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You are always thinking about death, I told her. No, she said. Death is always thinking about me. That was May's way of explaining why she saved and mended and preserved and stored. Death was trying to open the gate and she needed all she could collect to stave him off. Her daughter was the soft spot. A weakness that could lead to the loss of everything, she had to be protected not only from what came in and killed her husband, but from the live death of being poor. You could tell nothing scared her more. She gave herself every opportunity to recount how Mr. Cosey came from a long line of quiet, prosperous slaves—each generation adding to the inheritance left by the previous one. Independent contractors, she called them.

Cobblers, seamstresses, carpenters, iron mongers, blacksmiths, unpaid laborers and craftsmen who refined their skills, narrowed and pointed them for the rich. The carpenters made fine pianos; the iron mongers served the needs of a local college laboratory. One, a blacksmith, took his craft to a horse farm where he made himself first reliable, then indispensable then profitable. In that position his claim to wages instead of shelter was accepted. Little by little, more than much, they gathered and held on to

what they earned for offspring told and taught to do better. But they kept low, no bragging—just curry and keep close relationships with the whites who mattered. That way, they said. That way lay freedom. The real kind. Bounty.

To May, Heed was tk to that. A nasty bottle fly let in through the door, already buzzing at the food table and, if it settled on Christine would smear her with the garbage it was born in. She had put up with the girls' friendship until Mr. Cosey turned it into a joke nobody thought was funny. She had to figure something out fast. If Heed and Christine had other notions of how to behave with one another in a mix up made by an old man, May put a stop to them. If she couldn't swat the bottle fly, she could tear its wings, poison-spray the air so it couldn't breathe—and turn her daughter into an ally.

Pity. They were just little girls. In a year they would be bleeding—hard. Skin clear and death defying. They had no business in that business.

The day Mr. Cosey told us who he was marrying was the opening day of May's personal December 7. In an eye blink she went from protection to war. She wasn't always like that. When I first saw her in 1929 standing

next to Billy Boy she looked just like what she was: the last daughter of a preacher who had to accept clothes from his congregation—an under-loved girl in an over-mended coat. The little scrap of fur collar, the lettuce green dress and black and white pumps put you in mind of a rummage sale. And while I was wondering where Mr. Cosey's son found her, she raised Billy Boy's hand to her mouth and kissed it. The way her eyes ate everything, traveling up and around the hotel lobby, I thought she would behave like a visitor expecting to be waited on. I was dead wrong about that. She put off unpacking her suitcase; just changed out of that hand-me-down dress and started in. "Let's," she said. "Let's polish this. Let's move that, clean here, wipe there..." How could we help but smile. Mr. Cosey most of all, seeing his son had chosen a wife bound to be a plus.

She moved Billy Boy from waiting tables to tending bar and then booking performers which left Mr. Cosey to think about money and play. Even pregnancy didn't slow her down. May was the first mother I saw who weaned her baby at three months. When Billy Boy died in '35 and Mr. Cosey went low, May and me kept things up and going. For the next seven years she dedicated herself to the Hotel's business. Seven years of hard

work rewarded with "I'm taking a wife. You know her. Christine's little friend." Rewarded by watching her father-in-law marry her eleven year old daughter's playmate and put that playmate ahead of everything including herself, her own daughter and all she had worked for. Not only that. She had to teach and train the playmate to take charge of us. Still, there was more to it than age. May's new mother-in-law was not just a child, she was a Johnson. In no wild dream could she have invented a family that scared her more. The fool on German Syrup labels. The savage on Czar's Baking Powder. The brain dead on Alden's Fruit Vinegar, Korn Kinks Cereal, J.J. Coates Thread and the fly-blown babies on Sanford's Ginger. That's who she saw when she looked at the Johnsons. She might be braiding Christine's hair in the bedroom, patting cool water on her temples in the kitchen, wherever she was her talk was the same: shiftlessness was not a habit; it was a trait; ignorance was destiny; dirt lingered on by choice. She shuddered when she said that being the daughter of a preacher she really tried to dredge up Christian love, but failed whenever she looked at a Johnson. Or heard about them. Listen to some of their names, she said. overblown names people give to mules and fishing boats. Bride. Welcome

Morning. Princess Starlight. Righteous Spirit. Solitude. Heed the Night. But the main calamity for her was the greed of the parents, Wilbur and Surrey, who thought sitting in a rowboat with a string was work. Having lost two kids to the ocean they first used their grief like a begging cup then as a tax levied on their neighbors. So why not let their youngest girl marry a fifty-two year old man in exchange for who knew how much money changed hands. If he gave them a two-dollar bill, May said, a dollar and fifty cents refund was due. But we all knew Mr. Cosey never bought anything cheap—or if he did, it came to have value in time. Like a child who would soon grow up and bear other children. Which brings me to the other thing bothering May. The Johnsons were not just poor and shiftless, their girls were thought to be mighty quick in the skirt-raising department. So what must have attracted Mr. Cosey to Heed in the first place could influence her daughter. The place throbbed with girl flesh made sexy, an atmosphere that Christine might soak up faster than a fruit cake soaks up rum. And all because Mr. Cosey wanted children.

Well, that's what he told his friends and himself. But not me. He never told that to me because I had worked for him since I was fourteen and

knew better. He picked her because liked her. Besides, his sporting woman had left town.