



Chapter 3

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CHAPTER THREE

An orange-scented road to Harbor City was what Christine expected because three times the ~~odor~~^{perfume} had accompanied her escapes. The first was on foot, the second by bus and each time the orange trees lining the road marked her flight with a light citric ~~perfume~~^{trail of}. More than familiar, the road formed the structure of her dreamlife. From silly to frightening every memorable dream she had took place on or near Route 12, and if not visible, the road lurked just beyond the dreaming ready to assist a scarey one, or provide the setting for the incoherent happiness of a sweetdream. Now, pressing the gas pedal, her haste certainly had the feel of a nightmare—panting urgency in stationary time--but freezing weather had killed the

young fruit along with their aroma and Christine was keenly aware of the absence. She rolled down then up then down again the window.

Romen's version of washing the car did not include opening its doors, so the Oldsmobile sparkled on the outside while its dank interior smelled like a holding cell. She once fought a better class of car than this because of an odor. Tried to kill it and everything it stood for, but trying mostly to kill the White Shoulders stinging her sinuses and clotting her tongue. The owner, Dr. Rio, never saw the damage because his new girl friend had the car towed away before the sight of it could break her lover's heart. So Christine's hammer swings against the windshield, the razor cuts through plump leather; the ribbons of tape (including and especially Al Greene's tk) that she draped over the dash board and steering wheel he only heard about, never saw. And that hurt as much as his dismissal had. Fighting a Cadillac was never easy but doing it in bright day light in the frenzy of another woman's cologne was an accomplishment that deserved serious witnessing by the person for whom it was meant. Dr. Rio was spared, according to Christine's landlady, by his new woman. A mistake Manila had said. The new woman should have let him learn the lesson—observe the

warning of what a displaced woman could do—and sealed her own rental in his arms.

Regrets over her mis-managed life faded in the glow of Dr. Rio's memory as did the embarrassment of her battle with his beloved Cadillac. In spite of the humiliating end of their affair, the three years with him--well, near him; he was mightily un-divorceable--were the best ones. She had seen movies about the misery of kept women, how they died in the end or had suffering illegitimate babies who died also. Some times the women were saddened by guilt and cried on the betrayed wife's lap. Yet twenty years after she'd been replaced by fresher White Shoulders, Christine still recalled her kept years as the best ones. When she met Dr. Rio her forty-one years to his sixty made him an "older" man. Now, in her mid-sixties, the word meant nothing. He was beautiful. An elegant dresser, successful gp, passionate, playful. Her last good chance for happiness wrecked by the second oldest enemy in the world: Another Woman. Manila's girls said Dr. Rio gave each new love a gift of that particular cologne. Christine had thought it was unique—a private gesture from an imaginative lover. He preferred it; she learned to. Had she stayed longer at Manila's or visited

her whores once in a while, she would have discovered at once Dr. Rio's particular pattern of bull shit: he fell in love, courted, offered the (same) beautiful apartment on Trelaine Avenue and sent Dracena and White Shoulders on the day the replacement moved in. Unlike roses or other cut flowers, Dracena was meant to speak legitimacy, permanence. The White Shoulders—who knew? Maybe he read it somewhere, in a men's magazine invented to show men the difference between suave and a shampoo. Some creaky, unhip glossy for teenagers disguised as men that catalogued seduction techniques as if any technique at all was needed when a woman decided on a man. He could have sent a bottle of Clorox and a dead Christmas tree—she would have done whatever he wanted for what he made available. Complete freedom, total care, reliable love-making, reckless gifts. Trips, short and secret lest his wife find out, parties, edginess and a satisfactory place in the pecking order of a certain middle-class Black society that understood itself to swing, if the professional credentials and money were right.

Route 12 was empty, distracting Christine from the urgency of her mission to scattered recollections of the past. How abrupt the expulsion

from first class cabins on romantic cruises to being head-pressed into a patrol car; from a coveted table at an NMA banquet to rocking between her own elbows on a mattress aired daily to rid it of the ^{sexual} ~~previous~~ visitors bouquet. When she went back to Manila's, dependant on her immediate but short-lived generosity, Christine poured the remains of her own White Shoulders down the toilet and packed her shoes, pride, halter top, brassiere and pedal pushers into a shopping bag. Everything but the diamonds and her baby spoon. Those she zipped into her purse along with Manila's loan of fifty dollars. The girls had been congenial most of the time; other times not. But they so enjoyed their hearts of gold—gold they had slipped from wallets, or inveigled with mild forms of blackmail—they were staunchly optimistic. They told Christine not to worry. Some woman was bound to de-dick him one day, and besides, she was still a fox, there were lots of players and every good bye ain't gone. Christine was not cheered. Thrown out of the apartment after she had refused for weeks to leave quietly; prevented from taking her furs, suede coat, leather pants, linen suits, the St. Laurent shoes—not even her diaphragm: this goodbye was final. The four Samsonite suitcases she had left home with in 1947 held all she

thought she would ever need. In 1975 the Wal-Mart shopping bag she returned with contained all she owned. Considering how much practice she had had, her exits from Silk had gotten worse and worse. The first one as a thirteen year old, the result of a temper tantrum, failed in eight hours; the second one at seventeen, was planned but equally disastrous. Both escapes were fed by disorder and malice, but the third and last, in 1971, was a calm attempt to avert the slaughter she had in mind. Leaving other places: Harbor City, Jackson, Grafenwoehr, Tampa, Waycross, Chattanooga –or any of the towns that once beckoned was easy. Until Dr. Rio had her forcibly evicted for no good reason she could think of except a wish for another Dracena or a younger model for the furs he passed along from one mistress to another. Following days of reflection at Manila's (named for her father's heroic exploits) Christine discovered a way to convert a return to Silk in shame and on borrowed money into a noble battle for justice—her lawful share of the Cosey estate.

Heed's look, cold and long, had been anything but welcoming so Christine just pushed past her through the door. With very few words they came to an agreement of sorts because May was hopeless, the place filthy,

Heed's disabling arthritis was deforming her hands and because nobody in town could stand either one of them. So the one who had attended private school kept house while the one who could barely read ruled it. The one who had been sold by a man battled the one who had been bought by one.

Christine braked for a turtle crossing the road but, swerving right to avoid it, she drove over a second one trailing the first. She stopped and looked in the rear view mirrors—left one, right one and overhead— for a sign of life or death: legs pleading skyward for help or a cracked immobile shell. Her hands were shaking. Seeing nothing, she left the driver's seat and ran back down the road. The pavement was blank, the orange trees still. No turtle anywhere. Had she dreamed it, the second turtle? The one left behind, Miss Second Best, crushed by a tire gone off track, swerving to save its preferred sister? Scanning the road she did not wonder what the matter was; did not ask herself why her heart was sitting up for a turtle creeping along Route 12. She saw a movement on the south side of the road where the first turtle had been heading. Slowly she approached and was relieved to see two shine-y green shells edging toward the trees. The car wheels had missed Miss Second Best and while the driver was

shuddering in the car, she had caught up to the faster one. Transfixed, Christine watched the pair disappear, returning to her car only when another slowed behind it. As she left the verge, the driver smiled, "Ain't you got no toilet at home?"

"Go around, motherfucker!"

He gave her a thick finger and pulled away.

The lawyer might be surprised-- Christine had no appointment--but would see her anyway. Each time she forced herself into the office, Christine had been accommodated. She was a Cosey, after all and in Harbor City the name still lifted eyelids. William Cosey, one time owner of many houses, a hotel resort, two boats and a bank-full of gossiped about, legendary cash, always interested people but he had excited the county to fever when they learned he had left no will. Just doodles on a 1955 menu outlining his soggy desires. Which turned out to be 1. "Julia II" to Sandler Gibson. 2. Montenegro Coronas to Chief Buddy Silk. 3. the Hotel to Billy's Boy's wife. 4. the Silk house and "whatever nickels are left" to "my sweet Cosey child." 5. His '55 convertible to L. 6. His stick pins to Meal Daddy and on and on down to his record collection to Blind Josephus "the

best blues guitar player on God's earth." Feeling good, no doubt, from the Tom Collins, he had sat down one night with some booze-y friends and scrawled among side orders and ~~the day's specials~~, appetizers, main courses and desserts the distribution of his wealth to those he thought he loved. Sixteen years later, during the argument following his death, the booze-y friends were located and verified the event, the hand writing and the clarity of the mind that seemed to have had no further thoughts on the matter. Questions rose like snake heads: Why was he giving Sandler his newest boat? What Coronas? Chief Silk's been dead, then his son gets them, Boss Silk don't smoke and who is Meal Daddy? The lead singer of The Purple Tones, said Heed. No, the manager of the Fifth Street Lovers, said May, but he's in prison can inmates receive bequests? they're just records, fool, he didn't even identify you by name, so what? and why give a convertible to somebody who can't drive you don't need to drive a car to sell it this ain't a will it's a comic book! They focused on stick pins, cigars and the current value of old 78's--never asking the central question. Who was "my sweet Cosey child"? Heed's claim was strong--especially since she called her husband Papa. Yet, since, other than May and biologically

speaking, Christine was the only "child" left, her claim of blood was equal to Heed's claim as widow. Or so she and May thought. But years of absence, no history of working at the hotel, except for a few years as a minor, weakened Christine's position. The court examined the greasy menu, lingering perhaps over the pineapple flavored slaw and Fat's Mean Chili, listened to three lawyers and tentatively (until further evidence could be provided) judged Heed the "sweet Cosey child" of a drunken man's vocabulary.

Gwendolyn East, Attorney at Law, however, thought otherwise and recently she'd told Christine grounds for reversal on appeal were promising. In any case, she said there was room for review, even if no mitigating evidence was found. For years Christine had searched for such evidence: the hotel, the house and found nothing (except keys and traces of May's lunacy). If there was anything—a real, typed up intelligible will—it would be in one of Heed's many locked desks behind her bedroom door also locked nightly against 'intruders.' Now the matter was urgent. No more waiting for the other to die or, at a minimum, suffer a debilitating stroke. Now a third element was in the mix. Heed had hired a girl. To

help write her memoirs, Junior Viviane had said that morning at breakfast. Christine's jaw had dropped at the thought of the word "write" connected with some one who had gone to school off and on for less than five years. Scooping grapefruit sections, Junior had grinned while pronouncing "memoirs" just the way illiterate Heed would have. "Of her family," said Junior. What family, Christine wondered. That batch of beach rats who bathed in a barrel and slept in their clothes?

That afternoon, after mulling over what the girl had told her, Christine made up her mind. She waited until Junior went up to the third floor. Dressed in clothes Heed must have leant her (a red suit not seen in public in thirty five years) Junior looked like a Sunday migrant. Except for the boots, last night's leather was gone. Romen was puttering around in the sunshine, inspecting ice damage done to the shrubs. Christine called him to help her with the garage door stuck in ice that had not melted, though the temperature had climbed, then told him to wash the car. When he was done she drove off, picking up speed as quickly as she could to get to Gwendolyn East before the lawyer's office closed.

Christine's entanglements with the law were varied enough to

convince her that Gwendolyn was not to be trusted. The lawyer may know the courts but she didn't know anything about police—the help or the damage they could do long before you saw a lawyer. The police who led her away from the Cadillac were, like Chief Silk, gentle, respectful, as though her fury was not merely understandable but justified. They handled her like a woman who had assaulted a child molester rather than a car. Her hands were cuffed in front, not behind her back—and loosely. As she sat in the patrol car the sergeant offered her a lit cigarette and removed a shard of head light glass from her hair. Neither officer pinched her nipples or called her names or suggested what a blow job could do for racial justice. The one time she had been in a killing frame of mind with a hammer instead of a switchblade in her hand, they treated her like a white woman. During four previous arrests—for incendiary acts, causing mayhem, obstructing traffic and resisting arrest-- she had nothing in her hand and was treated like dog shit.

Come to think of it, every love she had led straight to jail. First Frank Holder, whom she married at seventeen, got them both arrested at an illegal social club. Then Grady, whose revolutionary pamphlets she passed

out and with whom she had lived the longest, got her thirty days, no suspension, for inciting mayhem. Other loves had overflowed and ended in dramas the law had precise names for: cursing meant assaulting an officer; yanking your arms when cuffed meant resisting arrest; throwing a cigarette too close to a police car meant conspiracy to commit arson; running across the street to get out of the way of mounted police meant obstructing traffic. Finally Dr. Rio. A Cadillac. A hammer. A gentle, almost reluctant, arrest. After an hour's wait, no charges pressed, no write-up or interview, they gave her back the shopping bag and let her go.

Go where, she wondered, as she slunk down the street. She had been man-handled out of her (his) apartment after a two-minute supervised reprieve to get her purse. No clothing can leave the premises, they said, but she was allowed to take some underwear and her cosmetics bag which, unknown to the lawyer-paid thugs, included a baby spoon and twelve diamond rings. Aside from that (the rings she would never sell) she had a recently cancelled credit card and seven dollars in change. She was as lonely as a twelve-year old watching waves suck away her sand castle. None of her close friends would risk Dr. Rio's displeasure; the not so close

ones were chuckling happily over her fall. So she walked to Manila's and persuaded her to take her in. For just a few days. For free. It was a serious almost impudent request since Manila did not run a whore house, as hateful people described her home. She simply rented rooms to needy women. The forlorn, the abandoned, those in transit. That these women had regular visitors or remained in transit for years was not her concern.

Christine had all of these requisites twenty-eight years ago. The blue cap who directed her to 187 Second Street, "right near the glass factory, look for a pink door," either misunderstood or understood completely. She had asked him if he knew of a rooming house and he had given her Manila's address. In spite of her white gloves, little beanie hat, quiet pearls and a flawless peter pan collar, the desperation, if not the costume, of Manila's girls was equal to her own. When she stepped out of the taxi it was 9:30 in the morning. The house seemed ideal. Quiet. Neat. Manila smiled at the four suitcases and said "Come on in." She explained the rates, the house rules and the policy on visitors. It was lunch time before Christine figured out that the visitors were clientele.

She was surprised by how faint her shock. Looking for secretarial

work or, even better, some high-paying post-war work in a factory, she had landed in the ^{Kind of} place her mother called "a stinking brothel" (as in "Is he going to turn this place into a...."). Christine laughed. Nervously. This is

Celestial ground, she thought, remembering the scar faced woman on the beach. ^{who WAS rumored to carry a gun} The girls sauntered through the dining room where Christine sat

and, scanning her clothes, spoke among themselves but not to her. It reminded her of her reception at Maple Valley: the cool but thorough examination. When a few women did engage her—"Where you from? Cute hat. Where'd you get those shoes? Pretty hair"--the similarity increased.

The youngest ones talked about looks, loves; the older ones gave bitter advice about both. As in Maple Valley every one had a role and a matron ruled the ^{stage} ~~play~~ acting. She hadn't escaped from anything. Maple Valley, Cosey's Hotel, Manila's whorehouse—all three floated in sexual tension and quarrels (open or hidden); in all three status was money; all three insisted on confinement. And all were organized around the needs of men.

Christine's second escape immediately after graduation, initiated by an intolerable home life, was nurtured by a dream of privacy, of independence. She wanted to make the rules, choose her friends, earn and

control her own money. For those reasons alone she believed she would^u never have stayed at Manila's, but she will never know^{now} because Frank Holder claimed her that very night, took her out of there into an organization with the least privacy, the most rules, the fewest choices, and^{was} the biggest, most completely male entity in the world.

PFC Frank Holder had come to Manila's looking to buy some fun and found instead a girl in a navy suit and pearls reading Life Magazine on a sofa. Christine accepted his invitation to dinner. By dessert they had plans. Love so instant it felt like fate. As marriages go, it wasn't bad. As love goes, it was ridiculous.

Christine parked and pulled down the visor's mirror to see if she was presentable. It was a move she was not accustomed to, but one she made because of an encounter on her first visit to Gwendolyn East's office. About to enter the building, she felt a tap on her shoulder. A woman in a baseball cap and track suit grinned up at her.

"Ain't you Christine Cosey?"

"Yes, I am."

"I thought that was you. I used to work at Cosey's. Way back."

"Is that so?"

"I remember you. Best legs on the beach. My, you used to be so pretty. Your skin, your hair. I see you still got those eyes, though. You don't mind me saying that, do you"? ^{You was one gorgeous thing,}

"Of course not," said Christine. "Ugly women know everything about beauty."

She didn't look back to see if the woman spit or laughed. Yet on each subsequent visit to the lawyer's office, she couldn't stop herself ^{from} checking the mirror.

Gwendolyn was not pleased. The whole point of an office was scheduled appointments. Christine's entrance had been like a break-in.

"We have to move," said Christine pulling the chair closer to the desk. "Something's going on."

"I beg your pardon?" Gwendolyn asked.

"This will business. She has to be stopped."

Gwendolyn decided that encouraging this rough client was not worth

the so far non--forthcoming settlement fee. "Listen Christine. I support you, you know that, and a judge might also. But you are living there, rent free, no expenses. The fact is it could be said that Mrs. Cosey is taking care of you when she is under no obligation to do so. And the benefit of being awarded the property is, in a way, already yours in a manner of speaking. Better, maybe."

"What are you saying? She could put me out on the street any day if she wants to."

"I know," Gwendolyn replied, "but in twenty years she hasn't. What do you make of that?"

"Slavery is what I make of it."

"Come on, Christine." Gwendolyn frowned. "You're not in a rest home or on welfare..."

"Welfare! Welfare?" Christine shouted the word at first then whispered it. "Look. If she dies who gets the house?"

"Whomever she designates."

"Like a brother or a nephew or a cousin or a hospital, right?"

"Whomever."

"Not necessarily to me, right?"

"Only if she wills it."

"No point in killing her then?"

"Christine. You are too funny."

"You don't understand. She's just now hired somebody. A girl. A young girl. She doesn't need me anymore."

"Well," Gwendolyn was thoughtful. "Do you think she would agree to a kind of lease agreement? Something that guarantees you a place there and support at some level in return for...services?"

Christine threw her head back and closed her eyes, praying for a new language to make herself understood. Slowly, tapping her middle finger on the lawyer's desk, ^{she stressed} ~~to stress~~ each word. "I am the last the only blood relative of William Cosey. I have taken care of his house and his widow for twenty years. I have cooked, cleaned, washed her underwear, laundered her sheets, done the shopping..."

"I know,"

"You don't know! You don't! She is replacing me."

"Wait now."

"She is! That's been her whole life, don't you get it? Replacing me, getting rid of me. I'm always last; all the time the one being told to go, get out."

"Christine, please."

"This is my place. I had my sixteenth birthday party in that house. When I was at school it was my address. It's where I belong and nobody is going to wave some liquor splashed menu at me and put me out of it!"

"But you were away from the property for years..."

"Fuck you! If you don't know the difference between property and a home you need to be kicked in the face you stupid, you dumb, ~~you~~-lawyer, you! You're fired!"

Once there was a little girl with white bows on each of her four plaits. She had a bedroom all to herself above a big hotel. Sometimes she let her brand new friend stay over and they laughed till they hiccuped under the sheets.

Then one day the little girl's mother came to tell her she would have to leave her bedroom and sleep in a smaller room on another floor. When

she asked her mother why, she was told it was for her own protection.

There were things she shouldn't see or hear or know about.

The little girl was so upset she ran away. For hours she walked a road smelling of oranges until a man with a big round hat and a badge found her and took her home. There she fought to reclaim her bedroom. They relented, but soon after she was sent away, far away, from things not to be seen, heard or known about.

Except for the man in the round hat, no one saw her cry. No one ever has.

MTK