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The Floating Theatre

Written by Martha Conway

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The FLOATING THEATRE

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For my father, Richard Conway,
who toured the Ohio River with me.

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 heavyset 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'é il mio papa?"

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.