ONE

1936

When she walked up Fullerton, everybody looked. Partly it was the New York clothes, that suit with the little check pattern in brown and olive green, the olive-green shoes, the olive leather handbag, and the cocky little hat, a sort of brown disc, like an upside-down bowl with a sprig of green leaves bobbing out to the right. She carried a suitcase that hobbled her walk some—but it was of a good quality, straw and leather, and she didn't want to leave it anywhere. Two trunks would come later.

People looked. She was used to it. Those clubs she sang at, the Cotton Club especially, that's what she'd been on stage for—to be looked at—and then, even offstage, she couldn't help herself: she kept getting decked out so that when they did look, what they saw was good.

White and black, both looked at her. Her father hadn't come to the station—he'd told her in advance he probably couldn't, and if she didn't see him she should take a cab. But she didn't find a cab, not one that would take her, and there were no jitneys around, so she caught a streetcar partway and began walking.

She was thinking about getting married, learning humility, none of this sassiness of hers, wanting to be someone special. Her mother thought she should work to be famous, and it was tempting, but her father had made a serious speech the last time she saw him, saying life was about making breakfast, having kids, taking care of them. And there was the fact that she was not some Ethel Waters, not some Billie Holiday. They had style. Her own successes came from being pretty, and almost, almost white. The voices in her head included her grandmother saying, "You come from a family with class. Show business is low," while her mother (who didn't get along with her mother-in-law) was saying, "Nothing like it, glamor, show business," and her father was shaking his head, murmuring, "All that craziness. You could just stop and settle down."

She paused for a while, winded, put down the suitcase and sat on it. She'd sat on worse. On the last bus she and the musicians toured in the seats were so worn she'd gotten poked by rusty springs. She'd sat on a crate in a restaurant, one of the few that let her in, and she was grateful enough for the crate even though there were vacant chairs around. She'd sat in filth and washed her good clothes in rooms that stank of former occupants. She was not supposed to be tired at her age, a year shy of twenty, but she felt a bone-weariness from always trying so hard, adapting to things.

"Comfortable?" a man asked, passing her.

"If I work at it." She always tried hard, at everything.

Some fifty feet away, she saw what looked like an older and a younger teenager selling lemonade on the street, the one instructing the other. She squinted and hurried forward. Lemonade sounded mighty good to her. She wobbled a few steps and then found her swing again. The two girls were staring at her wide-eyed. "Is business good?" she asked them. The younger one—twelve, fourteen—shook her head and shifted position once. She was wearing a faded blue dress and shoes with socks. "Could I buy some of that cool drink?" *Please, God*, she thought, *don't let them refuse me*.

They had an assortment of glasses and chipped cups. Would they let her spend a nickel, then break the cup after? Did white kids with lemonade stands learn that lesson too?

The girls, both of them, had curly dark hair and they were fairly well

suntanned, but she could tell they were white. And they surely had her categorized as Negro. It usually took a moment. Something about her confused people and then they looked again and made up their minds.

"Are you famous?" the older one asked.

"Slightly," she laughed. "Only slightly."

While the younger girl poured, the older one angled to take in her outfit, down to the shoes.

She put a nickel on the table. The little girl took it and carefully, balancing to avoid a spill, handed her a chipped cup that had a row of gray diamonds around the rim and a missing handle.

Lena drank thirstily.

"I love your shoes!" the older girl said. "And all your clothes."

"Thank you." The hat was slipping down toward her left eye, but she wasn't of a mind to take it off and reposition it.

The older girl asked timidly, "Are you a movie star?"

What an idea! Not that she hadn't had it herself. She shook her head, sorry to disappoint them.

"You have to be discovered. That's what they say."

"I suppose that's it."

Her father was only two blocks away. She couldn't wait to see him, so she hauled up the suitcase, which held as many pieces of clothing as it could bear without springing open. "Thank you, honey, for the cool drink." If she hurried, she wouldn't know if they broke the cup.

MARIE AND HER thirteen-year-old sister (the one with the lemonade business) had parents who'd come from Lebanon, though they mostly just said Syria because so few non–Middle Easterners made the distinction. The family had a grocery store, which they all worked. The girls also had cleaning jobs. Their father worked in the steel mill when he wasn't watching the store. Their brother, Freddie, was off in the army. Nobody in the family questioned the idea of working eighteen hours a day; it was simply what you did. Marie's family got up and smelled coffee, not roses, never would have thought to smell the latter.

Marie was a skinny thing, sixteen but often appeared younger. Her mother had chopped her hair awkwardly a year ago because she'd gotten lice—horrible lice, she shuddered to remember. The bugs must

have gotten on her sweater when she cleaned a house where there were four little kids who were all infected. Her mother's ungentle hands got hold of Marie's head, chopped her hair, and doused her with a liquid she'd gotten from the hardware store. Marie was rid of bugs and eggs in a matter of hours, but also rid of a lot of her hair. Now the hair was grown in enough that Marie could work it to make the sections blend, although today she hadn't had time to do it before setting up the lemonade table.

She was considered the family beauty. It was funny the way people always talked about beauty and responded to it—she did too. It wasn't exactly fair. Her little sister was not pretty and it affected the way she did everything.

Marie's mother had told her that when she was a little girl, a married couple offered *money* for her, to take her away and raise her as their own.

"Why?"

"They say because you pretty."

Her parents had managed to say no.

As soon as she got home from helping Selma at the lemonade stand, Marie took her place behind the counter of the little store her family owned. "Everything all right, Ummah?" she asked. Her mother nodded curtly and went back to the kitchen. Marie looked at the clock they had hanging up in the store. Was her mother's nod a reprimand? She hadn't been gone long.

As soon as her mother passed through the beaded curtain, Marie slipped the one movie magazine they carried from its place on the counter and turned to the article she'd been reading. It was about why movie stars fell out of love so easily; it was called "Losing at Love." Loretta Young and Jean Harlow and all of the women who talked about their heartbreaks were *astoundingly beautiful*. And yet they claimed they had lost at love.

There was a string of customers that particular day just when she got to the part about how playing love scenes could be emotionally confusing—you could persuade yourself to fall in love with your costar and when the movie was over, so was the feeling.

One woman wanted two cans of kidney beans and a bag of penny candy. The store was down to the last three loaves of bread when anoth-

er woman took two of them, saying she had relatives coming to visit the next day. She also bought most of the oranges and bananas and three cans of tuna for the lunch she had to make. Marie added up the purchases in her head. "A dollar seven cents," she said.

"How do you know? Would you write it down?"

"Sure." She tore off a strip of paper and detailed the items. The woman, not a regular customer, stretched to look at what Marie had written. "Oh. That's right," she said, surprised.

There were boys who, displaying nickels and pennies, wanted candy. "Saw you in school a couple of times," one boy said, hanging back after his friends had gone out to the street. "What's your name?"

"Marie."

"Italian?"

"No. Syrian."

"I thought Italian. That's what I am. What classes you have next year?"

"I quit."

"Quit school?"

She nodded. "My family needs me."

"Lucky you. I hate school." He paused at the door for a minute. "See you around."

She slipped a Tootsie Roll from the case and chewed. She was learning that Loretta Young had eloped when she was seventeen (one year older than Marie) but then had it annulled.

The articles were often about people who were doing something ordinary—changing a tire, hanging clothes on a line—when someone decided to put them in movies. It could happen to the beautiful woman she'd seen today even if she wasn't all dressed up. She could be taking off a shoe to rub a blister. Carole Lombard had been discovered playing baseball on the street.

The little bell on the door dinged. She looked up to see a person who looked familiar—from school, yes. He was a Negro boy.

"Sorry to disturb," he said, smiling,

"My mother doesn't like me reading in the store. She wants me to just stand here and keep dusting. This keeps me from going crazy."

He laughed and nodded toward her magazine. "I read about movies all the time. But I like to read about the directors. And the writers."

She hadn't thought about them.

"I need three cans of soup. Two tomato and one chicken noodle."

She put the Campbell's cans on the counter. They kept one of the ads for the soup tacked to the shelf. It showed tomato soup with crackers and the print said, A Bowlful of Goodness.

"That's it. My father has soup for lunch every day—even in this weather. I don't understand, but that's what he likes."

"Some people do take them, even in summer."

Marie put the cans in a bag while the boy slid coins across the counter to her.

"Thank you," he said, and left. Josiah. Right. Josiah Conner. Nice kid.

It seemed forever until finally her older sister, Fran, got home to take her shift. Fran had spent the day cleaning a big house in the Oakland area, but that was only her summer job. Usually she worked at the high school, in the front office, but they didn't need her for a couple more weeks.

Fran was short. She had startling and memorable features. Black shiny hair, big brown eyes, sizable nose, full lips. And she was expressive. It was as if she needed a bigger body to fit all of her in. "What a house I cleaned!" she said now. "Some people are dirty." Her voice went up on "dirty." She dabbed at her forehead with her sleeve. "My turn. Anything good in the magazine?"

"Loretta Young."

"Where's Selma?"

"Ought to be coming home soon. She did lemonade today."

"In the heat. Not so easy."

Marie went up to the room Fran now slept in, little more than a closet, and she snitched Fran's lipstick and put it on before wiping it off. Then she went to the room she shared with Selma. She messed with her hair, this way and that, over the forehead, straight back. With a hand mirror she checked her profile from both sides. There was supposed to be a good side, the one you made people look at. Actresses in movies had a camera side and they could even have it written into *contracts* that that was the side to use.

On the third night at her father's hotel, Lena looked at herself in the mirror of her room. She was wearing a slip, no skirt or blouse yet—it was too hot. She'd chosen a light red polish for her nails, a color that looked good with her skin, and now she was waiting for it to dry. When reviewers mentioned her they described her as chocolate cream, brown sugar and honey, café au lait—so often some kind of food.

She plopped on the bed, which creaked a little. There was hardly a breeze coming from the window. "I like this life," she practiced saying. "This is better."

The phone had rung earlier today at the hotel and it was for her. Why, she'd only been gone three days altogether and yet it was Sissle wanting her back on the bus, come autumn. "We're going to need you," he said. "Don't let this vacation stretch out past August."

She didn't tell him her father didn't want her to go back to singing, but she knew he sensed it.

She blew on her nails and tapped them to be sure they were dry enough, then got up and put on a shapeless printed dress she wore around the hotel, just a light cotton with tiny flowers, not her good clothes for tonight. Two hours from now she would be having a big meatloaf dinner at her father's house, a couple of doors down from the hotel. Her father was going to have her meet some people—one was a famous man, a baseball player. She was nervous about it, wondering what her father had in mind.

It was quiet and, she had to admit, boring, waiting for him to be done with all his commitments, and she was ravenous, so she left her room determined to feed one hunger or another.

"Do you know where my father is?" she asked at the desk downstairs where an old man, Pete, was sitting and half dozing.

"At the club, I think."

"Do you know much about Josh Gibson? We're having him to dinner tonight."

Pete straightened his suit coat, forcing himself to alertness. "I heard about that."

"What should I know about him? You know, to talk?"

"Hm. Your father hopes to hire him when he's done in the Caribbean. Um." Pete felt for and found his wire-rimmed glasses in his pocket.

"He's getting over a tragedy, losing his wife. Of course you know he's a great ballplayer."

"Tell me about that. Things I should say."

"Great player. Hits home runs. People love him. Catcher."

"Thanks!" Did her father have Gibson in mind for her? And if so, would she like him?

She started down the street to the club where her father spent a lot of time, meeting with people, playing cards with people who had some stake in the city and the music scene.

She opened the door to the bar and walked in nervously. Four men turned from their stools to stare at her. "Back room," she managed to say as she kept moving.

Her father looked up, his face registering surprise, anger, worry—in that order. "Something wrong?"

"Just visiting."

He frowned and went back to his hand, telling the other card players, "This is my daughter. She just came to tell me everything is going well back home." He laughed, then they laughed too.

He was the boss—well, second boss. Lena moved in behind him. Teddy Horne was holding three aces. Wow, she knew that was good. Her eyebrows went up. "Hey," he said, "go maybe help Irene and Elsie."

"I asked earlier. They don't need anything."

"Okay, then rest."

"All right."

Her father was dressed for dinner in a good clean shirt and pants; his coat with a bright white pocket handkerchief hung on the back of his chair. "You're changing clothes, right?" he asked Lena.

"Yes," she said. She made up an excuse for her visit. "I forgot the names for tonight."

"Mrs. White," he said quietly. "And Mr. Gibson."

It was well before five, and people weren't due at his house until six. She still had time to kill. She kissed him on the forehead and made her way slowly, walking backward to the door.

Man, she was hungry. Irene's meatloaf was supposed to be great, and tonight it would be served up with mashed potatoes, green beans cooked in ham, and ripe sliced tomatoes. And Irene was making biscuits. Her maid, Elsie, did the table settings earlier in the day and kept

cleaning every dish and counter as she worked, telling Lena three times they didn't need her.

She quickly changed clothes, went downstairs, and asked Pete if he could find her something to eat, whereupon he took her into the hotel kitchen and showed her where some crackers were stashed in a box. From there she wandered outside, taking a few crackers with her, and settled herself on a creaky wicker rocker. She traced places where the wicker had split. Did her father notice? Everything in his mother's house in Brooklyn, where he'd grown up and where Lena had grown up too, had been of a high quality, perfectly maintained.

She sat, brushing cracker crumbs from her palm. She watched a man working in the yard. After a while a teenage boy brought the man a jug of water. They talked for a while, but she couldn't hear what they were saying. She felt . . . she felt it might be about her. The boy carried some pipes from one place to another. Minutes went by. She watched them talking, not talking, and for a while, the boy just standing around. She saw the man eventually wave the boy away. But the kid didn't leave, and a few minutes later he came up to her. "Excuse me. You're Mr. Horne's daughter?"

"Yes."

"You sing?"

"Sort of. Been told I do."

He grinned. "I've been hearing about you. Reading about you, too!"

"And you are?"

"Josiah Conner." He pointed to the yard. "He's my father. Same name."

"What's he doing?"

"Plumbing work for right now but he does just about everything." After a pause, he said, "When you have a hotel, lots of things need attention. My pop is good. Everybody says he's good."

"Is that what you're going to do?"

He shook his head, flushed, and said, "Maybe just for a while. I mean, when he needs me. Just while I'm in school." The boy was blushing so hard his eyes were red. "I plan to work in movies."

"Really? How? You know someone?"

"No. But I will."

"So you're an actor?"

She thought of the porters and waiters she'd seen in the movies and quickly imagined this kid Josiah in costume before he said, "Not acting. Unless it's the only way in. Someday I'm going to *direct* movies—as my work in life."

He had the most wonderful face—intelligent eyes that took in everything. He was nice-enough-looking, but it was a spirit of eagerness that defined him. For the first time since she landed at her father's place, she felt she was going to be okay.

"You want to sit down for a moment?"

He cast a glance toward his father, and then perched on the porch steps, more or less sitting at her feet.

"Well. That's fantastic. I never get tired of seeing movies."

"It's hard to break in. I know that. But man, if anyone ever should be *in* pictures, it's you."

A mother across the alley called her children to dinner in a shrill voice. Lena listened to the voice, thinking how awful it sounded. Her mother tried to *intone*.

"My mother is an actress," she said. "When she can get work. I think the problem is . . . she isn't very good."

Scrunching himself one inch to the left into a blade of shade, he said, "I think most people need some lessons and a little experience in front of a camera, and if they've got it, things click. I'd be one of those directors who takes care of every shot, every second. Like Frank Capra or George Cukor."

She leaned back, smiling. "Huh. You know some names."

"I see everything they make, those guys. Three times at least."

Three times!

A little silence settled over them, but it was pleasant.

Clunk, clunk, the sound of a pipe hitting a pipe. Josiah looked to his father, then back to her. He began to talk rapidly about Bert Williams and the need for all-Negro films.

Josiah interrupted himself, wincing apologetically, and went to the yard to say something to his father that, though she didn't hear, looked like, *If you need me, just call,* and his father said audibly, "Don't you bother that young lady." After murmuring something placating, Josiah came back. He explained, "I worry about him. I'm always checking on

him. My mother died a couple of years ago and it's just him and me now, making do."

"I'm an only child," Lena said. "I wish I had a sibling."

"I have an older sister, but she's married and not around. So I know the feeling."

Suddenly Lena was aware of the door opening behind her. She turned to see her father.

"Lena! I've been looking everywhere for you."

"You come back and visit," she told Josiah, who got up carefully and nodded politely to Lena's father. She said, "I have to go for now. I hope you tell me more about your plans."

Josiah answered, as if donning five more years, "I'd like to. Thank you. Good day, Mr. Horne."

Teddy said tersely, "Our guests are over at the house. I thought you'd greet them for me."

She rose and brushed at her skirt. "I didn't know you wanted me to."

"Lena, were you flirting with that boy?"

"No. Just talking. Why? I mean, sometimes people think I'm flirting when I'm not."

"Well, think twice. He's just a young boy. And he's not our class. What kind of things did you pick up from your mother and that show business life, eh?"

"You look nice tonight, Daddy." She tapped his breastbone. "I like your shirt." It was an ice blue, so light you almost didn't see the blue but then you did.

"You're going to meet some fine people tonight. These are the Negroes you should be inspired by, not schoolboys, and definitely not road musicians."

Even though he was scolding her, even though he didn't understand how much she needed a friend, she got an overwhelming feeling of love for her father. She wrapped her arms around him. "My daddy," she said, planting a kiss on his neck. "Taking care of me."

Josh Gibson was far from the first famous person she had met. There were Joe Louis, Duke Ellington, and lots of others, and it seemed they liked her a lot.

Gibson and Lena were seated next to each other at the dining table.

He had a most serious furrowed brow and he lifted his knife twice and put it back down, distracted.

She sat up straight in the not-so-comfortable ladderback dining chair, aware again that her grandmother's furniture had been nicer, friendlier to the body. Whatever her father chose, however, was quality. The rug was one with an oriental pattern and the china had been made in England—gold scalloped edges. The linens were all white, soft and unwrinkled because Irene's Elsie ironed things into softness.

Gibson traced the edge of the tablecloth. He had circles under his eyes and seemed tired out.

"Tell me about baseball," she said brightly. "I always wonder how catchers *stay* in that position. Is it difficult?"

Gibson laughed and drummed his thighs. "It isn't easy."

She looked at his thick hands as he tried to figure out what to do with them. "I mostly know musicians. But I know you hit home runs all the time," she said, "and that you're famous for it."

He sat back a bit, looking at her. "People love the big stuff even if that's not what the game requires at the moment." A dish of greens came his way. He put some on her plate first, then on his.

"People like the extraordinary," she said.

He passed the greens on, smiling at Irene and at Mrs. White.

"Mrs. White," her father asked, "do you have everything you need?"

Mrs. White looked at her full plate. "Oh, my goodness, yes."

"Now, our Mrs. White reads about baseball all the time. She even wrote a letter to the *Courier* once, about how good it is for young boys to get interested in baseball. She knows Mr. Gibson works with young kids, to give them something to try for."

"Thank you," Gibson said.

Definitely a polite man.

"Mrs. White makes the best peach pie you ever tasted in your whole life," her father told everyone.

"I'll make you and Irene one of those pies next week," Mrs. White said to him.

He gave her a huge smile. "I can't say no." Then he added, "*And* she is a championship quilter. She makes big bed-sized quilts with the tiniest pieces of cloth, don't you, Adele? So tiny. Such patience."

Looking toward Gibson, Mrs. White said, "I love to make things from scratch. Beautiful things, I guess. And I always loved fabric."

Lena had the uncharitable thought that Mrs. White's blue skirt and white blouse didn't show a love of fabric at all.

Lena said, "This blouse I'm wearing is silk. I thought it had a good shine."

"Silk is very hot in summer," Mrs. White said.

Lena had been sweating profusely. "Well, yes it is," she admitted, suddenly realizing the truth of it.

"This food is wonderful," Gibson said, kindness in his eyes toward everyone.

"Isn't it!" Lena added.

"How do you like our city?" Mrs. White asked her.

"I like it fine but I haven't seen a lot yet. I've been begging for a tour."

"Lena's just settled in for a long summer's nap and now we're ready. I'm going to take her tomorrow daytime. And a few clubs tomorrow night."

"I'm holding you to that promise, Daddy." She turned to Mrs. White. "I'm sure I will like everything."

"I'm sure you will," said the respectable woman, but in a tone Lena knew was not exactly complimentary. Especially when Josh Gibson laughed.

By the time the evening was over, she was trying to figure out what her father wanted of her and if she'd failed or succeeded. Gibson appeared to find her entertaining, she thought, as she and her father stood at the door, bidding their guests goodnight. Her father said, as soon as the two were out of earshot, that he hoped Josh Gibson and Mrs. White liked each other enough to begin seeing each other.

Lena was surprised. Mrs. White seemed too boring for Gibson in her opinion, but she managed not to say that. Instead she poked at her father and teased him. "Are you really going to give me a tour tomorrow?"

"Of course. Tomorrow it is."

A COUPLE DAYS later, Marie was walking up the street from Aziz's butcher store where she bought boiled ham for her family to tuck into her mother's pita bread as soon as it came out of the oven, still hot enough to melt butter. She saw the beautiful woman, walking toward her, humming, her eyes cast upward, looking at something or dreaming of something. The woman was a Negro, Marie understood that, but what interested her was how she knew that exactly. It wasn't the skin, she thought. Hers and Selma's were almost as dark with the suntans they got each summer. Eyes, nose, mouth, hairline, hair? She wanted to understand.

This time the beautiful woman wore a light purple dress with white buttons and white shoes. Marie moved this way and that in her excitement and ended up right in the woman's way, practically tripping her up. The look on her face she hoped said *Hello* but she ended up saying, "Sorry."

"Oh, it's you!" the woman said.

"Yes. That's . . . that's another gorgeous outfit."

"Bought it yesterday! Here in town. It's cotton. Silk gets too hot." She shifted her stance, one toe pointed out. "You look a little different."

Marie hoped that meant better. She was wearing her good black skirt and white blouse with a necklace and the thick gold bracelet that came from the old country and was really her mother's. "I have to go to a wedding," Marie explained. "My friend's sister." She tried to study the woman's face, still not sure which part of it said *Negro*.

"And your hair is smoother," the woman went on. "It took me a moment to place you."

"It's very curly. It gets frizzy. In summer it's—"

The woman laughed, hands on hips. "You don't have to explain that to me." She moved closer to examine the bangs.

A man was passing them, a white man wearing overalls and carrying a drill and moving fast, and he said cheerfully, "Now you be nice to your little sister. I can see she's gonna look just like you."

They watched him continue up the street and both of them figured out what he'd just assumed.

That was exactly what Marie had been thinking about. Exactly. She thought maybe her family might be Negro from the old country.

"On my way," said the beautiful woman. For a moment she looked awkward and puzzled.

When Lena got home from walking, she lay on top of the bedspread in her room and tried to cool off. Once again her father had been too busy to make time for her. She found herself longing for Josiah's company. But it was a Sunday afternoon and his father wasn't working. She'd been walking around the Hill so she didn't really need a tour so much as want one. She saw that it was an energetic place—that was to the good. The people were churchgoing; that was okay with her although she hadn't gone today. She tried not to miss New York, telling herself change was good for a person. And anyway, being on the road was mostly lousy.

She reminded herself about one of the nights in particular she and the band had had to sleep on the bus. It was the first time her mother didn't happen to be riding along with her, guarding her from men, and so the drummer sat beside her. First he curled his head onto her shoulder. She minded it, always angled to get a seat to herself when sleeping on the bus. But soon she began to feel his hot breath on her breast and the sensation was not at all unpleasant, and later when his head dropped toward her belly and she shifted, he curled up like a baby with his head in her lap. He was a little guy, kind of ugly, dark chocolate, and he had a wife and two babies somewhere in New York. Lena felt his breath on her thigh and the only problem was, sensations of pleasure notwithstanding, her imagination fired, so she didn't sleep well at all.

So when the bus, spewing fumes, finally slowed down outside Toledo at a little shack of a restaurant, she was sleep-deprived and ragged.

"We got to hope they have a bathroom," said Johnny, a small, tidy, mustachioed fellow; he was their organizer, so he sat up front. The bus heaved into the small lot, like a tired old man, panting. Johnny stood in a half crouch, then stretched himself up to a full standing position. "Should be okay," he said. This prediction came from the fact that they could see out the windows an old Negro man stooped on the pavement eating something off a napkin.

She wanted eggs and bacon. Something hearty. Even more, she wanted a bathroom where she could wash out her other blouse, the lilac one, and dry it in the wind of the bus so she could wear it that night. When she wore the lilac, the show was usually good.

At the counter stood a wizened small person, a flat board of a woman.

"Where is the bathroom, please?" Lena asked.

"Sorry. No Negroes allowed." The woman was looking next to Lena at Johnny, and then she shifted and looked at Lena. "But wait . . . no, not you either, not allowed."

Lena could taste her own hunger, the slightly roiling stomach prompted by the smell of something overcooked. Oil, grease, burnt hot dogs, burnt potatoes—whatever it was, the smell in the air was driving her crazy.

"We need food," Johnny said simply, no aggression. He'd had practice.

"No. See our sign." The woman pointed to a hand-printed sign on the wall and kept an arm outstretched toward the sign as if to say the sign was the enforcer. SERVING WHITES ONLY.

"What about that guy out front? He got food."

"He cleans here before we open."

Johnny's arms went out in easy supplication. "Right now you have no customers. We have money. We'll be in and out before you know it. Can you make us a classic breakfast?"

"I said no. You want me to call the police?"

Johnny's good spirits deflated. He turned back to the few who had straggled in behind him and he shook his head.

Lena stayed calm outwardly though inside she was shaking. She walked like royalty out the door to the back of the restaurant, where she stooped, head high, and relieved herself. She was wearing high heels. When she stood and walked to the bus, she saw the men in the band starting toward her spot, to add their urine to hers. The man eating the last of his payment breakfast for cleaning the shabby joint, had a hand over his face, saying something with that hand, like *I'm not here either*, or *Never saw you, so when the police come I can say I never did*, or maybe *This breakfast wasn't worth it, you're right*. Something.

It was better here at her father's place, she told herself. Only lonelier.

MARIE GOT HOME from the wedding at four. She changed clothes and worked in the kitchen, cleaning along with Selma while her mother made the bread.

Their father was asleep on the bench in the kitchen. It was his day off. Selma whispered that he'd snored through the afternoon, deeply asleep, but still his wife and daughters were afraid to talk or put a plate down too hard or let the screen door slam.

The kitchen must have hit a hundred degrees because of the bread—Ummah could only fit four or five in the oven at one time, and she had made twenty-five loaves. Marie had to slip outside to the garden in back for a little air.

Then it was time to wake Pap up to eat. Fran was in front, in the store. This was good because if anybody got Pap angry, it was Fran. Pap had often hit Freddie and also Fran, but *less often* Marie and *even less* Selma, as if, as the children came along, he got tired out, not necessarily less angry, just less able to raise his hand.

After they finished dinner, he went out to the backyard and sat with a cigar.

Selma and Marie washed and dried the dishes with the radio on. The music was wonderful—"Cheek to Cheek" and "Blue Moon" and "You're the Top" and "I Get a Kick Out of You."

Eventually their father came in from the yard. He shook his head and Marie turned the radio off. He liked Arabic music, couldn't see the charm in American tunes. Sometimes he went to the church basement to play the oud in a group of men. None of them were very skilled but they tried to keep the tradition going.

"Still tired, Pap?"

"Very tired."

After a while he wandered back outside.

Marie worried about her sister's looks. She offered to wash and style Selma's hair and finally Selma gave in.

Marie often wished she had ended up with light brown hair and blue eyes. Every once in a while somebody who was Lebanese *had* blue eyes and some of them had fair skin, too. People gave all kinds of reasons for the difference in looks, but one of them was about marauding Swedes in another century. Marie's family, all of them, had black hair and brown eyes.

Marie scrubbed at Selma's hair, which was even coarser than hers. Fran was the lucky one with smooth, wavy hair.

"Let's sit outside," Marie said. "I'll comb it and form curls."

"No. Pap's out there."

"He just took a walk down the alley."

Marie took the chair her father had been sitting on and Selma sat in front of her on a crate. She tapped Selma's shoulder and pointed next door. "Seen him lately?" she giggled, referring to Alberto, who was about twenty-five and so startlingly handsome that everyone talked about him and his looks. There it was again—beauty, the power of beauty. It was hard to actually catch a glimpse of Alberto because even though he was breathtaking, he was also, like Selma, afflicted with shyness.

Selma shook her head.

"I almost can't breathe when I see him."

"Good thing he's not out here, then."

A joke! Selma had made a joke.

As soon as their Pap came back into the yard, Selma went upstairs but Marie didn't want to go indoors or to bed. She wanted to smell the garden, pinch a leaf of spearmint and rub it on her wrists. She felt like a brave person trying to tame a mean dog. She shut the door quietly, moved the crate to beside her father.

She could hear neighborhood kids in the alley, playing—the sound of a ball, and she also heard shouts while some smaller kids tried to catch lightning bugs in jars.

"Pap, can I ask a question?"

He fetched a stubbed-out cigar from the ground beside him and struck a match and relit the cigar with several puffs.

"Your family was from Lebanon, right?"

"Kfarhazir."

"And Ummah?"

"Same. They matched us."

"But you always tell people we're Syrian."

"Same."

She'd heard people at the wedding saying the Lebanese were better than the Syrians. Fairer skin, smarter, gentler, and *cultured*. Then somebody else disagreed, saying, "We're peasants and farmers, all of us. Wherever we came from."

A picture of Marie's uncle in Lebanon, her father's brother, showed a man who looked, to Marie's mind, Negro. He had tight curly hair, dark skin.

"Was our family farmers?" Marie asked her father.

"Yes."

"And Ummah's too?"

He nodded.

The garden was flourishing. She supposed that was true, then. "Good farmers," she ventured.

He didn't appear to hear her. Finally he said, "Poor."

"I wonder if anybody ever thought some of them—like your brother—were Negro."

"Don't ever say that. We have enough trouble as it is, being what we are."

They sat quietly for a while, breathing in the neighborhood.

Tomorrow, laundry and sewing. She was making a rose-colored blouse, hand stitched from a dress a neighbor was throwing away. Once when she didn't have shoes and Pap bought her a pair of work boots, she cried for a day and then she cut the boots with a kitchen knife until they looked like shoes.

THREE DAYS AFTER the Josh Gibson dinner and the promise of a tour, Lena decided today was going to be the day. She waited for her father in her room, then on the back porch, then in the lobby, and finally she got some crackers and went out to the backyard hoping to see the Conners working but they weren't around. It was hot, so she came back in.

The old man at the desk, Pete, was asleep. After a while, Lena tapped him on the shoulder—scared the bejesus out of him—to ask when her father was due back.

"Don't know the answer to that. There's a game going down. Gus called and said your father had to be there."

"Busy."

"Always."

"I'll go down and find him."

She saw the old man hesitate and almost say, *Maybe you shouldn't*, but she went anyway.

When she got there she ran straight into her father's partner, Gus, who was so huge a man that he blocked her way with his big belly. "Have a seat. Let me get you a Coke."

"He promised me a tour," she said.

"Did he? I'm sure he will be out in a little while." Gus snapped his fingers and a waiter came running. "A Coca-Cola for her and a whiskey for me. You hungry?"

"Well, yes."

"How about get us two salami sandwiches," he called to the waiter, who had just moved off.

Lena knew Gus ordered her father around. They were partners but not exactly equal. Her father never said a word against Gus, always said instead that Gus was good to him. But Gus was in charge, maybe because he'd started the numbers-running business a good while before he let her father in.

Maybe some people snapped to attention around her father, but her father snapped to attention around Gus. He was about three hundred pounds of will. His hair was heavily pomaded and his suit, his very large pinstriped suit, wanted a trip to the dry cleaner. It was summer. She could smell a little sweat on Gus through the cologne or aftershave. She had never once detected anything but sweet smells on her father, who was fastidious.

"We have a good life, me and your dad," Gus said.

"I guess you do. If you're doing what you want."

"Always ask myself what I want to be doing. Answer is, taking in money. That's what I'm doing."

She could imagine her father's answer: *Going to sports events or playing poker or, for a change of pace, hitting the slot machines*. Gambling was in his blood. Even when she was a little girl, she could see he loved to use his manicured hands to crack and massage a stiff deck of cards. He loved games of any sort, period.

Her father was making a job out of doing what he wanted. He played cards just about every day, and went to ballgames and boxing matches almost as often.

"He calls your back room 'The Bucket of Blood,'" she told Gus. "What does that mean?"

Gus smiled. "We got us two Saint Louis boys playing cards back there today."

She was thinking about her need to do what *she wanted to do*, needed to do. She had to tell her father about the call from Sissle.

Lena drank her drink and ate her very good sandwich until she

sensed Gus had relaxed his watchdog hold on her. Then, calling out a thank you, she slipped off the stool and went straight to the back room before Gus could get his big body in the way to stop her.

The two Saint Louis boys looked cocky—fedoras tipped back, chairs rocked back on their hind legs, jackets off. Both were chubby, their faces waxed with sweat.

Teddy saw her but kept his attention on his cards. The card players, meanwhile, saw Lena and their tipped-back chairs came forward, punctuating the silence with the sound of wood on wood.

"I'm his daughter," she said. "Go on, play your game. I don't mean to get in the way."

Her father played the next hand, and being a pro, he did what he did beautifully, watchably—easy and fluid in all his movements, but then he had to slide some bills over to one of the men, and he said, "That's it for me. I'm folding."

"No."

"Sorry. Date with my daughter. You guys need baseball tickets?"

"Good tickets?"

"Sure thing. The Crawfords."

"Did I hear you're an owner?"

Her father didn't answer, just made a face that meant *sort of yes*. Best Lena could figure, the answer was . . . *sort of*, compliments of Gus.

"Two good seats?" the second man asked.

Teddy said, "Of course."

"We would have liked to see Gibson."

"He'll be back. Mark my words."

The first man squinted at him. "How much?"

"Seats are on me."

Teddy told his waiter, "One more round for the visitors." And he told the visitors from Saint Louis, who had wiped him out, "My treat, too," he said, "the beer and the rye."

"Horne," they said when he got up to join his daughter. "We sure are happy to have met you. You had a big name in New York for a while, right?"

"Yes. My mother was pretty famous. She was very active in politics."

"No, it was you we heard about, in connection with gambling."

"Did a bit of that in the city, yes. Gotta go. Enjoy the game."

Out front he told Gus to give the Saint Louis guys ballgame tickets. "They weren't so dumb after all," he said.

"Sorry about that."

"You going to the game with me later?"

"Yeah, let's have a steak before we go. I'm buying."

"I thought you were going on about craving hot dogs."

"Steak first. I can always eat again at the ballpark," Gus laughed. "But you'd better give this beauty her tour. She's mighty restless."

Lena and her father left the club. She was worried he wouldn't recover from his bad day at the card table. She knew he joked about wanting to win 75 percent of the time with the 25 percent being just to keep it interesting. Same with baseball. He wanted an impossible .750 season.

He walked her out to the alley behind Gus's bar and used a key on a garage. There were few garages in the neighborhood, but he had apparently found one of them. Inside was a gleaming car, a Cadillac, brand-new, yellow, with very white wheels.

"What a beautiful car! It's yours?"

"Who else's would it be?"

"I thought maybe Gus's."

"No, it's mine. I do love it. Get in. Feel those seats."

It was all luxury, everything about it—leather seats, the clean dashboard, even its melodic hum.

Her father backed out of the garage and drove the Caddy with aplomb, leaning back, arm out the window.

"You look perfect in this, Daddy. Just simply elegant."

"You don't look so bad yourself."

There, he was cheerful again.

Some folks stopped walking to look at the Cadillac and several waved. Her father was well known here, that was clear.

"So your trunks haven't arrived," he said carefully. He cast her a quick glance to the side.

"I know." She took a deep breath and straightened her dress. "I held them up a little."

"I don't like what I'm hearing." He shook his head and sighed disappointment.

"I might need them in New York. Just for a bit."

"You're going back." Silence. "You were crying half the times I talked to you."

"Not half. Just Joe Louis." She had sobbed on the phone when Joe Louis lost the big fight. He was being beaten up and people were cheering. She and half of America listened on the radio that night. "It was like he stood for us and then he lost. He was us," she told her father.

Recovering his poise, her father said, "Sports. These things happen in sports. Don't be dramatic. That wasn't a good life for you on the road."

"It was *a* life. It had *some* good things. You loved it when I told you I palled around with Ellington and Cab and Kaye Thomson and Henderson."

The car hummed along. Her father had a flat hand on the steering wheel. Did he nod slightly?

"So it wasn't *nothing*," she continued. "People talk about me, they write about me. Just give me a little time to want the new me. I mean, I do want it. I just need a little time."

Her father said, "I can introduce you to lots of people, lots, everyone you just mentioned, easy, and more if that's what you want—hell, they all come through town. I know everyone."

He pulled over, looked toward a shop advertising cold drinks. "Hot as anything, isn't it? Well. Here's the thing. There's a band coming in in a couple of weeks. George Olsen. They called me asking could they play some music with you—have you sing with them. I said you weren't interested anymore—"

"I knew you would say that."

"But, you see, they were insistent." He smiled, nodding toward the little shop. Offhandedly, opening the driver's-side door, he said, "I have to keep them happy because, well, they'll stay at the hotel. It's good for my business if they feel treated well. Respected." And when he came to open her door, he offered what temptations he could to keep her. "I said maybe you could sing a little at the hotel with them. Messing around. After hours. Or at the club."

Her spirits quickened. "When?"

"Two weeks from now."

The way her heart leapt, she knew her decision. George Olsen, then back to Sissle and the road after.

"And we'll hit the Grill tonight," her father said. "We'll hear some jazz."

She stood from the car. The sun was high in the sky, the air was moist, things were growing, growing everywhere, even two plants outside the shop where they would get cold drinks. Her father was coming around.

As soon as she got home, she called Sissle back. "I'll come," she said. "September fifteenth, right?"

He said, "We have eleven bookings. It's looking good. People want to see you. And . . . I got you a coach."

"A coach?"

"Don't worry. You'll like him."

She went out to the porch, taking with her the book people were talking about; she had started it last night and ended up reading almost two hundred pages before falling asleep, then another hundred in the morning before her tour of the Hill. She leaned back in the creaky chair, reading, fanning herself.

Perhaps she'd go to a movie every afternoon until the Olsen band got in.

Yesterday she'd gone to see *Anthony Adverse*—all romance and fancy clothing. Josiah had come by and they'd talked again, even though she was nervous her father would see her and bother her about it.

They talked about every kind of thing. He told her how much his father had loved his mother and how devastated they both were when she died. He wanted to know about Lena's mother.

"That's a bad subject," she said. "I try to love her but it's hard."

"She's mean to you?"

"Well, sometimes. Pushy sometimes. And she got married again. I don't like him. At all."

"Ugh. That would be awful."

And after a silence in which she felt how sympathetic he was, she told him things she didn't much talk about—how her mother had once dumped her with strangers in the South, how scared she had been being with people she didn't know, going to a bad school, and all because her mother wanted some acting job.

"Ambitious," Josiah said thoughtfully, "and couldn't make it all work out."

"You understand things," she said.

"Sometimes," he laughed. He had talked about school. Many of his friends had quit or gone to Connelley Technical but he told her he was going back to high school.

She approved of that.

She talked through her dilemma about going back on the road, which if she did would disappoint her father. It was nice, having a person to talk to. A person who listened.

She hoped Josiah would come by today.

Late in the afternoon, as if wishing had made it so, Josiah and his father came back to do some work. Today they were painting the gate.

She tried to concentrate on her book, but when she looked up, she saw the father standing, rubbing his head as if to rub a thought in, and then when he walked down the alley,Josiah did a few quick swipes of the fence and came to her.

"Where's your father going?"

"To get a different brush. And lunch. Hmmm. What movie will you go to today?" he teased.

She laughed. "I *am* thinking of going."

She was the lesser student of movies. Josiah often took notes—he was trying to teach himself the rhythm of fadeouts and the use of calendars and such on screen.

"Did you make a decision?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm leaving in a few weeks. It won't be forever." They went silent for a few seconds. "You want a Coca-Cola?"

"I don't have any money today."

"No, I meant my father has some. I'm thirsty. I'll get you one."

She went into the hotel and asked Pete to fetch her two cold Coca-Colas. She hummed Cole Porter music and danced around the kitchen, so glad Josiah had come to see her. After all, she could only read so much of *Gone with the Wind* without wanting to throw something.

She carried the bottles of Coca-Cola outside. Josiah, who was sitting on the porch steps, stood to receive his. He tipped a head toward her copy of *Gone with the Wind*. "They're going to make a movie of that book. People are talking about how to cast it."

She turned the book over, thinking about how long it was, how large a project it would be. "Sit," she said. "Get comfortable."

He looked happy as he shifted the Coke from one hand to the other and scrunched down and planted himself on the steps again. He said, "When I'm a director, I'll put you in my movies. You're already cast."

"You are a brave soul."

"You have the actress look."

"Whatever that is."

"Liking being looked at."

"After this fall, I'm supposed to get out of show business and settle down." She stopped herself, revised. "I mean, I *want* to settle down. I just want one last . . . chance to perform."

"And do what then?"

"Regular life."

"I can't picture that. Not for you. I meant it about movies. I think you'd be good. Like Fredi Washington? In that movie where her mother was a maid. You should have roles like that."

"That's reaching pretty high."

"I wish I could write about you. Your story."

"Ha. Not much of one."

They sipped at their Cokes. He said, abruptly and out of the blue, "Did you see *The Emperor Jones*?"

"The movie and the play. I saw both. I think I was six."

"Wasn't he . . . ?"

"He was."

Somebody was sawing somewhere nearby. It reminded her of snoring that wouldn't stop.

She thought he looked at her too fondly. She sighed. "So I'm going to get married. Settle down."

His head jerked up. "Oh, I . . . I didn't know. Who are you marrying?"

"I don't have a clue yet. My father says this is the town to do it in."

Josiah drank the last of his Coca-Cola and looked out to the yard, where his father was back and darting angry glances at him. "I should help him."

"You should."

"I don't care what you think now. When I make the kind of movies I want to make, I'm going to call you wherever you are and offer you roles you won't be able to turn down."

He leapt off the porch steps and went to his father.

Marie was minding the family grocery store. Fran had gotten called back in to work at the high school. The best office workers got summer preparatory work—counting textbooks, things like that, and dealing with the summer school students who had to do courses over. Fran's teachers had wanted her to go to business school or college because she was so smart, but there wasn't money for more school. She was lucky she got to finish high school.

Fran's limp went back to the time she was a girl of eleven and her father in his anger threw her down the steps and the fall broke her leg. She thought it just hurt like crazy, so she wrapped it up tight for a long time. Finally it was clear it had gone back together all the wrong way. But she moved quickly anyway, determinedly cheerful.

Marie thought Fran smiled too much and tried too hard to make people like her. She feared Fran might have a bad reputation. Her mother always said so, called her *sharmuta*, which was the swear word that meant a bad woman.

Lots of the Lebanese fathers were kind to their kids, but Marie's family got the bad luck of one they had to be afraid of.

The screen door opened and Fran pushed into the store with her lopsided walk. She put a magazine down in front of Marie, exclaiming, "I brought you a present," and then, catching her breath, said, "One of the summer school girls snuck it in. Anyway, we confiscated it and it was just sitting in the office so I took it, kind of put it under my blouse."

The magazine was called *Movie Stories*. It said on the cover, *You can read the stories of all the best movies.*

"Read them?" Marie frowned.

"It's a good magazine," Fran said, picking it up briefly to fan herself. "You can be prepared when you go to a movie, or *if* you go and don't understand something, you come home and read about the script. It's very informative."

Marie opened the magazine to peek at its contents.

Fran crossed to the fruit stand to get an orange. "You want me to watch the store?"

"Now?"

"Yeah. I'll take a turn. You could go to a movie today."

"But Ummah won't like it."

"Here's how you can do it. I heard the people who run the candy store on Fifth are looking to hire. I'll say you went to apply."

Marie ran for her sweater and her little pocketbook. The movie theater showing *Mr. Deeds* was advertised as scientifically air-cooled. She hurried down the steps and paused. "You really don't mind?"

Fran said, "Go on, pretty one."

The guilt over the fact that Fran sometimes embarrassed her plagued Marie as she made her way downtown. She wished Fran would figure out how to become more respectable.

Almost at the candy shop, only two blocks away, she saw a familiar silhouette ahead. She quickened her pace. This time the beautiful woman wore a stark white blouse and a pink skirt that moved side to side with each step. And white high heels. So elegant!

Marie caught up, breathless. "Hello! Hot day, isn't it?"

The woman turned but continued walking. "Oh. You must be following me!"

"No. Going to see about a job. Then the movies. I just saw you ahead." They passed one store after another, dodging other pedestrians. The sidewalks were crowded and there were a good many cars on the street, too, horns tooting. "That is a beautiful skirt."

They had to stop at a street corner. "What's that you're squashing in your hand? Reading about movies?"

Marie displayed the magazine. "It's something different. It's about the scripts."

"I know somebody who would love that. He probably knows about it. Let me look."

Marie handed it over. The woman looked for a minute and handed it back. She said, "I had a favorite skirt I stupidly wore going down to my father's basement and I ripped a hole in it right here." She touched her right thigh. "I ruined it."

"How big is the hole? Maybe it can be fixed."

"How?"

"Take an equal panel out of the other side. If there's enough cloth."

"I'm not good at that."

"I am. I would look at it for you."

"Really?"

"I remake clothes all the time."

"Come to the Belmont Hotel. After lunch? Tomorrow?"

"Yes. Here's where I'm going." They were almost right smack in front of the candy shop.

Suddenly a man and his wife stopped right in their path, arms outstretched so Lena and Marie couldn't move on if they wanted to. The man cried, "Lena Horne! I heard you were in town. Your daddy says you're going to come live here."

"I don't know," the beautiful woman answered, then hurried to say, "I mean, yes, I am."

"You're going to keep singing, though?"

She waved the question aside. "Oh, I don't know. Yes."

Marie felt like she was watching a movie, trying to pick up on every line. She could tell Lena worried she would be a pest, so she said a quick, "Have to go," and opened the door to the shop. Before she was fully inside she heard the man mention a review in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, about a recording. So the beautiful woman *was* famous.

A woman emerged from the back of the shop.

Marie said, "May I see the manager?"

The woman behind the counter said warily, "I'm the owner. I'm Mrs. Kostopoulis. What is it?"

"I came to see about the job," she said.

The woman was tall and narrow with a high rooster's comb of black hair. "Are you Greek?"

"No."

"What are you? You look Greek."

"Syrian. Or rather Lebanese." People guessed every which thing. Italian, Hungarian, French.

"Can you add? Subtract? Make change?"

Marie looked to see if the group was still on the street talking, but they had moved on. "I do it all the time in our store. We have a grocery store."

"And you're pretty," Mrs. Kostopoulis observed. "Come back tomorrow. My husband will be here. I'll have him here to question you. Four o'clock."

"Oh. Yes. All right. I'll come tomorrow." Four o'clock meant she could still go look at the ruined skirt at one.

Just as Marie turned for the door, she heard, "Would you like to taste the chocolates?"

"Yes!"

"Choose."

Marie pointed to two pieces.

Mrs. Kostopoulis handed over the two pieces of candy in a piece of crisp paper.

Marie thanked her, thinking they were gifts.

"Twelve cents, please."

Stupid. She was stupid, she told herself. She paid with a nickel and seven pennies and had barely enough left to get into *Mr. Deed Goes to Town*.

Gary Cooper and Jean Arthur.

In this film, Longfellow Deeds, played by Cooper, had inherited twenty million dollars. Who could even imagine such an amount?

Marie carefully nipped bites of the two pieces of chocolate creams she'd gotten from the shop. One piece was filled with more chocolate and the other was filled with mint.

Lena had her skirt on the chair next to her and ready in case the girl she had run into the day before came by. She fully expected to hear it could not be fixed. And that would be that. Since she wasn't that used to talking to white people, she would be relieved.

Honestly, the Hill was a small town. She kept running into the same people—not just this kid, but others, too, so that now people on the streets waved to her when she passed. The Hill was called a neighborhood, but it was a city in miniature. Within a few blocks you could buy anything you needed or wanted—a washing machine, a lamp, a blouse, a skewer of lamb.

She had extracted from her father a little history. This tower of Babel with lots of poor people, a good number of dilapidated houses, a multitude of accents, used to be where the rich white people lived. Then the immigrants came. Then the Negroes.

If she was going to give up her career, it was as good a place to live as any. The problem was replacing her career with something she could bear.

The day was hot, drowsy.

Pete came out back to tell her she had a guest.

"A white girl?"

"Yes."

"Could you ask her to come out here?"

She put aside her novel on a small wicker table and stood, then scooped up the skirt from the other chair.

The girl came out. She was wearing her black skirt again, and a plain cream-colored blouse.

"You're all dressed up."

"I have to be interviewed about that job."

"Oh, good, you want it, then?"

"I think so. All the jobs help."

"I don't know your name."

"Marie. Marie David."

"Would you sit for a moment?" Lena took her own seat again. "Here's the skirt. I think it might be hopeless." She watched Marie study it, measuring something fingernail to knuckle, folding fabric this way and that.

"I can do it so you can wear it again."

"Huh. Well, it's worth a try. How much?"

The girl was clearly taken by surprise. "I didn't think about that. I was just going to do it."

"You should always be paid. So long as the work is decent."

"Fifty cents?"

Lena wagged her head. "A dollar?"

Marie nodded.

"Would you like something to drink? I have iced tea."

"Okay."

Lena went inside to the kitchen she now used fairly often. She poured two glasses of iced tea and came outside just as Josiah, without his father, bounded into the yard.

"Josiah!" Marie said, and he said, "Marie!"

Lena felt a small disappointment. "Oh. You know each other?"

"From school," Josiah said. "And from her store. I'm going back to school, but she quit." He leveled an accusing look at Marie.

Lena handed one iced tea to Josiah, who seemed surprised and also grateful to get it, and the other to Marie. She said, "I'm going back inside for one more." She stopped long enough to ask Marie, "Why did you quit?"

"Oh, just to work. To help the family."

Lena said, "I'll be right back." Once more she stopped herself, to tell

Josiah, "She's the one who had the movie magazine I was telling you about this morning." She heard him say, "So you do really love the movies if you're reading about the scripts!"

Again a pang of jealousy. Would he now not need to talk to her? Would she lose her time with him? When she came back, Marie was saying, "I saw *Mr. Deeds* last night."

"What did you think?"

"I liked it. I wonder why so many scripts have rich people in them, though. The writers really like to write about people with money."

Josiah nodded and bit his lip, thinking. "It's what people like to see."

"But Deeds had millions."

"I know. I saw it."

Lena said, "He sees everything. I saw it too, a couple of days ago. Last night I went to *Anything Goes*. The songs are still in my head. Even when I'm reading."

Josiah looked at her copy of *Gone with the Wind*, eyeing the thick side and the thin side around her bookmark. "You're almost done!"

"Almost. Still makes me mad. Those southerners!"

"My mother was from North Carolina and she was wonderful."

"White southerners."

"That book is going to be some huge movie," Josiah told Marie. "Did you read it?"

"No."

Lena said, "Well, I'm taking this back to the library tomorrow or the next day. You could swoop and get it before somebody else does." Lena thought suddenly from the look on Marie's face that she probably didn't read, didn't go to the library.

"You could try," Josiah said.

"I might try," Marie said quietly. "Maybe. I'm almost always working."

"Are you sure you have time to do my skirt?"

"Mornings, I'll do it. I can fit it in. I should go."

The girl was nervous, uncomfortable, and Lena was too. But Josiah appeared to be enjoying the three-way conversation. She felt like a high schooler again, with friends and all the complications that came with them.

"Can you remember the songs from the movie?" Josiah asked.

"I knew them before."

"Of course," he said. "You would!"

She started to sing the crazy lyrics already seared into her brain. The rhymes were amazing—Coliseum and museum! But just as she got going, the faces of the other two told her to look behind her.

"Hello," her father said. "Hello, all. It's a little party."

"Hello, sir."

"Where's your father?"

"He had an emergency today. A bust. He's coming back later."

"Good."

Lena said, "Daddy, this is Marie David, a young woman who sews."

"Ah. Yes, nice to meet you." He stretched as if he had just wakened from sleep and went back inside.

Josiah said, "I'll come back when my pop is working."

Marie said, "I'm leaving. But could I ask . . . I heard the man on the street yesterday say you made a recording. Is that true?"

Lena said, "It's in the shops. My father's business partner apparently called the radio stations about playing it more often. I haven't heard it on the radio yet. I keep missing it."

"I'll listen for it," Marie said.

Lena began reading after they left, waiting out her father, who had scared them off. He appeared, finally.

"Who was that girl?"

"She seems nice enough. Her family owns a grocery store."

"You should talk to Irene. She can get you a seamstress. I can see you're lonely here. You haven't found your crowd."

"I know."

"And the boy . . . as I said, don't lead him on. Sure he wants to climb up, but you have better things to do."

After that day, Teddy instructed Irene to take Lena shopping and to have a party with people she knew from a charitable organization at the church. He took her to the clubs to hear music three times in the next week and let her go three other times with some of Irene's acquaintances. She sang in her room at the hotel, practicing. She added "You're the Top" to the songs she knew. The Olsen band came in, thrilled to be

working with her, and that made her happy. Her father, who didn't want her to want a career, sat listening to the Olsen band at a front table of the club with his chin in his hands, looking proud.

Marie had worked on Lena's bright yellow skirt for three days. The cotton was of a very fine quality, she could see that. Marie cut carefully into the section with the tear and cut just as carefully into a balancing section that would hit the left leg. She had to make two fine seams and make them look purposeful. Since she had no sewing machine, she did this project, as she did everything, by hand, and though she was careful, she was also fast. When she thought the skirt looked good, she took it back to the Belmont. She understood that Lena's father had wanted to sit outdoors that day and hadn't much liked the company his daughter was keeping. She understood his point of view, but she felt angry anyway, knowing she was considered unworthy. The reasons were—she could tick them off—she had few changes of clothing, the clothing she had was inexpensive, she didn't read fast, and around people who had money she got tongue-tied. Somehow he knew these things about her.

Sewing and counting, math of all sorts, were her strengths.

When she told Lena on the day she returned the skirt that she would be happy to take on more work, mending or remaking clothing, Lena thanked her but said her father and his wife wanted her to use the tailor and seamstress they used for such jobs.

She felt the dismissal in her gut. She received the dollar and Lena's compliment about how the yellow skirt was now saved and usable again. Her face got hot with embarrassment that she had wanted to be friends with a famous person when she had nothing but sewing skills to offer.

The candy shop owners, however, liked her for her looks and her quickness making change, so she'd gotten the job.

One afternoon Lena, after the Olsen band came and went and just before she was going to meet Sissle's coach, settled on the old wicker chair to read. She saw a movement, looked up, and found Josiah passing

in the alley, but just passing, not coming in. It had just started to sprinkle rain. The air had been wet, threatening rain all day.

She just wanted to see him, that's all she knew. He'd stayed away except for a couple of times he worked with his father, but they only talked very briefly on those days in little snippets, about what she was singing, what she was reading, and which movies he had seen.

She waved him in. Her father was out of town.

Oh, what a smile.

"Do you have time to talk? Sit."

He looked worried but took his usual spot on the steps before she could invite him to sit in the other wicker chair.

Josiah had several books in a paper bag, which was speckled with rain.

"May I?" He moved the bag further onto the porch.

She had always wanted a sibling, she told herself, a sister, a brother, either would do, someone to argue with, tease.

Josiah had a particularly serious look on his face. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"I know you've been in the *Courier* a lot, but it's an ad from over a year ago."

"Oh, yes. I know what you mean."

"I clipped the picture way back when I saw it."

She hated that picture. The newspaper had printed a cutout of her head, but the cutout ended at the chin, no neck. It looked as if she'd been decapitated, and all the while there she was, smiling about it.

"In the quote, you said everybody could benefit from Dr. Fred Palmer's skin lightener. My sister was visiting once and she said she wondered if you used it. This is my chance to ask."

There were to be no secrets from Josiah. The rain had started up again. Laughing, she said, "You'd better come on in. Did your books get wet?"

"No, they're okay."

They entered the hotel kitchen. "I made my father stock a few things. He's out of town. Would you like cookies and tea?"

"Yes!"

"I thought so. I'm not proud about that ad. It's just how things are done—it's a way to get known." She went about heating water in the kettle. The kitchen had two stoves, cast-iron, both yellow and green, like twins. The room also held both a small round table with two chairs and a larger rectangular table where her father gave orders to a cook when they absolutely had to come up with food for residents, which was rare because people who stayed at the Belmont ate in the neighborhood restaurants, a pattern that made her father popular with other business owners.

They chose the smaller of the two tables.

Josiah removed his books from the paper bag. His worn brown pants and lighter brown shirt were dotted with rain.

She saw that Josiah was using the *Courier* ad about the skin lightener as a bookmark. She couldn't be completely sorry for it, could she? The ad had helped to make her a bit of a celebrity.

While she waited for the kettle to whistle, she took the ad out of his book and looked at the headline and her endorsement.

READ WHAT LENA HORNE SAYS

> *Lena Horne of the New York stage is one of the most beautiful, talented, and famous actresses of today. Miss Horne's wonderful successes have made her name known in thousands of homes. Her startling beauty holds her audiences entranced. She is one of many prominent theatrical personages who endorse Dr. Fred Palmer Skin Beautifiers.*

"They called you an actress," Josiah said.

"Oh, they just say that. They don't try to be accurate."

"*Did* you ever use the skin paste?"

She shook her head. "Never did." She went to a cupboard and came back with a plate and a package of cookies as she digested his criticism.

His gray eyes flickered and picked up light.

"You are just like having a little brother. Making me answer to you. Scamp!" She slid the clipping back to him and pulled at the cellophane on the package of cookies.

He placed the clipping back in the book, which he had kept open,

and when she looked, he lifted the book to show her. "Miss Hurston? Her essays about Negroes? You probably know them."

She perched on the seat across from him at the round table, waiting for the water to boil. "I should. I know I should. My grandmother used to talk about her."

"It's pretty interesting."

The kettle finally whistled and she got up.

"It helps me think about movies in a way. She says the Negro is naturally dramatic . . . we like action . . . we're physical and visual; she says we like metaphors."

"You must have a decent school, talking metaphors," she teased while pouring water into the teapot. Her Brooklyn school had been very strong in language and literature. "So, metaphors, huh?"

"She also says we make up words. We like to say *ain't* because it's softer than *aren't*. That shows—well, she thinks it shows—creativity. Do you think that's true?"

"You shouldn't say *ain't* no matter what. It's not correct. This tea needs to steep. Don't pour it yet." She put the teapot and two cups on the table.

"It's nice being in here."

"You're my little brother."

His face betrayed a momentary disappointment, but he went on, "You want to look? She says we like angularity and asymmetry. I think that's true. I do."

"I'll maybe take a peek." She put the cookies on a plate and moved the plate toward him. The rain started to beat at the windows. "Don't go home in this. You'll be soaked." He didn't protest. "We can have a study hall."

They drank tea for a while and ate Fig Newtons. Josiah ate a good half dozen of them. He opened one of the books from his bag and when he did she took her peek at the Hurston book. The rain coming down made a wonderful rhythmic sound because it had not only a steady beat but also an occasional accent that came when it gathered for a splash at one leaky downspout. She heard it all as . . . music.

She skimmed the book Josiah was enchanted by, reading a little bit about African heritages like trickery and folklore and friendship with

the devil. It all seemed to her to be more about poor Negroes or southern Negroes than about her. Was she wrong? Was there a "we?" The theories didn't sound like her grandmother, who was stiff and political and precisely verbal—and awfully symmetrical, come to think of it.

She looked up. Josiah was studying her.

"My sister wanted to change her skin to lighter. She said if you used it, she would buy it."

Lena held back her hair, which felt like rough cotton today from all the humidity. "Truly, I came into the world this way, lighter-skinned than some."

He nodded slightly. "You can borrow the book. I've read it. I have time on my card."

"Go on, have another couple of cookies."

When he left, Lena wandered the hotel, itchy for more talk. There was nobody around today, so she just walked the hallways. When she finally came back to the kitchen to slog away at Zora Neale Hurston, she saw that Josiah had left the *Courier* ad as a bookmark.

> *"I cannot praise Dr. Fred Palmer's Skin Whitener Ointment enough. I am always particular about my complexion, especially in the summer, because every actress must always look her best. Naturally I depend on Dr. Fred Palmer's Skin Whitener Ointment because of its extra-strength action and lovely results. I recommend it to all my friends." (Signed) Lena Horne, New York City.*

So she was a liar. She had that part of her heritage down.

She was getting too close to Josiah. In a little while she would be on her way back to New York and he could forget about her.

HAVING PASSED INSPECTION with the Greek husband of the woman who had first interviewed her, Marie was firmly ensconced in the candy shop. She was due downtown three to nine every day except Sunday. Her pay and the four chocolates she was allowed per day whenever she worked were the benefits. She dressed at 11:30 for the day and worked the grocery store until almost three and then hurried to the candy shop

in time for her shift. The hours she worked were the ones with customers going to and coming from the movies. They bought boxes of assorted candies to take into the theaters or to take home.

At first she was terrified, but when she figured out that most of the customers were moviegoers, she began to ask them about what they were seeing. It became clear to her that she liked meeting people.

She said to a young romantic couple, "I hope you enjoy the movie."

"As much of it as we see," the man joked, and the woman pretended to hit his arm. "But it's a good one, I hear. *The Petrified Forest*. Scary."

They waved at her as they left. She promised herself she would see that one.

"You're doing very well!" Mrs. Kostopoulis said one day when she came to check on things. "Business is good."

Mrs. K tended to wear stiff-looking but good-quality dresses and everything she added was clearly thought out—earrings, scarf, etc. The stiffness extended to her hair, which looked molded, every day exactly the same.

One day, only three weeks into the job, the doorbell sounded and Marie looked up from straightening the candy in the cases to find Mrs. K., stiff hair and all, at a time she didn't usually come in. The owner went into the back room for a moment and came out, saying, "I've watched you. You're quick at math and making change. My husband is opening another shop and he wants me *there*. If I do that, I can't come back to close up here. Or work on the accounts. I'm wondering if you think you could do the books after closing, clean the shop, list the orders, and close up."

So she wasn't being fired. The opposite. Marie squared her shoulders. "I think so."

"Could we try it? Starting next week? That would extend your hours to, say, ten thirty. Is that all right?"

"Yes."

"All right, let me show you." Then Marie's boss began to explain the columns that specified what had been sold, where they were running low, what should go on the order sheet. She showed Marie the cleaning materials, which hadn't been hidden at all, since they were in the small room in back with a toilet and a tiny table.

With great solemnity, Mrs. K handed over a key to the front door.

"Do you get hungry? The hours you're here."

"I eat before I come. My mother makes me bring a sandwich. I keep it in back. Just so you know, I only eat when there are no customers."

"Very wise, very wise."

The next week, it was definitely autumn, chilly, the smell of dry leaves and cold in the air. Mrs. K kept popping back in the afternoons, checking the books, over and over. It was clear she was amazed that the money kept coming in, every piece of chocolate was accounted for, and the pretty skinny thing she'd hired was apparently honest as the day was long.