

LOUISIANA SHOAL

A 10-minute play

by  
Mildred Inez Lewis

Louisiana Shoal

## CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

Earlene (40s+, African American) A sturdy, pipe smoking fisherwoman in rain gear. Her only concessions to traditional femininity are beautifully done hair and elegant stud earrings. A light Louisiana accent.

Livia (20s+, African American) A post-doctoral fellow with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). She has forced the drab disaster worker uniform, a windbreaker and khakis, into a semblance of style.

## SETTING

A small lake near Paradis, LA in spitting distance of Union Carbide and Cancer Alley.

## TIME

Now. Just before dawn. Fall, better known as hurricane season.

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*AT RISE:*

*IN DARKNESS, Zydeco music gives way to the sounds of a fire burning fish. Perhaps, there is smoke. A weak DAWN lights the stage as EARLENE stomps the fish ashes. Job done, she sits to enjoy her pipe. It's full of weed. The lake in front of her is illuminated by the surviving fish. They emit glimmering colored light.*

*Earlene finishes her pipe, grunts with pleasure, grabs her fishing rod, wades into the lake and casts.*

EARLENE

Dinner.

*LICIA runs in and immediately chokes on the toxic fish smoke.*

EARLENE

*(without turning)*

You all right over there?

*Licia coughs, struggles to nod. Earlene looks.*

EARLENE

Breathe shallow. Try to relax. Want some weed? Purifies the lungs. I might have some VapoRub in my bag.

*Licia vigorously shakes her head 'no,' but still can't quite catch her breath.*

EARLENE

You sure? We don't want nothing to happen to you. Something goes down wrong with a do-gooder, it stresses everybody out. Doesn't change anything, but ooooo the dust flies.

LICIA

You've got to get out of there!

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EARLENE

Soon as I catch my dinner.

LICIA

What?! You can't eat that fish!

EARLENE

Why not? It's Friday. This is Louisiana.

LICIA

They're poisoned.

EARLENE

I took out the ones that were bad.

LICIA

*(points to the embers)*

The smoke?

EARLENE

I sure couldn't leave 'em for the crows. They don't know no better. Why should they suffer? These in here are all right.

LICIA

They're not. Please believe me.

EARLENE

Cancer Alley's not safe? Now there's some up-to-the-minute news. You must be with the feds.

LICIA

*(angering)*

Not every "fed"—

EARLENE

You got kids?

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LICIA

Not yet.

EARLENE

If you had, you'd know to—

*(sings)*

“Take a deep breath and count to four.” Smoke’s starting to come out of your ears.

*(breathes)*

One, two, three, four. Don’t you love you some *Daniel Tiger*? My grandbaby turned me on to it.

LICIA

I appreciate...but we have to move. A storm’s coming. A cat six.

EARLENE

Mmm hmm. Felt something coming on a few days ago.

LICIA

Then may I ask what you’re waiting on?

EARLENE

You mean *wading* on?

*Earlene greatly enjoys her own joke.*

LICIA

It’s not that funny.

*Earlene grins. She can’t help herself.*

LICIA

You can’t hunker down in a cat six.

EARLENE

We used to. Oops! Not going to cancel me for that, are ya?

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LICIA

Things change. We're not built for it anymore.

EARLENE

Damn straight we're not. Y'all good feds thinking about doing something about that? It's late in the day, but—

LICIA

Let's go!

*(beat)*

Ma'am.

EARLENE

Running through your training? How to deal with non-compliant seniors.

LICIA

Let's try again. I'll talk and you walk to me when you feel ready, okay? I'm Licia. Licia Knowles. What's your name?

EARLENE

Mrs. Earlene Iridessa Jackson. Buster's widow.

LICIA

Pleased to meet you Missus Jackson. I'm with the EPA.

EARLENE

That's a FEMA jacket.

LICIA

I'm on temporary assignment.

EARLENE

EPA jacket's got a better fit. Not that that matters. You've got a real nice figure. See? I notice things.

LICIA

I'm temporarily assigned to FEMA. This lake, this whole area was declared an irretrievable hazard last night. That means—

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EARLENE

In know what it means.

*(softer)*

Damn.

LICIA

Everyone else in town's been evacuated. As of five minutes ago, this officially became a ghost town.

EARLENE

In the time it took to smoke a pipe.

LICIA

It's been coming for a long time.

EARLENE

Don't I know it. The bugs are gone. They used to slick my windshield. Last summer, during the heat wave? A pelican dropped from the sky. The state bird, DOA. Never seen anything like it. "Don't worry," they said. And now what? Where are we supposed to run to?

LICIA

The administration's going to work with the refinery to buy everyone out. It'll be enough to start over. Somewhere better. In a place that's sustainable. With green architecture.

EARLENE

I'm not talking about buildings. I'm talking about the heart of us. Where's that supposed to relocate?

LICIA

I'm so sorry. If we'd done our jobs sooner—

*Licia holds out her hand. Earlene advances.*

EARLENE

You mean back in the 70s? Or the 20s when Union Carbide and Carbon birthed the Carbide and Chemicals Corporation?

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LICIA

You know?

EARLENE

Everybody round here knows. Looks like you're the ones slow on the uptake.

LICIA

Maybe, when this is over, we can find a way to work together.

*Licia extends Earlene a clipboard.*

LICIA

But first, let's get you to safety. Just sign at the x.

EARLENE

*(reads)*

What about our personal belongings? I've been holding things for my son and his kids.

LICIA

I'm sure your insurance—

EARLENE

Insurance stopped covering us years ago.

LICIA

Oh.

EARLENE

Can you give me a personal guarantee? In writing.

LICIA

No.

EARLENE

Hmmm. Then maybe I'll take my chances.



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LICIA

You can't. Not with this storm. It's stirring up things you don't want to meet. Trust me. I'm a post-doc in emergency management. I'm here to study the site. But I'm committed to making sure people here get taken care of.

*(beat)*

A post-doc means—

EARLENE

I grew up here, but worked admin at Chicago State till I retired. I understand all about fish and post-docs, ground soil and promises.

LICIA

It's personal for me, too. I'm Penny's girl. Penny Corkle—

EARLENE

The school cafeteria. She still with us?

LICIA

Passed.

EARLENE

Cancer?

*Licia nods.*

EARLENE

Explains a lot. Condolences. Know your people. They didn't deserve. That said Miss Licia, there's a difference between being from a place and of a place.

LICIA

You left. Came back.

EARLENE

I took these hallows and swamps with me. They called me back. Doesn't feel like this place is inside you the same way.

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LICIA

That doesn't make my commitment less real.

EARLENE

Guess we'll find out.

LICIA

This storm's bad. There's something malignant about it. Best case scenario, it unleashes bad things for a long time to come. I've got a towel and dry clothes in the car.

EARLENE

Me and the fish and crawdads? We're good. You go 'head on.

LICIA

At least come out of that water.

EARLENE

I'm good where I'm at. Look at how they're lighting around me. We've made our own little shoal here every Friday since I got back. This is my happy place and my safety. It won't betray me.

LICIA

Shoals aren't stable in a cat six.

EARLENE

You're thinking 'bout sandbank shoals. This kind's where fish and other creatures move together. Each one on their own rhythm. Their light'll let me know what's up.

LICIA

The light that comes from those fish isn't what it used to be. It comes from chemicals now. Toxic chemicals.

EARLENE

Some of their light still comes from joy. That's the part that's safe to eat. I can tell the difference.

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LICIA

How?

EARLENE

Just do.

LICIA

You might feel okay, but the poison's building in your body.

EARLENE

Air was already bad. Make sense the water would follow.

*A siren sounds.*

EARLENE

*(lightly)*

That last call? I'll take a margarita.

LICIA

No one's coming back for you. The rest of my team's gone.

EARLENE

But you came.

LICIA

Some kid told me you'd be out here. I'm not going to lie. I didn't believe him. But he kept tugging on my pants leg. Rich? Ricky?

EARLENE

Little Ricky Pontcharian. He's another one.

LICIA

Another one what?

EARLENE

Another of this place. Shoot, it might've been your mama talking through him to you.

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LICIA

The dead don't speak.

EARLENE

The dead never shut up. Teasing us. Warning us. They just don't speak directly to folks who won't listen.

LICIA

I'm counting to ten—

EARLENE

Ha! That didn't work on me when I was seven. Damn sure won't work now. What else you got?

*Licia walks away.*

EARLENE

That it? You just gon' run off?

LICIA

I fight through science. I'm not throwing my life away in some overgrown pond. You want to stay. You're welcome to it.

*Licia tosses Earlene a Sharpie.*

LICIA

Write your Social on your arm so they can identify the body.

EARLENE

Handy trick. Will do.

LICIA

You don't make any sense.

EARLENE

I make more sense than you do. I'm willing to stay and fight for this place.

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LICIA

There's nothing left to fight for.

EARLENE

Says who? What good's your science if you don't have the guts to fight for what it shows?

*Another, more urgent siren.*

EARLENE

Says them? Where've they been hanging all this time? While everything was going bad.

LICIA

The past is past.

EARLENE

The past is now. The past's the future. You dig deep enough anywhere round here, you find fossils. That's the dead living with us. That dead pelican gave its life to warn us about the heat. We've got responsibilities to the dead and we owe the past more than another scientific study, 'specially one telling us what we already know.

*A crack of thunder.*

EARLENE

See? That's the earth fighting back. She's fighting back! And she'll win. We need her. She doesn't need us. Stand with me.

LICIA

And die?

EARLENE

Fight. As god is my witness, during the last storm I stayed under for two hours. The fish gave me air.

LICIA

Impossible.

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EARLENE

You study things. I gut know them. That's the difference. It's too late to run now anyhow. Time to hunker down.

*The rain begins. Earlene holds out her arms. Licia wades into the water.*

LICIA

We might not survive this.

EARLENE

Then we bear witness from beyond. This ain't N'awlins, but laissez les bon temps rouler.

*(howls to the storm)*

Let the good times roll, baby.

LICIA

Oui cher. Oui.

*Earlene, then Licia, submerge themselves in the lake as the storm hits.*

*FADE TO BLACK.*

*The sounds pass. Earlene and Licia take a sharp, deep breath. The sound of television news anchors reporting the devastation.*

THE END

