



"The Ocean is my man now..."

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THE OCEAN IS MY MAN NOW. HE KNOWS WHEN TO REAR AND HUMP HIS BACK. WHEN TO BE QUIET AND SIMPLY WATCH A WOMAN. HE IS NOT A FALSE-HEARTED MAN. HIS SOUL IS DEEP DOWN THERE AND SUFFERING. I PAY ATTENTION AND KNOW ALL ABOUT HIM. THAT KIND OF UNDERSTANDING CAN ONLY COME FROM PRACTICE AND I HAD A LOT OF THAT WITH MR. COSEY. YOU COULD SAY I FATHOMED HIS MIND. NOT RIGHT AWAY, OF COURSE. I WAS JUST A GIRL WHEN I WAS INTRODUCED TO HIM—A MARRIED MAN WITH A SON AND A SICK WIFE WHO NEEDED CARE EVERY MINUTE OF THE DAY AND NIGHT. HE SAID HER NAME, JULIA, SO SOFT YOU COULD HEAR THE LOVE IN IT AS WELL AS THE APOLOGY. THEIR SON, BILLY BOY, WAS TWELVE WHEN JULIA COSEY PASSED AND EVEN THOUGH I WAS ONLY FOURTEEN, IT WAS THE MOST NATURAL THING IN THE WORLD FOR ME TO STAY ON

AND LOOK AFTER THE TWO OF THEM. ONLY A WIDE HEART COULD HOLD THAT MUCH LOVE FOR A WIFE AND HAVE SO MUCH ROOM LEFT OVER. IT TOOK ME A WHILE TO LEARN THAT. WHEN JULIA COSEY DIED MR. COSEY TRANSFERRED ALL OF WHAT HE FELT TO HIS SON. LUCKY FOR HIM, THE BOY HAD THAT INSIGHT CHILDREN HAVE TO USE WITH GROWN UPS TO STAY LOVED. NOT BY DOING WHAT THEY SAY, BUT FIGURING OUT WHAT THEY REALLY WANT. A DADDY CAN SAY "FEND FOR YOURSELF, BOY" WHILE HE MEANS "DON'T SHOW ME UP; HURRY UP AND FAIL." OR HE CAN SAY "I'LL TEACH YOU THE WORLD," MEANING "I'M SCARED TO DEATH OF YOU." I DON'T KNOW WHAT MR. COSEY SAID TO HIS SON ALONG THOSE LINES, BUT WHATEVER IT WAS, BILLY BOY UNDERSTOOD IT TO MEAN "BE SOMETHING I CAN GET UP FOR IN THE MORNING; GIVE ME SOMETHING TO DO WHILE I PADDLE ALONG." SO IT DIDN'T MATTER MUCH IF HE WAS A VERY GOOD SON OR A REALLY BAD ONE. HE ONLY HAD TO BE INTERESTING. JUST BY LUCK, I SUSPECT, HE CHOSE THE FORMER. MR. COSEY WAS PLEASED WITH EVERYTHING BILLY BOY DID AND SAID. HE LAVISHED MONEY ON HIM AND TOOK HIM EVERYWHERE. WITH HIS

HAIR PARTED IN THE MIDDLE AND A CAP JUST LIKE HIS FATHER'S—WHAT
A PAIR THEY MUST HAVE BEEN ^{*}SITTING IN THE BLEACHERS AT EAGLE
GAMES, ON CAMP STOOLS AT SING-OUT COMPETITIONS, AT NARROW
TABLES IN JOINTS WHERE THE ^{most gifted}~~BEST UNKNOWN~~ MUSICIANS PLAYED.
THEY SLEPT IN ROOMING HOUSES OR JUST KNOCKED ON A DOOR.
MR. COSEY SAID HE WANTED BILLY BOY TO SEE MEN ENJOY THE
PERFECTION OF THEIR WORK SO THEY WENT TO PERDIDO STREET FOR
KING OLIVER, MEMPHIS FOR THE TIGERS, BIRMINGHAM FOR THE
BARONS. THEY WATCHED HOW COOKS EXAMINED MARKET PRODUCE,
WATERMEN SORT OYSTERS, BARTENDERS, POOL HALL RASCALS, PICK-
POCKETS AND CHOIRMASTERS. EVERYTHING WAS A LABOR LESSON
FROM ^{a MAN}~~SOMEONE~~ WHO LOVED HIS SKILL THE WAY A MAN LOVES A
WOMAN—WHICH IS TO SAY EVERY WHICH WAY (PROVIDED HE DIDN'T
HAVE TO BE ONE). MR. COSEY SAID IT WAS LIFE'S REAL EDUCATION,
BUT IT LOOKED TO ME LIKE TRUANCY FROM HIS OWN FATHER'S
SCHOOL. A WAY TO FLUNK THE LESSONS DARK TAUGHT HIM.

~~ALL THAT~~ BESOTTED ATTENTION DIDN'T SPOIL THE BOY. HE KNEW
HIS DUTY AND SPLASHED IN IT, COULD SMILE EVEN AS HIS FATHER

** one lounging in the barber shop while the other got a trim,*

BRAGGED ABOUT HIM IN FRONT OF PATIENTLY ~~SMILING~~ FRIENDS.
BRAGGED ABOUT HIS ARM WITH A BALL, HIS COOL HEAD IN
EMERGENCY. HOW HE HAD EXTRACTED A BENT NAIL STUCK IN A
LITTLE GIRL'S FACE BETTER THAN ANY DOCTOR COULD HAVE. I SAW
THAT ONE MYSELF. I'D BROUGHT THE LUNCH THEY WANTED ONE DAY
WHILE THEY WASTED TIME ON THE BEACH-KNOCKING PEBBLES INTO
THE SEA WITH BASEBALL BATS. DOWN A WAYS A GIRL, MAYBE NINE OR
TEN YEARS OLD, WAS CASTING INTO THE WAVES. FOR WHAT, WHO
KNOWS. NOTHING WITH SCALES SWIMS THIS CLOSE TO THE SHORE.
ON THE SECOND THROW ^{the wind turned and the} ~~HER~~ HOME MADE FISH HOOK HOOKED HER.
HER FINGERS WERE DRIPPING RED WHEN BILLY BOY GOT TO HER. HE
WAS DEFT ENOUGH AND SHE WAS GRATEFUL STANDING THERE
CUPPING HER FACE WITH OUT A TEAR OR A MOAN. BUT WE TOOK HER
BACK TO THE HOTEL ANYWAY. I SAT HER IN THE GAZEBO, CLEANED
HER CHEEK AND SPREAD ALOE GUM AND HONEY ON THE WOUND,
HOPING SHE WAS TOO STRONG FOR LOCKJAW. OVER TIME, AS
USUAL, MR. COSEY PLUMPED UP THE STORY. DEPENDING ON HIS
MOOD AND HIS AUDIENCE YOU WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THE CHILD

WAS ABOUT TO BE DRAGGED INTO THE WATER BY A SWORDFISH IF
BILLY BOY HADN'T SAVED HER. OR THAT ^{he} BILLY HAD REMOVED A HOOK
FROM A ^{little} BABY'S EYEBALL. BILLY BOY SMILED AT THESE FAT, LOVABLE
LIES, AND TOOK HIS FATHER'S ADVICE IN EVERYTHING INCLUDING
MARRIAGE: TO ^{wed} MARRY A DEVOTED NOT CALCULATING GIRL. SO BILLY
BOY CHOSE MAY WHO, AS ANYBODY COULD SEE, WOULD NEITHER
DISRUPT NOR RIVAL THE BOND BETWEEN FATHER AND SON. MR.
COSEY WAS ALARMED AT FIRST NOT BEING PRIVY TO HIS SON'S
SELECTION, BUT WAS MADE EASY WHEN THE BRIDE NOT ONLY FELL IN
LOVE WITH THE HOTEL, BUT SHOWED SIGNS OF UNDERSTANDING
WHAT SUPERIOR MEN REQUIRE. IF I WAS A SERVANT IN THAT PLACE;
MAY WAS ITS SLAVE. HER WHOLE LIFE WAS MAKING SURE THOSE
COSEY MEN HAD WHAT THEY WANTED. THE FATHER MORE THAN THE
SON; THE FATHER MORE THAN HER OWN DAUGHTER. AND WHAT MR.
COSEY, WIDOWER, WANTED IN 1930 SHOULD HAVE BEEN IMPOSSIBLE.
THAT WAS THE YEAR THE WHOLE COUNTRY BEGAN TO LIVE ON RELIEF
THE WAY UP BEACH PEOPLE DID-IF THEY WERE LUCKY, THAT IS. IF NOT,
THEY KILLED THEMSELVES OR TOOK TO THE ROAD. MR. COSEY,

HOWEVER, TOOK ADVANTAGE. HE BOUGHT A BROKE DOWN 'WHITES ONLY' CLUB AT SOOKER BAY FROM A MAN HONEST ENOUGH TO SAY THAT ALTHOUGH HE SWORE TO GOD AND HIS PAPPY HE WOULD NEVER SELL TO NIGGERS, HE WAS HAPPY AS A CLAM TO BREAK HIS OATH AND TAKE HIS FAMILY AWAY FROM THAT BIRD-INFESTED SIDEWALK FOR HURRICANES.

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT IN THE TEETH OF THE DEPRESSION COLORED PEOPLE WOULD WANT TO PLAY, OR IF THEY DID HOW COULD THEY PAY FOR IT? MR. COSEY, THAT'S WHO. BECAUSE HE KNEW WHAT A HARMONICA PLAYER ON A STREET CORNER KNEW: WHERE THERE WAS MUSIC THERE WAS MONEY. CHECK THE CHURCHES IF YOU DOUBT IT. AND HE BELIEVED SOMETHING ELSE. IF COLORED MUSICIANS WERE TREATED WELL, PAID WELL AND CODDLED, THEY WOULD TELL ONE ANOTHER ABOUT SUCH A PLACE WHERE THEY COULD WALK IN THE FRONT DOOR NOT THE SERVICE ENTRANCE; EAT IN THE DINING ROOM NOT THE KITCHEN; SIT WITH THE GUESTS, SLEEP IN BEDS NOT THEIR AUTOMOBILES OR IN A WHORE HOUSE ACROSS TOWN. A PLACE WHERE THEIR INSTRUMENTS WERE SAFE, THEIR DRINKS

UN-WATERED, THEIR TALENT HONORED SO THEY DIDN'T HAVE TO GO TO COPENHAGEN OR PARIS FOR LOVE. FLOCKS OF COLORED PEOPLE WOULD PAY TO BE IN THAT ATMOSPHERE. THOSE WHO HAD THE MONEY WOULD PAY IT; THOSE WHO DIDN'T WOULD FIND IT. IT COMFORTS EVERYBODY TO THINK OF ALL NEGROES AS DIRT POOR, AND OF THOSE WHO WERE NOT, WHO EARNED GOOD MONEY AND KEPT IT, AS SOME KIND OF SHAMEFUL, MIRACLE. WHITE PEOPLE LIKED IT BECAUSE NEGROES WITH MONEY AND SENSE MAKE THEM NERVOUS. COLORED PEOPLE LIKED IT BECAUSE, IN THOSE DAYS, THEY TRUSTED POVERTY, BELIEVED IT WAS VIRTUE AND A SURE SIGN OF HONESTY. TOO MUCH MONEY HAD A WHIFF OF EVIL AND SOMEBODY ELSE'S BLOOD. MR. COSEY DIDN'T CARE. HE WANTED A PLAYGROUND FOR FOLK WHO FELT THE WAY HE DID, WHO STUDIED WAYS TO CONTRADICT HISTORY. *With a plan instead of a palm.*

BUT IT HAD TO BE SPECIAL: EVENING DRESS IN THE EVENING; SPORT CLOTHES FOR SPORT. AND NO ZOOT SUITS. FLOWERS IN THE BEDROOMS, CRYSTAL ON THE TABLE. MUSIC, DANCING AND, IF YOU

WANTED TO, YOU COULD JOIN A PRIVATE CARD GAME WHERE MONEY
CHANGED HANDS AMONG A FEW FRIENDS, MUSICIANS, DOCTORS
WHO ENJOYED THE EXCITEMENT OF LOSING WHAT MOST PEOPLE
COULDN'T EARN. * (over)

sweet tempered
MAY, A PREACHER'S DAUGHTER BRED TO HARD WORK AND DUTY,
TOOK TO THE BUSINESS LIKE A BEE TO POLLEN. AT FIRST THE TWO OF
US MANAGED THE KITCHEN, WITH BILLY BOY WAITING TABLES. WHEN
IT BECAME CLEAR THAT THE QUEEN AT THE STOVE WAS ME, SHE
MOVED TO HOUSEKEEPING, BOOKKEEPING, PROCURING AND HER
HUSBAND BOOKED THE MUSICIANS. I THINK I DESERVE HALF THE
CREDIT FOR THE WAY THE HOTEL GREW. GOOD FOOD AND FATS
WALLER IS A ONCE IN A LIFETIME COMBINATION. STILL, YOU HAD TO
ADMIRE MAY. SHE WAS THE ONE WHO ARRANGED EVERYTHING, SAW
TO THE LINEN, PAID THE BILLS, CONTROLLED THE HELP. THE TWO OF
US WERE LIKE THE BACK OF A CLOCK. MR. COSEY WAS ITS FACE
TELLING YOU THE TIME WAS NOW.

WHEN WE WERE JUST THE TWO FEMALES, THINGS WENT ALONG
FINE. IT WAS WHEN THE GIRLS GOT IN THE PICTURE—CHRISTINE AND

* He liked George Raft clothes and gangster cars but ^{used his} ~~had a~~ heart like Santa Claus. If a family couldn't pay for a burial he had a quiet word with the undertaker. His friendship with the Sheriff got many a son out of handcuffs. Without a word he took care of a stroke victim's doctor bills and her daughter's college fees. In those days the devoted outweighed the jealous and the hotel basked in his glow.

HEED- THINGS BEGAN TO FRAY. OH, I KNOW THE "REASONS" GIVEN:

CANNERY SMELL, CIVIL RIGHTS, INTEGRATION. AND MAY'S BEHAVIOR

DID GO ^{Strange} INTO ~~HIGH GEAR~~ IN 1955 WHEN THAT BOY FROM CHICAGO

TRIED TO ACT LIKE A MAN AND GOT BEAT TO DEATH FOR HIS TROUBLE. ~~He had such tight eyes,~~

~~IT~~ IT SENT MAY TO THE BEACH WHERE SHE BURIED NOT JUST THE DEED,

^{a flashlight and hard knows what else.} BUT ~~ALL SORTS OF PAPERS~~. WE ALL SHIVERED ABOUT WHAT THEY DID

^{He had such light eyes.} TO THAT BOY, BUT FOR MAY IT WAS A SIGN. ANY DAY NOW SOME

NEGRO WAS GOING TO RILE WAITING WHITES, GIVE THEM AN EXCUSE

TO HANG SOMEBODY AND CLOSE THE HOTEL DOWN. MR. COSEY

DESPISED HER DREAD. I GUESS IT WAS TOO CLOSE TO HOME. HAVING

GROWN UP THE SON OF A STOOGES, HE DANCED ALL THE HARDER.

WHETHER THE PLACE THRIVED OR DIDN'T THE DECLINE STARTED WAY

BEFORE 1955. I FORESAW RUIN IN 1942 WHEN MR. COSEY WAS

MAKING MONEY HAND OVER FIST AND THE HOTEL WAS A

SHOWPLACE. THAT WINDOW OVER THERE LOOKED OUT ON

PARADISE. ONE ME AND MAY MADE BECAUSE WHEN BILLY BOY DIED

MR. COSEY ^{so} ~~FADED~~ FOR A YEAR OR TWO. THEN SUDDENLY HE REVVED

BACK UP, ORDERED SOME FINE SILVERWARE AND ~~TURNED THE PLACE~~

* bought the barber's chair ^{and just} ~~they used to~~ sat in it.

*

every where

~~INTO THE PLACE TO BE.~~ WOMEN TRAILED HIM AND I KEPT MY EYES
 OPEN FOR WHO HE MIGHT ^{*pick*} CHOOSE. THE HOOKED C'S ON THE
 SILVERWARE WORRIED ME BECAUSE I KNEW HE TOOK CASUAL WOMEN
 CASUALLY. SO I WAS KNOCKED OUT OF MY SOCKS IN 1942 WHEN HE
 DID CHOOSE. WORD WAS HE WANTED CHILDREN, LOTS OF
 CHILDREN, TO FILL ~~UP~~ ^{*for him*} THE MIRROR THE WAY BILLY BOY USED TO. FOR
~~THAT~~ ONLY AN UNUSED GIRL WOULD DO. FOR MOTHERHOOD.
 AFTER PLAYING AROUND A ^{*while*} ~~BIT~~, MR. COSEY ENDED UP IN THE MOST
 LIKELY PLACE FOR MAKING BABIES AND THE LEAST LIKELY FOR A VIRGIN.
 UP BEACH. WHERE EVERY WOMAN'S OBITUARY COULD HAVE READ
 "DEATH BY CHILDREN." IT WAS MARRYING HEED THAT LAID THE
 BRICKWORK FOR RUINATION. SEE, HE CHOSE A GIRL ALREADY
 SPOKEN FOR. NOT PROMISED TO ANYONE BY HER PARENTS. THAT
 TRASH GAVE HER UP LIKE THEY WOULD A PUPPY. NO. THE WAY I SEE IT,
 SHE BELONGED TO CHRISTINE AND CHRISTINE BELONGED TO HER.
 ANYWAY, IF HE WAS TRYING TO ^{*make*} RE-CONSTITUTE THE BLOOD HE ONCE
 TRIED TO CORRECT, HE FAILED. HEED NEVER GAVE HIM A TADPOLE
 AND, LIKE MOST MEN, HE BELIEVED THE FAULT WAS HERS. HE WAITED

* *joined us to keep the hotel the hot spot folks loved. , ~~part time~~*
Handsome dog.

A FEW YEARS INTO THE MARRIAGE BEFORE GOING BACK TO HIS
 FAVORITE, BUT BACK HE WENT. YOU'D THINK SINCE ONE OF HIS
 WOMEN HAD A STROKE AFTER ROOTING WITH HIM IN THE SAND, HE'D
 AVOID THE BEACH AS A SETTING FOR FUN. BUT HE DIDN'T. HE LIKED
 IT THERE. GOOD WEATHER OR FOUL. ME TOO.

MOSQUITOES DON'T LIKE MY BLOOD. ONCE I WAS YOUNG
 ENOUGH TO TAKE OFFENSE AT THAT, NOT UNDERSTAND THE
 REJECTION AS A BLESSING. SO YOU CAN SEE WHY I LIKED WALKING
 THE SHORE WAY HOME ^{how} ^{mu99y} ~~WHAT~~ [^]EVER THE WEATHER. THE SKY IS EMPTY
 NOW, ERASED, BUT ^{back} [^] THEN THE MILKY WAY WAS COMMON AS DIRT. ITS
 LIGHT MADE EVERYTHING A LOVELY BLACK AND WHITE MOVIE. NO
 MATTER WHAT YOUR PLACE IN LIFE OR YOUR STATE OF MIND, HAVING
 A STAR PACKED SKY BE PART OF YOUR NIGHT MADE YOU FEEL RICH.
 AND THEN THERE WAS THE SEA. FISHERMEN ^{Say} ~~TELL ME~~ THERE IS LIFE
 DOWN THERE THAT LOOKS LIKE WEDDING VEILS AND ROPES OF GOLD
 WITH RUBY EYES. THEY SAY SOME MAKE YOU THINK OF THE COLLARS
 OF SCHOOL TEACHERS OR PARASOLS MADE OF FLOWERS. THAT'S
 WHAT I WAS THINKING ABOUT ONE ^{hot night} ~~EVENING~~ AFTER A BIRTHDAY

* He even spent his wedding night there which proves how much

CELEBRATION. OFF AND ON, WHENEVER I FELT LIKE IT, I STAYED IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE IN UP BEACH. I WAS ON MY WAY THERE THAT NIGHT, TIRED AS A DOG, WHEN I SAW MR. COSEY WITH HIS SHOES IN HIS HAND WALKING NORTH BACK TOWARD THE HOTEL. I WAS UP AT THE GRASS LINE HOPING TO CATCH A BREEZE STRONG ENOUGH TO GET THE SMOKE AND SUGAR SMELL OUT OF MY UNIFORM. HE WAS FURTHER DOWN, SLOSHING THROUGH THE WAVES. I WAVED AND STARTED TO CALL OUT TO HIM BUT SOMETHING—THE WAY HE HELD HIS HEAD, MAYBE, OR A KIND OF PRIVACY WRAPPED ABOUT HIM—STOPPED ME. I WANTED TO WARN HIM BUT, WEARY AND STILL OUT OF SORTS, I KEPT ON WALKING. DOWN A PIECE I SAW SOMEBODY ELSE. A WOMAN SITTING ON A BLANKET MASSAGING HER HEAD WITH BOTH HANDS. I STOOD THERE WHILE SHE GOT UP, NAKED AS TRUTH, AND WENT INTO THE WAVES. THE TIDE WAS OUT SO SHE HAD TO WALK A LONG TIME FOR THE WATER TO REACH HER WAIST. TALL, RAGGEDY CLOUDS DRIFTED ACROSS THE MOON AND I REMEMBER HOW MY HEART KICKED. POLICE-HEADS WERE ON THE MOVE THEN: THEY HAD ALREADY DROWNED THE JOHNSON BOYS; ALMOST KILLED THE

CANNERY GIRL AND WHO KNEW WHAT ELSE. BUT THIS WOMAN KEPT
ON WADING OUT ^{into black water} AND I COULD TELL SHE WASN'T AFRAID OF
THEM—OR OF ANYTHING BECAUSE SHE STRETCHED, RAISED HER ARMS,
AND DOVE. I REMEMBER THAT ARC BETTER THAN I REMEMBER
YESTERDAY. SHE WAS OUT OF SIGHT FOR A TIME AND I HELD MY
BREATH AS LONG AS SHE DID. FINALLY SHE SURFACED AND I
BREATHED AGAIN WATCHING HER SWIM BACK TO SHALLOW WATER.
SHE STOOD UP AND MASSAGED HER HEAD ONCE MORE. HER HAIR,
FLAT WHEN SHE WENT IN, ROSE UP SLOWLY AND TOOK ON THE SHAPE
OF THE CLOUDS DRAGGING THE MOON. THEN SHE—WELL, MADE A
SOUND. I DON'T KNOW TO THIS DAY WHETHER IT WAS A WORD, A
SCREAM OR A CALL. ALL I KNOW IS THAT ^{it} ~~IS~~ WAS A SOUND I WANTED
TO ANSWER. EVEN THOUGH NORMALLY I'M ^{stone} ~~REAL~~ QUIET. *Celestial.*

I CAN WATCH MY MAN FROM THE PORCH. IN THE
EVENING MOSTLY, BUT SUNRISE TOO WHEN I NEED TO SEE HIS
SHOULDERS COLLARED WITH SEA FOAM. THERE USED TO BE WHITE
WICKER CHAIRS OUT HERE WHERE PRETTY WOMEN DRANK ICED TEA
WITH A DROP OF JACK DANIELS OR CUTTY SARK IN IT. NOTHING LEFT

NOW, SO I SIT ON THE STEPS OR LEAN MY ELBOWS ON THE RAILINGS.
IF I'M REAL STILL AND LISTENING CAREFULLY I CAN HEAR HIS VOICE.
YOU'D THINK WITH ALL THAT STRENGTH, HE'D BE A BASS. BUT, NO.
MY MAN IS A TENOR.