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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 street-sweet story anyway—the one made for neighbors and white businessmen.

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.

He never lied to me, Mr. Cosey. No point in it. I knew his first wife almost as long as he did. I knew he adored her and I knew what she thought of him after she found out where the money came from. That the father he bragged about had earned his way as a Court informer. The one the police could count on to know where a young wanted man was hiding, who sold liquor, who had an eye on what property and all sorts of things the law was interested in. Well paid, tipped off, and protected for fifty-five years, he hoarded paper money and coins, withheld decent shoes from his son and passable dresses from his wife and daughters until he died leaving

114,000 resentful dollars behind. The son took his share and decided to enjoy it. Not throw it away, but use it in exactly the way his father would have hated: good times, good clothes, good food, good music, dancing til the sun came up.

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 b^adly 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. The woman who set your daughter's bed on fire put ice packs on year forehead. I knew Heed was up to something that evening after Mr. Cosey humiliated her—twice. Once at dinner again at the dance. I smelled smoke and climbed up there with a pail of water. I ran back and

forth from the bathroom sink filling it, but water's no use with mattress fire. You think it's out but deep in there it's waiting, biding its time till you turn your back. Then it eats the whole place up. I hauled the biggest sack of sugar I could find up there. When May and Christine got back the bed was quiet, like syrup.

Heed never admitted or denied the fire and I used to wonder why, if she was made at him, why she took it out on Christine instead of him. It took a while to make sense. I don't wonder anymore. And I don't wonder why his mood stayed pleasant when he heard what Heed had done. May, naturally, was unforgiving and, twenty-eight years later, loved the sight of her enemy forced to feed her. More satisfying than if her daughter had been her nurse—which she was eventually.

Heed snarled, as you would expect, at Christine's break-in but she 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. At first I thought May would be relieved 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. So I was surprised at

May's 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 coddling of Mr. Cosey failed in the end to limit him to her bedsheets; the hat she chose for his funeral. Mother and daughter became friends. Twenty-five or so years of disgust at the other one's behavior was gone. 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
battled
~~fought~~ like champions. Sad.