



Sp. W

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teachers; where ~~ecstatic~~ children rode the ~~legs~~ of their fathers' and
 buried their uncles up to their necks in sand; and grandparents ^{leg shanks} watched
 over red thermoses with white handles leaning against hampers and
 orange crates ~~full~~ of crab meat salad, ham, chicken, yeast rolls and
 loaves of lemon flavored cake. Then, ^{It was the} suddenly, ^{who} in 1958 the ~~cranes~~ ^{water bitch}
^{and} ^{showed up} 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~~
^{carrying trailing} streams of ~~kelp~~ hair. Whether the bride had played around during the
^{whispered about but} honeymoon was unclear ^{but} she certainly had every opportunity.

Cosey's Resort had more handsome single men per square foot than
 anyplace outside St. Louis or even New Orleans. They came partly for
 the music but mostly to dance by the sea with pretty women. After the
 drowned 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~~ lightning, night time
^{baby-faced harpies could shout} or day, ~~ancient biddies~~ shot up out of the waves ^{and} to punish wayward

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women ^{or} and swallow the misbehaving young. ^{That ought to} We ~~thought that would~~

be work enough for a gaggle of she-devils, but it wasn't. It took

^{thirty} ~~twenty~~ more years and a boy and girl for us to ^{flock?} ^{reckon} acknowledge the reach

as well as the point of their appetite. All of Crooked Heart belongs to

them ^{these days} ~~now~~. Most of us live in Harmony and, except for a few fish

shacks, Up Beach is twenty feet under water. The ^{hotel part} ~~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 ^{the sea,} ~~home~~.

Hills of sand piling in porch corners and along the bannisters are whiter

than the beach, and soft, like flour after ~~decades~~ ^{twenty 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 ^{hotel} ~~house~~ looks silver plated, its peeling paint ^{reminds you of} ~~has become~~ the streaks

^{on} of an unpolished tea service. The big double doors are padlocked.

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Nobody has ^{Smashed} broken their panels of etched glass. Nobody could stand to do it because the panels mirror your own face ^{as well as} and the view behind your back: ^{an} a half acre of chive grass edging the glittery beach, the ^{Hollywood} hungry sky and an ocean that wants you more than anything. Despite the outside loneliness, the ^{hotel itself} house seems to promise gifts and toys inside. ^{too} They are secrets, maybe, crowding those long corridors and closed up rooms. ^{And} Music ^{too}. The shift of a shutter hinge sounds like the cough of a trumpet; 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 ^{forty-four} 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 ^{twelve} twenty miles

north, as well as ^{former} Up Beach folk. (It's easy to tell which is which by ^{of Cosey land} their hands.) The sale ^{acres} had just closed, the land barely plotted when ^{Up Beach} mothers were pumping mud from their spigots. Dried up wells and

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degraded pipes encouraged the most stubborn ^{of them} ~~Up Beach~~ tenant to
^{give up} ~~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
^{water-women} ~~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 ^{hussies} ~~crones~~ had won: three and a half miles of
Atlantic beach front was theirs ^{all} ~~alone~~ for play. That should have
ended the story and would have except for the girl, the boy and, of
course, the Cosey widows. ^(over) * 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: ^{just}
another wicked women tale made up to scare females and discipline
^{In the end} 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. ^{A brand new tale.}

must have
Made a deal ^{with} trading beachfront
an exchange ^{all} for protection
People ^{said} say they took the ~~witch's~~ ^{power}
with them ~~and that~~ ^{over} no good could come from
close contact with them ~~yet~~

and we waited to see if any
good could come from ~~outright~~ that much selfishness. I?

It looked as though
we would wait forever. Then
the girl came. After that

They
carried the
manic

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[STORYVOICE]

(make more colloquial - intimate)

had a good one - an old one - and we needed it to
 We need a better story to explain what happened to the girl - and that
 boy too. ^{Curses} ^{Water-women} ^{bursting up like sharks}
 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 ^{very} right then ~~standing at~~ ^{at} her table at the cannery - the crab knife clutched in her 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 father's fishing shack. Three mother-in-law's porch only to have mud turtles dig them up. A few hadn't risen when 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.

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Although no ^{body ~~separately~~} ^{flat out} ^{creatures} actually saw the ~~hags~~ during the shame of these

guilty women, we knew they were there and what they looked like

because ^{earlier, one} ~~one~~ evening in 1948, some hard-headed children swam past

the safety rope. ^{and drowned} 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. ^{with TK} Some of us swore that ^{gate =} what others took for thunder was

^{heard as} a sneaky kind of laughter. From that time to the fifties the beach

^{water women} ~~cranes~~ pounced on the unsuspecting only ^{around} after sunset (when lust was

keenest, when turtles lay eggs and exhausted parents became

^{We thought they were hungriest particularly at night} negligent), and they seemed especially hungry when the hotel was full

of visitors drunk with dance music, salt air and the temptation of ^{startlet} 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. tk and guests ^{from} as far away

as Michigan and New York couldn't wait to get down here where

Crooked Heart beach swirled with young mothers and ^{brand new} novice school

^{among} who ^{loitering} in the waves
— under the surf

whooping
for joy

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teachers; where ~~ecstatic~~ children rode the ~~legs~~ of their fathers' and
 buried their uncles up to their necks in sand; and grandparents ^{leg shanks} watched

over red thermoses with white handles leaning against hampers and

orange crates full of crab meat salad, ham, chicken, yeast rolls and

loaves of lemon flavored cake. Then, suddenly, in 1958 the ^{water bitch} ~~cranes~~

^{and} ^{showed up} ~~were spotted~~ in bright daylight. A clarinet player and his bride

drowned at noon. The inner tube raft they were floating on washed

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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, ^{baby-faced harpies could shout} ~~ancient biddies~~ shot up out of the waves ^{and} to punish wayward

all of a
 Sudden
 got bold
 as Jezebel

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Off. He remembers the crack of her heels on concrete as she approached; the angle of her hip as she stood there, the moon sun behind her, the garage light in her face. He remembers the pleasure of

CHAPTER ONE she asked for directions to the house of women he had known all their lives.

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 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 ^{against} 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 ^{way} ripping the seam from a sack of Ice-

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Off. He remembers the crack of her heels on concrete as she approached; the angle of her hip as she stood there, the ^{pimento} ~~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. ^{glared at her}

^{back} She took a small square of paper from a jacket pocket, held it with ungloved fingers and nodded. ^{what made him say that}

^{"Jail"} Sandler Gibbons scanned her legs and reckoned her knees and thighs were stinging from the cold her tiny skirt exposed them 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.

^{school} "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

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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 ^{AND} but did not turn around when he hollered at her back, "Or a jail house."

Sandler 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^{and} way too tall and getting muscled, there was a skulk about him, something furtive that made

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Sandler 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 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 Gibbons smiled, hoping to ^{de-rail} divert any criticism her husband might be gathering against her grandson.

[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

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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."—see notes]

the girl
She did not miss it and the man with the ice melt was not wrong?

*Vida +
Ramon
dancing
down the
porch
doesn't like
to see them*

The house was graceful, imposing, and its peaked third story roof did
suggest a chapel. On either side of the *untended* walkway *old trees*
met the blasting wind with a *carelessness* *that came with a century of*
triumph. The steps to the porch, slanted *with ice*, encouraged caution
for there was no railing. But the girl clicked along the walk and up the
steps without hesitation. Seeing no bell, she started to knock,
hesitating when she noticed a shaft of light below, to the right of the
porch. She went back down the sloping steps, followed the curve
marked by half-buried pieces of slate and descended a flight of iron
stairs leading to a window—beyond it a door. No wind buffeted her
there. The area had the look of what was called a garden apartment
by some—by others a basement one. Pausing at the pane she saw a

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seated woman. On the table before her were a colander, newspapers 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.

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~~^{they} stared at the girl, then moved ~~her eyes~~ from the young face and its pleading smile to the piece of paper. She squinted

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at it, looked again at the face then back at the paper scrap. She motioned toward the door and disappeared from the window but not before something like panic glinted then died in her eyes.

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, Harmony.

"Where did you get this?" The woman's voice was ^{low, its tone} ~~calmer now~~ ^{accusatory} but just as imperious as her greeting.

"From the newspaper."

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

"Yes, Mam." ^{Skye. With an 'e'.}

"When?" ^{in around here?}

"Yesterday." ^{I've been away.}

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

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sit down."

"Are you Mrs. H. Cosey?"

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

The girl's laughter was the agitation of bells—a welcoming disruption on a silent night. "Oh, right. Sorry."

They both sat ^{then,} 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 name, then?"

"Yes, Mam. 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 named

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Skye with an 'e' or without one."

"Oh, they're not from here. Originally."

"Where then?"

The jacket ^{leather} purred as Toby Skye shrugged her shoulders and

reached across the table to the colander. "Up north. Can I help you

with that?" she asked. "I'm a pretty fair cook."

"No." The woman held up a staying hand. "Needs a certain rhythm."

A bouquet of steam wandered away from water lifting to a boil on the stove. Behind the table was a wall of cupboards, their surfaces as pale and handled as ^{dough} pastry. The silence stretching between the two ^{tightened} began to pulse. Toby Skye fidgeted. Her jacket creaking over the ^{tick} pop of shrimp shells.

"Is Mrs. ^eCosy here?"

"She is."

"May I speak to her?"

"Let me see that thing again." She wiped her hands on a

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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, please?" Toby sank her chin into her palm, underscoring her question with a smile.

"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. Toby stood up.

"Miss Skye. Miss Toby Skye with an 'e'. 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."

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

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

7 / Her boots were ^{SOUNDLESS} ~~loud~~ on the stairs.

1 Christine glanced at the warming light on the rice cooker.

Gathering the shrimp shells she plopped them into the boiling water and adjusted the flame. Returning to the table she picked up a garlic paw and, enjoying as usual 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 trembled a little. Christine gave it an encouraging pat before bending to a ^{low} 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, the initials, once hooked together for life, were hardly a

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trace. It was tiny, a toddler's first spoon, but Christine 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 ^{ing}scooped peach slices with it from home made ice cream, helpless in the thrill, ^{the slide} she slide ^{on the tongue} between her lips, never minding the grains of sand blowing over the dessert—the whole picnic lunch for that matter. ^{There was}

Soaping and rinsing the glass bowl Christine's thoughts skittered from beach picnics to Silver Dip, salt-spiced air to Q-tips and on to the interview being held at that moment in the bedroom of the meanest woman on the coast. While sitting across from the lying Miss Skye, Christine had set her own body of ^{forty}fifty—even ^{thirty}forty—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 she had nothing to rival the Christine of the ^{9/?}[late forties and]fifties 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. It was the

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girl's face that struck gongs of envy. That and her Amazon hair. At first Christine 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 the girl's 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, underfed child. One you wanted to slap for being needy and kiss for being perfect.

Christine stirred the garlic into butter softening in a skillet, ~~After a moment she added the shrimp then set about make the roux. She~~ ^{After a moment she} ^{ING} ~~drained a little stock to loosen the paste, whisking it smooth.~~ ^{SPRINKLING flour and watched it brown before with stock and}

'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 country, a woman who knew every black ever born from Niggerhead Rock to Sacker's Point, from Up Beach to

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Harmony and half the ones in Harbor City as well since that was where she had spent (or wasted) twenty years of her life. Skye. Toby Skye.

With an 'e'. She could have gotten that name from True Confessions except she was too young to have heard^{of}, let alone read it, the lying

bitch. So what was the heart skip for? Was she afraid she would

blush any moment and sharpened^{ing} 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 working telephone? Had the Gibbons boy

helped her^{do it} after working in the yard? Whatever was going on was a

trap laid by a high heeled snake. Some new way to hurt her, Rob her

future just as she had ripped off her past.

"I'll be damned," she murmured. "Good and damned before I let her win this one."

Christine spread her fingers for the soothing her diamonds lent.

Then she assembled the rice, the shrimp, the sauce, layering each meticulously, artfully in the casserole. It would remain warm while she tossed a light salad and, finally, arrange it all on a silver tray, take it up

adding that errand to
others after

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three flights of stairs where it would be ignored by the meanest thing on the coast.

"My Lord. Snow." She spoke without turning her head, ~~Simply~~ parted ^{ing} the draperies further. "Come over here and look. Here of all places."

Toby joined the tiny woman at the window and peered through wobbly glass trying but unable to see snowflakes. ~~The small~~ ^{she} woman looked to be in her sixties at least but had something of a little girl smell: butter rum candy, grass juice and fur.

"Strange, don't you think? We never get snow. Never."

"I saw a man sprinkling ice melt," said Toby. "Since he already had it, he must have expected to use it."

Startled, the tiny woman turned. The girl had called her a liar before saying hello. "You're here for the job?" Heed Cosey's eyes swept Toby's face then quickly examined her clothes.

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"Yeah."

"Don't you mean 'yes'?"

This room, like the kitchen below, was over-bright, lit like a surgery. Climbing ^Fup the stairs, glancing around ~~the rest of the house,~~ Toby had to guess what the rooms were for because the darkness spreading away from the bannisters was thick. Here, however, at the end of the hall every lamp—six? ten?—was on, ^{the} rivaling a huge chandelier. ^{heavy?} Now she waited for this pretentious little woman to break the silence she herself had made.

"I'm Heed Cosey. And you are?"

"Toby. Toby Skye."

"Oh, dear," said Heed, and batted her lashes as if someone had spilled red wine on pale velvet: sorry, of course, and no fault, of ^{impossible to correct} course, but ~~difficult to take [get rid of?]~~ nonetheless. As she moved away from the window she had to negotiate every step, ^{crowded} so full was the room with furniture. A chaise, two dressers, two writing tables, side tables, chairs high-backed and low seated. All under the influence of

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from the letter
the great canopied bed ^{erupting from?} against the far wall. Heed ^{arrived} ~~sat down~~ finally at a small desk, ^{and sat down} gesturing with a twice-lotioned hand for ^{her} the applicant to take the facing chair.

"Tell me where you have worked before. The notice didn't specify a resume' but I need to know your work history."

"I'm twenty-four and can do anything you want. Anything."

Heed smiled. "That's good to know, but ^{I NEED} references. Do you have any? Is there someone I can call?"

"Nope."

"Well how will I know you are honest? Discreet?"

"A letter won't tell you even if it says so. I say I am. Hire me and you'll see. If I'm not good enough—" Toby turned her palms up.

Heed touched the corners of her lips, her hand small as a child's.

"Let me tell you what this job calls for. The duties, I mean."

"Go ahead." Toby shouldered out of her jacket, the cheap leather whining as though in grief. Under it, her black T shirt gave no support to her breasts, but it was clear to Heed that they didn't need any: the

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Soldierly
nipples were high, *martial* militant. Without the jacket her hair seemed to spring into view. Layers of corkscrews, parted in the middle, glinted jet in the lamplight.

"I'm writing a book," said Heed, both satisfaction and giddiness lighting her face. Whatever restraint she had been under, whatever pose she'd assumed to manage *this* an interview, dissolved with the mention of her book. "It's about my family. The Coseys. I've ~~got all~~ *have* the material, but some things need checking, you know. Dates, spellings. I've got all the guest books from *the* our hotel—except for two or three, I think—and some of *them* ~~those~~ people, not many but some, had the worst handwriting. The worst. But most folks had perfect hands you know because that's the way we *was* ~~were~~ taught. But Papa didn't make them print it the way they do now right alongside the signature. Didn't need to anyway because he knew every body who was anybody and could recognize *da* signature even if it was a X but no X type people ever came of course. Our guests, for the most part, had gorgeous handwriting because, between you and I, you had to be more than just

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literate, you have to have a position, an accomplishment, understand?

You couldn't achieve nothing worthwhile if your handwriting was low.

Nowadays people write with they feet."

Heed laughed, then said ^{Ohard} "Excuse me. You have no idea, do you, what I'm talking about. I get excited is all, just thinking about it." She straightened her shoulder pads. "But I want to hear about you. Toby, you said?"

"Toby. Right."

"Well now, Toby. You said you can do anything I want so you must have worked somewhere before. If you're going to help me with my book I need to know..."

"Look, Mrs. Cosey. I'm literate, Okay? I'm as smart as it gets. You want research, I'll do research. You want handwriting, typing, I'll do it. You want a bath, I'll give you one. I need a job and a place to stay. I'm real good, Mrs. Cosey."

Heed leaned toward her. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Like nobody you ever knew."

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"Because the work is delicate. Nobody can know about it. Not nobody."

"You mean Christine?"

"I mean nobody."

"I'll take it."

"You don't even know what the pay is."

"I'll take the job. You'll pay. Should I start now or wait til tomorrow?"

Footsteps, slow and rhythmic sounded in the hall.

"Tomorrow," Heed said. She whispered but it came out like a hiss.

Christine entered carrying a tray. No knock preceded her and no word accompanied her. She placed the tray on the desk where Heed and Toby faced each other and left without meeting a single eye.

Heed lifted the casserole lid then replaced it. "Anything to annoy me," she said.

"Looks delicious," said Toby.

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"Then you eat it," said Heed.

Toby tasted the food and moaned," God, she sure knows how to cook."

"What she knows is I don't eat shellfish. That's what she knows."

[They talk well into the night. So late it was too late to expect Toby to go home and then come back the next morning. Heed talked as though she had been deprived of a listener, a sympathetic one, for most of her life. And the same impulse that made the story of her family [the Coseys] so urgent informed^s her conversation: all about Cosey's Resort. How she was left in charge of it after her husband died. The difficulty, the demands, everybody on her back or on her case]

Girl lying in ^{a tiny} 2nd floor bed - reviewing the interview.

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and almost anything you could name would have put this generation of take-out brides to shame if they had any. Every house had an L kind of cook in it once. Now, well, it's all over. People wait for July 4 or Thanksgiving to give their kitchens proper respect. Otherwise they go to Maceo's Café Ria and hope L hasn't dropped dead at the stove. She could. Probably will because nobody is older. Not an original tooth in her head, so she hasn't eaten a thing but cornbread dipped in hot liquor since 1978. Well, she does like those peppermint sticks at Christmas.

[STORYVOICE]

The sign read "Maceo's Café..ria" but the diner belonged to L. Indeed, if not in deed, ^{we used to say} She was ^{at Casey's Resort} still cooking there when Bill Cozey died but his funeral flowers were still fresh when she fell out with his widow.

Later, much to ^{our} Harmony's relief, L gave in to Maceo's pleading. He had ^s a certain reputation for fried fish (sooty black and crisp on the outside; flaky tender on the inside) but his side orders let you down every time. What L did with okra, with sweet potatoes, hopping john

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She's through talking too. Says it wears her out. So a conversation with her is mostly you talking while she hums. Not loud, though. L hums softly and you feel encouraged by this back^{up}ground

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music and tell her all you know or heard ^{tell} of. Anybody who remembers
what the L stands for is dead by now and its hopeless to inquire.

Even children—who have a world of time to waste—don't ask her anymore. Some said it was short for Ellen, or Ellie or Elvira but can't anybody recall a time when she didn't take the usher's pencil and sign her tithe envelopes with an L We gave up. Like we gave up calling Maceo's Maceo's, or supplying the missing letters. Café Ria is what it's known as. And L glides there still.

Women in love like the place a lot. Over iced tea with a clove in it, they join girl friends to repeat what he said, describe what he did and guess what he meant by any of it. ^{intert form p 31}

He didn't call me for three days and when I called him he wanted to get together right then! See? He wouldn't do that if he didn't want to be with you. Oh, please. When I got there we had a long talk and for the first time he really listened to me. Sure he did. Why not? All he had to do was wait til you shut up then he could work his own tongue. I thought he was seeing what's her name. No, they split.

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You lying! He asked me to move in. Sign the paper first, honey. I don't want anybody but him. It's like that huh? Well no joint accounts, hear? You want porgies, or not?"

7. 30 ← They spice the lunch hour and lift the spirits of broken-hearted men eavesdropping at nearby tables.

There are no waitresses at Café Ria. The food is displayed in steam trays, and after your plate is heaped you take it to the cash register for cost analysis done by Maceo, his wife or one of his no-count sons.

The girl--she called herself Toby-- came in one Sunday just before church let out. She walked the length of the steam table checking the menu with the kind of eyes you see on those "Save This Child" commercials. L, her work finished and waiting for Maceo, was blowing cool air on a ^{saucer} ~~cup~~ of pot liquor before dipping her bread in. Through the kitchen door--never closed--she saw Toby pacing before the food trays--like a panther or some such. The big hair Sandler Gibson saw was gone. Tk And although the leather jacket still covered her upper

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half, the skirt was a see-through, flowery thing swinging just above her boots.

One of Maceo's no-count boys waited while Toby made up her mind. He never opened his ^{mouth} lips to say good afternoon, may I help you? anything in particular? or any of the welcoming things you're supposed to greet customers with. L [said she?] just cooled her liquid and watched to see which one would behave normal first.

Toby did.

Her order must have been for herself and Heed because Christine is a champion cook. Anyway ^{Toby} she chose three sides, two meats, one rice pudding and one chocolate cake. Maceo's boy, Theo they call him, smirking more than usual, moved from the cash register to load up the styrofoam plate, carelessly or deliberately letting the stewed tomatoes slide over the compartments to discolor the potato salad, forking the barbecue on top of the gravied chicken. ("Only dark meat," she'd said.) L got so heated watching Theo disrespect her food she dropped her bread into her ^{saucer} cup where it disintegrated like sand.

And would starve
before eating take-out.

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Toby never took her eyes off the food. Never met Theo's eyes until he gave her change at the register. Then she looked right at him and said "I expect you do better with a posse. You seem kind of helpless by yourself."

Theo said something mean to her back but it fell flat with no audience in sight to enjoy it.

When Maceo walked in, ready to bundle L into his car and get her home before customer lines started forming, Theo was dribbling air balls in his dream court behind the register as if he'd just been signed by the X and a cereal company too.