



"An orange-scented road..."

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An orange-scented road to Harbor was what Christine expected because three times the aroma 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 fragrance 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~~ ^{Cadillac} 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. Killing 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 shame-faced end of their affair, the three years with him--well, near him; he was mightily un-divorceable—were the best. 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 insisted her kept woman years were the best. 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. 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' stench. 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 ^{Silver} ~~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, a run for her life, was equally disastrous. Both escapes were fed by malice, but the third and last, in 1971, was a calm attempt to avert the slaughter she had in mind. Leaving other places: Harbor, Jackson, Grafenwoehr, Tampa, Waycross, Boston, 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 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 heroes and the trees destroyed to build them. Maceo's was still on Gladiator across from Lamb of God, holding its own against a new hamburger place on Prince Arthur called Patty's. Then home: a 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. The house nailed down 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. The windows were not askew—you were. Which is to say it was more yours than ever.

Heed's look, cold and long, had been anything but inviting 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 arthritis was disabling 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 returning to a house whose owner was willing to burn down just to keep her out. Had once, in fact, set fire to Christine's bed for precisely that purpose. So this time, 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 hidden key and 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 ^{imagined}~~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 homelessness had been neither slow nor hidden. Everybody knew. There was no homecoming for her in elegant auto driven by successful husband. No degree-in-hand-with-happy-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 full of hints of personal fulfillment and veiled condescension. She was a flop. Disreputable. But she was also a Cosey, and in Harbor 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 1958 menu outlining his whiskey-driven desires. Which turned out to be 1. "Julia II" to Dr. Ralph. 2. Montenegro Coronas to ^{Chief} ~~Boss~~ Silk. 3. the Hotel to Billy's Boy's wife. 4. the Monarch Street 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 a few 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 Dr. Ralph his newest boat? What

Coronas? ^{Chief Buddy's} ~~Boss~~ Silk's been dead for years, so does his son get them? ^{Boss} ~~Chief~~

^{Silk} ~~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? ^{he didn't mention you at all!} 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 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. With a certain amusement, the court examined the greasy menu, lingering lazily 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 ^{-y} and traces of May's lunacy). If there was anything ^{else} [^]—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.

sputtered her coffee

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 used to stay. Unlike the memory-and-junk-jammed rest of the house the uncluttered quiet there was soothing. Except for pots of plants rescued from violent weather, the apartment looked much the same as it had some 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. Earlier, at breakfast, dressed in clothes Heed must have leant her (a red suit not seen in public since the Korean War) Junior had looked like a Sunday migrant.

Except for the boots, last night's leather was gone, as was the street life smell 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~~ ^{Chief Buddy}, gentle, respectful, as though her violence 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, inciting mayhem, obstructing traffic and resisting arrest-- she had nothing lethal in her hand and was treated like sewage.

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 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. Aside from the rings she would die rather than pawn, she had a recently cancelled MasterCard and seven dollars plus 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 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 ~~certain~~ ^{SANCTIMONIOUS} 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 Manila's 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, 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. Fresh from an overdue sixteenth birthday party and graduation from 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 a scar faced woman on the beach. The girls sauntered through the dining room to the living 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~~^{politely} hostile questions. When a few of Manila's girls did engage her—"Where you from? Cute hat. Sharp shoes too, where'd you get em? 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 resentment; all three insisted on confinement; in all three status was money. And all were organized around the pressing 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 wifedom, it was easy as pie for Ernie Holder to claim her that very night. So long independence; so long privacy. He took her out of there into an organization with the least privacy, the most rules and the fewest choices: the biggest, totally male entity in the world.

PFC Ernest Holder had come to Manila's looking to buy some fun and found instead a lovely 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 had its moments. 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?"

"I am."

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

"Is that so?"

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

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

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 hair" needed a cut and a style—any style. The skin was still unlined, but "those eyes," looking out never inward, seem to belong to somebody else.

Gwendolyn East 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 whispered the word at first then shouted it. "Look. If she dies who gets the house?"

"Whoever she designates."

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

"Whoever."

"Not necessarily to me, right?"

"Only if she wills it."

"No point in killing her then?"

"Christine. You are too funny."

"You listen to me. 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 for life and support at some level in return for...services?"

Christine threw her head back and scanned the ceiling as though searching for a new language to make herself understood. What to say to this lawyer woman shouldn't be all that hard. After all Miss East had Up Beach history, was the granddaughter of a Cannery girl who died young of a stroke. 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. For free 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 Cannery trash! 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 beneath the attic in 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. Her mother relented, but stuck a key in the lock to lock her in the bedroom at night. Soon after she was sent away, far away, from things not to be seen, heard or known about.

Except for the man wearing a round hat and a badge, no one saw her cry. No one ever has. Even now her "still got those" eyes were dry. But they were also, for the first time, seeing the treacherous world her mother knew.

She had hated her mother for expelling her from her bedroom and, when

~~Chief Buddy~~

~~Boss Silk~~ brought her back, smacking her face so hard Christine's chin hit

her shoulder. Then sending her away to Maple Valley School where a

mother like May was an embarrassment. Maple Valley teachers were

alarmed by acting-out Negroes, but they flinched openly when reading

May's incoherent letters to the Atlanta Daily World about white honor and

She languished for
years
and
where

misguided "freedom rides." Christine was happy to confine their relationship to letters she could hide or destroy. Other than a little gossip about famous guests, there was nothing in them of interest to a thirteen year old trying to be popular and as the years passed she didn't even understand them. Christine could laugh at her own ignorance now, but then it was as though May wrote in code: CORE is sitting-in in Chicago (who was she, this Cora?) Mussolini resigned (resigned to what?) Detroit on fire. Did Hitler kill Roosevelt or did Roosevelt kill Hitler—anyway they both died in the same month. Most of the letters, however, were about Heed's doings. Plots, intrigue. Now she finally understood her mother. The world May knew was always crumbling; her place in it never secure. A poor, hungry preacher's child, May's life depended on colored people who rocked boats only at sea. Events begun in 1942 with her father-in-law's second marriage heaped up quickly throughout the war and long after until, disoriented by her struggle against a certain element in her house and beyond it, she became comic. Yet her instincts, thought Christine, if not her methods, were correct. Her world had been invaded, occupied, turned into 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.

Everyone decided her mother was insane and speculated as to why: widowhood, overwork, no sex, SNCC. 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. It had gone from the mild acuteness they called kleptomania to outright brilliance. She covered her bedroom windows with plywood painted red for danger. She lit look-out fires on the beach. Raised havoc with Boss ~~Buddy~~ ^{Buddy} Silk when he refused her purchase of a gun. The sheriff's father, Chief ^{Buddy} Silk, would have let her, but his son had a different view of Negroes with guns, even though they both wanted to shoot the same people. Now Christine realized that May's understanding of the situation was profound. She had been right in 1971 to sneer at Christine's fake military jacket; Che-style beret, black leotard, mini-skirt. Sharp as a tiger's tooth, May instantly recognized the real deal as was clear from her own attire. People laughed. So what? The army helmet May had taken to wearing was an authentic position and a powerful statement. Even at the funeral, having been encouraged by L to substitute a black scarf, she still carried it under her arm because, contrary to what

Christine thought then, it was true that at any minute protection might be needed in the enemy occupied zone she, and now Christine, lived in. In that zone, readiness was all. Again Christine felt the sheer bitterness of the past two decades tramping up and down the 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 painting over that grotesque bed, collecting soiled clothes, washing out the tub, pulling hairs from the drain—if this wasn't hell it was the lobby.

Heed had long wanted to have May put away but L's judgment, more restraining than Cosey's, stopped her. 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, adjusting her helmet, had said, "I beg your damn pardon?"

The argument that followed was a refined version of the ones that had been seething among the women since the beginning: all had been displaced by 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 later 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; angry that her attempt to place the diamonds on Cosey's fingers had been thwarted—Christine exploded. Reaching into her pocket 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. Heed, having thrust her face into Christine's as soon as it was safe, 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, even ridicule. But not pity. Panicked, she closed the knife and settled for an icy glare. But Heed—why had she obeyed so fast? What was she afraid of? May, however, understood what was needed and immediately took her daughter's side. Stepping forward into that feline heat, she removed Heed's *Gone With the Wind* hat and tossed it into the air. Perfect. A giggle from somebody opened a space in which Heed chased her hat and Christine cooled.

The tacky display, the selfish disregard for rites due the deceased each claimed to love, angered people, and they said so. What they did not say was how delighted they must have been by the graveside entertainment featuring beret, bonnet and helmet. Yet in that moment, by tearing Heed's silly 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 intruder was a snake: penetrating, undermining, sullyng, devouring.

According to May's letters, as far back as 1960 Heed had begun to research ways to ~~put~~ⁱⁿ remove her ~~mother-in-law~~ to a rest home or an asylum. But nothing Heed 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 watching in ecstasy as Heed's grasping hands turned slowly into wings. Still, Heed's solution for her problems with May 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 now, 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 slaved, abandoned by her daughter to strange ideas, 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, Christine's own disorganized past was the result of laziness—emotional laziness. She had always thought of herself as fierce, active but, unlike May, she'd been simply an engine adjusting to whatever gear a loverman chose.

No more.