

Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first, I was not aware of what hunger really meant. The boys scattered, yelling, nursing their heads, staring at me in utter disbelief. Whenever I begged for food now my mother would pour me a cup of tea which would still the clamor in my stomach for a moment or two; but a little later I would feel hunger nudging my ribs, twisting my empty guts until they ached. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly. Though I had not known why he was absent, I had been glad that he was not there to shout his restrictions at me. But it had never occurred to me that his absence would mean that there would be no food. The hunger I had known before this had been no grim, hostile stranger; it had been a normal hunger that had made me beg constantly for bread, and when I ate a crust or two, I was satisfied. But this new hunger baffled me, scared me, made me angry and insistent. I became less active in my play, and for the first time in my life I had to pause and think of what was happening to me. "Mama, I'm hungry," I complained one afternoon. The cry went up with tears in my eyes, teeth clenched, stark fear making me throw every ounce of my strength behind each blow. I stood panting, egging them on, taunting them to come on and fight. The parents of the boys rushed into the streets and threatened me, and for the first time in my life I shouted at grown-ups, telling them that I would give them the same if they bothered me. I finally found my grocery list and the money and went to the store. I sensed that she was teasing me and it made me angry. She was ironing and she paused and looked at me with tears in her eyes. She asked me. I stared in bewilderment. "But I'm hungry," I whimpered, stomping my feet. "Don't you come in here," my mother warned me. I froze in my tracks and stared at her. "Don't you come into this house until you've gotten those groceries," she said. A stinging slap came on my jaw. "Go now! If you come back into this house without those groceries, I'll whip you!" I shook with fright. I walked slowly down the sidewalk, coming closer to the gang of boys, holding the stick tightly. I would grow dizzy and my vision would dim. "Jump up and catch a kungry," she said, trying to make me laugh and forget. "What's a kungry?" "You'll have to wait." "You'll just have to wait," she said again. Yes, it was true that my father had not come home to sleep for many days now and I could make as much noise as I wanted. "Well, your father isn't here now," she said. "You'll have to wait until I get a job and buy food," she said. "They'll beat me." "You've got to get over that," she said. "They b-beat m-me," I gasped. "You just stay right where you are," she said in a deadly tone. I was baffled.