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L 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 time, or when the husband is walking the road alone

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 thought to be the wisdom maturity brings. Still, I was able to have normal conversations and, when the need arose, I could make a point strong enough to stop a kidney—or a switchblade. 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 agreed to spread in public there were secrets—some to hold, some to tell. Now? No. Barefaced being the order of the day, I hum. The words dance in my head to the music in my mouth. People come in here for a plate of crawfish, pass the time,

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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 time, or when the husband is walking the road alone wondering if anybody saw him down at the beach doing the bad thing he couldn't help. My humming encourages people; frames their thoughts (like when Mildred Pierce decides she has to go to jail for her daughter). I suspect that (soft as it is) my music has a strong influence 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 smart and lucky. So why not swim farther and a little farther still? What's the deep to you? It's way down below, and has nothing to do with blood made bold and bolder by coronets and piano keys, does it? Of course, I don't claim that kind of power. My hum is below range, private; suitable for an old woman brought low in the world; 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

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me until some thirty years ago that 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 naked on tv, these nineties women are not all that different from the respectable women who live around here. This is coast country, humid and God fearing, so female recklessness—the kind city men know how to plunder—was secret, hidden and ran too deep for short shorts or cameras. But then or now, long skirts or none, wild women never could hide their 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 full of dope. None of them can hide the sugar-child, the winsome baby girl curled up somewhere inside, between the lungs, 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

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their legs rather than hearts where that folded child is tucked.

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, holding down, and making women hate one another and ruin their children. And a scarey story satisfies what a bitter one can't. People in Up Beach, where I live, used to tell a good one. It's about some hellions called Claras--fish women who shoot up out of the ocean to harm loose women and eat disobedient children. It's a shivery tale--the kind ignorance enjoys--that came out of nowhere back in the forties when a couple of "see there, what'd I tell you?" things happened at the shore. Like that 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 Silkville 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 fishing shack only to have loggerheads

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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. Of course nobody flat out saw the Claras during the shame of those guilty women, but they knew they were around and knew what they looked like too because, earlier, one evening in 1942, some hard-headed children swam past the safety rope and drowned. As soon as they were pulled under, dark clouds gathered over the heads of screaming parents and dumb struck picknickers, and in a blink turned into the profiles of gate-mouthed women whooping for joy. Some took for thunder what other fools heard as laughter. From that time on into the fifties, people said the Claras loitered in the surf or flopped across the beach ready to pounce around sunset (you know, when lust is keenest, when loggerheads lay eggs and tired parents get negligent). Now most demons, like us, get hungry at supertime, 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

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Cosey's Resort was the best and best known vacation spot for colored folk on the east coast. Everybody came: Lil green, Fatha Hines, T Bone Walker, Jimmy Lunceford, The Drops of Joy, and guests from as far away as Michigan and New York couldn't wait to get down here. Sooker Bay swirled with first lieutenants and brand new mothers; with young school teachers, doctors, businessmen. All over the place children rode their fathers' leg shanks and buried uncles up to their necks in sand. Men and women got up baseball teams whose goal was to knock a homer into the waves. 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 school of Jezebels, the Claras showed up in bright daylight. A clarinet player 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.

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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 lightening, night time or day, Claras could blast up out of the waves to punish wayward women or swallow the misbehaving young. When the Resort went broke, the story lost its grip [tk]. A few people still sinking crab castles in the back bays probably remember it, but with no more big bands or honeymooners; with the boats and picnics and swimmers gone; when Sooker Bay became a treasury of sea junk and Up Beach itself drowned, nobody needed or wanted to recall salt wet females with scaley legs and foaming hair. But it's forty years on, now; the Cosey girls have disappeared from view and I think of them almost every day.

Except for me and a few fish shacks, Up Beach is twenty feet

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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 there, so far from the ocean. Hills of sand piling in porch corners and between bannister railings are whiter than the beach, and smoother, 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 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 all your best

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friends. Secrets, too, jam those corridors and closed up rooms. And music. The shift of a shutter hinge sounds like the cough of a trumpet; piano keys waver a quarter 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 savage enough to scare you. Jade and sapphire waves fight each other, kicking up enough foam to wash sheets in. An evening 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 poppies. Our shore is like sugar—which is what the Spaniards thought of when they first saw it. Sucra, they called it, a name local whites tore up for all time into Sooker.

Nobody could get enough of our weather except when the Cannery smell got to the beach and into the hotel. Then guests discovered what Up Beach people put up with everyday and why Mr. Cosey moved his family out of the hotel and built that big house on his

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Post Road land. Fish odor wasn't all that bad a thing in these parts. Like marsh stench and privies, it was just another variety to the senses. But in the 60's it became a problem. A new generation of female vacationers complained about what it did 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 conch. That hurt me, because I have never failed in the kitchen. Mr. Cosey told people that's what ruined his business. That the whites had tricked him. They let him buy all the ocean front he wanted because the Cannery, so close by, kept it unprofitable. The fish smell had turned his Resort into a joke. But I know the smell that blanketed Up Beach every day hit Sooker Bay only once or twice a month--and never from February to August when nets were empty and the Cannery closed. No. I don't care what he told people, something else wrecked his Resort. Freedom, May said. She tried hard to keep the place alive when her father-in-law gave up, and was convinced that Civil Rights destroyed her family and its business. By which she meant

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colored people were more interested in blowing up cities than dancing by the seashore. She was like that, May; but what started out as mule-headed turned into soft-headed. Fact is, folks who bragged about Cosey vacations in the fifties boasted in the seventies about Hyatt's, Hiltons, cruises to the Bahamas and Ocho Rios. Maybe a freedom won felt better than a freedom snatched. Truth is neither fish stink nor integration was to blame. Nevermind the woman with the conch-flavored steak, customers will sit next to a privy if it's the only way they can hear Wilson Pickett or Nellie Lutcher or Jimmie Witherspoon. Besides, who can distinguish one odor from another on a crowded dance floor pressing close to a partner? And while May kept blaming Martin Luther King every day for her troubles, her step-mother was proving her a liar. Something else must have caused it. Besides, Mr. Cosey was a smart man. He helped more black people here than forty years of government programs. And he wasn't the one who boarded up the hotel and sold seventy-five acres to an Equal Opportunity developer for thirty-two homes built so cheaply my shack puts them to

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shame. At least my floors are hand planed oak, not some slicked-up pine, and if my beams aren't ruler smooth, they were properly aged before hoisted.

Water was one problem. The sale had just closed, the acres barely plotted when Up Beach mothers were pumping mud from their spigots. Dried up wells and brackey water scared them so they gave up the sight of the sea and applied for a two per cent HUD mortgage. Rainwater wasn't good enough anymore. Trouble, unemployment, tidewater floods followed by droughts turning marshland into mud cakes so dry even the mosquitoes quit—I saw all that as life simply being itself. Then the government houses went up and they named it Oceanside—which it isn't. The developers started out selling to veterans and retired railroad men, but when Oceanside became a solution for people thrown out of work onto food stamps, churches and this affirmative action stuff got busy. Now, it's full of people commuting to offices and hospital labs twenty-two miles north. Traveling back and forth from those cheap, pretty houses to malls and

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movie-plexes they're so happy they haven't had a cloudy thought, let alone a recollection of the Claras. They didn't cross my mind either until I started to miss the Cosey girls. I used to see one of them driving along in that big old car—to the market or in here, once in a while, for some of my Salisbury steak. Otherwise, they haven't left that house in years. Not since one of them came back carrying two K Mart shopping bags and you could tell by the set of her shoulders she was ashamed. The four pieces of white Samsonite luggage she ran off with no where in sight. Meaner than most and stand offish, they have the constant attention disliked folks attract. They live like queens in Mr. Cosey's house and since that girl walked in there, with a skirt short as underpants, they seemed to have vanished from sight leaving me with nothing but a worn out fairy tale to draw on. I know it's trash: just another wicked women tale made up to scare females and correct unruly children. But it's all I have. I need something else. Something better. A story that shows how brazen women can take a good man down. I can hum to that.

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CHAPTER ONE