

She used to dress me so pretty. Even the Reynolds girls—and their daddy owned the bank; everyone said they wore drawers made out of French silk. They used to admire my clothes.”

Dessa stared at the white woman. She was crazy, making up this whole thing, like, like—  
“. . . pretend their clothes came from a fashionable *modiste*, but I always said, ‘Oh, this a little something Mammy ran up for me.’ So when I walked into the great hall at Winston, I had on a dress that Mammy made and it was Mammy’s—”

“Wasn’t no ‘mammy’ to it.” The words burst from Dessa. She knew even as she said it what the white woman meant. “Mammy” was a servant, a slave (Dorcas?) who had nursed the white woman as Carrie had nursed Young Mistress’s baby before it died. But, goaded by the white woman’s open-mouthed stare, she continued, “Mammy ain’t made you nothing!”

“Why, she—” The white woman stopped, confused. Hurt seemed to spread like a red stain across her face.

Seeing it, Dessa lashed out again. “You don’t even know mammy.”

“I do so,” the white woman said indignantly, “Pappa give her—”

“Mammy live on the Vaugham plantation near Simeon on the Beauford River, McAllen County.” This was what they were taught to say if some white person asked them; their name and what place they belonged to. The white woman gaped, like a fish, Dessa thought contemptuously, just like a fish out of water. Anybody could make this white woman’s wits go gathering.

“My, my— *My Mammy*—” the white woman sputtered.

The words exploded inside Dessa. “*Your ‘mammy’*—” Never, never had that white baby taken Jessup’s place with Carrie. “*Your ‘mammy’!*” No *white* girl could ever have taken *her* place in mammy’s bosom; no one. “You ain’t got no ‘mammy,’” she snapped.

“I do— I did so.” the white woman was shouting now, the white cloth crushed in her trembling hands.

“All you know about is this kinda sleeve and that kinda bonnet, some party here— Didn’t you have no peoples where you lived? ‘Mammy’ ain’t nobody name, not they real one.”

“Mam—”

The white woman's baby started to cry and the white woman made as if to rise and go to it. Dessa's voice overrode the tearful wail, seeming to pin the white women in the chair. "See! See! You don't even not know 'mammy's' name. Mammy have a name, have children."

"She didn't." The white woman, finger stabbing toward her own heart, finally rose. "She just had me! I was like her child."

"What was her name then?" Dessa taunted. "Child don't even know its own mammy's name. What was mammy's name? What—"

"Mammy," the white woman yelled. "That was her name."

"Her name was Rose," Dessa shouted back, struggling to sit up. "That's a flower so red it look black. When mammy was a girl they named her that count of her skin—smooth black, and they teased her bout her breath cause she worked around the dairy; said it smelled like cow milk and her mouth was slick as butter, her kiss tangy as clabber."

"You are lying," the white woman said coldly; she was shaking with fury. "Liar!" she hissed.