



## Chapter 3

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### CHAPTER THREE

An orange-scented road to Harbor City was what Christine expected because three times the odor 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. 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 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 "For the Good Times") 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. If he had been allowed to see the result of getting rid of one woman, it might help the new one convert her own rental in his arms to a longer lease.

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~~ <sup>Shame-filled</sup> 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 sure to be dead by now or propped up in bed paying some teenage welfare mother a hundred dollars to nibble his toes while a day nurse monitored his oxygen flow. It was a scene she had to work at because the last sight she'd had of him was as seductive as the first— and 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 same cologne. Christine had thought it was unique—a private gesture from a thoughtful 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, seduced, offered his lovely 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 hooker's mattress aired daily to rid it of the 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. Manila's 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 should not have become more and more pitiful. 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~~ <sup>hurried</sup> but equally ~~disastrous~~ <sup>disastrous</sup>. 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 a fresh 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 a father's heroic exploits) Christine discovered a way to convert a return to Silk in shame



and on borrowed money into an act of filial responsibility—taking care of her ailing mother and a noble battle for justice—her lawful share of the Cosey estate.

She remembered the bus ride back, punctured by drifts of sleep flavored with sea salt. With one explosive exception (during which fury blinded her) it was her first glimpse of Silk in twenty-eight years. Neat houses stood on streets named for the trees destroyed to build them. Maceo's was still across from Lamb of God, holding its own against a new hamburger place called Patty's. Then home: ~~the strangest place in the world.~~ A <sup>down</sup> familiar place that when you left kept changing behind your back. The creamy oil painting you carried in your head turned into house paint. Vibrant, magical neighbors became misty outlines of themselves. Then the house nailed <sup>down</sup> in your dreams and nightmares comes undone. Not sparkling but shabby, yet even more desirable because what had happened to it had happened to you. The house had not shrunk; you had. <sup>\* you were not strong</sup> Which is to say it was more yours than ever.

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

*\* The windows were not askew — you were,*



came to an agreement of sorts because May was hopeless, the place filthy, Heed's ~~disabling~~ <sup>disabling</sup> arthritis was ~~deforming~~ her hands and because nobody in town could stand 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. The level of desperation it took to force her way in was high for she was entering a house its owner had set fire to—had in fact begun the fire in Christine's bed. For safety she settled in the little apartment next to the kitchen. Some relief surfaced when she saw Heed's useless hands, but knowing what the woman was capable of still caused her heart to beat raggedly in Heed's presence. No one was slyer or more vindictive. So the door between the kitchen and Christine's rooms had a very strong lock.

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. Her slide from spoiled girl child to tarnished, never-was homelessness had been neither slow nor hidden.



Everybody knew. There was no homecoming in elegant auto driven by successful husband. No degree-in-hand, family-in-tow return. Certainly no fascinating stories about the difficulty of running one's own business or the limitations placed on one's time by demanding executives, clients, patients, agents or trainers. In short no hometown sweep from hints of fulfillment to generous condescension. She was a flop but she was also a Cosey, 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 whiskey-driven desires. Which turned out to be 1. "Julia II" to Sandler Gibson. 2. Montenegro Coronas to Boss 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 Dumb Tommy "the best blues guitar player on God's earth." Feeling good, no doubt, from the Wild Turkey straight, 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. Following his death sixteen years later 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 flared like snake cowl: Why was he giving Sandler his newest boat? What Coronas? Boss Silk's been dead for years, so does his son get them? Chief Buddy 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 one summer 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 rubbish 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 nest of beach rats who bathed in a barrel and slept in their clothes? Or is she claiming Cosey blood along with Cosey land?

After mulling over what the girl had told her, Christine had retreated to her apartment—two rooms and bath annexed to the kitchen, servant quarters where L once ruled. Unlike the memory-and-junk-jammed rest of the house the uncluttered quiet there was soothing. Except for pots of plants being nurtured back to health or rescued from violent weather, her apartment looked much the same as it had fifty years ago when she hid there under L's bed. Misting begonia leaves Christine found herself unable to come to a conclusion for a new line of action, so she decided to consult her lawyer. She waited until Romen was due and Junior out of sight on the third floor. <sup>Earlier at breakfast,</sup> Dressed in clothes Heed must have leant her (a red suit not seen in public in thirty five years) Junior had looked ~~at breakfast~~ like a Sunday migrant. Except for the boots, last night's leather was gone, as was the smell of street life <sup>g</sup> she had brought into the house. When Christine saw



Romen puttering around in the sunshine, inspecting ice damage done to the shrubs, she called him to help her with the garage door still stuck in ice, 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 Boss 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 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 lethal in her hand and was treated like dog shit.

Come to think of it, every love she had led straight to jail. First Ernie Holder, whom she married at seventeen, got them both arrested at an illegal social club. Then Fruit, 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, slinking 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. <sup>those things she would die rather than pawn</sup> Aside from ~~that~~ <sup>the rings she would never sell</sup> she had a recently cancelled MasterCard and seven dollars in change. She was as <sup>an orphan</sup> 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 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 <sup>Manila's</sup> ~~her~~ concern.

Christine had all of these requisites in 1947. The bus driver 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, <sup>tiny</sup> ~~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. Her plan was to find secretarial work or, even better, some high-paying post-war work in a factory. Now, fresh from a sixteenth birthday party and graduation at Maple Valley she had landed in a place her mother would have called "a stinking brothel" (as in "Is he going to turn this place into a...."). Christine had laughed. Nervously. This is Celestial ground, she thought, remembering the scar faced woman on the beach. The girls sauntered through the <sup>living</sup> 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; the tentative, vaguely hostile questions. When a few of Manila's girls did engage her—"Where you from? Cute hat. Where'd you get those shoes? Pretty hair"--the similarity increased. The youngest ones talked about their looks, their loves; the older



ones gave bitter advice about both. As in Maple Valley every one had a role and a matron ruled the stage. 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); all three insisted on confinement; in all three status was money. And all were organized around the needs of men. Christine's second escape, initiated by a home life turned dangerous, was fed 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 never have stayed at Manila's, but she will never know because, being a colored girl in the nineteen forties with an education that suited her for nothing but wifehood, it was easy for Ernie Holder to claim her that very night. He took her out of there into an organization with the least privacy, the most rules and the fewest choices: the biggest, ~~most~~ <sup>totally</sup> completely male entity in the world.

PFC Ernest 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 had 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. Lord you was one foxy thing. You don't mind me saying that, do you"?

"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 checking the mirror. The "pretty <sup>hair</sup> ~~girl~~<sup>ed</sup>" need a cut and a style—any style. The skin was still unlined, but <sup>"those"</sup> ~~the~~ eyes, looking out, never inward, seem to belong to somebody else.

Gwendolyn <sup>East</sup> 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 <sup>SCANNED the ceiling</sup> ~~closed her eyes~~ as though searching for a new language to make herself understood. Slowly she tapped her middle finger on the lawyer's desk to stress certain words. "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 away 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— 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 <sup>beneath the attic in</sup> ~~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. <sup>Her mother</sup> ~~They~~ relented, but soon after she was sent away, far away, from things not to be

(over)



but stuck a key in the lock to lock  
her in at night. ~~When~~

/  
the bedroom.

seen, heard or known about.

Except for the man <sup>wearing a</sup> ~~in the~~ round hat <sup>and a badge</sup>, no one saw her cry. No one ever has. Even now her "still got those" eyes were dry. But now they were, for the first time, seeing the treacherous world her mother knew. How she had hated her mother for expelling her from her bedroom, and, when Boss Silk brought her back, smacking her face so hard Christine's chin hit her shoulder. Then sending her away to school. Now she understood her mother. The world May knew had been invaded, occupied by an army of scum. Without vigilance and constant protection it slid away from you, left your heart fluttering, temples throbbing racing down a road that had lost its citrus.

They called her mother crazy and speculated as to why: widowhood, overwork, no sex, SNIC. It was none of that. Clarity was May's problem. By 1971, when Christine came home for Cosey's funeral, her mother's clarity had been accumulating for years. <sup>It</sup> ~~She~~ had gone from the mild acuteness they called kleptomania to outright brilliance. <sup>\*</sup> ~~She~~ burned look <sup>=</sup> out fires on the beach. Raised havoc with Buddy Silk when refused <sup>her</sup>

purchase of a gun. The sheriff's father, Boss Silk, would have let her, but

\* She Covered her bedroom windows with  
Painted panels of plywood, red  
painted



his son had a different view of Negroes with guns, even though they both wanted to shoot the same people. <sup>Now Christine realized that</sup> ~~Yet~~ May's understanding of the situation was profound. She took to wearing Army Navy surplus and even at the funeral, having been encouraged by L to wear a black pants suit, she still carried her camouflage outfit under her arm because, contrary to what Christine thought then, it was true that at any minute disguise might be needed in the enemy occupied zone she, and now Christine, lived in. <sup>→ (over)</sup>

Heed had long wanted to have May put away but L's judgment, more restraining than Cosey's, <sup>stopped her</sup> ~~prevented Heed from success~~. When the menu was read for the "will" it was taken to be, and "Billy Boy's wife" was awarded the hotel, Heed shot straight up out of the chair.

"To a nutcase? He leaves our business to a nut case?"

It got ugly and stayed that way until the lawyer slapped the table, assuring Heed that no one would (could?) stop her from running the hotel. She was needed and besides her husband had bequeathed her the house, the cash. At which point May had said, <sup>damn</sup> "I beg your pardon?"

The argument that followed was a refined version of the ones that had been seething among the women for decades: all had been displaced by

~~She thought~~ <sup>the</sup> 1 years tramping up  
and down those stairs carrying  
meals she was too proud to ruin,  
wading through layers of competing  
perfumes, trying not to shiver  
before the "come on" eyes in the  
portrait over the bed, collecting  
soiled clothes, washing out the tub,  
pulling hairs from the drain —  
if this wasn't hell it was the lobby.



another; each had a unique claim on Cosey's affection; each had either "saved" him from some disaster or relieved him of an impending one. The only difference during this pre-burial quarrel was L whose normal silence seemed glacial then because there was no expression on her face, no listening, no empathy—nothing. Taking advantage of L's apparent indifference Heed shouted that unstable people should not be allowed to inherit property because they needed "perfectionate" care. Only the arrival of the undertaker, announcing the need for immediate departure to the church kept Christine's hand from becoming a fist. Temporarily, anyway, because at the grave site, seeing Heed's false tears, her exaggerated shuddering shoulders; watching townsfolk treat her as the sole mourner, and the two real Cosey women as unwelcome visitors; ~~and~~ angry that her attempt to place the diamonds on Cosey's fingers had been rudely rejected—Christine exploded. She leapt toward Heed with a raised arm which L, having suddenly come to life, bent behind her back. "I'll tell." she whispered to one, the other or to no one in particular. And Heed, having thrust her face into Christine's, backed off. Nothing L said was ever idle. There were many details of her sorry life that Christine did not want

exposed. Dislike she could handle, but not ridicule. Panicked, she closed the knife and settled for an icy glare. But Heed—what was she afraid of? What secret was she hostage to? May, however, understood <sup>immediately</sup> ~~completely~~, and took her daughter's side. Stepping forward into that feline heat, she removed Heed's silly hat and tossed it into the air. Perfect. A giggle from somebody opened a space in which Heed chased her hat and Christine cooled.

Disgust for the tacky display, the selfish disregard for rites due the deceased hero they each claimed to love, entertained folk for years. Yet in that moment, by tearing Heed's hat off, un-crowning the false queen before the world, May's clarity was at its most extreme. As it had been when she did everything to separate the two when they were little girls. She had known instinctively the invader was a snake: penetrating, undermining, sullyng, devouring.

Sure enough Heed began to research ways to remove her mother-in-law to a rest home or an asylum. But nothing she did—not spreading lies, inventing outrages, seeking advice from psychiatric institutions—could force May out. With L watching and without an accomplice, Heed failed. She was



forced to put up with the dazzling clarity of the woman who hated her almost as much as Christine did. May's war did not end when Cosey died. She spent her last year<sup>s</sup> watching in ecstasy as Heed's grasping hands turned slowly into wings. Still, Heed's <sup>proposed for her problems with May</sup> solution had been a good one and a good idea directed at the wrong person was still good. Besides, L was gone. Hospitals were more hospitable. And <sup>Now</sup> with a little coaxing, there might just be an accomplice.

Poor Mama. Poor old May. To keep going, to protect what was hers, crazy-like-a-fox was all she could think of. Husband dead; her crumbling hotel ruled by a rabid beach rat, ignored by the man for whom she had worked so hard, abandoned by her daughter, a running joke to neighbors—she had no place and nothing to command. So she recognized the war declared on her and fought it alone. In bunkers of her own industry. In trenches she dug near watch fires at ocean's edge. A solitary mis-understood intelligence shaping and controlling its own environment. Now she thought of it, <sup>Christine's</sup> ~~her~~ own disorganized past was the result of laziness—emotional laziness. She had always thought of herself as active,

but, unlike May she'd been simply an engine adjusting to whatever gear *a*.

loverman chose.

No more.