

*I held out the handkerchief. As she took it from my hand our fingers touched, and she said in a low voice, "You're the friend of Mrs. Howard's, aren't you?" My heart jumped and then started racing. I glanced at Hugo, who was standing out of earshot. The woman's back was to him, blocking him out. Deliberately, I realized.*

*"Yes. I'm May Bedloe," I said quickly. Then I thought: should I have told her my name? I didn't know how this worked, but it didn't matter, I believe I could have said anything as long as I started with "Yes." She came to deliver the information, not receive it.*

*"Your package will be waiting across the river tonight . . ."*



# 1

*April 25, 1838, Cincinnati, Ohio*

When the steamboat *Moselle* blew apart just off its Cincinnati landing, I was sitting below deck in the ladies' cabin, sewing tea leaves into little muslin bags and plotting revenge on my cousin Comfort for laughing at me during dinner.

I had many ways of getting back at her. Sometimes I put a few darts in her cuffs so that when her wrists swelled, which they always did when she was performing, she would have to cut the cloth later to get her arms out. Or I snipped her lace ties just a little, which kept her from pulling her corset as tightly as she liked; or I sewed a small pigeon feather into the back of one of her costumes so that when she walked across the stage the shaft scratched at her skin.

I was Comfort's seamstress, dresser, and trunk packer. And a hundred other things as well. She was the Famous Comfort Vertue. That was her stage name.

But she was not famous, and she was not related to Lord and Lady Vertue of Suffolk, England, as she claimed at dinner. Comfort was nearly thirty but gave her age as my own, twenty-two. In the last six months, offers for ingénue roles had begun to dry up, but she was not yet willing to move on to stately matriarchs or widows, since those parts received second or third billing at best. Instead she booked us both tickets to St. Louis on the steamboat *Moselle* in search, as she put it, of new opportunities.

We had quarreled about it in Pittsburgh. I wanted to take an overland coach to New York, where there were more opportunities. But Comfort had had enough of New York.

"We haven't enough money for that, Frog. Anyway, I've got an offer from the New Theatre in St. Louis. The director is putting together a company."

She smiled at me. She was a very beautiful woman, my cousin, with bright, reddish-gold hair that I curled in rags for her every night, and clear blue eyes, and good teeth. Although her nose was ever so slightly crooked, it called attention to the cleft on her chin.

"A *firm* offer?" I asked.

She liked to say that she rescued me after my mother died, but that was not true. She recognized an opportunity is all. Like the opportunity she now saw in St. Louis. No one knew us there. She could be twenty-two and just starting out, instead of almost thirty and stumbling along. I would be who I always was: her dark-haired cousin who sewed for her and stayed well off the stage. I could be twenty-two also. Which I was.

On the afternoon the *Moselle* went down, we'd already been on board for six days and expected to be on it for six more. At dinner, Comfort and I sat at a large table near the center of the dining room with seven or eight other guests, all of us pulled up close to the white cloth with its small dots of gravy stains spattered over it, while men in white jackets brought out platters from the kitchen: broiled and fried chicken, breaded cod, cold ham, hot bread, pickled peaches, preserved cucumbers, and big ironstone bowls of steaming vegetables. The dining room smelled of roasted meat and turpentine, and there was a low but constant roar from the boilers, which we had to speak over. This was no problem for Comfort, a trained actress. One of the ladies at our table, Mrs. Flora Howard, a red-faced abolitionist—I

called her Florid Howard to myself—was someone we'd begun to eat all our meals with. She was telling us a funny story about a mule, and I suppose I must have been smiling, because another one of our party, Mr. Thaddeus Mason, an actor like Comfort, suddenly said, "Why, May! What a beautiful smile!"

I immediately felt self-conscious and pulled my lips together.

"Now see what you've done," Mrs. Howard said. "I do believe I've never seen May's teeth before."

"The smile that is all the more entrancing because it's so rare," Thaddeus said in his poetry-reciting voice. Thaddeus was a shade shorter than average and wore his curly blond hair rather long, like a younger man. We knew him from the Third Street Theatre, where Comfort played opposite him for a month. Mrs. Flora Howard had been visiting her brother in Shippingport and now was going to visit another brother in Vevay. She was a heavysset woman who wore long ropes of pearls and silver chains every day over the drapery of her silk dresses. A great many yards of fabric went into each dress she wore, and I wondered if the cost alone wouldn't induce her to slim down a bit; but Comfort told me that Mrs. Howard was a wealthy widow with a large, beautifully furnished house in Cincinnati—Comfort always seems to find out about such things—so perhaps she felt she could afford her weight.

Comfort tilted her head at Mrs. Howard and smiled her dimpled, childlike smile; she was used to being the one who received the attention and she didn't like sharing it with me. Nor did I like taking any share, for that matter.

"You have a great deal of talent," she said to Mrs. Howard, "if you can make my cousin smile. And if you can make her laugh, why, I'll give you a dollar. I believe I've heard May laugh only twice in all of my life."

An exaggeration. I dislike exaggerations.

"I laugh sometimes," I said.

"I'm sure you have a beautiful laugh," Thaddeus put in. "Like your smile."

Comfort frowned. Attention, to her, was what sewing a perfectly straight hemline was to me, and we were both willing to work hard to get what we wanted.

"Why, look at that: Is that girl going to sing for us?" she asked loudly, changing the subject. "I do believe I'm right! I do believe that girl is actually going to sing for her supper!"

I turned. A tall woman wearing a rose-colored dress was standing on a small dais, preparing to perform. Next to her a man with a violin under his chin played a few tuning notes to get our attention, and when the room quieted he pointed to her with his violin bow and said: "Ladies and gentlemen! Miss Helena Cushing, from Hugo and Helena's Floating Theatre."

The closed glass doors of the dining room cast a diffused afternoon light onto her pink dress and her lovely soft face. Above us, the chandeliers swung as the boat made a slight course adjustment, and then Miss Cushing spread her arms and began to sing:

*"Drink to me only with thine eyes, and I will pledge with mine  
Or leave a kiss within the cup and I'll not ask for wine . . ."*

She sang in a composed and relaxed manner, not at all as if she was standing in front of a hundred strangers with napkins tucked into their collars and their forks halfway to their mouths, but rather like someone alone in a room, letting her tea grow cold while she followed her own thoughts to their rightful end. When she finished, there was some polite applause, and then people began ringing their bells for more bread.

Miss Cushing turned to the violinist and began speaking to him energetically. All in a moment her lovely stillness was gone.

"Well, that's just terrible," Mrs. Howard announced.

I followed her gaze to a nearby table, where an elderly woman in a dark green dress was being waited on by a young Negro boy.

"She's brought her slave boy with her," Mrs. Howard said.

The boy was standing behind his mistress's chair, wearing white gloves buttoned tightly at the wrist and a little brown necktie over a freshly ironed white shirt. I'd grown up in the North and had only seen slaves a few times before. Although his shirt had clearly been made over for him—the line of the shoulders was not quite right—he or someone else took great care to keep it clean.

One of our dinner table companions, a man with mutton-chop whiskers and a ring with an emerald stone on his smallest finger, leaned forward.

"In St. Louis I hear the slaves all speak French," he said.

"He's like a piece of luggage to her," Mrs. Howard went on in a loud, indignant voice. "She just picks him up and carries him with her wherever she goes. Someone should snatch him away right now and take him to Canada."

The man with the pinkie ring scowled. "That's theft; they could hang you for that. Take that man Lovejoy: all he did was run a few antislavery articles in his paper and they burned down the press and him in it. Or shot him—I can't remember which."

But this just made Mrs. Howard more adamant. "Slavery must be eradicated, not tomorrow but today. I'm sure everyone at this table agrees."

For some reason her eyes rested on me. Getting no reaction—I was not sure what she wanted—her gaze traveled to Comfort. "What do you think, my dear?" she asked.

But Comfort was still looking at the singer. "Oh, she has a pleasant enough voice to be sure," she said. "But nowadays you need to know a bit of everything. A pleasant voice is not enough. Why, I was at a theater in Boston where they wanted me to dance a jig. A jig! And they all want someone singing 'Jump Jim Crow.' I could kill Tom Rice

for writing that down. I know him, of course. We performed together in Tarrytown. He heard the song from a stable hand in back of the theater. I was on the stage at the time.”

Not true. More than an exaggeration—a lie. I wiped my hands on a dark brown napkin that seemed already greasy.

“May was there, too,” Comfort went on, giving me a sly look, and I saw that she was not done teasing me. “She heard the stable boy singing it herself. If she had been quicker, she might have written down the song first and made us our fortune.”

“Is that so?” Thaddeus asked, helping himself to another piece of cod. The food on the boat came with the price of the ticket.

“No,” I said. “It is not. Tom Rice heard the song in Baltimore, not Tarrytown. And I was nowhere near.”

Comfort burst out laughing. “There—did I not tell you, Mrs. Howard? May cannot tell a lie! She simply cannot do it!”

I looked at her sharply. Had she been talking about me before I sat down? But Mrs. Howard was still staring daggers at the woman with the slave boy.

“She never in her *life* has been able to tell a lie,” Comfort said, this time addressing everyone at the table. “Not even to say she likes your hat when she does not. Once I heard her tell a bride on the morning of her wedding that the weather would certainly not get any better that day. And it was raining only very slightly at the time.”

The man with the emerald pinkie ring looked me over while still chewing his food, as though I were a curiosity. A dark anger rose in me.

“And then of course May was right: a storm hit while they were in the church,” Comfort went on gaily, “and they missed their wedding breakfast, afraid to leave for the lightning. We ate it ourselves. Isn’t that right, May?”

I felt my face flush hotter and crossed my fork and knife carefully over my plate. I did not want to speak—I do not like speaking in groups—but I had to say, “No. We did not.”



Comfort laughed again. She had everyone's attention now. "See! She can't tell a lie, not even to let me save face, and I believe she is most fond of me in all of the world."

Mrs. Howard, Thaddeus, and the man with the emerald pinkie ring all turned to look at me. I pinched my wrist, willing the conversation to be over. I did not like speaking in a group, I did not like being teased, and I did not, above all, like everyone watching me. This was my punishment for smiling.

"You *are* fond of me, Frog, aren't you?" Comfort teased in her flirtatious voice.

I looked away. I am fond of my cousin, it's true, but at that moment I hated her.

After dinner Comfort and Mrs. Howard went for a walk around the deck, and Thaddeus Mason accompanied the man with the emerald pinkie ring to smoke cigars. I went by myself to the ladies' cabin to sew and plot revenge on my cousin.

The ladies' cabin was a large square room, fitted up rather shabbily compared to the men's, which Comfort and I had peeked into when we first came on board. Ours had a couple of thin rugs on the floor and only two framed pictures, but at least there were no spittoons. Fifteen or twenty women were already in the room when I entered, sitting in upholstered straight-backed chairs in little groups of three or four, all of them reading or talking or sewing.

I found an empty chair near a window where I could look out on our westward progress. Since the Ohio flows downstream from Pittsburgh to where it meets the Mississippi River in Cairo, Illinois—passing four more states in between—we were going fairly fast with the current, and, sitting down, I could hear the rhythmic thrashing of the paddlewheels as they churned up the water.

I arranged my light shawl over my knees, which get cold, and pro-

ceeded to take out a needle and thread and a squat jar of tea. I was sewing little tea sachets that I sold for extra money, an invention I thought of myself: shredded tea leaves, measured out for one cup, folded inside a square of absorbent muslin and then sewn closed. I used to take around a box of them during intermission at whatever theater Comfort was performing, explaining to the theatergoers how they could dip the sachets in a cup of boiling water for a convenient single serving of tea. I always gave the theater managers ten percent of my profit, and I was careful to calculate their amount to the penny, although I could have easily cheated them, they paid so little attention to what I did. But I would never cheat them, because cheating is the same thing as lying.

Comfort was right when she said I could not lie. It's not on principle. For reasons I can't explain, I feel a great need to give a pointedly accurate account of the facts. And since I don't always understand what people mean outside of their words, I might be more honest than is necessary or even desired. My mother used to blame this on the loss of hearing in my left ear. I could not hear the undertones, she explained, and that was why I didn't pick up what other people might from a conversation. For instance, if a woman said to me, to use Comfort's example, *I am not sure about this new hat I bought*, I probably would not guess that she wanted me to tell her I liked it. Instead I would try to list what I saw as the hat's good points and bad in order to help her reach a conclusion. I don't know why Comfort laughs at me when I do this. It's just who I am, and she knows this. Why should someone lie about a hat?

However, pushing a needle in and out of a small space always soothes me, and as the boat veered to stop at one of Cincinnati's outlying landings, rocking gently forward and back over the thrum of its boilers, I began to forget my irritation with Comfort. I'd been on steamboats before and didn't mind the smell of wet wood, cigar smoke, and roasted meat from meals long past that pervaded every

cabin and deck, and I enjoyed the sight of the Ohio River with its long line of willows bending to bathe their leaves in the water. The river was the natural division between the North and the South, with Ohio on one side and Kentucky on the other. Along the shore I could see crooked shacks where the woodcutters lived, and a little boy with a bluish-white complexion waded along in the mud leading a half-starved cow. He looked up as the *Moselle* steamed past as if it alone were his instrument of redemption and here we were, passing him by. I snipped off the end of thread with my scissors: another tea sachet finished.

"After Chautauqua I may take the water cure at Malvern," one of the ladies opposite me said in a dry, feathery voice. It was the elderly lady from dinner who had brought her slave boy with her, although the boy was not with her now. She sat with her old, gnarled hands folded on the dark green silk of her dress, and a couple of shiny gray ringlets hung from beneath her matching green cap. As I cut more muslin into squares I could hear the steam on the boat rise to an unusual pitch while we waited for the newcomers to board. Later I heard that the captain of the *Moselle* was overly proud of his vessel, which had recently set a record for the quickest journey from Pittsburgh, and that on this particular day he wanted to beat the steamboat *Tribune* to the next landing. The new passengers pushed their way onto our crowded vessel, the captain raised his arm, and we were off, hoping to make up the time. But the wheel of the *Moselle* did not even make one full rotation when all four boilers burst at the same time with a sound like a full stockade of gunpowder all exploding at once.

It was a noise I felt like a hit. For a moment it seemed as though the air itself had cracked open and the boat lurched sharply, causing all of us to fall from our chairs. The unlit oil lamps crashed to the floor, and above us the chandeliers swung crazily as everyone in the room tumbled toward the bulkhead. My face swept over some-

one's gown and I was momentarily pinned by the elderly woman who wanted to go to Malvern.

"What's happened?" she asked in her old, feathery voice.

"She's blown!" someone cried.

The boat lurched and stopped. For the first few minutes all any of us could do was try to stand up and help others get up, too. Everyone was saying the same thing: "Are you hurt?" "No, are you?" The old woman who wanted to go to Malvern was hugging her elbow. "Are we sinking?" she asked me. Without waiting for an answer, she said, "We must get to the deck before we go under."

Her cap had been partially knocked back and I saw that her shiny gray ringlets were fake, sewn onto the inside of the cap, and that her real hair was wispy and scarce. Although there were easily fifteen of us in the room, after the explosion my world shrank to the two or three people around me. Somehow the Malvern lady and I and another woman with her child made it our business to help each other. The air in the room was dangerously smoky and my ears hurt from the sound of the blast, but the walls, I noticed, were still level.

"Is the boat on fire?" the woman with the child asked.

"Let's get up on deck," I told her. "Surely some boats will come to come help us."

My voice seemed to come from my ears and everything looked like it was outlined in black: the doorframe, the edge of the steps. We were all trying to get out of the cabin now, and for the moment everyone was still orderly, although later I found bruises on my arm that I couldn't account for, sharply yellow and round as buttons. In all this time I did not think of Comfort—that's how dazed I was. I thought only of myself, the Malvern lady, and the lady with her child. But once we got up to the deck we were separated, and I don't know if in the end they were saved or not, if the elderly lady ever got to Malvern, or if the mother drowned with her child.

On the deck I was pushed all the way to the rail by people com-

ing up behind me, and when I finally could stop and look around, I saw that our situation was even bleaker than I had imagined. There were still several hours of daylight left; that was one good thing. But the upper deck of the vessel in front of the side wheels had been blown to splinters. Anyone unlucky enough to be standing there when the boilers exploded had almost certainly been killed, and I could see a dozen charred bodies floating in the river. So far there were no boats coming out to save us, although where I stood, on the lower deck behind the wheels, was crowded with people scanning the banks.

I searched for my cousin in the throng but could not immediately spot her. One man, someone in uniform, was trying to give directions: ladies here, gentlemen there. He had a moustache like wet straw and a blue coat, and his stiff collar was spattered with blood. I'm not sure anyone was paying him attention. It was hard to know what to pay attention to. Without steerage, we were drifting with the current, moving farther and farther away from the Ohio embankment. Kentucky, on the other side of the river, was even farther away. A dry, gunpowdery smoke hung above us, and I could see several fires burning in the bow of the ship.

How long could we remain afloat? That's what people were asking each other in high, frightened voices, and there was a good deal of jostling as people tried to move as far back from the front of the boat as possible. Some of the wounded in the river were trying to climb back on board, and, looking down, I saw a man's burned hand, unattached to a body, in our wake.

My stomach turned over. "Comfort!" I shouted.

The hand had an emerald ring on its pinkie finger.

*"Comfort!"*

The man in the blue uniform said sharply, "Keep calm." He had a thunderous voice, and even just speaking it carried farther than my shout. A moment later the boat, which had been drifting toward

Kentucky all this while, stopped abruptly as if it had caught on something. Everyone turned and looked out to see what it was.

For a moment, nothing. Then the boat tipped. Only a slight tip, but we all felt it. Leaning back instinctively as though my body could right this imbalance, I felt a powerful urge, like a trapped animal, to get away, to be elsewhere. On the Kentucky side of the boat people began to shout, and on the Ohio side there was a lot of shoving and movement. I gripped the railing hard every time a person pushed against me in their effort to cross to the other side, where, anyone could see, the situation was no better. I turned my deaf ear toward Kentucky and watched the crowd on the Ohio side swell and pulse like a heart. Sweat ran in a thin line down my spine. It had been a warm day, but the fires on the bow made the air positively hot.

People began to panic and jump into the river. A few feet away from me a man stripped off his clothes and dove into the water holding his wallet in his teeth. Seconds later a young woman jumped in after him fully clothed. She never resurfaced.

*“Dov’è il mio papà?”*

I looked down. A girl in a clean brown-checked dress was looking up at me. She was Italian and must have mistaken me for Italian. It’s happened before—my black hair and black eyes. I could see faint lines where her hem had been let down, and there was a small cross-stitched patch near her shoulder. Comfort was twice in an Italian operetta, so I was able to reply, *“Non so.”* I don’t know. The girl was eight or nine years old and she held her hands in front of her like a supplicant or someone in prayer.

To my right I heard another loud splash as someone else dove into the water. Besides the burned bodies from the initial explosion, the river was now littered with a second front of corpses: foolish women like the one I’d seen jumping into the water a few moments before without regard for their boots and their heavy dresses, their mutton-shaped sleeves floating out at their sides, their fleshy arms

and legs hidden beneath yards of sodden cloth—striped, burgundy, checkered, a few tartans, some of the colors more visible than others. There were drowned men, too, a few of them faceup. The water near the boat had become very crowded with bodies both dead and alive, although the deck didn't seem any less populated. Where were the barges to pick us up? All I could see were a row of warehouses on the waterfront and tall factory chimneys behind them. Although the Ohio River is almost a thousand miles long, it's only a mile across at its widest, and we were more or less in the middle of it. A few men on the shore had waded into the water and were trying to reach the first set of people swimming for land, but still I could see no boats.

Every one of us would live or die on our own; I understood that now. A woman a few feet away from me began to scream, and the noise was like glass breaking inside my ear. The front half of the boat, still aflame in parts, was tipping in small, jerky stages into the water. In a quarter of an hour we would be completely submerged, but it was the scream that finally spurred me to action. The little Italian girl was searching my face as if to say, *What now?*

I looked again for Comfort—I shouted her name again—but it was useless: there were too many people, and I could not think clearly. When I glanced down I saw that I was still holding the pair of fabric scissors I'd been using when the boilers exploded. Had I been holding them this whole time? I couldn't feel them in my fingers.

I knew one more piece of Italian: "*Io mi chiamo May*," I said. Then in English: "What is your name?"

"*Mi chiamo Giulia*."

"Good," I said. "All right, Giulia. Look. I have a pair of scissors here, do you see? I'm going to cut your dress off. We don't have time for all these buttons. We need to cut off our clothes so they don't drown us." I looked at the riverbank again. I had swum across the Tiffin River near my girlhood home many times, and it was about as wide as where we were now from the shore. My mother taught me

to swim, and it was something I did better than anyone else, even Comfort. When I was swimming, all the noise of the world receded and I was alone with the feel of water like silk against my skin. I liked that feeling. I thought I could do it.

Giulia's eyes were wet with fear but she didn't cry, and although she opened her mouth to put her tongue between her lips, she made no sound when I began to cut her dress off, starting from her small pointed collar and proceeding down. The noise around us was getting louder, both wailing and shouting, and a group of women had knelt down with their foreheads on the railing and were praying aloud. Occasionally hot cinders from the bow fires floated back onto the deck, burning our hands and faces. I couldn't take a deep breath for fear of them. After I was finished cutting the girl's dress off, I began cutting off my own.

When we were both in our muslin shifts, I tucked my father's pocket watch, which hung from a silver chain around my neck, under the fabric. Then I looked for a place to ease our way into the river. If we jumped, we would go down a long way before coming up again, and Giulia might panic. Other people were climbing down the port side of the boat—their feet on the window ledges, then the latticework, then the edge of its muddy hull—and after looking for a better way and finding none, I did the same with the girl holding on to my neck.



## 2

My mother's only brother had drowned when she was a girl, and for that reason she made sure that I knew how to swim at an early age. We lived near a small town on the Tiffin River about fifty miles southwest of Toledo. Our property was on raised land above the riverbank, but, even so, the Tiffin flooded us and everyone else every five or six years until at last funds were raised to build a levee. When I was six, one of our barns got swept away. I still remember the sight of its buckled and splintered wood leaning against a couple of mud-encrusted trees where it landed, a good half mile from where it had been built.

I loved to swim. I liked feeling the slight pressure of the water like an eggshell around me, and I liked being at a distance from everyone else. My mother tied a red ribbon around my head so she could watch my progress. She always wore a faded blue wraparound dress with two cloth ties instead of buttons—the dress she cleaned in—and she sat on an old oak stump on the lowest part of the bank to watch me.

The river ran behind our house and heavy white oak trees grew down nearly to the waterline, so she probably felt it was private enough for that dress. My mother cared quite a lot about privacy, as well as prompt housekeeping and regularly paid accounts. She liked

everything to be neatly arranged and organized efficiently—"my German side," she used to say. She was an excellent dressmaker, and her seams and hems were straighter than anyone else's, although unlike me she never used a measure. I remember how she would touch a hem I was working on to show me where it had veered off a little. She had me touch it, too, as if the misalignment was something I could understand better by feel. Then she would tell me to pull it out and start again.

I wanted to pull it out. I wanted my hems to be as straight as hers. I don't know if I inherited my feelings from her or if I learned them, but I always took great pleasure in neat, straight lines and even seams. When I was older, my sewing became a matter of pride to my mother, something she showed people when they visited.

"May did this when she was only six years old," she said, passing around a gingham dress I'd made for my doll. "She learned how to sew buttonholes without asking one person."

What she didn't tell people—what perhaps she did not even know—was how she lifted her eyebrows slightly whenever I asked her a question, as though she found it strange that I did not already know the answer myself. This was less about her confidence in my abilities than a general ignorance of what children learn by themselves and what you must teach them. My mother was forty years old when I was born, and I think that she never quite got over the surprise of having me. My father was one month shy of fifty-five. They had been married almost twenty years, and whatever thoughts they might have once had about children must have been long past when they found out I was coming. My father raised cows; he died when I was eleven. His hair was fully white by the time I was four, and by the time I was nine he walked with a cane. He had but one tease and that was to say when I did something careless, that he would send me back to work at the glass factory if I did it again. Then he would smile and pinch my arm gently to show he was joking.

My mother's father was from Germany, and from him she got the habit of drinking a glass of hard cider every night after dinner. Then she came up to my bedroom and sat on my bed. "Good night, May. God be with you," she would say. Sometimes she said it in German, and I wondered if this was what her parents had said to her when she was a girl. I understood that the cider she drank each night from her father's heavy yellow glass, cloudy with age, was her way of honoring her past, and that sitting on my bed and her words to me—the only time she mentioned God to my memory—was her way of telling me she loved me.

Other than this, she did not show much emotion. She always dressed in dark blue or brown and moved quickly, erectly, and with concentrated purpose from the moment she got up until her glass of cider at night. One of her interests was the price of pig iron, and she kept a little book in her apron pocket where she recorded each day its fluctuating prices. It was my belief that she owned some shares of pig iron, and that belief I found out to be true when she died.

My father took care of the animals and the outbuildings, and he constructed and repaired the light wooden wheels for the cheese. My mother oversaw the two dairymaids who milked our cows, and she also made it her job to teach *them* how to swim. And when Comfort and her mother moved to the little town near our farm the summer I was nine, Comfort was told that she must learn to swim also.

It was the first time we met. I was just coming up to the house after visiting the cows—something I did every morning—and I saw her standing by the back door with my mother and a woman who looked like an older, thinner, unhappier version of my mother.

"May, come meet your cousin and your aunt," my mother called to me.

Comfort was already grown up, at least to me, for she was sixteen years old and stunningly beautiful, while I was nine and still awkwardly growing. She and her mother had been living in Europe with

Comfort's stepfather, who was Dutch and a gambler, which meant they moved constantly from town to town. He died after falling from a horse late at night, drunk, and after that Aunt Ann took to the stage for a few years, playing the matronly roles that Comfort would come to despise. But Aunt Ann had quit that life now and was moving to America to be closer to her sister.

"Comfort, do you know how to swim?" my mother had asked that first day. They would stay with us the entire summer and then rent a few rooms in the nearby town of Oxbow in the fall. My aunt Ann thought this would give Comfort "more opportunity" than living on a dairy farm. Opportunity always carried great weight with both of them, perhaps an effect of the gambling nature of their early days.

"A little," Comfort answered, looking at me and winking.

For some reason her wink thrilled me.

"I'll teach you," my mother said.

As I made my slow way across the Ohio River holding on to Giulia, however, I couldn't think about Comfort. I could only think about the bank: how far away was it, could I reach it, and could I keep my grip on the girl? Only later did I remind myself that my mother had taught Comfort how to swim, hoping this meant that she was alive.

With one arm crossed over Giulia's little chest and under her arm, I paddled very slowly north toward Ohio. I can remember only a few things about that twilight swim: the feel of Giulia's wet hair pasted against my neck, the sight of two men in the water clinging to the corpse of a mule, and the cries of those drowning around us. Also—but I might have dreamed this later in one of my nightmares—I remember seeing fragments of some silky material floating by me in the water. At first I thought they were the muslin tea sachets I'd been sewing on the boat, but then I realized they were bits of burned skin.

I had to stop a number of times to rest and tread water. After the

first time Giulia understood what I was doing and, holding on to my shoulder, scissored her legs alongside mine, both of us facing the bank. The water was cold and the slight current pushed us away from where we wanted to go. Treading water let me rest my arms and lungs but made me colder, and as soon as I could I pushed off again, which I signaled to Giulia by squeezing her arm.

Her thin, barely clad body was a long, heavy sack that grew heavier the longer I swam. The slithery water fingered my skin and heaved itself against me, and I tried not to think about what was swimming beneath us: the whiskered catfish I'd seen fishermen haul up from among the rocks as the steamship trudged past them. My left arm grew numb and seemed to harden around Giulia's little body while my right arm propelled us gradually forward.

Our progress seemed impossibly slow, but when at last my foot found the river's bottom, my relief was like a sob in my belly, and then I remember nothing more until Giulia and I were sitting side by side on newspapers that someone had spread out for us on a dry log on the bank.

But even here, out of habit or in need of her warmth, I held her close, and she pressed her little body against mine. A woman gave us blankets and another woman took down our names. My relief melted into a kind of stunned exhaustion, and I looked out at the river we had just swum across as if I needed, even from here, to make sense of it. Of course, there was no sense to be made. With my good ear I could still hear people in the water crying for help.

Giulia moved her wet head from side to side, looking at every man who walked by us as the sun fell over the horizon. Small boats and rafts had finally begun picking up the swimmers, but more shouted for help than there were boats to help them. I looked for Comfort in the water but I was too far away to make out anyone's features, and exhaustion held me in place. I had no sensation in my arms and legs, and my breath felt like a quietly wheezing animal inside my chest.

Suddenly, Giulia shouted, “Papa!” with a voice strangely loud and deep for a girl so young, and she seemed to spring with one motion off the log and right into a man’s arms.

The man was barefoot and hatless and wore only wet long johns under his blanket. He was not very tall and his shoulders were stooped, but he had Giulia’s nose and something of her bearing. There was no mistaking him for anything other than kin, and I felt then, as I feel now, that it was a kind of miracle that they both had made it off the *Moselle* alive, considering how many had not. Giulia’s father wrapped his wet arms around Giulia, and I felt the cold air come into the space under my arm where a moment ago I’d been holding her. I watched them embrace and cry. He was sobbing openly, something I had never seen a man do before.

When Giulia led him back to me, he said something in Italian in a voice that cracked. He stopped and cried some more and then started again. I listened to him, not understanding a word, and I tried to look him in the eye as my mother always reminded me to do. I was glad they were alive and I was glad that they had found each other, but I was embarrassed by his attention. When he finished speaking, Giulia hugged me and I let myself be hugged, trying not to stiffen. After she let go I relaxed, and then I looked at her face carefully so I would remember it. I must have gotten a good image of it in my mind, for it often came back to me later in my dreams, but in my dreams she was not smiling; she was scared.

“*Grazie, grazie, che il buon Dio con voi,*” Giulia’s father called back.

I watched them until Giulia’s little head became just a dot in the distance. Then it was gone. The lamplighter began lighting the lamps alongside the river, and when I looked out at the water again I saw that it was streaked with the deep purples and blues of sunset. The cool evening air seemed to blow down from the town and up from the river both at once, and I pulled my blanket closer around my shoulders and stood.

I needed to find Comfort. She was wearing her chartreuse dress. She had her favorite hair ornament in her hair, a silver bird with a turquoise eye. I tried to remember other details. But although I stumbled barefoot along the debris on the beach, looking at each face I passed and at all the faces of the waterlogged dead pulled up from the river, I could not find her.

Early the next morning, the Cincinnati City Council appointed twenty-one men to retrieve the remaining bodies from the river. Some men cut back the saplings and brush that grew down into the water in order to make the bank wider, while others pulled the bodies onto flat sheets and arranged them faceup with scraps of clothes or personal articles alongside them to help with identification. By the time I got back to the riverbank, a large tent had been erected over the bodies to protect them from the sun: for April, the weather was unusually mild.

The corpses were laid out with their feet pointing toward the river like an accusation, and their clothes were stained with mud and blood. The woman in front of me, Mrs. Alma Stoke, her face swollen with crying, pinched her nose with her fingers as she looked at the bloated faces. The night before Mrs. Stoke and I had both been given lodging in the home of a city gauger named Nedel. Mrs. Stoke was looking for her husband and three children.

When we came to the last row in the tent, a man with a city emblem on his coat said, "There's more at the morgue, taken last night."

This was a one-story yellow brick building a few blocks away. A line had formed at the door, and we were led inside in groups of five. Here the bodies seemed more dignified, lifted off the ground and laid out on low tables with sheets up to their necks and their hair brushed. The floor and the lower halves of the walls were tiled with teal-blue tiles, and in the middle of the floor stood a drain.

Comfort was not among those on the tables, but Mrs. Stoke found her husband and two of her children. Before that moment the five of us looking were silent, and then all at once her wails filled the room, echoing off the tiled floor. I turned my good ear away from the noise and found myself staring at a metal counter with unmarked toe tags, needles and sewing materials, a bone saw, and other tools of the trade. Bile rose in my throat. I was beginning to feel desperate.

Back out on the sidewalk, a boy with a brown jug gave me half a cup of water even though I didn't have a penny to pay him. People were gathering with signs: "Looking for: one child, gray dress, yellow stockings, called Anna Weaver" and "John and Edward Sunbury lodging at 2 West Circle and looking for their mother" and "Frank Jewett! I am alive and staying on Cross Street at Mrs. Vernon's, on the corner." Horses pulling wagons with company names painted on the sides passed me in a steady stream, and I stood there staring at them for a long time, not knowing what to do next. She knows how to swim, I reminded myself, but I was by now sick with anxiety.

"Well, well, if it isn't the girl with the ephemeral smile."

I turned to see a man walking toward me with shoulder-length curly blond hair: Mr. Thaddeus Mason. His left arm was in a sling made of soft black cotton dotted with irregular specks like the night sky on a very clear night if stars were light green and not white. He held a jar of jam in his injured hand and a spoon in the other.

A warm flood of relief washed over me. "Mr. Mason!" I said.

"Thaddeus," he corrected as he led me to a bench in the shade. "My dear, I was worried about you!" I could tell he hadn't given a thought to me until he saw me this moment, but I didn't mind: I was just glad to be speaking to someone I knew.

Thaddeus licked his spoon and put it in his jacket pocket. Despite being an actor and not rich, Thaddeus always dressed well. Today he was wearing a dark green jacket with a wide striped tie and light-colored trousers—certainly borrowed, and yet the clothes seemed tai-



lored to fit him. When I asked him what had happened to his arm, he said, "A little sprain from my fall; nothing serious. Now, what news do you have of your beautiful cousin? Please tell me you are waiting here for her, that she's just gone to post a letter or to collect a check."

I don't know why actors are always going to the post office looking for money in the mail; in my experience they either get paid promptly in person or not at all. Two young women came strolling toward us arm in arm, taking care to keep away from the pigs, which in Cincinnati roam freely in the streets. One of the women had hair the same reddish-gold color as Comfort's, and all at once I felt tears stand in my eyes.

"I fear that she's dead," I said.

Thaddeus said in a kind voice, "Oh, my dear," and I looked down at my lap. But when he took my fingers in his, I blinked back my tears and concentrated on easing my hand away. To my surprise, Thaddeus laughed and his manner shifted.

"You don't take much in the way of sympathy, do you?" he asked, and for once his voice sounded genuine. "Listen, they're printing up a new broadsheet now. I'm guessing that with all the confusion Comfort didn't think to give her name last night. I'll just pop over to the newspaper office and see what I can find out. Here," he said, fishing out the jam jar from his sling. "Sour cherry preserves."

He didn't leave the spoon, but in any case I wasn't hungry. I watched him stride down the street in his usual confident manner. When I first met him, Thaddeus seemed to me like an opportunistic man with most of his opportunities behind him. For all his long yellow hair he was aging: there were small wrinkles around his eyes and laugh lines at the corners of his mouth. But he was not unattractive, and if he worried about his own prospects, he never let on. He had a way of looking straight at a woman as though he could see her hidden self and he liked it. I'd seen him look this way at Comfort whenever he wanted something from her. A loan of money, usually.

It felt a long time until he came back, but when he did he was carrying a folded newspaper in his good hand and he was grinning.

"There," he said, opening it up for me to see.

On the page, three columns of names were printed in dark type: "Dead," "Missing," and "Saved." Comfort's name was just below Mrs. Flora Howard's in the category of "Saved." The print was very small but there was no mistake.

Comfort Vertue. Of course she would save herself; why did I doubt that? As I held the long paper I noticed my fingers were shaking, and the page folded backward in the wind.

"But where could she be?" I asked. I cast around in my mind for an explanation. "With Mrs. Howard?"

"The woman boasted of having a large house." Thaddeus grinned at me. In direct sunlight he looked even older. "Now's our chance to see."

Mrs. Flora Howard had not exaggerated about her home, which was an immense sand-colored stone house, three stories high, with a round turret on the left. The cabdriver—Thaddeus persuaded him to give us a free ride, since we were "victims of the *Moselle*, don't you know"—let us out at the corner, and we walked up to the house between tightly clipped shrubbery, which flanked the drive like armrests. As we came to the front door I felt my heart give two hard beats against my ribs and then settle itself into a faster rhythm.

Thaddeus rapped the large brass knocker. A moment later the blackest man I'd ever seen opened the door. He was immaculately dressed in a brown suit with a white shirt, and his eyes went straight to the hem of my skirt, which I knew was too short.

"We've come to see Mrs. Howard," Thaddeus said. He gave our names and explained that we were all on the *Moselle* together. "And Miss Comfort Vertue, if she is here."

"Is she here?" I asked.

The man kept his hand on the door. His suit coat was so crisp that it looked as though it had been cut from mahogany wood instead of cloth, and I wanted to tell him that my shawl, visibly mended, and my short dress were both borrowed.

"May we come in?" Thaddeus asked.

Still the man did not answer. He shut the door.

The color rose slightly on Thaddeus's face. "Well!" he said, drawing back his chin. The man's silence had surprised me, too, but he hadn't looked completely blank when we asked about Comfort, so that gave me hope.

After a few moments the man opened the door again and stepped aside to let us into the hallway, which was very wide, almost a room by itself. A long wooden settee painted black stood against the wall to our left, and three framed pictures hung in a precise line above it. Mrs. Howard was coming down the hallway, wiping the back of her neck with a handkerchief.

"I don't know why you felt compelled to come in person when a note would have done just as well," she said. She took my hand for a brief moment before letting it drop. She was wearing a dove-gray gown with long silver chains over it, one of them supporting a small bottle of perfume.

"Mrs. Howard," Thaddeus said. "I'm so happy to see you alive and well!"

"Yes, yes, it's been quite a remarkable few days, and I must return the compliments, of course, so happy to see you both, and so on. But I expect you've come to inquire about Comfort. I thought at least we'd have a day or two to recuperate first, but here you are already. Well, never mind that; I suppose it's natural." She frowned at me.

"So Comfort is here? She's well?" I asked.

"Of course she's here; isn't that plain by what I am saying? She received a nasty blow to the head, but Dr. Penrod has seen her twice

and declares she is in no danger. Well, these doctors are overly sanguine sometimes, but I daresay he's right as long as she is adequately nursed, which I am more than capable of, considering how I nursed Mr. Howard in his last illness for over a year—and that was a bad case, let me assure you." She paused to frown at me again.

"A very bad case," I said, for I thought she was waiting for my response, "considering how it ended in death." Last illness, she'd said.

Her face became very red, and I thought of my private nickname for her: Florid.

"Well, Comfort is not so bad as that; no, indeed! And it was not my fault that Mr. Howard . . . No one could say I didn't do everything possible. And I am quite just as careful with Comfort . . ."

She went on talking without a break and without leading us out of the hallway. She put me in mind of a stout operatic singer I once knew, capable of talking over anyone and with terrible breath besides, but Mrs. Howard smelled of mint and violets. Her bottom two teeth grew in toward each other, and I found myself watching them while she spoke.

". . . and the oarsman swung around at the shout and hit Comfort with his oar. She nearly fell in the river again but for me. And then when I chastised the man, he had the effrontery to remind us he had just saved our lives!" She was telling us about her adventures, which I wanted to hear from Comfort.

"I'd like to see her," I said.

But Mrs. Howard paid no attention; perhaps she did not even hear me. "Fortunately, Donaldson was waiting at the river with the carriage—he came as soon as he heard what had happened, which was quite soon, he's remarkable that way—and we rushed home to where Dr. Penrod was waiting, thinking I might need some care. I pay for his boy's schooling, you know; they've sent him back to England for that, better mathematics and science over there."

"You must let me see Comfort," I said, and when Mrs. Howard

continued talking, I said loudly, "Mrs. Howard, excuse me, I'll just make my way upstairs." That stopped her.

"Oh, no! No, no!" She actually took a step sideways, blocking my passage. "You mustn't disturb her, not now: I've only just gotten her to sleep!"

"You talk as if my cousin were an infant." I looked over at Thaddeus, who was wearing an amused smile. This annoyed me further.

"She just needs rest and good nursing; she'll be perfectly fine. Why won't you take my word on that? I know what I am about. Anyway, she is asleep. Donaldson!"

The black man appeared with a lacquered tea tray. He placed it neatly on the table next to the wooden settee and then turned one of the cup handles to match the direction of the other.

Thaddeus bent to take a look. "Mm. Is that ginger cake?"

"Don't bother to ask him anything; he can't speak," Mrs. Howard said of Donaldson without so much as a glance at the man. "Now I must go. Dr. Penrod is waiting in the kitchen and I want to consult with him. After that, I'm gone to the apothecary. You may leave a note for Comfort if you wish. I hope tomorrow she'll be able to sit upright . . . I'll tell her you were here." She turned to the kitchen and I realized she meant for us to take our tea in the hall.

"She intends to keep Comfort to herself," Thaddeus said in a low voice.

"What do you mean?" But Thaddeus only smiled his annoying smile. "I'm her cousin," I said, and he shrugged.

Donaldson stood by the door with his hands at his sides. If he was surprised that we took up the offer of tea in the hallway, he didn't show it; but I was hungry and thirsty, and Thaddeus never refused food. He cut himself two thick slices of ginger cake and sat down beside me, resting his plate on his knee.

This was not the first time I had been shut out of some room Comfort was in. All too often she met with admirers after the last

bow or the curtain call, then the flowers, a final adieu followed by the sweep of her dress as she made her way through the narrow passageways of some theater or another going back to her dressing room (not always the largest—she was not always the star). Perhaps I would be sent to find more wood for the dressing room stove, and when I returned the door would be shut and I would hear her laughing. “Don’t come in yet, May!” she would call, and I knew that someone else was in there, untying her laces. It was always chilly in theater hallways. It was not unusual for me to be locked out without a shawl and she would laugh, later, to find me with an old curtain over my shoulders. If the hall porter saw me, he might fetch off a boy to get me a half-pint of beer and some bread. One porter once gave me half of his dinner and let me have his stool while he stood. The clergy like to say that the theater is not a respectable profession, but I have found hall porters to be, to a man, honest, good folk.

In Mrs. Howard’s hallway I drank my tea slowly and listened for any noise from upstairs. As I sliced a second piece of cake, Mrs. Howard called out to Donaldson from the kitchen.

Donaldson glanced at us but did not move.

“Donaldson!” she boomed again.

For a moment I thought he was going to open the front door to usher us out, cake in hand, rather than leave us alone, but instead he walked back to the kitchen. How old was he? Forty? Fifty? Seventy? None of those ages would have surprised me. He had wide shoulders and a good build, and he was careful with his clothes, which I approved of. When the door closed behind him, I put my plate down on the settee and stood.

Thaddeus looked up and winked, his mouth full. As I walked silently up the carpeted steps, I could hear Mrs. Howard’s loud voice at the back of the house. Upstairs I opened one door and then another until I found Comfort—not asleep in bed, as Mrs. Howard had claimed, but sitting on a white and blue upholstered chair looking

out the front window. Her head was bandaged and she was wearing a loose white gown with a white pelisse over it, not tied and not properly ironed.

She turned to look at me as I stepped into the room. "Why . . . May!"

"Don't stand up." I went to her and took her two hands. After so many fittings and costume changes, I was as used to the feel of her skin as I was of my own.

"May! Oh, May!" was all she could say at first, squeezing my fingers, and then, in spite of my words, she stood up and pulled me into a hug. I felt her warmth for a moment before I drew back.

"Did you think I had drowned?" I asked.

"Of course not! No! Well, I don't know! I was trying not to think," she said, and that sounded right to me. "Flora was planning to get the afternoon paper—she'd been checking the names—but I'm not supposed to read any fine print for a day or two. Oh, May, I'm so glad to see you! My little May," she said, although I am now taller than she is—something she always disputes.

"You should rest. I'll be back tomorrow. I just wanted to see if you were really all right."

"Of course I am."

Of course she was. Her hair smelled freshly washed, and the bandage on her forehead was as clean as if it were part of a costume.

"I feel fine," she said, "just the tiniest headache. Of course, I suppose I play it up some; you know how I am."

I looked her over carefully. Her face was paler than usual.

"You should lie down," I told her.

"Oh, all right, but only if you'll come with me, Frog. The bed is heavenly."

I helped her to the bed, and after she was settled I took off my shawl and carefully folded it up into a square, laid it on the end of the mattress, and stretched out next to her with my shoes on the

shawl. I looked up at the ceiling. Comfort was right: the bed was very comfortable.

"It's pleasant here, don't you think?" she asked. "A beautiful house. You must move your things in; there's plenty of room. What an ordeal! Did you have a hard time?"

"Mrs. Howard tried to keep me downstairs."

"I meant getting off the boat."

"Oh." As usual I tried to be precise. "Not hard, exactly. Swimming to the bank took a long time. At least, it felt long."

"I can't remember much, and I don't want to," Comfort said.

I turned my head to breathe in the faint rose scent of the pillow. Relief, I sometimes think, is a feeling that doesn't have any feeling: when it happens you hardly notice—you've already turned your mind to other things. Lying on the bed next to my cousin, I began thinking about money and how we could get ourselves to St. Louis. I could always sew or do alterations. Two tickets probably wouldn't cost more than twelve dollars, and in New York or Pittsburgh, when Comfort wasn't in a play, I could make that in a couple of weeks. Or we could tap Mrs. Howard, who was rich and clearly fond of Comfort. She might give us a loan. Thaddeus, of course, was a dead loss.