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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 rich folks who would gift and tip them. The carpenters made fine pianos; the iron mongers served 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 they 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.

That was the ^{stupid} ^{sweet} story anyway — the one made for the neighbors.

To May, little Heed with a t-shirt for a dress was the end of 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 ideas about being friends and behaving like sisters just because of 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—or turn her daughter into its 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 defense 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 right away 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, leaving Christine to me to raise. Seven years of her 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 twelve 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 was supposed to teach and train the playmate to take charge of us. Crazy-making for sure, but 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 her 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 their names, she said. Overblown names people give to mules and fishing boats. Bride. Welcome Morning. Princess Starlight. Righteous Spirit. Solitude. Heed the Night. Add to that the main calamity—the unapologetic 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 used their grief first 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 infect her daughter. Before May had even begun instruction about menstruation or thought of sheltering

Christine from unsuitable boys, the place was throbbing 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 Heed because liked her. Besides, like a lot of folk did when war plants desegregated, his sporting woman had left town.

Families make the best enemies. They have time and convenience to butter the wickedness they prefer. Short sighted, though. What good does it do to keep a favorite hatred going when the very person you've spent poisoning your life with is the one (maybe the only one) able or willing to carry you to the bathroom when you can't get there on your own? I sat at the bottom of May's bed or on top of her dresser sometimes and watched Heed soap her bottom, mash badly cooked food to just the right consistency. She cut May's toe nails and wiped white flakes from her eyelids. Nagging every second, but doing it: airing, cleaning, spooning, rubbing, turning her over to the cooler side of the bed on nights hot enough to make you cry. Heed snarled, naturally, at Christine's break-in but she

→ TK - real history of Cosey's father.

Insert the same name who set your daughter's bed on fire, but ice packs on your brows. I knew Heed was up to something that room - after Mr. C humiliated her - three times - once at the dance and again at the dance. I smelled smoke & climbed up there with a pair.

of water (in case) I ran back and forth from
the bathroom - filling it, but
Water's
but it was no use ~~it~~ with ~~the~~
mattress fire. You think it's out
but deep ^{down} in there it's ~~still~~
waiting, ~~mending~~ ^{biding} its time,
till you turn your back - then
it ~~takes~~ ^{eats} the whole place ~~down~~ ^{up}.
I hauled the biggest sack of sugar
I could find up there. When
May & Christine got back the
bed was quiet ~~except for~~
~~a pop~~ like syrup.

Heed never admitted or denied what the fire and
I ^{used to} wonder why she ~~was~~ ^{took it out on} him if she was mad at
him why she ~~destroyed~~ ^{took a while to} Christine's bed instead
of his. It ~~make~~ ^{made} sense ~~for~~ I don't wonder any more.
And I don't wonder why his ^{mood} ~~was in~~ ^{stayed} such a pleasant
May, naturally, was unforgiving, loving, I guess,
the sight of her enemy ~~not~~ forced to feed her.
More satisfying than if her own daughter ~~was~~ ^{had been}
her nurse - which she was eventually.

(and 28 years later

was happy to shift May onto her. And just in case Christine looked at the job, changed her mind and left, Heed took to her bed and let her hands fold. ^{first thought} May, ~~I~~ ^{had} have thought, would be pleased by her daughter's return even though Christine was a big disappointment to her. Their quarrels were name-calling contests separated by years of silence. ~~Still~~ I was surprised at May's ~~first~~ reaction. She was afraid. Not sure if her daughter could be trusted with a pillow. But Christine jumped right in with beautiful cooking and plants to fill the room, both of which, if truth be told, hurried the sick woman along. Christine played prodigal girl for a year or so then, on one of the prettiest dawns, May died. Smiling.

I don't know what the smile was about. Nothing she aimed for had gone her way—except for the hatchet she threw between Heed and Christine when they were little girls. That stuck. Cleaved the ground they stood on. So when Christine leaned in to wipe crumbs from her mother's chin, May saw the familiar glint in her daughter's eyes. Like before, they whispered about Heed. Refreshed themselves with old stories of how she tried to trick them into believing she could write; the chop that fell to the floor because she couldn't manage the knife; how ^{her} ^{of} coddling Mr. Cosey failed in the end to

*Between mother
and daughter*

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limit him to her bedsheets; the hat she chose for his funeral. Gone were
twenty-five or so years of ~~outrage at the other one's~~ *disgust by each one's* behavior. Dead the
question of what was best for the race because Heed answered it for them.
She was the niggerhood they both had fought. Neither won but they agreed
on the target so I guess that's why May smiled into that lovely dawn.

Heed closed her fingers. Christine decorated hers. No matter. They
fought like champions. Sad.