



S.W.: L and Chapter 1

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L

The women's legs are spread wide open, so I hum. Standing by, unable to do anything but watch is a trial, but I don't say a word. My nature is a quiet one, anyway. As a child it was considered respectful; as a young woman it was called discreet. Later on it was thought to be the wisdom maturity brings. But my silence is looked on as odd these days since most of my race has forgotten the beauty of meaning much by saying nothing. Now tongues work all by themselves with no help from the mind. Still, I used to be able to have normal conversations and, when the need arose, I could make a point strong enough to stop a kidney—or a knife. Not anymore because back in the seventies, when women began to straddle chairs and dance crotch out on television; when all the fashion magazines featured behinds and inner thighs as though that's all there is to a woman, well, I shut up altogether. Before women agreed to spread in public there used to be

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, 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 beach front alone wondering if anybody saw him 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, soft as it is, my music has that kind of 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 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 by the world; her way of objecting to the way the century is turning 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 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 men know how to ^{use} plunder] was secret, hidden and ran too deep for short shorts or cameras. But then or now, decent underwear 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. But you do have to watch out for the ones who wear scars like honorary medals. That kind of woman is an exception; ^{her} ~~their~~ spell is hard to crack. It's the rest who can't hide the sugar-child, the winsome baby girl curled up somewhere inside, between the ribs,

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 their hearts where that folded child is tucked.

Sometimes the cut is so deep no woe-is-me tale is enough. Then 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 is an outside evil. People in Up Beach, where I live, used to tell about some creatures called Police-heads—hateful things with big hats who shoot up out of the ocean to harm loose women and eat disobedient children. My Grandmother knew them when she was a girl and people dreamed wide awake. They disappeared for a while but returned with new and bigger hats 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] gripped in her hand. She wasn't but 24 at the time. Or that other woman—she lived over in Silk and wouldn't have anything to do with Up Beach people—well she hid a paper and a purchase deed under her father-in-law's pier one evening only to have loggerheads dig them up in the morning. The miserable daughter-in-law broke her hip trying to keep the breezes and the neighbors away from the papers she'd stolen. Of course nobody flat out saw any Police-heads 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 they turned into gate-mouthed profiles wearing wide hats. Some took for thunder what others heard as whoops of joy. From that time on into the fifties they loitered above the surf or hovered over the beach ready to pounce around sunset (you know, when lust is

keenest, when loggerheads lay eggs and tired parents get negligent).

Of course most demons get hungry at supptime, like us, but Police-

heads liked to troll at night, too, ^{especially} when the hotel was full of visitors

drunk with dance music, or salt air, or maybe just the temptation of

starlit water. Those were the days when Cosey's Hotel and 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 played croquet and got up baseball teams whose goal was

to knock a homer into the waves. Grandparents watched over red

thermos jugs with white handles and hampers 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 posse, the Police-heads

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 wads of scale cluttered beard 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 lightening, night time or day, Police-heads could blast up out of the waves to punish wayward women or swallow the misbehaving young. When the Resort began to fail they disappeared like pick-pockets from a bread line . A few people still sinking crab castles in the back bays probably remember them, 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 big hats and scaley beards. But it's forty years on, now; the Cosey girls have disappeared from public view and I think of them almost every day.

Except for me and 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 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 twice-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 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 behaves 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 Post Road land. Fish odor didn't used to be 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 females 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. ^{later on} 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 hit Sooker Bay only once or twice a month--and never from February to August when crab castles 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 going when her father-in-law lost interest, and was convinced that Civil Rights destroyed her family and its business. By which she meant 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 crack-brained. Fact is, folks who bragged about Cosey vacations in the forties boasted in the sixties 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. Besides, who can distinguish one odor from another while pressed close to a partner on a crowded dance floor listening to "Harbor Lights"? And while May kept blaming Martin Luther King every day for her troubles, the hotel still made money, although with a different clientele. Something else was

to blame. Besides, Mr. Cosey was a smart man. He helped more colored 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 cheap my shack puts them to shame. At least my floors are hand planed oak, not some slicked-up pine, and if my beams aren't ruler smooth, they're true and were properly aged before hoisted.

Before Up Beach drowned in a hurricane called David, there was a drought with no name at all. 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 for them anymore. Trouble, unemployment, hurricanes 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 the neighborhood 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 movie-plexes they're so happy they haven't had a cloudy thought, let alone a memory of Police-heads. They didn't cross my mind either until I started to miss the Cosey girls and wonder if they'd finally killed each other. Who would know if they were dead in there—one vomiting on the steps still holding the knife that cut the throat of the one that fed her the poison? Or if one had a stroke after shooting the other and, not able to move, starved to death right in front of the refrigerator? They wouldn't be found for days. Not until Sandler's boy needed his weekly pay. Maybe I best leave off the tv for a while.

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 a Wall Mart shopping bag and you could tell by the set of her shoulders she was ashamed. The white Samsonite luggage she ran off with nowhere in sight. I thought the other one would slam the door in her face, but she didn't. I guess they both knew they deserved each other. Meaner than most and stand offish, they have the regular attention disliked folks attract. They live like queens in Mr. Cosey's house but since that girl walked in there a while ago with a skirt short as underpants and no underpants at all, I've been worried about them leaving me here with nothing but an old folk's tale to draw on. I know it's trash: just another story made up to scare wicked females and correct unruly children. But it's all I have. I know I need something else. Something better. Like a story that shows how a brazen woman can take a good man down. I can hum to that.

CHAPTER ONE

IMAGE

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The day she walked the streets of Silk a chafing wind 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 an agile tread. 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: 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 his life.

"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.

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.

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

"Jailhouse." He believed his wife was on his mind. She would be off the bus 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 neighborhood 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 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 Cannery closed. "Parents idle, children sidle," 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. His own boyhood had been shaped by fear of vigilantes but dark blue uniforms had taken over posse work now. What thirty years ago was a one-sheriff, one-secretary department was now four patrol cars and eight officers with walkie-talkies to keep the peace.

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 any criticism her husband might be gathering against her grandson.

At dinner, the cheese-scalloped potatoes having warmed his mood, Sandler picked up the gossip he'd begun while the three of them were setting the table.

"What did you say she wanted?" Vida asked, frowning. The ham slices had toughened with re-heating.

"Looking for those Cosey women I reckon. That was the address she had. The old address, I mean. When wasn't nobody out here but them."

"That was written on her paper?" She poured a little raisin sauce over her meat.

"I didn't look at it, woman. I just saw her check it. Little scrap

of something looked like it came from a newspaper."

"You were concentrating on her legs, I guess. Lot of information there."

Romen covered his mouth and closed his eyes.

"Vida, don't belittle me in front of the boy."

"Well, the first thing you told me was about her skirt. I'm just following your list of priorities."

"I said it was short, that's all."

"How short?" Vida winked at Romen.

"They wear them up to here, Gran." Romen's hand disappeared under the table.

"Up to where?" Vida leaned sideways.

"Will you two quit? I'm trying to tell you something."

"You think she's a niece, maybe?" asked Vida.

"Could be. Didn't look like one, though. Except for size, looked more like Christine's people." Sandler motioned for the jar of jalapenos,

"Christine don't have any people left."

"Maybe she had a daughter you don't know about." Romen just wanted to be in the conversation, but, as usual, they looked at him like his fly was open.

"Watch your mouth," said his grandfather.

"I'm just talking, Gramp. How would I know?"

"You wouldn't, so don't butt in."

"Stch."

"You sucking your teeth at me?"

"Sandler, lighten up. Can't you leave him alone for a minute?"

Vida asked.

Sandler opened his mouth to defend his position, but decided to bite the tip off the pepper instead.

"Anyway, the less I hear about those Cosey girls, the better I like it," said Vida.

"Girls?" Romen made a face.

"Well, that's how I think of them. Hincty, snotty girls with as much cause to look down on people as a pot looks down on a skillet."

"They're cool with me," said Romen. "The tall, skinny one, anyway."

Vida glared at him. "Don't you believe it. She pays you; that's all you need from either one."

Romen swallowed. Now she was on his back. "Why you all make me work there if they that bad?"

"Make you?" Sandler scratched a thumb.

"Well, you know, send me over there."

"Drown this boy, Vida. He don't know a favor from a fart."

"We sent you because you need some kind of job, Romen. You've been here four months and its time you took on some of the weight."

Romen tried to get the conversation back to his employers' weaknesses and away from his own. " Miss Christine always gives me something good to eat."

"I don't want you eating off her stove."

"Vida."

"I don't."

"Vida."

"You forgot?" Vida's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"Nobody knows for sure."

"Knows what?" asked Romen.

"Some old mess," said his grandfather.

Vida stood and moved to the refrigerator. "Somebody killed him as sure as I'm sitting here. Wasn't a thing wrong with that man."

Dessert was canned pineapple in sherbert glasses. Vida set one at each place. Sandler, unimpressed, leaned back. Vida caught his look but decided to let it lie. She worked; he was on pension. And although he kept the house just fine, she was expected to come home and cook a perfect meal every day.

"What man?" Romen asked.

"Bill Cosey," replied Sandler. "Used to own a hotel and a lot of other property, including the ground under this house."

Vida shook her head. "I saw him the day he died. Hale at

breakfast; dead at lunch."

"He had a lot to answer for, Vida."

"Somebody answered for him: 'No lunch'."

"You forgive that old reprobate anything."

"He paid us good money, Sandler, and taught us, too. Things I never would have known about had I kept on living over a swamp in a stilt house. You know what my mother's hands looked like. None of us had to keep doing that kind of work because of Bill Cosey"

"It wasn't that bad. I miss it some times."

"Miss what? Slop jars? Snakes?"

"The trees"

"Oh, shoot." Vida tossed her spoon into the sherbert glass hard enough to get the clink she wanted.

"Remember the summer storms?" Sandler ignored her. "The air just before..."

"Get up, Romen." Vida tapped the boy's shoulder. "Help me with the dishes."

"I ain't finished, Gran."

"Yes you are. Up."

Romen, forcing air through his lips, pushed back his chair and unfolded himself. He tried to exchange looks with his grandfather, but the old man's eyes were inward.

"Never seen moonlight like that anywhere else." Sandler's voice was low. "Make you want to—" He collected himself. "I'm not saying I would move back."

"I sure hope not." Vida scraped the plates loudly. "You'd need gills."

"Miss Christine said it was a paradise." Romen reached for a cube of pineapple with his fingers.

Vida slapped his hand. "It was a plantation. And Bill Cosey took us off of it."

"The ones he wanted." Sandler spoke to his shoulder.

"I heard that. What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, Vida. Like you said, the man was a saint."

"There's no arguing with you."

Romen dribbled liquid soap into hot water. His hands felt good sloshing in it, though it stung the bruises on his knuckles. His side hurt more while he stood at the sink, but he felt better listening to his grandparents fussing about the olden days. Less afraid.

The girl did not miss the house and the man with the Ice Off was not wrong: the house was graceful, imposing, and its peaked third story roof did suggest a church. The steps to the porch, slanted and shiny 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 slate and descended a flight of iron stairs lit by a window. Beyond the window, 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 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 they stared at the girl, then moved 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 scrap. She motioned toward the door and disappeared from the window but not before ~~an~~ a shard of 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 mature, professional lady . Light but highly confidential work. Apply to Mrs. H. Cosey. 1 Post Road, Silk.

"Where did you get this?" The woman's tone was accusatory.

"From the newspaper."

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

"Yes, Mam."

"When?"

"Today."

She handed back the advertisement. "Well. I guess you better sit down." The snap in her voice loosened.

"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 like the abrupt agitation of bells. "Oh, right. Sorry."

They both sat then and the woman returned to the work of deveining 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. Junior."

The woman looked up. "Your daddy's idea?"

"No, Mam. My mother's."

"Have mercy."

"You can call me June, if you want."

"I don't want. Your mamma give you a last name? Prom, maybe? Or Choir?"

"Viviane," said Junior. "With an 'e'."

"An 'e'? You from around here?"

"Used to be. I've been away."

"I never heard tell of any family around here named Vivian with an 'e' or without one."

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

"Where then?"

Jacket leather purred as Junior Viviane shrugged her shoulders and reached across the table to the colander. "Up north. Can I help you with that, Mam?" she asked. "I'm a pretty fair cook."

"Don't." 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 pastry dough. The silence stretching between the two tightened. Junior Viviane fidgeted. Her jacket creaking over the tick of shrimp shells.

"Is Mrs. H. Cosey here, Mam?"

"She is."

"May I speak to her, please?"

"Let me see that thing again." The woman 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, please?" Junior sank her chin into her palm, underscoring her question with a smile.

"I guess. Sure. Up those stairs, then some more stairs. All the way to the top." She motioned toward a flight of stairs leading from

an alcove near the stove. Junior stood.

"I don't suppose you interested in my name?"

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

"It's Christine. If you get the confidential job you'll need to know it."

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

Her boots were muffled on the stairs.

Christine turned away. She should have said, "No. Third." but she didn't. Instead she 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 two of the cloves. These she diced and left on the cutting board. The old Philco refrigerator murmured and trembled. Christine gave it a reassuring pat before bending to a low 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 selected 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 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. Scooping peach slices with it from home made ice cream, helpless in the thrill, never minding the grains of sand blowing over the dessert—the whole picnic lunch for that matter.

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 Junior-but-you-can-call-me June, Christine had put her own body of

forty—even thirty-- years ago next to the girl's and won. The girl had good legs (well, knees and thighs were all she could see in those tall boots) and a white woman's narrow, poked-out behind that was all the rage these days. But she had nothing to rival the Christine of 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. It was the girl's face that struck gongs of envy. That and her Amazon hair. At first Christine had stared at her, then, wary, concentrated on the newspaper clipping. Except for that, she would never have let into the house a strange girl with no purse. The shrimp work gave her ample time to get a bounce from her, some sense of what (nevermind who) she was. It also gave her reason to sustain a lowered gaze because she did not like the heart jump that came when she looked in the girl's eyes. She had the unnerving look of an underfed child. One you wanted to ^{cuddle} ~~kiss~~ or slap for being needy.

Christine stirred the garlic into butter softening in a skillet, then set about making the roux. After a moment she sprinkled in flour and

watched it bronze before loosening the paste with stock and whisking it smooth.

"I'm a pretty fair cook," is what the 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 person ever born from Niggerhead Rock to Sooker Bay, from Up Beach to Silk and half the ones in Harbor City as well since that was where she had spent (or wasted) a whole chunk of her life. Junior Viviane. With an 'e'. Sounded like a name from a baseball card. So what was the heart skip for? Was she afraid she would blush in recognition at any moment, sharpening her voice to a razor to cut off the possibility? The tell-tale signs of a run-away's street life were too familiar: bus station soap, other people's sandwiches, unwashed hair, slept-in clothes, no purse, mouth cleaned with chewing gum instead of toothpaste. So what did Heed want her for? How had an ad been placed in the newspaper without a working telephone? The Gibbons boy must have

helped her—adding that errand to others after working in the yard.

Whatever was going on was a trap laid by a high heeled snake. Some new way to rob her future just as she had ripped off her past.

“I’ll be damned,” she whispered.

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 three flights of stairs where she hoped it would choke the meanest thing on the coast.

“My Lord. Snow.” She spoke without turning her head, simply parting the draperies further. “Come over here and look. Here of all places.”

Junior moved near the tiny woman at the window and peered through the glass trying but unable to see snowflakes. She looked to

be in her sixties at least--hair made mega-black by a thick border of silver at the scalp-- but she had something of a little girl scent: butter rum candy, grass juice and fur.

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

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

Startled, the woman turned. The girl had called her a liar before saying hello.

"You're here for the job?" Her eyes swept Junior's face then examined her clothes. She had had no way of knowing the applicant was in the house until she heard footsteps she knew were neither Christine's or Romen's. Then she had quickly positioned herself at the window to strike the right pose, give a certain impression. But she needn't have bothered. The girl was not at all what she had expected. Not just the messy hair and tacky clothes; there was some bold laziness in her manner, the way she talked. Like the "yeah" she gave to Heed's question.

"Don't you mean 'yes'?"

This room, like the kitchen below, was over-bright, lit like a department store. Climbing up the stairs, glancing around the rest of the house, Junior had to guess what ^{those} the rooms ^{might hold} ~~were for~~ because the darkness spreading away from the bannisters was thick. Here, however, in the room at the top of the house, every lamp—six? ten?—was on, rivaling the ~~fat~~ ^{overhead} chandelier ^{above}. Staring openly at the items crowding the surfaces of tables, desks, she waited for the little woman to break the silence.

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

" Junior. But you can call me June."

"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 course, but difficult to ^{clean} ~~correct~~ nonetheless. Moving away from the window she had to step carefully, 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 a bed behind which

The women's rooms
Both places were like two
spot lit stages separated by darkness

Too much light at the top, Too much
at its bottom, ~~dark mess~~ in between.
BKA } ~~Missing between them~~
Both places were
Like ~~the~~ spot lit stages separated
by darkness

^{man's}
a portrait loomed. Heed sat down finally at a small desk. Placing her hands in her lap, she nodded for the girl 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."

Junior smiled. The woman pronounced 'resume' with two syllables. "I'm eighteen and can do anything you want. Anything."

"That's good to know, but references. Do you have any? Is there someone I can get in touch with?"

"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—" Junior turned her palms up.

Heed touched the corners of her lips with a hand small as a child's and crooked as a wing. She considered her instant dislike of the Junior-you-can-call-me-June person slouching in front of her and thought that her blunt speech while not a pose was something of an act. She considered something else too: whether the girl's attitude had

staying power. She needed someone who could be coaxed into or who already had a certain hunger. ^{things were becoming urgent} Christine, true to her whore's heart, sporting diamonds ~~right~~ in their rightful owner's face, was pilfering house money to pay a lawyer.

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

"Go ahead." Junior shouldered out of her jacket, the cheap leather mewing. 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 nipples were high, martial. 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, a smile of satisfaction lighting her face. The posture she'd assumed to manage the interview changed with the mention of her book. "It's about my family. The Coseys. ^(over) I got all the material, but some things need checking, you know. Dates, spellings. I got each guest book from our hotel—except for two or three, I think—and some of those people, not many but some, had the

My husband's family."

¶ Junior looked at the portrait.

¶ "That him?"

¶ "That's him. It was painted from a photograph ~~but~~ ^{so it's} exactly like him. What you see is a great man.

worse handwriting. The worse. But most folks I seen had perfect hands you know because that's the way we was taught. But Papa didn't let them print it the way they do now right alongside the signature. Didn't need to anyway because he knowed every body who was anybody and could recognize a signature even if it was a X but no X type people came of course. Our guests, most of them, had gorgeous handwriting because, between you and I, you had to be more than just 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 "Excuse me. You have no idea, do you, what I'm talking about. I get excited is all, just thinking about it." She adjusted the lapels of her housecoat with her thumbs, re-addressing herself to the interview. "But I want to hear about you. 'Junior', you said?"

"Yeah."

"Well now, Junior. 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 can read; I can write, Okay? I'm as smart as it gets. You want handwriting, you want typing, I'll do it. You want your hair fixed, I'll fix it. You want a bath, I'll give you one. I need a job and I need a place to stay. I'm real good, Mrs. Cosey. Really real good." She winked, startling Heed into a momentary recall of something just out of reach, like a shell snatched away by a wave. It may have been that flick of melancholy⁵⁰ sharply felt that made her lean close to the girl and whisper,

"Can you keep a secret?" She held her breath.

"Like nobody you ever knew."

Heed exhaled. "Because the work is private. 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 the word but it had the urgency of a shout.

Christine entered carrying a tray. No knock preceded her and no word accompanied her. She placed the tray on the desk where Heed and Junior 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 Junior.

"Then you eat it," said Heed.

Junior forked a shrimp into her mouth and moaned, "Mmmm, she sure knows how cook."

"What she knows is, I don't eat shellfish."

The second floor had none of the fussy comfort Junior found on the third. Here a hallway, two plain bedrooms and a bath equaled the entire square footage of the room above where Junior had spent two hours trying to read the woman who was now her boss.

It should not have taken that long but the taste of hot, home cooked food so distracted her she forgot. She was near the end of a second helping before she began to watch for the face behind the face; and to listen: for the words hiding behind talk. It was Heed's constant playing with her salad that finally pulled Junior's attention away from her own plate. Forking wedges of iceberg lettuce around oil and vinegar, piercing olives, lifting rings of onion on tines only to let them drop again and again, Heed had chattered on, eating nothing. Junior focused on the hands more than what occupied them: small, baby smooth, ^{except in one place ✓} each one curved gently away from its partner-like fins.

Arthritis? she wondered. Is that why she can't write her own book?

Or some other old lady sickness? Even before the food arrived she had

heard the change in Heed's speech, the slow move away from the class room to the girls' locker; from a principal's office to a neighborhood bar.

Yawning under blankets in the bed to which Heed had directed her, Junior fought sleep to organize, recapture her impressions. She knew she had eaten too much too quickly as in her first days at Correctional before she learned how to make food last. And, just as it had been there, she was already ready for more. Her appetite had not surprised her—it was permanent—but its ferocity had. Watching the gray-eyed Christine cleaning shrimp earlier she had leashed it and had no trouble figuring out that a servant who cooked with twelve diamond rings on her fingers would enjoy—maybe even need—a little boot licking. And although she had caught the other one's pose as well and recognized it from the start as a warden's righteous shield, Junior knew that some up front raunchiness would crack it. Still, gobbling real food after days of clean garbage and public filch, she had let her antennae droop. As now, when sleep—alone, in silence, in total

darkness at last—overwhelmed caution for pleasure. ^{Just} ~~The thrill of not having~~ ^{stet} ~~a toilet in the room where you~~ ^{slept was} ~~^~~ ^{a thrill.} The bath she
craved had to be postponed too. When Heed said the weather was
too nasty, the bus depot too far, and why not spend the night and
collect your things tomorrow? Junior thought immediately of a solitary
^{in a real tub}
soak with a perfumed bar of colored soap. But the water she heard
[^]
running through pipes above reduced the tap flow in the second floor
bathtub to a sigh. Heed had beat her to it, so Junior spent a few
minutes rummaging in the closet where she found one can of tomato
paste, two rock hard sacks of sugar, a jar of hand cream, a tin of
sardines, a milk carton full of keys and two locked suitcases, She
gave up trying to force the locks and undressed. After massaging her
feet, she slid under the covers with two days worth of dirt on hold.

Sleep came down so fast it was only in dreaming that she felt the
peculiar new thing: protected. The face hanging over the woman's bed
must have started it. A handsome man with a re-assuring smile that
pledged endless days of hot food, ^{fasty} ~~seductive but~~ [^] kindly eyes that
promised to hold a girl steady on his shoulder while she robbed apples

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from the highest branch.