



## L4

---

### No Known Copyright

Princeton University Library reasonably believes that the Item is not restricted by copyright or related rights, but a conclusive determination could not be made.

You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use.

## Princeton University Library Disclaimer

---

Princeton University Library claims no copyright governing this digital resource. It is provided for free, on a non-commercial, open-access basis, for fair-use academic and research purposes only. Anyone who claims copyright over any part of these resources and feels that they should not be presented in this manner is invited to contact Princeton University Library, who will in turn consider such concerns and make every effort to respond appropriately. We request that users reproducing this resource cite it according the guidelines described at <http://rbcs.princeton.edu/policies/forms-citation>.

## Citation Information

---

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

L4

1 folder (partial)

## Contact Information

---

## Download Information

---

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:06:16 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/ng451p09x>

*Done June 3*

L

4

*5/18/17*  
~~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  
*rich folks who liked to tip 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 <sup>they</sup> 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 ~~it~~ <sup>the end of</sup> 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 <sup>ideas about being friends,</sup> other <sup>about be-</sup> notions of how to behave with one another in <sup>having</sup> 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—<sup>or</sup> ~~and~~ turn her daughter into <sup>its</sup> ~~an~~ ally. <sup>like sisters because of</sup>

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



~~other~~  
ideas about ~~friendship~~  
being close friends

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~~<sup>defense</sup> 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 <sup>right away</sup> 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. <sup>leaving Christine to me to raise</sup> 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 <sup>twelve</sup> ~~eleven~~ year old

daughter's playmate and put that playmate ahead of everything including

herself, her own daughter and <sup>everything</sup> ~~all~~ she had worked for. Not only that. She <sup>was</sup>

<sup>Supposed</sup> ~~had~~ to teach and train the playmate to take charge of us. <sup>Crazy-making for sure, but</sup> ~~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 <sup>her</sup>

~~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~~ *Add to that*  
 the main calamity ~~for her~~ <sup>! ~~was~~</sup> 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~~ <sup>was</sup> ~~throbbed~~ <sup>ing</sup> with girl flesh made sexy, an atmosphere  
 that Christine might soak up faster than a fruit cake soaks up rum. And all

*\* Before May <sup>even</sup> ~~could~~ <sup>had begun</sup> ~~sheltering~~ <sup>instruction about</sup> Christine <sup>menstruation</sup> ~~menstruation~~ <sup>or even</sup> ~~thought of~~ <sup>thought of</sup> from unsuitable boys*



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 <sup>Heed</sup> her because liked her. Besides, <sup>↑</sup> his sporting woman

~~had~~ left town.

Like a lot of folks when war plants were  
desegregated