

1

Even the smell of chalk dust and old blackboards was welcome to her. All schools smelled alike, all had the same creaky stairs and echoing corridors. So the sounds and odors of the building brought to mind her own graduation when she sat on the platform with the class officers, and after they finished their speeches, she played the minuet and an *étude* by Chopin. Played both very badly, she remembered; not so much because she had stage fright—she hit the right notes—but the music sounded as if she were copying letters on a typewriter. Still, most of them would never have known the difference if she had been playing with mittens on. Except her mother.

Room 201, she read, second floor. Elderly men at the doorway were squeezing the last puffs from their cigarettes as Joyce Allen slipped past them into a hall grimly illuminated by bluish globes that hung chained from the ceiling. Blackout curtains covered the windows. The instructor at his desk stood leafing through the pages of a book, the students were scattered sparsely among the chairs. Night classes must be very different, Joyce saw, no longer entirely glad that she had agreed to come. But she was accustomed

to sitting alone, and busied herself taking her fountain pen from her handbag and opening her notebook. In the row directly ahead, which had been empty, a colored woman was preparing herself to sit down, and as she turned, caught Joyce's eye. They exchanged nods and smiles.

The instructor had approached the blackboard. WELDING EQUIPMENT, he spelled in sprawly capitals. With book in hand, he proceeded to trace out the lines of diagrams, pressing the chalk till it squealed on the down strokes. No, he had made a mistake, he rubbed out his work and began again. If it were only the copying and learning, Joyce told herself, which always had come so easy for her, she would have nothing to fear. But she had seen the welders swinging from their ropes alongside the hulls and their torches sparkling like blue stars. That was something she had not taken into account at the time—the Sergeant had been so insistent. She had remembered only that she had been a good student in high school, thinking all the while of the graduation and her mother waiting by the door of the auditorium like a thin, beady-eyed bird, perched there amid that out-rushing throng of white faces. At least she could write that she was going to school again.

But of course her mother who had been a teacher herself long since in New Orleans, would not be at all pleased to hear that she was taking a night class in welding. Joyce laughed silently as she copied the diagrams. The instructor had circled the room, filling one board after another with his charts and lists of names; and the students shifted uneasily in their creaky chairs, sneezed, blew their noses, writing furiously till the buzzer sounded for the end of the first hour.

“Go take a smoke,” said the instructor, and this was the only word he had spoken all evening.

In the corridor, Joyce found the other colored woman at her side. They were presently joined there by a tall, dark-

skinned man dressed in a black suit, who, unlike most of the other men students, was wearing a shirt with a necktie. Shaking their hands, he at once introduced himself as a minister, Reverend Beezely. The woman had brought out a cigarette and the Reverend gallantly struck a light but declined to smoke himself. So they stood rather close together in the crowded corridor, the woman telling them she had come all the way from Memphis, Tennessee to work in the shipyards. They discussed which of the various yards were best to try to get into; and when Joyce mentioned that she was working on the cleanup gang in the new San Martin yard, Reverend Beezely inquired if it were not the Sergeant there who had sent her.

“The Sergeant?” she repeated, thinking, how does he come to know the Sergeant? “Yes he did,” she told him. “Do you work at San Martin yourself?”

“No, not yet, but I hope to,” he said. She noticed that he spoke with a precise, slightly foreign-sounding voice. “Oh, we’ve heard of the Sergeant even over here,” he explained. “His fame has traveled before him. Are you the only one he sent?”

“I don’t know.” But she must be, she thought. There were no others. Though of course he might have talked to others who had been unable to come. Or afraid to.

“And where are you from, Miss?”

“From Signal Springs,” she said. “In Nevada.”

“I don’t believe I ever even heard of that.”

“Oh, nobody much has. It’s a railroad town not far from Reno.”

“Why, I’m learning something new every day,” cried the Reverend, and he stepped aside to let her walk in front of him as the buzzer summoned them for the second half of the period. But when the class came to an end at nine o’clock, Joyce hastily avoided these new acquaintances. She hurried from the building, ran to the corner and caught the

trolley back to Fillmore. Through the long clattering blocks and shadowy intersections, she sat with her notebook open on her knees, staring at the diagrams she had copied. *Generator. Clamp. Welding Rod.* Now she ought to return to the Hendersons' right away, she was arguing with herself, they might likely be waiting up for her. She would be tired in the morning in any case. *After the hard day you've put in, dear,* she said, mimicking Mrs. Henderson who had been a childhood friend of her mother's in New Orleans.

And that was true enough, she was tired; but not in any way that going to bed at nine o'clock could cure. It was not really the work that tired her. A day in the shipyard seemed easier than the café of the Signal Springs Hotel had ever been. More than anything else, it was the confusion, she thought, the noise, the sense of never knowing what to expect from one instant to the next; and wondered suddenly if the Sergeant felt the same way at a day's end. Then she wondered, too, why she had not waited at least long enough to say good night to those two in the welding class. She did not know. Her mind seemed to be spinning like a top. The nerves in her legs and back were stretched tight as piano wires. When she got down at Fillmore, instead of turning toward the Hendersons' apartment, she walked in the opposite direction.

On many evenings after the dishes were finished, she had told the Hendersons she thought she might run out to a movie, she wasn't quite sleepy yet—inviting them to go along though she knew they would refuse. And it was pleasant enough to sit in the dark theater carried out of herself by the story on the screen. But more often, instead, she would simply walk out along Fillmore Street which always was crowded at this time of the evening. Here she could almost lose herself, and as she moved with the moving crowd, past Fillmore and Geary, past Fillmore and California, she could even imagine that she was going somewhere, that someone

was waiting for her, man or woman, young or old, it scarcely mattered; but someone who *knew* her, and whom she knew, waiting on some corner, in some tavern, in some apartment. As she walked, she carried on a conversation with these imaginary friends. She had been in San Francisco almost a year, she told them. What had she come looking for? she asked. How much longer must she wait? Was it not time at last to give up and return home to Signal Springs? Or *was* that her home any longer? The lights and shadows, the stream of passing faces, remained as indecipherable as always, till Joyce unwillingly retraced her steps toward the Hendersons', where she had her room and board.