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a pinched and harased look. Then she applied makeup heavily. Now she gave herself surprised eyebrows and a
cupid-bow mouth. Later she would make Oriental eyebrows
and an evilly slashed mouth.

Poland, in her sweet strawberry voice, began another
song:

I know a boy who is sky-soft brown
I know a boy who is sky-soft brown
The dirt leaps for joy when his feet touch the ground.
His strut is a peacock
His eye is burning brass
His smile is sorghum syrup drippin' slow-sweet to
the last
I know a boy who is sky-soft brown

Marie sat shelling peanuts and popping them into her
mouth. Pecola looked and looked at the women. Were they
real? Marie belched, softly, purringly, lovingly.
My daddy's face is a study. Winter moves into it and presses there. His eyes become a cliff of snow threatening to avalanche; his eyebrows bend like black limbs of leafless trees. His skin takes on the pale, cheerless yellow of winter sun; for a jaw he has the edges of a snowbound field dotted with stubble; his high forehead is the frozen sweep of the Erie, hiding currents of geld thoughts that oddly in darkness. Wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills. A Vulcan guarding the flames, he gives us instructions about which doors to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat, lays kindling by, discusses qualities of coal, and teaches us how to rake, feed, and bank the fire. And he will not unrazor his lips until spring.

Winter tightened our heads with a band of cold and melted our eyes. We put pepper in the feet of our
anybody to eat with in the cafeteria—they flocked to the table of her choice, where she opened fastidious lunches, shaming our jelly-stained bread with egg-salad sandwiches cut into four distantly squares, pink-frosted cupcakes, stocks of celery and carrots, proud, dark apples. She even bought and liked white milk.

Frieda and I were besotted, irritated, and fascinated by her. We looked hard for flaws to restore our equilibrium, but had to be content with ugly up her name, changing Maureen Peal to Meringue Pie. Later a minor epiphany was ours when we discovered that she had a dog tooth—a charming one to be sure—but a dog tooth nonetheless. And when we found out that she had been born with six fingers on each hand and that there was a little button where each extra one had been removed, we smiled. They were small triumphs, but we took what we could get—sneering behind her back and calling her Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie. But we had to do it alone, for none of the other girls would cooperate with our hostility. They adored her.

When she was assigned a locker next to mine, I could indulge my jealousy four times a day. My sister and I both suspected that we were secretly prepared to be her friend, if she would let us, but I knew it would be a dangerous friendship, for when my eye traced the white border patterns of those Kelly-green knee socks, and felt the pull and slack of my brown stockings, I wanted to kick her. And when I thought of the unearned laughter in her eyes, I plotted accidental slammings of locker doors on her hand.

As locker friends, however, we got to know each other a little, and I was even able to hold a sensible
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conversation with her without visualizing her fall off a cliff, or giggling my way into what I thought was a clever insult.

One day, while I waited at the locker for Frieda, she joined me.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Waiting for your sister?"

"Uh-huh."

"Which way do you go home?"

"Down Twenty-first Street to Broadway."

"Why don't you go down Twenty-second Street?"

"'Cause I live on Twenty-first Street."

"Oh. I can walk that way, I guess. Partly, anyway."

"Free country."

Frieda came toward us, her brown stockings straining at the knees because she had tucked the toe under to hide a hole in the foot.

"Maureen's gonna walk part way with us."

Frieda and I exchanged glances, her eyes begging my restraint, mine promising nothing.

It was a false spring day, which, like Maureen, had pierced the shell of a deadening winter. There were puddles, mud, and an invading warmth that deluded us.

The kind of day on which we draped our coats over our heads, left our galoshes in school, and came down withroup the following day. We always responded to the slightest change in weather, the most minute shifts in time of day. Long before seeds were stirring, Frieda and I were scrubbing and puking at the earth, swallowing air, drinking rain... .

As we emerged from the school with Maureen, we

gained to moul immediately. We put our head scarves in our coat pockets, and our coats on our heads. I was wondering how to maneuver Maureen's fur muff into a gutter when a commotion in the playground distracted us. A group of boys was circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove.

Bay Boy, Woodrow Cain, Buddy Wilson, Junie Bug—like a necklace of semiprecious stones they surrounded her. Headly with the smell of their own musk, thrilled by the easy power of a majority, they gaily harassed her.

"Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaahsleepnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo... ."

They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds—cooled—and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit.

Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked.
Stch ta ta stch ta ta
stach ta ta ta ta ta
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Pecola edged around the circle crying. She had dropped her notebook, and covered her eyes with her hands.

We watched, afraid they might notice us and turn their energies our way. Then Frieda, with set lips and Mama’s eyes, snatched her coat from her head and threw it on the ground. She ran toward them and brought her books down on Woodrow Cain’s head. The circle broke. Woodrow Cain grabbed his head.

“Hey, girl!”

“You cut that out, you hear?” I had never heard Frieda’s voice so loud and clear.

Maybe because Frieda was taller than he was, maybe because he saw her eyes, maybe because he had lost interest in the game, or maybe because he had a crush on Frieda, in any case Woodrow looked frightened just long enough to give her more courage.

“Leave her ‘lone, or I’m gone tell everybody what you did!”

Woodrow did not answer; he just walled his eyes.

Bay Boy piped up, “Go on, gall! Ain’t nobody bothering you.”

“You shut up, Bullet Head.” I had found my tongue.

“Who you calling Bullet Head?”

“I’m calling you Bullet Head, Bullet Head.”

Frieda took Pecola’s hand. “Come on.”

“You want a fat lip?” Bay Boy drew back his fist at me.

“Yeah. Gimme one of yours.”

“You gone get one.”

Maureen appeared at my elbow, and the boys seemed reluctant to continue under her springtime eyes so wide with interest. They buckled in confusion, not willing to beat up three girls under her watchful gaze. So they listened to a budding male instinct that told them to pretend we were unworthy of their attention.

“Come on, man.”

“Yeah. Come on. We ain’t got time to fool with them.”

Grumbling a few disinterested epithets, they moved away.

I picked up Pecola’s notebook and Frieda’s coat, and the four of us left the playground.

“Old Bullet Head, he’s always picking on girls.”

Frieda agreed with me. “Miss Forrester said he was incorrigival.”

“Really?” I didn’t know what that meant, but it had enough of a doom sound in it to be true of Bay Boy.

While Frieda and I chucked on about the near fight, Maureen, suddenly animated, put her velvet-sleeved arm through Pecola’s and began to behave as though they were the closest of friends.

“I just moved here. My name is Maureen Peal. What’s yours?”

“Pecola.”

“Pecola? Wasn’t that the name of the girl in Imitation of Life?”

“I don’t know. What is that?”

“The picture show, you know. Where this mulatto girl hates her mother cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral. It was real sad. Everybody cries in it. Claudette Colbert too.”

“Oh.” Pecola’s voice was no more than a sigh.
"Anyway, her name was Pecola too. She was so pretty. When it comes back, I'm going to see it again. My mother has seen it four times."

Frieda and I walked behind them, surprised at Maureen's friendliness to Pecola, but pleased. Maybe she wasn't so bad, after all. Frieda had put her coat back on her head, and the two of us, so draped, trotted along enjoying the warm breeze and Frieda's heroics.

"You're in my gym class, aren't you?" Maureen asked Pecola.

"Yes."

"Miss Erkmeister's legs sure are bow. I bet she thinks they're cute. How come she gets to wear real shorts, and we have to wear those old bloomers? I want to die every time I put them on."

Pecola smiled but did not look at Maureen.


She unzipped a hidden pocket in her muff and pulled out a multifolded dollar bill. I forgave her those knee socks.

"My uncle sued Isaley's," Maureen said to the three of us. "He sued the Isaley's in Akron. They said he was disorderly and that that was why they wouldn't serve him, but a friend of his, a policeman, came in and beared the witness, so the suit went through."

"What's a suit?"

"It's when you can beat them up if you want to and won't anybody do nothing. Our family does it all the time. We believe in suits."

At the entrance to Isaley's Maureen turned to Frieda and me, asking, "You all going to buy some ice cream?"
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like Hedy Lamarr's, and the lady said, "Yeah, when you grow some hair like Hedy Lamarr's." She laughed long and sweet.

"Sounds crazy," said Frieda.

"She sure is. Do you know she doesn't even menstruate yet, and she's sixteen. Do you, yet?"

"Yes." Pecola glanced at us.

"So do I." Maureen made no attempt to disguise her pride. "Two months ago I started. My girl friend in Toledo, where we lived before, said when she started she was scared to death. Thought she had killed herself."

"Do you know what it's for?" Pecola asked the question as though hoping to provide the answer herself.

"For babies." Maureen raised two pencil-stroke eyebrows at the obviousness of the question. "Babies need blood when they are inside you, and if you are having a baby, then you don't menstruate. But when you're not having a baby, then you don't have to save the blood, so it comes out."

"How do babies get the blood?" asked Pecola.

"Through the like-line. You know. Where your belly button is. That is where the like-line grows from and pumps the blood to the baby."

"Well, if the belly buttons are to grow like-lines to give the baby blood, and only girls have babies, how come boys have belly buttons?"

Maureen hesitated. "I don't know," she admitted. "But boys have all sorts of things they don't need." Her tinkling laughter was somehow stronger than our nervous ones. She curled her tongue around the edge of the cone, scooping up a dollop of purple that made my eyes water. We were waiting for a stop light to change. Maureen kept scooping the ice cream from around the cone's edge with her tongue; she didn't bite the edge as I would have done. Her tongue circled the cone. Pecola had finished hers; Maureen evidently liked her things to last. While I was thinking about her ice cream, she must have been thinking about her last remark, for she said to Pecola,

"Did you ever see a naked man?"

Pecola blinked, then looked away. "No. Where would I see a naked man?"

"I don't know. I just asked."

"I wouldn't even look at him, even if I did see him. That's dirty. Who wants to see a naked man?" Pecola was agitated. "Nobody's father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too."

"I didn't say 'father.' I just said 'a naked man.'"

"Well . . . ."

"How come you said 'father'?" Maureen wanted to know.

"Who else would she see, dog tooth?" I was glad to have a chance to show anger. Not only because of the ice cream, but because we had seen our own father naked and didn't care to be reminded of it and feel the shame brought on by the absence of shame. He had been walking down the hall from the bathroom into his bedroom and passed the open door of our room. We had lain there wide-eyed. He stopped and looked in, trying to see in the dark room whether we were really asleep—or was it his imagination that opened eyes were looking at him? Apparently he convinced himself that we were sleeping. He moved away, confident that his little girls would not lie open-eyed like that, staring, staring. When he had moved on, the dark took only him away, not his
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nakedness. That stayed in the room with us.

Friendly-like.

“*I’m not talking to you,*” said Maureen. “Besides, I
don’t care if she sees her father naked. She can look at
him all day if she wants to. Who cares?”

“You do,” said Frieda. “That’s all you talk about.”

“It is not.”

“it is so. Boys, babies, and somebody’s naked daddy.
You must be boy-crazy.”

“You better be quiet.”

“Who’s gonna make me?” Frieda put her hand on her
hip and jutted her face toward Maureen.

“You all ready made. Mammy made.”

“You stop talking about my mama.”

“Well, you stop talking about my daddy.”

“Who said anything about your old daddy?”

“You did.”

“Well, you wanted it.”

“I wasn’t even talking to you. I was talking to Pecola.”

“Yeah. About seeing her naked daddy.”

“So what if she did see him?”


“You did too,” Maureen snapped. “Bay Boy said so.”

“I didn’t.”

“You did.”

“I did not.”

“Did. Your own daddy, too!”

Pecola tucked her head in—a funny, sad, helpless
movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling
in of the neck, as though she wanted to cover her ears.

“You stop talking about her daddy,” I said.

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“What do I care about her old black daddy?” asked
Maureen.

“Black? Who you calling black?”

“You!”

“You think you so cute!” I swung at her and missed,
hitting Pecola in the face. Furious at my clumsiness, I
threw my notebook at her, but it caught her in the small
of her velvet back, for she had turned and was flying
across the street against traffic.

Safe on the other side, she screamed at us, “I am cute!
And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!”

She ran down the street, the green knee socks making
her legs look like wild dandelion stems that had
somewhere lost their heads. The weight of her remark
stunned us, and it was a second or two before Frieda and
I collected ourselves enough to shout, “Six-finger-dog-
tooth-meringue-pie!” We chanted this most powerful of
our arsenal of insults as long as we could see the green
stems and rabbit fur.

Grown people frowned at the three girls on the
curbside, two with their coats draped over their heads,
the collars framing the eyebrows like nuns’ habits, black
garters showing where they bit the tips of brown
stockings that barely covered the knee, angry faces
knotted like dark cauliflowers.

Pecola stood a little apart from us, her eyes hinged in
the direction in which Maureen had fled. She seemed to
fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain
antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her
edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine,
force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the
There was no answer, but a sound of feet. Mr. Henry shuffled part of the way down the stairs. One thick, hairless leg leaned out of his bathtub.

"Hello there, Greta Garbo; hello, Ginger Rogers."

We gave him the giggle he was accustomed to. "Hello, Mr. Henry. Where's Mama?"

"She went to your grandmother's. Left word for you to cut off the turnips and eat some Graham crackers till she got back. They in the kitchen."

We sat in silence at the kitchen table, crumpling the crackers into handfuls. In a while Mr. Henry came back down the stairs. Now he had his trousers on under his robe.

"Say. Wouldn't you all like some cream?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Here. Here's a quarter. Go over to Islay's and get yourself some cream. You been good girls, ain't you?"

His light-green words restored color to the day. "Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. Henry. Will you tell Mama for us if she comes?"

"Sure. But she ain't due back for a spell."

Coatless, we left the house and had gotten all the way to the corner when Frieda said, "I don't want to go to Islay's."

"What?"

"I don't want ice cream. I want potato chips."

"They got potato chips at Islay's."

"I know, but why go all that long way? Miss Bertha got potato chips."

"But I want ice cream."

"No you don't, Claudia."
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"I do too."
"Well, you go on to Isley's. I'm going to Miss Bertha's."
"But you got the quarters, and I don't want to go all the way up there by myself."
"Then let's go to Miss Bertha's. You like her candy, don't you?"
"It's always stale, and she always runs out of stuff."
"Today is Friday. She orders fresh on Friday."
"And then that crazy old Soaphead Church lives there."
"So what? We're together. We'll run if he does anything at us."
"He scares me."
"Well, I don't want to go up by Isley's. Suppose Meringue Pie is hanging around. You want to run into her, Claudia?"
"Come on, Frieda. I'll get candy."
Miss Bertha had a small candy, snuff, and tobacco store. One brick room sitting in her front yard. You had to peep in the door, and if she wasn't there, you knocked on the door of her house in back. This day she was sitting behind the counter reading a Bible in a tube of sunlight.
Frieda bought potato chips, and we got three Powerhouse bars for ten cents, and had a dime left. We hurried back home to sit under the lilac bushes on the side of the house. We always did our Candy Dance there so Rosemary could see us and get jealous. The Candy Dance was a humming, skipping, foot-tapping, cooing, smacking combination that overrook us when we had sweets. Creeping between the bushes and the side of the house, we heard voices and laughter. We looked into the living-room window, expecting to see Mama. Instead we saw Mr. Henry and two women. In a playful manner, the way grandmothers do with babies, he was sucking the fingers of one of the women, whose laughter filled a tiny place over his head. The other woman was buttoning her coat. We knew immediately who they were, and our flesh crawled. One was China, and the other was called the Maginot Line. The back of my neck itched. These were the fancy women of the maroon nail polish that Mama and Big Mama hated. And in our house. China was not too terrible, at least not in our imaginations. She was thin, aging, abstemious, and unaggressive. But the Maginot Line. That was the one my mother said she "wouldn't let eat out of one of her plates." That was the one church women never allowed their eyes to rest on. That was the one who had killed people, set them on fire, poisoned them, cooked them in lye. Although I thought the Maginot Line's face, hidden under all that fat, was really sweet, I had heard too many black and red words about her, seen too many mouths go triangle at the mention of her name, to dwell on any redeeming features she might have.
Slowing brown teeth, China seemed to be genuinely enjoying Mr. Henry. The sighs of him licking her fingers brought to mind the girls magazines in his room. A cold wind blew somewhere in me, lifting little leaves of terror and obscure longing. I thought I saw a mild lonesomeness cross the face of the Maginot Line. But it may have been my own image that I saw in the slow flaring of her
notirls, in her eyes that reminded me of waterfalls in movies about Hawaii.

The Magnol Linz yawned and said, "Come on, China. We can't hang in here all day. Them people be home soon." She moved toward the door.

Frieda and I dropped down to the ground, looking wildly into each other's eyes. When the women were some distance away, we went inside. Mr. Henry was in the kitchen opening a bottle of pop.

"Back already?"

"Yes, sir."

"Cream all gone?" His little teeth looked so kindly and helpful. Was that really our Mr. Henry with China's fingers?

"We got candy instead."

"You did huh? Ole sugar-tooth Greta Garbo."

He wiped the bottle sweat and turned it up to his lips—a gesture that made me uncomfortable.

"Who were those women, Mr. Henry?"

He shook on the pop and looked at Frieda. "What you say?"

"Those women," she repeated, "who just left. Who were they?"

"Oh." He laughed the grown-up getting-ready-to-lie laugh. A heh-heh we knew well.

"Those were some members of my Bible class. We read the scripture together, and so they came today to read with me."

"Oh," said Frieda, I was looking at his house slippers to keep from seeing those kindly teeth frame a lie. He walked toward the stairs and then turned back to us.

"Bed not mention it to your mother. She don't take to

so much Bible study and don't like me having visitors, even if they good Christians."

"No, sir. Mr. Henry. We won't."

He rapidly mounted the stairs.

"Should we?" I asked. "Tell Mama?"

Frieda sighed. She had not even opened her powerhouse bar of her potato chips, and now she stared the lens on the candy wrappers with her fingers. Suddenly she lifted her head and began to look all around the kitchen.

"No. I guess not. No plates are out."

"Plates? What you talking about now?"

"No orate are out. The Magnol Linz didn't eat out of one of Mama's plates. Besides, Mama would just fuss all day if we told her."

We sat down and looked at the graham-cracker anthills we had made.

"We better cut off the turnips. They'll burn. And Mama will whip us," she said.

"I know."

"But if we let them burn, we won't have to eat them."

"Heyyy, what a lovely idea," I thought.

"Which you want? A whipping and no turnips, or

turnips and no whipping?"

"I don't know. Maybe we could burn them just a little so Mama and Daddy can eat them, but we can say we can't."

"O.K."

I made a volcano out of my anthill.

"Frieda?"

"What?"

"What did Woodrow do that you were gonna tell?"
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"Wet the bed. Mrs. Cain told Mama he won't quit."

"Oh, nasty."

The sky was getting dark; I looked out of the window and saw snow falling. I poked my finger down into the mouth of my volcano, and it toppled, dispersing the golden grains into little swirls. The turnip pot cracked.

They come from Mobile. Aiken. From Newport News. From Marietta. From Meridian. And the sound of these places in their mouths make you think of love. When you ask them where they are from, they tilt their heads and say "Mobile" and you think you've been kissed. They say "Aiken" and you see a white butterfly glance off a fence with a torn wing. They say "Nagadoches" and you want to say "Yes, I will." You don't know what these towns are like, but you love what happens to the air when they open their lips and let the names ease out.

Meridian. The sound of it opens the windows of a room like the first four notes of a hymn. Few people can say the names of their home towns with such sly affection. Perhaps because they don't have home towns, just places where they were born. But these girls soak up the juice of their home towns, and it never leaves them. They are thin brown girls who have looked long at hollyhocks at the backyards of Meridian, Mobile, Aiken, and Baton Rouge. And like ho-
lyhooks they are narrow, tall, and still. Their roots are deep, their stalks are firm, and only the top blossom pods in the wind. They have the eyes of people who can tell what time is by the color of the sky. Such girls live in quiet black neighborhoods where everybody is gainfully employed. Where there are pecky swings hanging from chains. Where the grass is cut with a scythe, where rooster combs and sunflowers grow in the yards, and pots of bleeding heart, ivy, and mother-in-law tongue line the steps and windowsills. Such girls have bought watermelon and snappeons from the fruit man's wagon. They have put in the window the cardboard sign that has a pound measure printed on each of three edges—10 lbs., 25 lbs., 50 lbs.—and 90 lbs. on the fourth. These particular brown girls from Mobile and Aiken are not like some of their sisters. They are not fretful, nervous, or shrill; they do not have lovey black necks that stretch as though against an invisible collar; their eyes do not bite. These sweet-souled Mobile girls move through the streets without a stir. They are as sweet and plastic as buttercake. Slim ankles, long, narrow feet. They wash themselves with orange-colored Linen Soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet face, clean their teeth with salt on a piece of rag, soften their skin with Jergens Lotion. They smell like wood, newspapers, and vanilla. They straighten their hair with Dixie Peach, and part it on the side. At night they curl it in paper iron brown bags, tie a print scarf around their heads, and sleep with hands folded across their stomachs. They do not drink, smoke, or swear, and they still call sex "nookie." They sing second soprano in the choir, and although their voices are clear and steady, they are never picked to solo. They are in the second row, while blouses starched, blue skirts almost purple from ironing.

They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: Home economics to prepare his food; teaches education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swing and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions.

Wherever is cramps, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it croutes, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. The laugh that is so little too loud; the exclamation a little too round; the gesture a little too gesticulous. They hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipsticks, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick and, what worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair. They never seem to have boyfriends, but they always marry. Certain men watch them, without seeming to, and know that if such a girl is in his house, he will sleep on sheets boiled white, hung out to dry on juniper bushes, and pressed flat with a heavy iron. There will be pretty paper flowers decorating the picture of his mother, a large Bible in the front room. They feel secure. They know their work clothes will be mended, washed, and worn on Monday, that their Sunday shirts will billow on hangers from the door jamb, stiffly starched and white. They look at her hands and know what she will do with biscuit dough; she smell the coffee and the fried ham; see the white, smoky grits with a dollop
of butter on top. Her hips assure them that she will bear children easily and painlessly. And they are right.

What they do not know is that this plain brown girl will build her nest with a stick, make it of her own immaculate world, and stand guard over its every plant, weed, and dolly, even against him. In silence she will return the lamp to where she put it in the first place; remove the dishes from the table as soon as the last bite is taken; wipe the doorknob after a greasy hand has touched it. A sidelong look will be enough to tell him to smoke on the back porch. Children will sense instantly that they cannot come into her yard to retrieve a ball. But the men do not know these things. Nor do they know that she will give him her body sparingly and partially. He treats her superstitiously, lifting the hem of her nightgown only to her navel. He must rest his weight on his elbows when they make love, ostensibly to avoid hurting her breasts but actually to keep her from having too much of him.

While he moves inside her, she will wonder why they didn’t put the necessary but private parts of the body in some more convenient place—like the armpit, for example, or the palm of the hand. Somewhere one could get to easily, and quickly, without undressing. She irritates when she feels one of her paper curlers coming undone from the activity of love; imprints in her mind which one is that is coming loose so she can quickly secure it once he is through. She hopes he will not sweat—the damp may get into her hair; and that she will remain dry between her legs—she hates the clacking sound they make when she is moist. When she senses some spasm about to grip him, she will make rapid movements with her hips, press her fingertips into his back, suck in her breath, and pretend she is having an orgasm. She

might wonder again, for the six hundredth time, what it would be like to have that feeling while her husband’s penis is inside her. The closest thing to it was the time she was walking down the street and her napkin slipped free of her sanitary belt. It moved gently between her legs as she walked. Gently, ever so gently. And then a slight and distinctly delicious sensation collected in her cooch. As the delight grew, she had to stop in the street, hold her napkin together to contain it. That must be what it is like, she thinks, but it never happens while he is inside her. When he withdraws, she pulls her nightgown down, slips out of the bed and into the bathroom with relief.

Occasionally some living thing will engage her affections. A cat, perhaps, who will love her order, precision, and constancy, who will be as clean and quiet as she is. The cat will settle quietly on the window sill and caress her with his eyes. She can hold him in her arms, letting his back paws struggle for footing on her breast and his front paws cling to her shoulder. She can rub the smooth fur and feel the interesting flesh underneath. At her gentle touch he will preen, stretch, and open his mouth. And she will accept the strangely pleasant sensation that comes when he wishes beneath her hand and flattens his eyes with a surge of sensual delight. When she stands looking at the table, he will circle about heranks, and the tip of his fur spirals up her legs to her thighs, to make her fingers tremble a little in the pie dough.

Or, as she sits reading the “Utilizing Thoughts” in The Liberty Magazine, the cat will jump into her lap. She will fold that soft ball of hair and let the warmth of the animal’s body seep over and into the deeply private area of her lap. Sometimes the magazine drops, and she opens her legs
just a little, and the two of them will be still together, perhaps shifting a little together, sleeping a little together, until four o'clock, when the intruder comes home from work vaguely anxious about what's for dinner.

The cat will always know that he is five in her affections. Every time she heeds a child. For she does bear a child—easily, and painlessly. But only one. A son. Named Junior.

One such girl from Mobile, or Meridian, or Aiken who did not scowl in her aprons nor between her dyes, who smelled of wood and vanilla, who had made saddle in the Home Economics Department, moved in with her husband, Louis, to Lorain, Ohio. Her name was Geraldine. There she built her nest, raised little, pointed bleeding hearts, played with her car, and breasted Louis Junior.

Geraldine did not allow her baby, Junior, to cry. As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them—comfort and satiety. He was always bathed, bathed, oiled, and she. Geraldine did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge him in kissing hours, but she saw that every other desire was fulfilled. It was not long after the child discovered the difference in his mother's behavior to himself and the cat. As he grew older, he learned how to direct his hatred of his mother to the cat, and spent some happy moments watching it suffer. The cat survived, because Geraldine was seldom away from home, and could effectively soothe the animal when Junior abused him.

Geraldine, Louis Junior, and the cat lived next to the playground of Washington Irving School. Junior considered the playground his own, and the schoolchildren coveted his freedom to sleep late, go home for lunch, and dominate the playground after school. He hated to see the swings, slides, monkey bars, and seesaws empty and tried to get kids to

stick around as long as possible. White kids, his mother did not like him to play with negroes. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and negroes. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; negroes were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group: he wore white shirts and blue trousers; his hair was cut close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool, the part was combed into his hair by the barber. In winter his mother put Jergens lotion on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen. Even though he was light-skinned, it was possible to ask. The line between colored and negro was not always clear; subtle and gentle signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant.

Junior used to long to play with the black boys. More than anything in the world he wanted to play King of the Mountain and have them push him down the mound of dirt and roll over him. He wanted to feel their hardness pressing on him, smell their wild blackness, and say "Fuck you" with that lovely casualness. He wanted to sit with them on sandstones and compare the sharpness of jackknives, the distance and arcs of spitting. In the toilet he wanted to share with them the laurels of being able to pee far and long. Bay Boy and P. L. had at one time been his idols. Gradually he came to agree with his mother that neither Bay Boy nor P. L. was good enough for him. He played only with Ralph Niesicky, who was two years younger, wore glasses, and didn't want to do anything. More and more Junior enjoyed bullying girls. It was easy making them scream and run. How he laughed when they fell down and their bloomers showed. When they got up, their faces red and crinkled, it made him feel good. Theigger girl he did not pick on very much. They usually traveled in packs, and once when he
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threw a stone at some of them, they thased, caught, and beat him without. He lied to his mother, saying Boy did it. His mother was very upset. His father was keeping reading the Local Journal.

When the mood struck him, he would call a child passing by to come play on the swings or the seesaw. If the child wouldn't, or did and left too soon, Junior threw gravel at him. He became a very good shot.

Alternatively bored and frightened at home, the playground was his joy. On a day when he had been especially idle, he saw a very black girl taking a shortcut through the playground. She kept her head down as she walked. He had seen her many times before, standing alone, always alone, at recess. Nobody ever played with her. Probably, he thought, because she was ugly.

Now Junior called to her. "Hey! What are you doing walking through my yard?"

The girl stopped.

"Nobody can come through this yard, less I say so."

"This ain't your yard. It's the school's."

"But I'm in charge of it."

The girl started to walk away.

"Wait," Junior walked toward her. "You can play in it if you want to. What's your name?"

"Tecola. I don't want to play."

"Come on. I'm not going to bother you."

"I got to go home."

"Say, you want to see something? I got something to show you."

"No, What is it?"

"Come on in my house. See, I live right there. Come on. I'll show you."

"Show me what?"

"Some kittens. We got some kittens. You can have one if you want."

"Real kittens?"

"Yeah. Come on."

He pulled gently at her dress. Pecola began to move toward his house. When he knew she had agreed, Junior ran ahead excitedly, stopping only to yell back at her to come on. He held the door open for her, smiling his encouragement. Tecola climbed the porch stairs and hesitated there, afraid to follow him. The house looked dark. Junior said, "There's nobody here. My ma's gone out, and my father's at work. Don't you want to see the kittens?"

Junior turned on the lights. Pecola stepped inside the door.

How beautiful, she thought. What a beautiful house.

There was a big red-and-gold Bible on the dining-room table. Little lace doilies were everywhere—on arms and backs of chairs, in the center of a large dining table, on little tables. Potted plants were on all the windowsills. A color picture of Jesus Christ hung on a wall with the prettiest paper flowers fastened to the frame. She wanted to see everything slowly, slowly, but Junior kept saying, "Hey, you. Come on. Come on." He pulled her into another room, even more beautiful than the first. More doilies, a big lamp with green-and gold base and white shade. There was even a rug on the floor, with enormous dark-red flowers. She was deep in admiration of the flowers when Junior said, "Here! Pecola turned. "Here is your kitten!" he screamed. And he threw a big black cat right in her face. She stunk in her breath in fear and surprise and for fear in her mouth. The cat
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clawed her face and chest in an effort to right itself, then hap ted nastily to the floor.

Junior was laughing and running around the room clutching his stomach delightfully. Pecola touched the scratched place on her face and felt tears coming. When she started toward the doorway, Junior leaped in front of her.

"You can't get out. You're my prisoner," he said. His eyes were merry but hard.

"You let me go." "No!" He pushed her down, ran out the door that sepa rated the rooms, and held it shut with his hands. Pecola's begging on the door increased his grinning, high-pitched laughter.

The tears came fast, and she held her face in her hands. When something soft and furry moved around her ankles, she jumped, and saw it was the cat. He wound himself in and about her legs. Momentarily distracted from her fear, she squatted down to touch him, her hands wet from the tears. The cat rubbed up against her knees. He was black all over, deep silky black, and his eyes, pointing down toward his nose, were white green. The light made them shine like blue ice. Pecola rubbed the cat's head; he winced, his tongue flicking with pleasure. The blue eyes in the black face held her.

Junior, curious at not hearing her sobbing, opened the door, and saw her squatting down rubbing the cat's back. He saw the cat stretching its head and flattening its eyes. He had seen that expression many times as the animal responded to his mother's touch.

"Give me my cat!" His voice broke. With a movement both awkward and sure he snatched the cat by one of its

hind legs and began to swing it around his head in a circle.

"Stop that!" Pecola was screaming. The cat's feet paws were stiffened, ready to grasp anything to restore balance, its mouth wide, its eyes blue streaks of horror.

Still screaming, Pecola reached for Junior's hand. She heard her dress rip under her arm. Junior tried to push her away, but she grabbed the arm which was swinging the cat.

They both fell, and in falling, Junior let go the cat, which, having been released in mid-motion, was thrown full force against the window. It thudded down and fell on the radiator behind the sofa. Except for a few shudders, it was still.

There was only the slightest smell of singed fur.

Geraldine opened the door.

"What is this?" Her voice was mild, as though asking a perfectly reasonable question. "Who is this girl?"

"She killed our cat," said Junior. "Look." He pointed to the radiator, where the cat lay, its blue eyes closed, leaving only an empty, black, and helpless face.

Geraldine went to the radiator and picked up the cat. He was limp in her arms, but she rubbed her face in his fur. She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the piles sticking out on her hair, hair matted where the paws had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel of the shoe. She saw the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up. Up over the bumpy of the cat's back she looked at her. She had seen this little girl all of her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edge of town, sitting in bus stations holding paper bags and crying to mothers who kept saying "She