



Storyvoice

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because one evening in 1943 some hard-headed children swam past the safety rope. As soon as they were pulled under, the dark clouds

[STORYVOICE] the heads of screaming parents, subdued siblings and picknickers became the profiles of old women in a spasm of open-

We need a better story to explain what happened to the girl—and that boy too. The one about harpies bursting out of the ocean to harm loose women and eat disobedient children won't do anymore. It was an unappetizing tale anyway, but it emerged in the fifties fully formed and without source when a couple of "see, what'd I tell you?" events took place at the shore. Like that Up Beach woman who made love in the sand with her neighbor's husband and suffered a stroke right then and there. And she wasn't but 24 at the time. Or that other woman—she was from Harmony and wouldn't have anything to do with Up Beach people—who hid some letters and a purchase deed under her mother-in-law's porch only to have mud turtles dig them up. A few days later the greedy daughter-in-law broke her hip trying to keep the breezes and the neighbors away from the papers that damned her. Although no one actually saw the hags during the shame of these guilty women, we knew they were there and what they looked like

because one evening in 1948 some hard-headed children swam past the safety rope. As soon as they were pulled under, the dark clouds gathering above the heads of screaming parents, subdued siblings and picknickers became the profiles of old women in a spasm of open-mouthed joy. Some of us swore that what others took for thunder was a sneaky kind of laughter. From that time to the fifties the beach crones pounced on the unsuspecting only after sunset (when lust was keenest, when turtles lay eggs and exhausted parents became negligent), and they seemed especially hungry when the hotel was full of visitors drunk with dance music, salt air and the temptation of deep water. Those were the days when Cosey's Resort was the best and best known vacation spot for colored folk on the east coast.

Everybody came: Lil Green, Fatha Hines, etc. ^(over) ~~th~~ and guests as far away as Michigan and New York couldn't wait to get down here ^{to} ~~where~~

Crooked Heart beach ^(over) ~~offered the best of everything.~~ ^{suddenly} Then in 1958 the crones were spotted in bright daylight. A clarinet player and his bride drowned at noon. The inner tube raft they were floating on washed ashore and broke up into unmistakably geriatric faces crowned by streams of kelp hair. Whether the bride had played around during the

Swirled with young mothers and novice
school teachers; where ecstatic children
rode the legs of their fathers and
buried their heads up to their necks
in sand; and grandparents watched
over red thermoses with white handles
that were leaning against hampers
and orange crates full of crab meat
salad, ham, chicken, yeast rolls and
loaves of lemon flavored pound cake.

honeymoon was unclear but she certainly had every opportunity.

Cosey's Resort had more handsome men per square foot than anyplace

outside St. Louis or even New Orleans. ^(lover) After the couple was

separated--sent to different funeral parlors-- women up to no good and

mule headed children didn't need further warning because there was no

escape: quick as lightening, night time or day, ancient biddies shot up

out of the waves to punish wayward women and swallow the

misbehaving young. We thought that would be work enough for ^{a gaggle of} the

she-devils, but it wasn't. It took twenty more years and a boy and girl

for us to acknowledge the reach as well as the point of their appetite.

All of Crooked Heart belongs to them now. Most of us live in Harmony

and except for a few fish shacks, Up Beach is twenty feet under water.

The main house of Cosey's Resort is still standing. Sort of standing.

Looks more like it's rearing backwards--away from hurricanes and a

steady blow of sand. Odd what ocean front can do to empty buildings.

You can find the prettiest shells right up on the steps, scattered like

petals or cameos from a Sunday dress and you wonder how they got

so far from home. Hills of sand piling in porch corners and along the

bannisters are whiter than the beach, and soft, like flour after twenty

They came partly for the music but
mostly to dance by the sea with
pretty women.

years of sifting. Roses, which all the time hate our soil, rage here. More thorns than blackberries and weeks of dark red blossoms. The wooden siding of the house looks silver plated, its peeling paint has become the streaks of an unpolished tea service. The big double doors are padlocked. Nobody has broken their panels of etched glass. No ^{-body} ~~one~~ would because they mirror your own face and the view behind your back: a half acre of chive grass edging the glittery beach, the hungry sky and an ocean that wants you more than anything. Despite the outside loneliness, the house seems to promise gifts and toys inside. They are secrets, maybe, crowding those long corridors and closed up rooms. Music too. ^(over) A trumpet ~~keens~~; piano keys waver one note above the wind.

In 1978 Bill Cosey's widow sold seventy-five of his inland acres to an Equal Opportunity Housing developer for fifty homes so reasonably priced and generously financed even Up Beach people could afford them. That section of Harmony is called Oceanside—which it isn't—and is full of people who commute to offices and hospital labs twenty miles north as well as Up Beach folk. (It's easy to tell which is which by

The shift of a

Shutter hinge ^{sounds} ~~more~~ like
the cough of a trumpet;

their hands.) The sale had just closed, the land barely plotted when mothers were pumping mud from their spigots. Dried up wells and degraded pipes encouraged the most stubborn Up Beach tenant to abandon the sight of the sea, its groovy breeze and apply for a HUD mortgage. So when everybody had pulled out we knew for certain the hags wanted the whole place for themselves. Accidents, hotel ruin, the sale of Bill Cosey's inland acres and unheard of drought turning marshland into mud cakes so dry even the mosquitoes quit—none of that was random. The crones had won: three and a half miles of Atlantic beach front was theirs alone for play. That should have ended the story and would have except for the girl, the boy and, of course, the Cosey widows. Their lives, their behavior and then their disappearance whipped up so much feeling that a grown up nursery story was all we had to explain what was known and to grasp what was hidden. Even though we knew in our hearts the story was trash: another wicked women tale made up to scare females and discipline children. But it doesn't work, doesn't explain. Even Eve, poor thing, can't carry this modern world's evil. We need something else. Something better.

poor thing, can't carry this modern world's evil. We need something
else. Something ^{better,} ~~else.~~

CHAPTER ONE " he asked when she told him the address.

She took a small square of paper from a jacket pocket, held it

The day she walked into Oceanside was peculiar for that part of the county. Chafing winds kept the temperature low and the sun was helpless to move ^{outside thermometers} ~~thermostats~~ more than a few degrees above freezing. Tiles of ice had formed at the shoreline and inland, the thrown-together houses on Post road whined like puppies. Ice slick gleamed then disappeared in the early evening shadow causing the sidewalks she marched along to undermine even the most agile tread. She should have bent her head and closed her eyes to slits in the weather, but, being a stranger, she stared wide-eyed at each house searching for the address that matched the one in the advertisement: One Old Post Road. Finally 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.

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

She took a small square of paper from a jacket pocket, held it with ungloved fingers and nodded.

Mr. Gibbons scanned her legs and reckoned her knees and thighs were stinging from the cold her tiny skirt exposed ^{them} her to. Then he 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 it 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 1410 or 1401, probably."

Now it was her turn to question his certainty.

"I'm telling you," he said, suddenly irritable—the wind, he thought, tearing his eyes. "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."

Sandler

Mr. Gibbons didn't know what made him say that. "Jailhouse."

He believed his wife was on his mind. She would be on her way from the bus stop by now, stepping carefully on slippery pavement until she got to their driveway. There she would be safe from falling because, with the forethought and common sense he was known for, he was prepared for freezing weather in a community that had no history of it. But the "jailhouse" comment meant he was really thinking of Romen, his grandson, who should have been home from school an hour and a half ago. Fourteen, way too tall and getting muscled, there was a skulk about him, something furtive that made *Sandler* Mr. Gibbons stroke his thumb every time the boy came 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 (house cleaning in Harbor City for the women, hauling road trash for the men) was left once the canneries closed. Parents idle, children idle, his own mother used to say. Getting regular yard work helped but not enough to keep Romen on the dime and out of the sight line of ambitious, under occupied police.

^{He}
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, Gran? I had your arm all the way from the bus."

"Course you did, baby." Vida

[tk: they enter house; ref. to girl "with skirt to her hips near bout; What'd she want? Looking for the Cosey place. Get out. What for? Nobody visits them. Didn't say. Had a bit of newspaper with Bill's old address on it. Corrected her. Told her it looked like a church. She can't miss it."]

Conversations -
while Vida is
dying a death w/
R. H. H.

ff: Vida
Romen recollecting the party (fear, embarrass-
ment etc. - getting close to Grandparents
Vida, ^{gas to bed} remembering the sleight of Casey's
widow - growing up together - parents working at
cannery etc. - then ^{head taking over the hotel} coming into it, and
snubbing her former friends. [Sent Sandler out to get a tree?]

and that other one - hobbling back
to Harmony ^{last year (?)} like a bad smell,
Dialogue (iii) Well the girl - whoever she was - I would
soon find out, (if she had ^{two} brain cells

-> Roman must have been more
battered than she'd thought by Sandler's
~~exit room~~ ^{supper} the argument with Sandler
He was tossing, creaking the bed, so
loud you'd think he had company
for ^{a st} you ~~would~~ wouldn't know -
[hard to believe] he
was alone in it.

Roman's Thoughts.

Then " She did not miss it —