too. About cravings sharp enough to bring tears of rage to grown up eyes. Like May's when she learned who her father-in-law would marry. And young eyes. Like Christine's when she knew her best friend was the chosen one. Both of them, mother and daughter, incensed by what May called Bill Cosey's dangerous sense of humor, went wild just thinking about his choice of an Up Beach girl for his bride. A girl without a night gown or bathing suit. Who had never used two pieces of flatware to eat. Never knew food to be separated in special plates. Who bathed on Saturday in a washtub full of the murky water left by her sisters. Who could never get rid of the Cannery fish smell. Whose family salvaged newsprint not for reading but for the privy. Who could not form a correct sentence; who knew block letters but not script. Under those circumstances she had to be braced every minute of the day. Bill Cosey protected her, but he wasn't around all the time or in every place where people could humiliate her. He wanted her to learn how to run the hotel

and she did learn in spite of local sniggering, and May's and Christine's sabotage. They smoldered in an outrage kept lit by the radiance the couple brought with them to breakfast and their anticipatory glow at supper.

Thoughts of Papa and her together in bed drove the two of them to more and newer meanness. The war had already been declared on the wedding gown Bill Cosey had ordered from Texas. Expensive, beautiful, it was way too big. L pinned it for alteration, but the gown could not be found until the afternoon of the ceremony when it was too late. L folded the cuffs, safety-pinned the hem, still it took a lot for Heed to grin her way down the stairs into the hotel lobby and through the ceremony. A ceremony unobserved by Heed's own family because, other than Solitude and Righteous Morning, none of her family was allowed to attend. The given excuse was that they were still mourning the deaths of Joy and Welcome. The real reason was May who took pains to show her repulsion for the whole Johnson brood. She even objected to Bill Cosey's paying for the funerals—muttering that the boys had no business swimming in “their” part of the ocean. Only Heed's younger sisters were permitted to squeeze into the room and listen to “Oh, Promise Me.” From that spitefulness she and

her daughter moved on to relentless criticism of the ignorant newly wed: her speech, hygiene, table manners and thousands of things Heed didn't know. What "endorse a check" meant; how to dress a bed; how to dispose of sanitary napkins; how to set a table; how to estimate supplies. She could have learned to read script if that deficiency had not been a running joke. L, who liked her in those days, taught her a lot and saved the life Papa had given her.

Up to her neck in lilac bubbles, Heed rested her head on the curve of porcelain behind her. Stretching, she manipulated the chain with her toe to pull out the stopper then waited until the water drained. If she slipped and knocked her self out, at least she had a chance of coming to without drowning.

"This is dangerous," she thought, climbing out of the tub. "I can't do it no more."

Wrapped in a towel, resting in Cosey's red barber's chair, she decided to ask, no order, Junior to help her right away in and out of the. It was a necessary sacrifice she did not look forward to. Dependency, awkwardness while exposing her poor soft nakedness to the judging glance

of a firm young girl did not matter. What troubled Heed, had made her hesitate, was the loss of skin memory, the body's recollection of love. Of her wedding night, for instance, submerged in water in his arms. Creeping away from the uncomfortable reception, out the back door into the dark, rushing in tuxedo and way too big bridal gown across sea grass to powdery sand. Undressing. No penetration. No blood. No eeks of pain or discomfort. Just this man stroking, nursing, bathing her. She arched. He stood behind her, placed his hands behind her knees and opened her legs to the surf. Skin might forget that in the company of a sassy girl whose flesh was accumulating its own sexual memories like tattoos. The latest of which, apparently, would be Romen's mark. Where would it go? What would it look like? Junior probably had so many it would be hard to find space. They would merge finally into a lacy net covering her whole body, making indistinguishable one image from another; one love from another.

Heed's sexual history was dyed in colors restored to their original clarity in bubbly water. She would have to figure out a way to prevent Junior's presence from erasing what her skin knew first in sea foam.

Once a little girl wandered too far—down to big water and along its

edge where waves skidded and mud turned into clean sand. Ocean spray dampens the man's undershirt she is wearing. There on a red blanket another little girl with white ribbons in her hair sat eating ice cream. The water was very blue. Beyond a crowd of people laughed. "Hi, want some?" asked the girl, holding out a spoon.

They ate ice cream with peaches in it until a woman came and said "Go away now. This is private."

Later, making foot prints in the mud, she heard the ice cream girl call "Wait! Wait!"

The kitchen was big and shiny, full of grown people busy cooking, talking, banging pots. The one who had said "Go away," smiled at her now and the ice cream girl was her friend.

Heed put on a fresh night gown and an old fashioned satin robe. At a dressing table she studied her face in a mirror.

"Go away?" she asked her reflection. "Wait?" As it turned out she didn't do either one. Although they tried to chase her from white sand back to mud; to stop her with a hidden wedding gown. In time the one who shouted "Wait!" was gone and the one said "Go away" lived all alone in a

world as closed as a coffin. Spoiled silly by the wealth of an open-handed man, neither had learned, or learned too late. Even now she knew any interested folk would think her life was that of an idle old lady reduced to pouring over papers, listening to the radio and bathing three times a day. They didn't understand that winning was nine parts patience. Quiet determination, like not acknowledging a woman with a scar like a pencil stroke on her cheek who could summon your husband anytime she wanted to. Whose name he moaned in his sleep. Celestial. Oh girl, Celestial. Let him moan; let him "go fishing" without tackle or bait. There are remedies. Stakes are high; the cards are dealt. Now the game was ending.

Christine had sensed it and, predictable in such matters, had driven off to consult with her lawyer. One of those so-called new professional black women with twenty years of learning that Christine hoped could outwit a woman who had bested an entire town.

Scribble on a menu was legal provided no other, later and contradictory writing could be found. Suppose, however, later writing, supporting, clarifying the first was found. Not a real notarized will--there was none, and if there ever was one, crazy May had hidden it as she had

the deed—but another menu from a year after the 1955 one, one that actually identified the deceased's "sweet Cosey child" by name: Heed. If Papa jotted down his wishes in 1955 and again on whatever subsequent menu Heed could find, no judge would favor Christine's appeal.

It was not a new thought. Heed had mused about such a miracle for a very long time; since 1975 when Christine had pushed her way into the house flashing diamonds and claiming it as hers. What was new, recent, was the jolt to Heed's memory last summer. Lotioning her hands, trying to flex her fingers, move them apart, examining the familiar scar tissue on the back of her hand, Heed re-visited the scene of the accident. Muggy kitchen, work table stacked with cartons. Electric knife, Sunbeam mixer, General Electric toaster oven—all brand new. L wordlessly refusing to open them, let alone use the equipment they contained. 1964? 1965? Heed is arguing with L. May enters the kitchen with her own cardboard box. She is frantic with worry that the Hotel and everybody in it are in immediate danger. That city Negroes have already invaded Up Beach, carrying lighter fluid, matches, Molotov cocktails; shouting, urging the locals to burn Cosey's Hotel and Resort to the ground and put the Uncle Toms, the sheriff's

pal, the race traitor out of business. Without a dot of proof, a hint of attack, threat or even disrespect except the mold growing in her own mind, May was beyond conversation, assigning herself the part of the Resort's sole warrior.

Once she had been merely another of the loud defenders of colored owned businesses, the benefits of separate schools, hospitals with Negro wards and doctors, colored owned banks and the proud beauty of professions designed to service the race. Then she discovered that her convictions were no longer traditional, old-time racial up-lift, but separatist, "nationalistic." Not sweet Booker T., but radical Malcolm X. In confusion she began to stutter, contradict herself. She forced agreement from the like minded and quarreled endlessly with those who began to wonder about dancing by the sea while children blew apart in Sunday School; about holding up property laws while neighborhoods fell in flames. As the Movement swelled and funerals, marches and riots was all the news there was, May, prophesying mass executions, cut herself off from normal society. Even guests who agreed began to avoid her eyes and her warnings of doom. Her father-in-law, especially, wasn't listening. She saw rebellion in

the waiters; weapons in the hands of the yard help. A bass player was the first to publically shame her. "Aw, woman. Shut the fuck up!" It was not said to her face, but to her back and loud enough to be heard. Other guests became equally blatant, or just got up and left when she entered their company.

Eventually May quieted, but she never changed her mind. She simply went about re-moving things, hiding them from the kerosene fires she knew were about to be lit any day now. From grenades lobbed and land mines buried in sand. Her reach was both wide and precise. She patrolled the beach and set booby-traps behind her bedroom door. She hid legal documents and safety pins. In 1955, sensing disorder when word of an Alabama boycott spread at the same time Cosey was transferring control to his wife, May recognized one fortress—the Hotel—and buried its deed in the sand. By 1965 when no one took her seriously and waves of Blacks (now) were on the move, she added the Post Road house to her care. Ruling nothing in either place, she went underground locking, tidying, hoarding. Money and silverware nestled in sacks of Uncle Ben's rice; fine table linen hid toilet paper and toothpaste; tree holes were stuffed with emergency

underwear; photographs, keepsakes, mementoes, junk she bagged, boxed and squirreled away.

She comes into the hotel kitchen carrying a box while Heed argues about the waste L is causing by her refusal to open the cartons, use the equipment, and thereby produce more meals faster. L never looks up, just keeps dredging chicken parts in egg batter then flour. An arc of hot fat from the fryer splashes Heed's hand.

Until recently that was all she remembered of the scene—the burn. Thirty years later, lotioning her hands, she remembered more. Before the pop of hot fat. Checking on May, looking into her box of junk and seeing packets of last New Year's cocktail napkins, swizzle sticks, paper hats and a stack of menus. Hearing her say "I have to put these away." That afternoon the new equipment disappeared to be found later in the attic—L's form of comment better than speech. Now Heed was convinced that May's particular junk box was still there—in the attic. Fifty menus must have been in it. Prepared weekly, daily or monthly, depending on L's whims, each menu had a date signaling the freshness of the food, its home cooked accuracy. If the fat hit her hand in 1964 or 5, when May, reacting in terror

to Mississippi or Watts, had to be followed and watched to retrieve needed items, then the menus she was storing were ten years beyond the 1955 one accepted as Bill Cosey's only will and testament. There would be a lot of un-tampered menus in that box. Only one was needed. That, a larcenous heart and a young, steady hand that could write script.

Good old, May. Years of cunning, decades of crazy—both equaled the simplemindedness that might just save the day. If she were alive it would kill her. Again. Because before her real death she was already a ghost, floating through the rooms, wafting over the grounds, lighting search fires by the sea, steadily burying evidence of a life the Revolution wanted to deprive her of. Yet she might rest easily now since when she died in 1976, her beloved death penalty was back in style and she had out lived the Revolution. Her ghost though, still packing, was alive and gaining strength.

MTK