



"dollar bill, May said..."

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-

"dollar bill, May said..."

1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:11:24 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/n009w687h>

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 trifling, 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, her home 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 maybe himself. But not me. He never told that to me because I had worked for him since I was fourteen and knew the truth.⁽⁴⁾ Just like he avoided Christine because she had his father's gray eyes, he picked Heed to make old Dark groan.⁽³⁾ That was the truth but not all of it.⁽¹⁾ He liked her.⁽²⁾ Besides, like a lot of folk did when war plants desegregated, his sporting woman had left town.

Every family has a Dark and needs one. ^{As} Like in every countr^y, tribe, race;
every religion or business, treachery equals progress. ^{It} The ~~traitor~~ nestles
power, licks its boots, learns the lingo and protect^s itself. Oh, and makes
money too, since that what it's for although the lingo calls it "service", or

"dedication", or even "morals." ^{Like} Of course the plague ~~traitors~~ ^{ing} cause fill the
^{its survivors} ~~treachery~~ ^{purifies} (the people left alive); helps them know
cemetery, they can clarify things too, like knowing the difference between a

strong mind and a healthy one, between the righteous and the right—which

is, after all, progress. The problem for those left alive
is vengeance — its outrageous sweetness.
So you can see why

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 hate going when the very person you've poisoned 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. The girl May lived to mistreat was the one who held her head over the slop jar. Nagging her 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. Not much sense in wasting time and life trying to put a woman in the asylum just to end up chipping ice for her to suck on. Where's the gain in setting fire to the nest you live in? I saw what Mr. Cosey did to Heed at the birthday party. My heart reached out to her and I let him know it. While he fumbled for something in his pocket, and May and Christine were waiting in the car, I tapped him on the shoulder. "Don't you never lay a hand on her again no matter what. Do, and I'm long gone." He looked at me with Billy

Boy's eyes and said, "I made a mistake, L. A big mistake." "Tell her," I said. All I got was a sigh for an answer and if I hadn't been so agitated I would have known then who he was sighing over.

I never did learn what really happened at the dance, but my mother didn't knit me. Soon as they left I knew Heed was up to something. She telephoned one of the hotel waiters; told him to come get her. About an hour or so after she left I heard a truck drive up and a door slam. Then high heels running across the hall. Not five minutes passed when I smelled smoke. I had the sense to climb up there with a pail of water and had to run back and forth from the bathroom sink to fill 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 mad at him, she took it out on Christine instead. 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 nothing. 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 a familiar look 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 to limit him to her sheets; the hat she chose for his funeral. Mother and daughter became friends at last. Twenty-five or so years of ^{disquiet} shame 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 throw back 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 on as though they were champions instead of sacrifices. A crying shame.