

JUDE AND MARY'S HOUSE OF LOVE

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I miss Mary stirring the pot on the stove of our little house, making what she called hot-weather soup. Mind you, it's hot out here in California. Hot without that Tennessee bug stillness, swarming around your head like a fog. California been good to the two of us, and we left the South weeks before the war. Mary worked in a shoe store in Brentwood on account of her skin being so light, and I started out cleaning house for Mr. Arnstein, a picture producer, till he tried to get fresh with me. I was in the kitchen drying dishes when he come from behind and put his hand on my belly, but I was real quick. I put a knife so close to his throat, I could've nicked him if I wanted. Goddamn devil just laughed and told me he liked them real spunky. But he didn't bother me no more and soon he gave me a better job. I told Mary what he done when we were cozying up for the night in our bed and she laughed just the same he did. "He don't know what you like," Mary said. Then she put her hand down my belly and made it all right.

As Mr. Arnstein's personal assistant, I got to run errands and drive a car after all the years of raising other women's boys back home. Learning to drive with Mary nearly killed us a few times, but we'd settle in our seats and put the hats back on our heads and just laugh as the car sputtered and stalled. All that driving came in handy when I'd see actors on the movie lot and ask for autographs for Mary. She put Hedy

Lamarr's and Tommy Dorsey's in a frame by her side of the bed. Mr. Arnstein had a good Austin 8 for me to go around the MGM studio and deliver all manner of things, even reels. They're most precious of all, so I knew I'd done good when he let me handle them. I kept the reels in the seat next to me stacked so neat and put a little tea towel on top so the sun wouldn't heat up the cans and melt the film. Mr. Arnstein told me he fired a boy for doing just that. The poor sap piled the cans on the back of his bicycle and parked out in the open. The boy had to go back to Utah after that, which was a shame because Mr. Arnstein reckoned he'd become one of them farming polygamists. Mr. Arnstein turned out to be a good kind of devil, if there's such a thing. I worked with him for thirty-some years till he died of lung cancer in 1971. Mary followed six years later from her own cancer that took first her right breast and then her left. She was only sixty-three. Good Lord Almighty, I miss my Mary. To think the whole time we been together in that tiny house.

We'd saved enough money keeping house in Nashville to put down a payment and buy ourselves that house in West Hollywood. There was a porch and a dirt patch out back for Mary's garden. In the early years we could still walk down to the orange groves and from the porch the smell would be strong as punch in late summer. By the time Mary'd gone, the groves were long cut down for homes and restaurants and shops. That smell in the air left with her, like the song of all the birds she put seed out for in her garden. She'd make tiny suet balls with scraps of lard and heaping spoonfuls of peanut butter. I can see her rolling out those suet balls and covering them in millet and sunflowers seeds. I kept some pieces of chipped porcelain from Mr. Arnstein. He never married, but he sure liked his things pretty. Sandringham Blue they were, fancy things from all the way in England, and she put out those plates in the garden for her birds. "Quit your yapping, Jude," she'd say, "them sweet fellows over there are called Lesser Goldfinches and that's why I give them gold plates to peck on—ain't nobody tell me who's lesser or greater." Then she'd talk about the birds she'd seen and which

ones she liked best.

My Mary kept a diary of us and her garden and her birds. When we moved here, we told everybody that wanted to know we were sisters and that Mary'd lost her husband. Sometimes she said he coughed blood to death and sometimes I said he died in the war. We settled on telling people that he died of tuberculosis on his way to war. People like a widow and a good sister that tries to help. They felt sorry for us, but we were sorrier for them. We had our white lies, me and Mary.

And now I'm selling the house of our life together for more money than I can count. They don't want the house or the garden or our handprints in cement slabs that go from the porch steps to the street. They want to put our house down like a sick dog. They'll bulldoze it and it'll be gone, but that's fine by me. It hurt too much to think of somebody else planting flowers in the garden or painting new colors on the walls. The life we had is buried in a plot nearby with a pretty little headstone with Mary's name on it. I had the carving man put my name under, where it says, "Jude Hardin, Who Loves Her Always." Years from now, those that walk by will think Jude was a man, the kind that dies on his way to war or of some old disease that don't exist no more. But me and Mary'll be cozy in our plot of earth, knowing the good times we had while keeping safe our little secrets.