



Chapter 6 [Original Chap. 7/Husband]

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[original Chap. 7/Husband]

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Chapter Six

Correctional girls knew better than to trust a label. "Let set for 5 minutes, then rinse thoroughly" was a suggestion, not an order. Some products needed fifteen minutes; others would cook the scalp instantly. Correctionals knew all about grooming hair—braiding, curling, shampooing, straightening, cutting. And—before coloring privileges were taken away—(x sprayed y with a blast of Natural Instinct)—they practiced tint and dye with professional single mindedness.

Junior slid the tail of a fine-tooth comb through Heed's hair. Then filled the silver valley with a thick stream of Velvet Tress. She had lubricated each parting with Vaseline to take down the pain of its lye. Upon completion she tipped Heed's head gently—this way and that—to check the nape and hairline. The rims of Heed's ears were lightly scarred either from old dye

burns or awkwardly held straightening combs. Junior ran a gloved forefinger slowly over the wounded skin. Then she bent the ear to blot the excess liquid with cotton. Satisfied that the roots were wet and steeping, she tucked the hair into a shower cap. Washing utensils, folding towels, she listened to Heed drone—the voluptuous murmur that always accompanies hair dressing. Massage, caress by devoted hands are natural companions to a warm water rinse, to the shy squeak of clean hair. In a drowsy voice full of amusement Heed explained the barber's chair she was sitting in. How Papa said no chair in the world was more comfortable; that he had paid x for it but it was worth y. How home decorating issues could not keep him from moving it into the bathroom of their new house. How much Heed treasured it because in the early days of their marriage he took great pains to teach her how to manicure, pedicure, keep all his nails in perfect shape. And how to shave him too with a straight razor and strop. She was so little she had to stand on a stool to reach. But he was nothing but patience and she learned. Encouraged by Junior's obedient but interested silence, she went on to say she never felt clean enough in those early days. Folks from her neighborhood were mocked for living near a fish factory and although

she had never worked one minute in the place, she suspected she was suspected of its blight. Even now it was the worse thing about her hands, how limited her habits of hygiene had become.

Junior wondered if Heed was trying to ask for a pedicure as well as a bathing hand. Although it was not the fun of group showers at Correctional, soaping a body—any body—held a satisfaction only a Settlement child could know. Besides, it pleased him to see her taking care of his wife; as it pleased him to watch her and Romen wrestle naked in the back seat of his twenty-year-old car; just as it tickled him to know she was wearing his shorts.

She turned on the blow dryer. Warm then cool air played on Heed's scalp encouraging reminiscence.

"We were the first colored family in Silk and not a peep out of one white mouth. Nineteen forty seven. The War was just over. Everybody had money but Papa had more than most, so he bought this house. He was good friends with the sherif whose family named the town for themselves and by themselves. We owned x acres, all of Oceanside but it wasn't Oceanside then. It was a rundown orchard full of birds. Hand me the

towel."

Heed patted her temples and looked in the mirror. Next to her Junior rinsed utensils.

"We had two Victory celebrations. One at the hotel for the public; and a private one here at the house. The one at the Hotel..." Heed stopped. Memory of those two kinds of Victory parties in 1945 was swamped by another pair of celebrations, two years later. A sixteenth birthday plus graduation party for Christine. A family dinner at the house preceding a public celebration at the Hotel. In May of 1947, Heed had not seen her used-to-be friend in four years. The Christine that stepped out of Cosey's Cadillac was nothing like the one who, in 1943, had left home rubbing tears from her cheeks with her palm. The eyes above those cheeks had widened—and cooled. Two braids had become a page boy smooth as the wearer's smile. They did not pretend to like each other and hid curiosity like pros. The sun, dipping and red as watermelon, left its heat behind—moist and buzzing. Heed remembered the baby-powder smell from the bowl of gardenias; their edges browning like toast. And hands: a casual wave at a fly, pressing a dinner napkin to a damp upper lip; Cosey's

forefinger playing his mustache. In silence they waited for L. She had cooked a sumptuous meal and prepared a lavish cake. Sixteen candles waited to be lit in a garden of sugar roses and ribbons of blue marzipan. Earlier, the conversation had been polite and hollow, punctuated by the grating ceiling fan and meaningful looks between May and Christine. Cosey, in the grip of post-war excitement, had talked about his plans to improve the hotel including a Carrier air cooling system.

"Wouldn't that be wonderful," said Christine. "I had forgotten how hot it gets here."

"We'll do the Hotel first," said Cosey. "Then the house."

Heed feeling a flush of authority chimed in. "The bedroom fans are in good shape, but I do feel badly about the one in this room."

"You mean 'bad.' You feel 'bad.'"

"That's what I said."

"You said 'badly'. Feel is an intransitive verb in your sentence and is modified by an adjective. If you really mean you feel 'badly', then you are saying something like 'My fingers are numb and therefore they don't touch things well. Now if you....'"

"Don't you sit at my table and tell me how to talk."

"Your table?"

"Be quiet, you two. Please? Just be quiet."

"Whose side you on?"

"Do what I say, Heed."

"You taking her side!" Heed stood up.

"Sit down, you hear me?"

Heed sat down in the thumping silence of magnified hand and gardenia petals until L entered with a champagne bucket. In her presence Heed calmed enough to hold up her glass for the pouring.

"The other one," he said. "That's a water glass."

May didn't try to hide her smile as she exchanged gleeful glances with her daughter. When Heed caught the smile, the look, she burst out of herself and, throwing the incorrect glass at her husband, rushed past him toward the stairs. Cosey rose and grabbed her arm. Then with a kind of old-timey grace, he put her across his knee and spanked her. Not hard. Not cruel. Methodically, reluctantly, like you would any other brat. When he stopped there was no way for her to get out of

the room onto the stairs. No way at all, sweet Cosey child, but she made it. The conversation that picked up as she climbed the stairs was relaxed, as though an awful smell that had been distracting the guests had been eliminated at last.

Junior cut off the dryer. "What about your own family? You never talk about them."

Heed made a sound in her throat and waved a hand.

Junior laughed. "I know what you mean. I'd swallow lye before I'd live with my folks."

Heed glanced at Junior's face in the mirror, thinking: That's what it is, what made me take her on. We're both out here, alone. With fire ants for family.

"Listen." She reached back to touch Junior's elbow. "There is something I want you to do for me. Together. We have to do it together. There's something in it for you as well as me."

"Sure. What?"

"There's some documents I need. But they're in a place I can't get to alone. You'll have to take me there and then you have to help me find

them."

"Take you where?"

"To the Hotel. The attic. We'll need a fountain pen."

Junior couldn't find him. Even in his study and wearing his tie, there was no trace of after shave. Maybe she didn't need him to tell her. To approve. Maybe he took for granted she'd know what to do. First, check on Christine; make sure she was unaware; make sure they were still friendly in case Heed's plans went bust. Getting Heed out to the car unseen by Christine should be easy since the house schedule was as reliable as Correctional's. [see notes]

Later, that evening, she joined Christine sitting in the yard smoking.

"Can I have one?"

"Buy your own. You get paid. I don't."

"How come?"

"Because your boss lady is crazy as well as evil and needs help."

"I help her."

"Not that kind of help. You don't notice anything strange?"

"A little. Maybe."

"A little? Who don't leave a room for years but a crazy? What you all talk about up there, anyway?"

"Stuff. Her life."

"God."

"She showed me pictures. Wedding pictures. I saw a beautiful picture of you at her wedding. You were hot, Christine, really hot. You've known her a long time, right? You cousins or something?"

"Cousins?" Christine lips curled.

"Whatever. You're not related? Just friends?"

"She is not my friend. She's my grandmother."

"Say what?"

"You heard me. Grandmother. Get it?"

"But you're the same age."

"I'm older. Eight months older."

"Wait a minute. She said she was married for forty years and he died twenty five years ago. So she must have been...a baby."

"Mention was made."

"And you were...how old?"

"Twelve. My grandfather married her when she was eleven. We were best friends. One day we built castles on the beach; next day he sat her in his lap. One day we were playing house under a quilt; next day she slept in his bed. One day we played jacks; the next she was fucking my grandfather." Christine surveyed her diamonds, waved her fingers like a hula dancer. "One day this house was mine; next day she owned it."

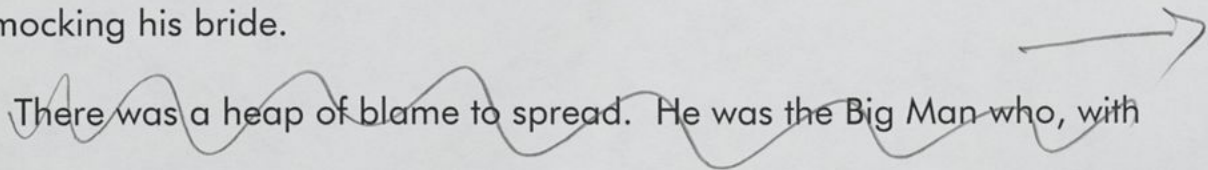
She put her cigarettes away and stood up. "It did something to her mind, marrying that young. She needs professional help, don't you think?"

Back in the kitchen Christine began to perspire. She put her forehead against the refrigerator door, then opened it for its cool air. The wave of heat receded but left her trembling. It had been a while since the veil parted to expose a wide plateau of lifeless stone and she wondered if it was she, not Heed, who needed care. Extracting some ice cubes, she wrapped them in a towel, touching her throat, temples, wrists until she felt steady. Yet the bleakness remained. A clear sight of the world as it was—barren dark ugly without remorse. What was she doing here? her mind scurried; her motives pointless. She knew she was playing busy, but how else to set it

aside—the bleak rock stripped of green. Closing her eyes, the cold towel pressed against her lids, she whispered No! and straightened her spine. This was important. Her struggle with Heed was neither mindless nor wasted. She would never forget how she had fought for her, defied her own mother to protect her, to give her clothes: dresses, shorts, a bathing suit, sandals; to picnic alone on the beach. They shared stomach ache laughter, a secret language and knew as they slept together one's dreaming was the same as the other one's. Then to have your best and only friend leave the squealing splash in your bath tub, trade the stories made up and whispered beneath sheets in your bed for a dark room at the end of the hall reeking of liquor and an old man's business, doing things no one would describe but were so terrible no one could ignore them. She would not forget that. Why should she? It changed May for life. Even L's jaw dropped.

After the wedding, they tried to play together occasionally, but with each one lying in wait for the other's insult, the efforts ended in quarrel. Then tears, May's hand gripping ; words hissed lest Grandpa Cosey hear you mocking his bride.

There was a heap of blame to spread. He was the Big Man who, with



There was a heap of blame to spread. He was the Big Man who, with no one to stop him, could get away with it and anything else he wanted. Then there was her mother who chose to send her away rather than confront him. Put her in a far away school and discouraged summer vacations at home. For her own good, she said, arranging church camps and summers with classmates. Once May enrolled her as a counselor in a Settlement House for Negro girls who had run away rather than be mistreated at home. Nevermind Christmas packages in the mail, expensive, wrong size shoes in September; in spite of envelopes fat with lies and money, the rejection was obvious. L too, was to blame; she was the only peacemaker around, whether glaring or shaking her head, but she would take no one's side. The real betrayal, however, lay at the feet of the friend who grinned happily as she was led down the hall to darkness, liquor smell and old man business. So who had to go? Who had to leave her bedroom, her playhouse, the sea? The only innocent one in the place, that's who. Even when she returned, a sixteen year old, poised and ready to take her place in the family, they threw her away, because by then Heed had become grown-up-cruel. Mean enough to set her on fire.

Christine sat down in the worn recliner she preferred to the scratchy sofa. The perspiration was on hold; the dizziness receding. The melancholy persisted. "I must have been the one who dreamed up this world," she thought. "No nice person could have."

It should have been different. She meant it to be different. On the train, heading home from Maple Valley, she had carefully planned her attitude, her behavior. Everything would come off nicely since her return began with a celebration celebrating everything: her birthday, graduation, the War's end, the new house. She was determined to be civil to Heed, in control, but nicely so the way they were taught to behave at Maple Valley. How or why she got lured into showing off about grammar, she couldn't recall. What she most remembered was her grandfather spanking Heed, and the rush of pleasure that came when he took his granddaughter's side against his wife's—for a change, taking steps to show the kind of behavior he prized. Christine's delight was deep and rampant as the three of them—the real Cosey's—left together, drove off in the big automobile, the unworthy one no where to be seen.

When she and May returned smoke was billowing from her bedroom

window. Racing, screaming into the house and up the stairs they found L smothering the blackened sheets with a twenty pound sack of sugar, carmelizing evil.

Again, it was Christine, not Heed, who had to leave. Bill Cosey, had left the hotel party abruptly to go nobody knew where to. Afraid and angry, mother and daughter stayed awake seething until 3:00 am when he came back, barefoot as a yard dog, holding his shoes in his hand. Instead of fury, instead of locating Heed to throw her back where she came from, he laughed.

"She's going to kill us," May hissed.

"The bed was empty," he said, still chuckling.

"Tonight! What about tomorrow?"

"I'll speak to her."

"Speak? Speak? Mr. Cosey, please!" May was begging.

"Calm down, May. I said I'd take care of it." He moved, as though the conversation was over and he needed rest. May touched his elbow.

"What about Christine? She can't live here like this. It's dangerous."

"It won't happen again," he said, hitting the word 'won't.' "

"She's dangerous, Mr. Cosey. You know she is."

He looked at May then, for what seemed an age and nodded. "You may be right." Then, touching his moustache, "Is there somewhere she can go for a week or two?"

"Heed?"

"No," he said, surprised at the suggestion, then frowning. "Christine."

"Mr. Cosey, Heed started the fire. Why should Christine leave?"

"I'm not married to Christine. I married Heed. Besides it will be for just a little while. Til things get settled around here."

Just like that, Christine is to be packed off, sent away to the house of a classmate. For a week or two. A "vacation," they will tell people whether anyone believed it or not. Christine will call and May will get on the line, make arrangements.

Standing there in a movie star's gown, rhinestones glittering its top, Christine made up her own mind. He had laughed. The cheap little bitch had tried to kill her—sort of—and might succeed one day would he laugh then too would he look at the charred flesh of his own flesh and settle that also as though it were a guest's bounced check or a now-show musician or

a quarrel with a salesman who had short changed an order of Scotch whiskey. Later for a visit with a classmate. Later, crazies. Put on your shoes, old man and look at me good now, because you will never see me again.