



## "We need a better story..."

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"We need a better story..."

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8/14 SWH

8/14 SWH

fragile?

better

the girl

that girl

that

harpies

We need a story to explain what happened to ~~those women~~ and the boy too. The one about hags flying in from the sea to harm ~~straying~~ women and eat disobedient children won't do anymore. It was an ~~unappetizing~~ tale anyway that emerged fully formed and seemingly without source just because for a few years (1951 to 1953) a couple of "see, what'd I tell you" events happened at the shore. For example, an Up Beach woman ~~making~~ love in the sand with her neighbor's husband suffered a stroke and she wasn't but 24 at the time. Another woman—she was from Harmony and wouldn't have anything to do with Up Beach people—hid some letters and a purchase deed under her mother-in-law's porch only to have a mud turtle dig them up. A few days later the greedy daughter-in-law broke her hip trying ~~unsuccessfully~~ to keep the breeze and the neighbors away from the papers that damned her. Although the hags were not in view during the distress of these guilty women, we already knew what they looked like. In 1948 some children waded too far out. Having no idea of what "too far" could mean when gravity was already behind them, they were pulled under, it was then the dark clouds gathering above the heads of screaming parents, subdued siblings and picnickers became the profiles of old women in a spasm of open-mouthed delight. At first this cautionary tale insisted that those happy beach harpies pounced on the unsuspecting only in the evening, (when lust was keenest, when turtles lay eggs and exhausted parents became negligent); that they were especially active when the hotel was full of visitors drunk with dance music, salt air and the proximate danger of deep water. Those were the days when ~~Crooked Heart~~ <sup>Crooked Heart</sup> was the best and best known vacation spot for ~~colored folk~~ <sup>black people</sup> on the east coast. Where everybody came: Lil Green, Father Hines, etc. tk and guests as far away as Michigan and New York state couldn't wait to get down here. But in 1958 the hags were spotted near daytime accidents. A clarinet player and his bride drowned at noon.

\* Some people swore [that] what others took for thunder was a freaky kind of laughter. And we had to admit only ~~IK~~ <sup>ENIGMA</sup> would ~~start~~ at a drowned child's cover

the hotel  
Cosey's Rest  
where  
Cosey's Rest offered the best of everything.  
(the heart of Crooked Heart)



What started out as  
~~If it had been a~~  
~~nursery~~ story, it  
wasn't anymore. Now it  
was grown up. And mean.

to play.

The inner tube raft they were floating on washed ashore and broke up into unmistakably geriatric faces <sup>crowned by</sup> ~~covered with~~ streams of kelp hair. Whether the bride had <sup>played around</sup> ~~strayed~~ during the honeymoon

was unclear but she certainly had every opportunity. Bill Cosey's resort had more handsome

men per square foot than anyplace outside St. Louis or even New Orleans. From then on, ~~the~~ women up to no good and mule headed children needed no further warnings; <sup>because</sup> there was no escape.

Quick as lightning <sup>anytime or day, ancient biddies</sup> ~~old women~~ shot up out of the waves to punish the wayward and devour <sup>swallow</sup> ~~the~~

misbehaving young. You <sup>We thought</sup> ~~would think~~ that would be enough for some female Rumpelstiltskins, <sup>and (over)</sup> ~~work (career)~~

but it wasn't. It took twenty more years for us to <sup>acknowledge</sup> ~~see~~ the reach of their appetite. <sup>As well as the point</sup> ~~the~~

In 1978 Bill Cosey's widow sold seventy-five <sup>inland</sup> acres to an Equal Opportunity Housing

developer for fifty homes so reasonably priced and generously financed even Up Beach people

could afford them. Those, at least, who <sup>after the war</sup> ~~had not left~~ in the fifties when the cannery closed, their

pockets heavy with B class war effort money and fingers so warped from shelling crab they

needed their children to count it. The sale <sup>had just</sup> ~~was barely~~ closed, the <sup>land barely</sup> ~~foundations~~ just plotted when <sup>stubborn</sup> ~~widows~~

mothers were pumping mud from their spigots. Dried up wells encouraged the most recalcitrant

Up Beach tenant to abandon the sight of the sea <sup>its groovy</sup> ~~the delicious~~ breezes and apply for a HUD

mortgage. Then we knew <sup>run</sup> ~~for certain~~: the hags wanted the whole place for themselves.

Accidents, <sup>run</sup> ~~the decline of the~~ hotel, the sale of Bill Cosey's inland acres, and unheard of drought

in an area identifiable by its cattails and ~~tk~~ plants as water hungry as papyrus. <sup>None of that was random</sup> ~~The old women~~

<sup>hags</sup> ~~had won~~: three and a half miles of Atlantic Coast beach front was theirs alone for play. That

<sup>have</sup> ~~should end the story~~, and would <sup>have</sup> ~~except for the~~ Cosey women. Their lives, their behavior, and

then their disappearance whipped up so much feeling that a <sup>grown up nursery</sup> ~~children's~~ story is all we <sup>had</sup> ~~have~~ to

<sup>explain what was known and, hazard what was hidden,</sup> ~~supply a much needed context~~. How else account for what they did to the boy and the pain they

heaped on that young woman? But we know in our hearts <sup>its</sup> ~~their~~ weakness: wicked women tales



a — boy and a — girl

All of Crooked Heart  
~~The whole place~~ belongs to them now:

Most of us ~~live in~~ moved to Harmony ~~now~~. Except for

a few fishshacks, Up Beach is 20 feet under water. Casey's  
Kest is still standing. Sort of standing. Looks more like  
its <sup>rearing</sup> ~~leaving~~ backwards — away from hurricanes and  
the <sup>ocean</sup> steady blow. Odd what <sup>ocean</sup> ~~happens~~ <sup>front</sup> can do  
to empty houses. TK



Harmony  
←

25

<sup>make up</sup> invented to <sup>scare</sup> ~~intimidate~~ females and discipline children don't work, don't explain. Even Eve, poor thing, can't carry this modern world's evil. We need something more.

<sup>when the girl worked for the Casey women,</sup>  
Fact is, ~~that girl came to them and~~ <sup>she</sup> solved all their problems: mice, blocked drains, outrageous ancestry and the simplest and cheapest way to clean diamonds. She was never able, though, to crack the silence. Those old women who had not spoken more than the purely <sup>Casey</sup> ~~perfunctory and absolutely~~ necessary to each other for decades continued their mute argument as though the health of their lungs depended on it.

<sup>peculiar this</sup>  
The day she came was ~~novel~~ <sup>novel</sup> for that part of the county--cold and scratchy. Chafing winds kept the temperature low and the sun was helpless to move thermostats more than a few degrees above freezing. <sup>Ice melted</sup> ~~Thin~~ tiles of ice formed at the shoreline and, seven miles inland, the <sup>like puppies.</sup> ~~houses on Post Road whined. The landscape dotted with young trees and shrubs protected no one from acid licks of wind. Dogwood and palmetto arched to breaking. Patches of ice gleamed then disappeared in the early evening shadow causing the sidewalks she marched along to undermine even the most agile tread.~~ <sup>step</sup> She should have bent her head and closed her eyes to slits in that weather, but being a stranger, she stared wide-eyed at each house searching for the address that matched the one in the advertisement: 1 Old Post Road. ~~No house on the street had a single digit number.~~ Finally, ~~her knees and thighs must have been stinging from the cold that her mini-skirt exposed them to,~~ she turned into a driveway where Sandler Gibbons stood in his garage door ripping the seam from a sack of Ice-off. He remembers the crack of her heels on concrete as she approached; the angle of her hip as she stood there, the melon sun behind her, the garage light in her face. He remembers the pleasure of her voice when she asked for directions to the house of women he had known all their lives.



and peckoned her knees and thighs  
were stinging from the cold her  
mini skirt exposed them to.

"You sure?" he asked when she told him the address.

She <sup>took</sup> a square of paper from a jacket pocket, held it with ungloved fingers and nodded.

Mr. Gibbons scanned her legs, <sup>then he</sup> marveled at the height of her boot heels, the cut of her short leather jacket. At first he'd thought she wore a hat, something big and fluffy to keep her ears and neck warm. Then he realized that <sup>it</sup> ~~hair~~ was hair-blown forward in the wind and distracting him from her face. She looked to him like a sweet child—fine boned, gently raised but lost. "Cosey women," he said. "That's their place you looking for. It ain't been number one for a long time now. But you can't tell them that. Can't tell them nothing. It's 1410 or 1401, probably."

Now it was her turn to question his certainty.

"I'm telling you," he said, suddenly irritable-- the wind, probably. "Go on up that a way. You can't miss it 'less you try to. Big as a church."

She thanked him but did not turn around when he hollered at her back, "Or a jail house."

Mr. Gibbons didn't know what made him say that. "Jailhouse." He believed his wife was on his mind. She <sup>'d be</sup> ~~was~~ on her way from the bus stop by now, stepping carefully on slippery pavement until she got to their <sup>drive way</sup> ~~house~~. There she would be safe from falling because, with the forethought and common sense he was known for, he was prepared for freezing weather <sup>after-</sup> ~~where it~~ <sup>never froze</sup>. But the "jailhouse" thought meant he was really thinking of Romen who should have been home from school an hour and a half ago. Fourteen, way too tall and getting muscled, Mr. Gibbons' grandson was demanding more and more attention. There was a skulk about him, something furtive that made Mr. Gibbons stroke his thumb and frown every time the boy came

\* in a village that had  
~~there was~~ no history of it.

into view. He and Vida Gibbons had been pleased to have him, raise him, when their daughter and son-in-law enlisted. Mother in the army; father in the merchant marines. The best choice out of none when only pick up work—housecleaning in Harbor City for the women, hauling road trash for the men—was left after the canneries closed. Parents idle; children idle. Getting yard work for Romen from the Cosey's was something but not enough to keep him on the dime and out of the sight line of under occupied, <sup>over eager, badly trained</sup> police

Sandler Gibbons was wiping salt dust from his hands when the two people under his care arrived at the same time, one hollering "Hoo! Am I glad you did this, thought I'd break my neck"; the other saying "What you mean, Gramma? I had your arm all the way from the bus."

She did not miss it and <sup>the man with the ice melt</sup> ~~he~~ was not wrong. The house was graceful, imposing, and its peaked third story roof did suggest a chapel. On either side of the <sup>uncleared</sup> walkway old trees met the blasting wind with <sup>a</sup> ~~the~~ carelessness that came with a century of triumph. —> ②

~~She climbed seven steps to the porch~~  
Seeing no bell, she started to knock, but hesitated when she noticed a brightly lit window below, to the right of the porch. <sup>The area</sup> It had the look of what was called a garden apartment by some—by others a basement one. She went back down the <sup>sloping</sup> ~~wooden~~ steps, followed the curve marked by half-buried pieces of slates and descended a flight of iron stairs leading <sup>to</sup> ~~past~~ the window <sup>(No wind in the wall)</sup> to a door. <sup>and, next to it,</sup> Pausing at the pane she saw a seated woman. On the table before her were a colander, newspaper and a mixing bowl. The girl tapped on the window and smiled when the woman looked up. She rose slowly but once on her feet, moved rapidly to the door.

"What is it?" The door opened just wide enough to expose one gray eye.

"I came about the job," said the girl. A marine odor hovered in the crack.

"Then you're lost," said the woman and slammed the door.



(2)

The [Seven] steps to the porch, ~~were~~ started with the  
~~they~~ encouraged caution for there was no  
railing. but the girl clicked  
along without hesitations  
the walk and up the stairs.

Enter house; ref to girl.

of course you did, baby

clothes

girl with skirt up to her  
hip near bout. ~~look~~

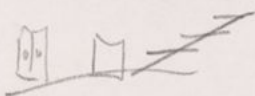
what she want?

Cosy place

Get out

what for? (Romen)

Didn't say. Had a bit a newspaper  
w/ old address on it but I ~~showed~~ corrected her.  
She can't miss it.



The girl banged on it, shouting, "But it says 1 Post Road!. 1 Post Road!"

There was no answer so she went back to the window and pecked the glass with the nails of her left hand while her right pressed the tiny square of newsprint toward the light..

The woman came back to the window, her eyes flat with annoyance as she stared at the girl, then moved her eyes from the young face and its pleading smile to the piece of paper. She squinted at it, looked again at the face then back at the paper, but not before something like panic glinted then died in her eyes. Motioning toward the door she disappeared from the window.

When the girl was inside, the woman offered neither seat nor greeting. She took the advertisement and read. A pencilled circle separated the few lines of one help wanted notice from others above and below.

Companion, secretary sought by elderly woman. Light but highly confidential work.

Apply to Mrs. H. Cosey. 1 Post Road

"Where did you get this?" The woman's voice was calm as a secretary's.

"From the newspaper."

"I can see that. Which? The tk Harbor Journal?"

"Yes, Mam."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

She handed back the advertisement. "Well. I guess you better sit down."

"Are you Mrs. H. Cosey?"

She gave the girl a look. "If I was I'd know about that little scrap of paper wouldn't I?"



The girl's laughter was the agitation of bells—a welcoming disruption. “Oh, right. Sorry.”

They both sat and the woman returned to the work of de-veining shrimp. Twelve rings, two on three fingers of each hand snatched light from the ceiling fixture and seemed to elevate her task from drudgery to sorcery.

*You have a*  
“What’s your name, then?”

“Toby.”

“Toby what?”

“Skye. Toby Skye. With an ‘e’.”

“You from around here?”

“Used to be. I’ve been away.”

“Who’re your people? I never heard tell of any family name Skye.”

*Oh*  
“They’re not from here.”

“Where, then?”

The jacket leather purred as the girl shrugged her shoulders and reached across the table to the colander.

“Can I help you with that?” She asked. “I’m a pretty fair cook.”

*The woman held up a staying hand.*  
“No. Needs a certain rhythm.”

A bouquet of steam wandered away from water lifting to a boil on the stove. Behind the woman was a wall of cupboards, their surfaces as pale and handled as pastry. The silence stretching between the two began to pulse. The girl fidgeted. “Is Mrs. Cosey here?”

“She is.”

"May I speak to her?"

"Let me see that thing again." She wiped her hands on a dishtowel before touching the ad. "'Highly confidential,' huh?" She pursed her lips. "I believe that. I sure do," she said and dropped the paper with thumb and forefinger as though depositing a diaper into a soak pail. She wiped her hands again and selected a shrimp. There, just there, beneath the lucent flesh she held in her fingers crept a dark and tender line. Deft as a jeweler she removed it.

"Can I see Mrs. Cosey now?"

"I guess. Sure. Up those stairs, then some more stairs. Bedroom at the end of the hall." She motioned toward a flight of stairs leading from an alcove near the stove.

"Miss Skye? Miss Toby Skye? You not interested in my name?"

Toby turned back, her grin a study in embarrassment and muddle. "Oh, yes, mam. I am. I'm just so nervous."

"Christina. If you get the job you'll need to know it."

"I hope so. Nice meeting you, Christina. Really. Second floor you said?"

Her boots were loud on the stairs. Christina glanced at the warming light on the rice steamer. Gathering the shrimp shells she plopped them into the ~~pot of~~ boiling water and adjusted the flame. Returning to the table she picked up a garlic paw and, enjoying as always her bedizened hands, peeled away tissue from two of the cloves. These she diced and left on the cutting board. The old Philco refrigerator hummed and wavered a little. Christina gave it an encouraging pat before bending to a bottom cabinet thinking, what's she up to now? Must be scared or fixing to make a move. What, though? And how did she manage to get a notice in the paper without me knowing? She took out a silver tureen with a fitted glass bowl, sighing at the



stubborn tarnish in the crevices of the C's on its cover. Like all the carved letters in the house, the double C's went beyond ornate to illegible. Even on the handle of the spoon in her apron pocket, <sup>the</sup> ~~its~~ initials, once hooked together for life, were hardly a trace. It was tiny, a toddler's first spoon, but Christina ate every meal she could with it just to hold close the child it was given to, and hold also the pictures it summoned at will. How she had scooped peach slices with it from home made ice cream, helpless in the thrill, the slide between her lips, never minding the grains of sand blowing over the dessert—the whole picnic lunch for that matter.

Soaping and rinsing the glass bowl Christina's thoughts skittered from beach picnics to Silver Dip, salt-spiced air to Q-tips on to the interview being held <sup>at that moment</sup> in the bedroom of the meanest woman on the coast. While sitting across from the lying Miss Skye Christina had set her own body of fifty years ago next to the girl's and won. Miss Toby Skye had good legs (well, knees and thighs were all she could see in those tall boots) and a white woman's narrow behind that was all the rage these days. But nothing to rival her own self in the forties when the beach was the color of cream but glittery and the sucking waves reached out from water so blue you had to turn away lest it hurt your eyes. Nothing to rival that self, the one that walked inside <sup>her</sup>. It was the <sup>girl's</sup> face that struck gongs of envy. That and the Amazon hair. At first Christina had stared at her, then, rattled, concentrated on the newspaper clipping. The shrimp work gave her ample reason to sustain a lowered gaze because she did not like the heart jump that came when she looked in <sup>the girl's</sup> ~~Toby's~~ lying eyes. Clear, they were, and still, too still. And full of--what? What was that? Yearning? Trust? There was something frail under those double lashes. Like the unnerving look of a beautiful, under fed child. One you wanted to slap for being needy and kiss for being perfect.

Christina stirred the garlic into butter softening in a skillet. After a moment she added the

shrimp then set about making the roux. She drained a little stock to loosen the paste, whisking it smooth. "I'm a pretty fair cook," is what the Toby girl had said, all the while reaching with dirty hands for the bowl of cleaned shrimp. And "Used to be" from around here she'd said, while sitting in front of the best known woman in the county, a woman who knew every black ever born from Niggerhead Rock to Sackers Point, from Cosey's Rest to Barrington, and half of the ones in Harbor City as well since that was where she had spent (or wasted) twenty years of her life. Skye. Toby Skye. She could have gotten that name from True Confessions except she was too young to have even heard of it. So what was the heart skip for? <sup>What's she</sup> So afraid she would blush any moment and sharpened her voice to a razor to cut off the possibility? What did Heed want her for? How had she got an ad in the newspaper without a telephone? Had the yardboy helped her? Whatever was going on was a trap laid by a high heeled snake. Some new mess. Some new way to hurt her. Rob her future just as she had stolen away her past.

"I'll be damned," she murmured. "~~I'll~~<sup>be</sup> good and damned before I let her win this one."

Christina spread her fingers for the soothing her diamonds lent. Then she assembled the rice, the shrimp, the sauce, layering each meticulously, artfully in the tureen.. It would remain warm while she tossed a light salad and, in a little while, arrange it all on a silver tray, take it up three flights of stairs where it would be ignored by the meanest thing on the coast.