



"Correctional girls knew better..."

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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—Fawn practically blinded Helen with a deliberate 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~~s~~. 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's 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 thirty dollars for it but it was worth hundreds. How home decorating issues could not keep him from moving it from the hotel into the bathroom of their new house. How much Heed treasured it because in the early days of their marriage it was in that very chair that he ~~took~~ taught 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 worst 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-five 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 stimulating more reminiscence.

"We were the first colored family in Silk and not a peep out of one white mouth. Nineteen forty five. The War was just over. Everybody had money but Papa had more than most, so he built this house on land as far as you could see. It's Oceanside now but then it was a rundown orchard full of birds. Hand me the towel."

Heed patted her temples and looked in the mirror.

"We had two Victory celebrations. One at the hotel for the public; and a private one here at the house. People talked about it for years. that whole summer was a party; started in May and ended August 14. Flags everywhere. Firecrackers and rockets on the beach. Meat was rationed but Papa had black market connections so we had a truckload. I wasn't allowed in the kitchen, but they needed me then."

"Why wouldn't they let you in the kitchen?"

Heed wrinkled her nose. "Oh, I wasn't much of a cook. Besides I was the wife, you know; the hostess and the hostess never..."

Heed stopped. Memory of "hostessing" 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. Again a family dinner at the house preceding a public celebration at the Hotel. In June 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 sitting at the table 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, a dinner napkin pressed 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 cake. Sixteen candles waited to be lit in a garden of sugar roses and ribbons of blue marzipan. The conversation had been polite, hollow, ^{stressed} ~~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 ^{is} ~~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 aware of magnified hands 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 ^{glee}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 but she made it. The conversation that picked up as she stumbled up 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 fino} ~~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. Her marriage was a chance to get out, to sleep every single night in a real bed, to have somebody ask you what you wanted to eat then labor

over the dish. All in a big hotel where clothes were ironed and folded or hung on hangers—not nails. Where you could see city women sway; hide ^{on a dance floor} behind the stage to watch musicians tune up and singers fix their underwear or take a final sip before going on to sing ^{IN the DARK, IN the DARK} ~~"I Thought about You"~~. Right after the wedding, her own family had begun to swarm and bite for blood. Whatever it cost, the Cosey's were (had become) her family. Although it turned out she had to fight for her place in it, Papa made it possible. When he was around everybody backed off. Time after time he made it clear—they would respect her. Like the time they came back from a three day ^h "honeymoon". Heed was bursting with stories to tell Christine. Running up the steps she was met not just by May's scorn, but Christine's sulk as well.

May, of course, started it, laughing aloud at Heed's new clothes; but Christine joined in with a smirk Heed had never seen before.

"What in God's name have you got on?" said May, wiping her eyes. "You look like a, a...."

"Whoa. Whoa," said Papa. "I'm not having that. Both of you—quit it. You hear me?"

Trembling, Heed looked to Christine for help. There wasn't any. Her

friend's eyes were cold, as though Heed had betrayed her, instead of the other way around. L came forward with a scissors and cut the price tag hanging from Heed's sleeve. What, she wondered, are they laughing at? The Cuban heel shoes? The black net stockings? The pretty purple suit? Papa had been charmed with her purchases. He had taken her to a fine department store that did not have a "No Colored" sign or policy, where you could use the bathroom, try on hats (they put tissue inside the crown), and undress in a special room in the back. Heed picked out things glamorous women in the Hotel wore and believed the wide smile of the clerk and the ~~tinkly~~ ^{delighted} laughter of other customers showed their ~~delighted~~ approval of her choices. "You look like a dream," one of them said and sputtered with pleasure. As she came out of the dressing room in a creamy beige dress with red silk roses sewed at the shoulder, the low cut bosom gathered for breasts somewhere in her future, Papa smiled, nodded and said "We'll take it. We'll take it all."

Every day for three days they shopped, Papa letting her buy anything she wanted, including Parisian Night lipstick. They played "wrestle" in the morning, then ate lunch at Reynaud's (Unlike Cosey's Hotel, this one had

no dining room, which pleased Papa who was always looking for colored businesses less satisfactory than his.) He took her to Broad Street, Edwards Bros., Woolworth's, Hansons where she bought not just high heeled shoes, but huaraches, shiney bedroom slippers and fish net hose. Only in the evening was she alone. But just for a few hours while he visited friends, tended to business. None of which Heed minded because she had coloring books, picture magazines, paper dolls to cut out and clothe. Then there was the street. From their second floor window, she watched in gaping fascination the people traffic below. Black square-topped automobiles, bleating. Soldiers, sailors, women in tiny hats like pin cushions. Vegetable stands in front of Uncle Sam Wants you posers.

Papa took her to see "How Green Was My Valley," "Kitty Foyle. She sobbed so loud and long at "Grapes of Wrath," his handkerchief was squeezing wet. Wonderful as the honeymoon was, she could hardly wait to get back and tell Christine all about it. Hurt by her reception, she kept her stories to herself. The one time she tried to make peace with Christine, offering to let her wear her wedding ring, the kitchen exploded. The four of them, May, L, Christine and Heed were preparing vegetables when Heed

slipped off the ring, held it out to Christine and said, "You can wear it , if you want."

"You little fool!" May shouted.

Even L turned on her. "Watch yourself, " she said. "The streets don't go there."

Christine cried and ran out the back door. From the rain barrel, Heed could hear her shouting: "Ou-yidagay a ave-slidagay! E-hidagay ought-bidagay ou-yidagay ith-widagay a ears-yidagay ent-ridagay an-didagay a andy-cidagay ar-bidagay!"

Heed examined the string beans as closely as she could while "Ave-slidagay! Ave-slidagay!" rang in her head.

That night when Christine was dragged back by Boss Silk from a failed attempt to run away, and got slapped in the face for it. Heed did not speak one word to her. Instead she took Papa's hand in hers. Two weeks later, Christine was gone leaving Heed fending for herself. L and Papa her saviors in that puzzling world.

"I never really knew my Daddy," said Junior. "He was killed in the army. Vietnam."

"At least he went," said Heed.

"And my mother didn't care a thing about me."

"Mine, neither."

"Maybe I should get married, like you did."

"Be careful."

"Well, you got this nice big house and everything."

"My Vietnam. Except I came out alive." So far, she thought.

"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 by myself. 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. She checked every room because sitting 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 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.

Later, that evening, she joined Christine sitting on the back porch with a soda can in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

"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 about her?"

"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.

"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." Junior frowned. "She said she was married for thirty years and he died twenty five years ago. So she must have been...a baby."

"Mention was made." Christine sipped from the can.

"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 does something to the mind, marrying before your first period. She needs professional help, don't you think?" Christine blew on her rings. "There's virgins and then there's children," she said and left Junior to ponder the thought.

Back in the kitchen Christine began to perspire. She put her forehead against the refrigerator door, then opened it for the 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 professional care. Extracting some ice cubes, she wrapped them in a towel, touching her throat, temples, wrists until she felt steady. 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 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 her life. 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 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-nasty. Mean enough to set her on fire.

Christine went to her room and sat down in the worn recliner she preferred to the scratchy sofa. The perspiration was ebbing; 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 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 it was! 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.