



"Heed eased down..."

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

"Heed eased down..."

1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:04:53 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/6m311t87g>

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Heed eased down into the froth, 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," 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. 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, handled crawfish or conch ended up with hands more deformed than those of the factory workers who had. Ben Gay, aloe, Aspercream did little to help and constant 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.

She didn't need to know what Junior had said to him. Watching the boy's face from her bedroom window Heed thought 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 the gray eyed cat would jump. On her ninth life, Lord willing. Heed 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. But if Romen had reasons of his own to hang around, he could be more useful than he already was. 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 abilities, no proper raising, he chose her anyway while everybody else thought she could be run

over. 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 brawls, arrests, torching cars and prostitution. There was no telling what a mind trained to gutter life 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 by mouth: quarrels about whether the double C's engraved on the silver was one letter doubled or the pairing of Christine's initials. It could be either because Cosey had ordered the service after his first marriage but long before his second. They argued about twice stolen rings and the real point of sticking

them 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 strength, and her swift cunning—anticipating, protecting, warding off—exhausted her enemy. Once, perhaps twice, a year they 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, moved into acid silence and invented other ways to underscore bitterness. Along with age, recognition that neither one could leave played a part in their un-negotiated cease fire. More on the mark was their unspoken realization that the fights did nothing other than allow them to hold one another. Their grievances were too serious for that. Like love, hatred needed more than physical intimacy; it wanted creativity and locks to sustain itself. The first fight, cancelled in 1971, signaled the will to claw one another. It began when Christine stole from Heed's desk the jewelry Papa 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 Christine pretended she wanted to place in Papa's hands in his coffin. Four years later she pushed her way into Heed's house holding a shopping bag with fingers loaded with that collection of other women's hopes; demanding rights and space to take care of her sick mother—the same mother she had been laughing at for years when she took the trouble to think about her at all. Immediately the postponed 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 Papa 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 twelve 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, 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 might 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 some block letters but not script. Under those circumstances she had to be braced every minute of the day. Papa protected her, but he wasn't around all the time or in every place where people could mess with her. ~~He wanted her to~~ ^{Papa insisted she} learn how to run the hotel



May and Christine were not
the only ones.

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 snub 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 ^{May} she and her daughter moved on to

relentless criticism of the ~~young~~ bride: 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 and her alone. She had not thought much about it at the time, but she took for granted that her husband would be generous with her. He had already paid for her brothers' funerals; gave her mother a present and put a grateful smile on her father's face. She had no idea ^{that} ~~how~~ so many other people—especially her own family—waited to take advantage of him. Her kinfolk so overreached they forced the break that was never repaired. As soon as the wedding was over, they crept up on her. Hinting—"I heard they're hiring but you need work shoes to get taken..." "Did you see that dress Lola gave her mama?..." Begging—"Ask him if he can lend me a little till..." "You know I'm short since..." "I'll pay you all back as soon as..." Demanding—"Bring me some a that...." "Is this all?" "You don't need that, so you?" By the time they were told to stay off Hotel property, Heed was too ashamed to

object. Even Righteous and Solitude began to wonder about her loyalty. Recriminations and accusations peppered her visits to Up Beach and when she told Papa why her eyes were puffy, she was relieved by his firm response. All she needed was him, which was lucky because he was all she had.

Up to her neck in lilac bubbles, Heed rested her head on the ^{tub's} 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 Papa's red barber's chair, she decided to ask, no order, Junior to help her right away in and out of the tub. 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 lover from another.

Heed's love story 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 dampened the man's undershirt she ^{wore}~~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 smiling 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 even more 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 ^{the} a mirror.

"Go away?" she asked her reflection. "Wait?" How could she do both? They tried to chase her from white sand back to mud; to stop her with a hidden wedding gown, but in time the one who shouted "Wait!" was gone and the one said "Go away" was shunned. 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 who could summon your husband anytime she wanted to. Whose name he kept secret even in his sleep. Oh girl. Oh girl. Let him moan; let him "go fishing" without tackle or bait. There was always time; always remedies. But now with stakes still high; cards being dealt so fast, there was less time for remedy.

Christine knew it and had suddenly 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: defeated her ^{daughter} ~~mother~~-in-law, run Christine off and raised her self above all those ^{CONNIVING} ~~smiling~~ folks begging favors who, no matter what she did, still threw up behind her back. For as long as she could remember, Heed believed stomachs turned in her company. Truth be told, Papa was the only person who did not make her feel that way. She was safe with him no matter what he muttered in his sleep. And there was no

question about what he meant her to have when he died. Will or none, nobody would ever believe he preferred Christine, whom he hadn't seen since 1947, to his own wife. Unless it was one of those lawyer-type black girls, full of themselves, despising women of Heed's generation who had more business sense in their tooth fillings than those educated half-wits would ever know.

Since there was nothing else, just notes for a will that L found, scribble on a menu was legal provided no other, later and contradictory writing could be found. Provided. Provided. 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 1958 one, one that actually identified the deceased's "sweet Cosey child" by name: Heed Cosey. If Papa jotted down his wishes in 1958 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, wearing that stupid army hat. * She is frantic with worry that the Hotel and everybody in it are in immediate danger. That city Blacks 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. Papa said the protesters had no idea of what real betrayal was; that May should have married his father not his son. Without a dot of proof, a hint of attack, threat or even disrespect except the mold growing in her own mind, May was beyond discussion, assigning herself the part of the Resort's sole protector.

* She is ~~and~~ carrying an institutional size carton that once held boxes of Rinso.

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 professions designed to service the race. Then she discovered that her convictions were no longer 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 people. Even guests who agreed began to avoid her and her warnings of doom. 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. As early as 1955, when a teenager's bashed up body proved how seriously whites took sass, and sensing disorder when word of an Alabama boycott spread May recognized one fortress—the Hotel—and buried its deed in the sand. Ten years later the hotel's clientele, short tempered and loud treated her with the courtesy you'd give a stump. And when waves of Blacks crashed through quiet neighborhoods as well as business districts, she added the Monarch Street house to her care. Controlling nothing in either place, she went underground locking away, storing up. 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.

Panting she comes into the hotel kitchen carrying ^{her loot} ~~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 escapes 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. ^{Stopping} Checking on May, ^{checking the Rinso} 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 final, wordless comment. Now Heed was convinced that May's particular ^{of junk} ~~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 to retrieve needed items, then the menus she was storing were prepared seven years later than the 1958 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. Before her real death she was already a minstrel show spook, floating through the rooms, flapping over the grounds, hiding behind doors until it was safe to bury 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, helmeted and packing, was alive and gaining strength.