

Sp. W

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November 20, 2000

time. When the husband is walking the streets alone wondering if

I hum now. The women's legs are spread wide open so I don't talk at all. My nature is a quiet one, anyway. As a child my silence was considered respectful; as a young woman it was called discreet. Later on it was understood to be the reticence of maturity. Still, I was able to have normal conversations and, when the need arose, I could make a point strong enough to stop a ^{blood} feud. Not anymore because back in the mid-seventies, when women began to straddle chairs and dance crotch out on television; when every fashion magazine featured behinds and inner thighs as though that's all there is to a woman, well, I stopped talking altogether and haven't said a word since. Before women opened their legs in public there were secrets—some to be held, some to tell. Now? No. Barefaced being the order of the day, I hum. The words dance quietly in my head to the music behind my lips. People come in here for a plate of crawfish, pass the time, and never notice or care that they do all the talking. I'm background. The movie music that comes along when the sweethearts see each other for the first

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time. When the husband is walking the streets alone wondering if anybody saw him down at the beach doing the bad thing he was forced to do. My humming encourages people; frames their thoughts (like ^{when} Mildred Pierce realizes she has to go to jail for her daughter). I sometimes suspect ^{that} (soft as it is) my music influences people too. The way "Mood Indigo" drifting across the waves can change the way you swim. It doesn't make you dive in, but it can set your stroke, or trick you into believing you are both lucky and brave. So why not swim farther and a little farther still? What's the deep to you? Far below, it has nothing to do with blood made bold by coronets and piano keys. Of course, I don't claim that kind of power. My hum is below tk, personal; ^{suitable for} an old woman brought low in the world's ^{her} way of objecting to the way the century has turned out. Where all is known and nothing understood. Maybe it was always so, but it didn't strike me until ^{Some thirty years ago that} ~~the seventies~~ when prostitutes, looked up to for their honesty, set the style. Well, maybe it wasn't their honesty; maybe it was their success. Still, straddling a chair or dancing crotch out on tv, these

to *

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can hide the sugar-child, the some baby girl curled up somewhere inside, near the spine, maybe, or under the heart. Naturally all of them have a story. Too much notice, not enough.

The women's legs are wide open. You could take the spread for an invite but its mostly provocation: within reach but way out of reach. I don't rightly recall exactly when I first noticed it (in a magazine maybe or on tv,) but it was in the 70's, I'm sure. Back when prostitutes, looked up to for their honesty, set the style. Well, maybe it wasn't their honesty; maybe it was their success. Still, straddling a chair or

spread
might think it's
it

NEW INSERT
HBPE

dancing crotch out on tv, these nineties women are not all that different from women who to live around here. This is back country,

scitified modern

coast country
land

quiet and God fearing, so that kind of recklessness—the kind city men know how to plunder—is hidden and runs too deep for short shorts or cameras. But then or now, long skirts or none, they never could hide

the innocence—a kind of pity kitty hopefulness. Especially the tough ones with their box cutters and bad language, or the glossy ones with two-seated cars and a pocketbook lining full of drugs. None of them

slow humed
quiet

was secret
female
ran

wild women

dope



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can hide the sugar-child, the winsome baby girl curled up somewhere inside, near the spine, maybe, or under the heart. Naturally all of them have a story. Too much notice, not enough, or the worst kind. Some tale about dragon daddies and ice-veined men, or love-blind mamas and friends who did them wrong. Each story has a monster in it that made them tough instead of brave, so they open their legs rather than hearts where that folded child is.

fucked

Sometimes, when the cut is deep and no woe-is-me story is enough, a big, country wide tale is the only thing that does the trick, that explains the craziness heaping up and holding the women down.

*making the women
hate each other &
piss up the
children*

And a scary story satisfies what a bitter one can't. *

there is
We have a good one around here. It's old, though, and was close to forgotten until we had to haul it out to explain what happened to

the widows. Our story is about some hellions called Claras--fish women who bust up out of the ocean to harm loose women and eat disobedient children. It's a shivery kind of tale that came out of

** It's
^
Shant*

the kind ignorant loose

nowhere back in the forties when a couple of "see there, what'd I tell

** Up Beach people tell
how a good one
that told
put my name
always foolish
People in
Up Beach where
I live tell
a good one*

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you?" things happened at the shore. Like that ~~Up Beach~~ woman who made love in the sand with her neighbor's husband and the very next day suffered a stroke at the cannery, the crab knife [tech. term] frozen in her hand. 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—well she hid some letters and a purchase deed under her father-~~in-law's~~ ^{tool shed? gazebo} fishing shack only to have loggerheads dig them up. Three suns hadn't set when the greedy daughter-in-law broke her hip trying to keep the breezes and the neighbors away from the papers that damned her. Although ^{of course} ~~nobody~~ ^{didn't} flat out ^{see} saw the Claras during the shame of those guilty women, ^{but they} ~~we~~ ^{supposedly} all knew they were around and knew what they looked like too because, earlier, one evening in 194²5, some hard-headed children swam past the safety rope and drowned. As soon as they were pulled under, ^{the story goes,} ~~the~~ dark clouds gathering above the heads of screaming parents and dumb struck picknickers turned into the profiles of gate-mouthed women whooping for joy. Some ~~of us~~ ^{fools} took for thunder what others ^{heard} heard as laughter. From that time on into

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people said

the fifties the Claras loitered in the surf or flopped across the beach ready to pounce around sunset (when lust is keenest, when loggerheads lay eggs and tired parents get negligent). Of course, ~~all~~ ^{most} the best demons, like us, get hungry at suppertime, but the Claras liked to troll at night when the hotel was full of visitors drunk with dance music, or the salt air or maybe just the temptation of starlit 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, Jimmy Lunceford etc. tk and guests from as far away as Michigan and New York couldn't wait to get down here. Sooker Bay swirled with brand new mothers and young school teachers. All over the place children rode their fathers' leg shanks and buried uncles up to their necks in sand. Grandparents watched over red thermos jugs with white handles, and orange crates full of crab meat salad, ham, chicken, yeast rolls and loaves of lemon flavored cake, oh my. Then, all of a sudden, in 1958, bold as a ~~pack~~ ^{herd} of Jezebels, the Claras showed up in bright daylight. A clarinet player

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and his bride drowned at noon. The inner tube raft they were floating on washed ashore dragging streams of scale cluttered hair. Whether the bride had played around during the honeymoon was considered and whispered about but the facts were muddy. She sure 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 they knew there was no escape: fast as lightning, night time or day, Claras could shoot up out of the waves

to punish wayward women or swallow the misbehaving young. When

Casey lost his business
~~the Resort went bust~~, the story lost its grip [tk]. A few people ^{still} sinking

crab castles in the back bays ^{probably} remembered it, but with no more big

bands or honeymooners; with the beach picnics and swimmers gone;

when Sooker Bay became a treasury of sea junk and Up Beach itself

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drowned, nobody needed or wanted to recall salt wet females with
scaley legs and foaming hair. But forty years on, we brought them
back.

I think of them almost every day.

(cover)

Except for me ~~most of us~~ live in Harmony now, and, except for a few fish shacks, Up Beach is twenty feet under water; but the hotel part 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, like scattered petals or cameos from a Sunday dress and you wonder how they got so far from the ocean. Hills of sand piling in porch corners and along the bannisters are whiter than the beach, and ~~soft~~ like sifted flour. Roses, which all the time hate our soil, rage here, with more thorns than blackberries and weeks of beet red blossoms. The wood siding of the hotel looks silver plated, its peeling paint like the streaks on an unpolished tea service. The big double doors are padlocked. Nobody has smashed their glass panels. Nobody could stand to do it because

people

I sat cooled.

smooth

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Just
my
page

drained, nobody needed or wanted to recall, still very familiar with the
scaly legs and foaming hair. But forty years on, we brought them

The Casey girls have disappeared
from view and

back to the... Except for the most... and...
low fish shack. Up Beach is twenty feet underwater but the hotel

part of Casey's Beach is still standing. Set of standing books from
like it's rearing backwards - away from business and a steady blow of

sand. Odd what ocean front can do to empty buildings. Pylon can't
the prettiest girls right up on the street like statues and

comes from a Sunday dress and you wonder how they got out from
the ocean. Hills of sand rising in front of camp and along the way

panniers are white, but the beach is soft, like tilted floor. (Best
which all the time's patterned with a regularity that's more than

blackberries and weeks of better placed. The wood siding of the
hotel looks silver, it's being painted the streaks on any - ragus

unpolished car service. The big double doors are packed - nobody
has smashed their glass panels. Nobody could stand to do it because

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the panels mirror your own face as well as the view behind your back: acres of chive grass edging the sparkly beach, a movie screen sky and an ocean that wants you more than anything. No matter the outside loneliness, if you look inside the hotel seems to promise you gifts and the company of your best friends. Secrets, too, crowd those long corridors and closed up rooms. And music. The shift of a shutter hinge sounds like the cough of a trumpet; piano keys waver one note above the wind.

Our weather is soft, mostly, with peculiar light-pale mornings fade into white noons; then by 3:00 the colors are wild enough to scare you. Jade and sapphire fighting each other, kicking up enough foam to wash sheets in. A sky behaving as though it's from some other planet—one without rules where the sun can be plum purple if it wants to and clouds can be red as a rose. Our sand is like sugar—which is what the Spanish thought of when they first saw it. Sucra, they called it, a name local whites tore up for all time into Sooker.

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Nobody can get enough of our ^{weather} warm breeze ^{and grow} except when they come in from the south carrying the Cannery smell to the beach and into the hotel. Then guests know what we Up Beach people put up with everyday and why Bill Cosey moved his family out of the hotel and built that big house on the ^{his} Post Road land ~~he owned~~. Fish odor wasn't all that ~~bad~~ a thing in these parts. Like marsh stench and privys, it was just another variety to the senses. But in the 60's it became a concern. A new generation of female vacationers complained about what it ^{did} do to their dresses, their appetite and their love making. I remember Vida trying to calm the girlfriend of a famous singer who was carrying on about her steak tasting like shrimp. Hurt me, because I have never failed in the kitchen. Bill Cosey ^{told} ~~always~~ people ^{who} believed ^{said} that's what ruined his business. That the whites let him have ^{so close by} all the ocean front he wanted because the Cannery kept it unprofitable, ^{had and} ~~ticked~~ him - the fish smell ~~ruined~~ turned his Resort into a joke. ^{I know} But the smell that blanketed Up Beach every day hit Sooker Bay only once or twice a month-and nev er from February to August when nets were empty and the Cannery closed. No. ^{I don't care what he told} ~~Something else~~ people,

It's what he told people.

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The old sheriff () died and the
 new one upped the insurance.
 Casey couldn't pay the bands
 and the liquor man too.

for the.

Bill Casey
 was a smart
 man. he helped
 more people than
 40 years of government
 programs.

Never mind the woman with
 shrimp tasting steak, customers
 will sit next to a priny if its the
 only way they can hear.

They will ^{Heppily} ~~Who~~ ~~case~~ ~~about~~ Who can
 distinguish ^{one} ~~one~~ ~~odor~~ ~~on~~ ~~a~~ ~~crowded~~ ~~dance~~ ~~floor~~
~~when they are dancing~~
 pressing
 So close to their partner?

Casey tried and Vida too as

And while ~~May~~ ~~Vida~~ ~~tried~~ ~~and~~ ~~Casey~~ ~~Bill~~ → Kept blaming M.L. King
 for her father.

for her father. ~~But~~ ~~after~~ ~~while~~ every day
 her step-mother ^{was} providing her a liar. Something else must
 have done it. Besides #

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led by ~~out~~ two churches, it's full of people who commute to offices and hospital labs ^{twenty-five} twelve miles north. Traveling back and forth to malls

and movie houses ^{they haven't} nobody had a cloudy thought to remind them of the Claras. It didn't cross our minds that the Claras had what they wanted

all along: three and a half miles of Atlantic beach front theirs alone for play. The story was dead to us and would have stayed that way

except for the disappeared Cosey widows. Meaner than most and stand offish, they were quickly missed because we paid them the

constant attention disliked folks always attract. People said they must have struck a deal, trading beach front for the Claras' protection and

we were waiting to see if any good could come from that much sin.

For a long time it looked as though we would wait forever. Then the

girl came. After that, and after everybody's business was in the street, they vanished from sight, whipping up so much feeling folklore was all

we had left to draw on. That and the picture of women straddling chairs, only putting their thighs together when their skirts were as

short as underpants. That way there was no blame. We knew from

(see over)

with in a skirt with nothing to hide

and what they call affirmative action got busy + now

these cheap form pretty houses

They live like Queens in Cosey's house and since that

they seem to have

leaving me with nothing but worn out fairy tale

I know →

let alone a recollection of the Claras.

~~Nothing it didn't~~
~~until the ~~Claras~~ ~~my mind~~ ~~in the~~~~
~~the ~~Claras~~ ~~my mind~~ ~~in the~~~~
~~disappeared~~

I started to miss the
Cosey girls.
to see one of them
dreaming along - I would
or see her once in a while
for some of my
friends.

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all along three and a half miles of Atlantic beach front their stone for
Clevel. The didn't quite mind that the Claras and what they wanted
and movie house nobody had a cloudy thought to look at them of his
and hospital, less twelve miles north. Traveling back and forth to malls
led by but two churches. It's full of people who commute to offices

except for the dispersed they were. Menner than most and
play. The story was dead to and would have stayed that way
stand offish, they were. Menner than most and
constant attention. I liked folks. People said they must
give the Claras, the Claras' protection and
For a long time I looked through we would wait forever. Then the
they vanished from sight. Whipping up so much feeling followed
we'd left to draw on. That and the picture of women straddling
chairs, only putting their thighs together when their skirts were as
short as underpants. That way there was no blame. We knew from

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chairs, only putting their thighs together when their skirts were as
short as underpants. That way there was no blame. We knew from

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~~the beginning the Clara story was~~ trash: just another wicked women
tale made up to scare females and correct unruly children. We knew it

~~wouldn't explain. Even Eve, poor thing, can't carry this modern
world's misery. We need something else. Something better. A brand-~~

~~new tale.~~

it's

but, it's
all I have.

Doesn't
anything

I want

A story that shows how broken women can
take a good
man
down.

I can hum to that.

... 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 background
music and tell her all you know or heard 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, Elie or Elvira but can't
anybody recall a time when she didn't take the usher's pencil and sign
her tube 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

W. W.

W. W.

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the beginning the girls stop... just another wicked woman

the made up to scare females and correct unruly children... they're

wouldn't explain. Even Eve, poor thing, can't carry this message

world's misery. We need something else. Something better. A brand

new tale.

conversation with... with no conversation

though. I know soft... and I thought

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what the L stands for is dead by now... the L stands

Eve's children who have a world of... children

anywhere. Some said... or Bill or Steve but can't

anybody recall a time when she didn't take the other's name and sign

her name 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 good tea with a clove in

it, they join girl friends to repeat what he said, describe what he did

new story
something to show how
brazen women can take a
good man down.