We'll Just Act Natural

1948–1949

It was about seven in the evening. Susan kept getting up and looking out the porch window, down off the hill at the railroad tracks, the trains running in, the smoke rising. The red and green lights were reflected in her wide brown eyes. In the darkness, her plump hand was a darker darkness. She kept pressing her mouth and looking at the clock. "That old clock must be fast," she said. "That crazy old tin clock."

"Ain't no crazy clock," said Linda, in the corner, a stack of phonograph records in her black hands, scuffling them through. She picked one out, eyed it, put it on the Grafanola, and cranked the machine. "Why'n't you just sit down and unworry yourself, Mom?"

"My feet is still in good shape," said Susan. "I'm not so old."

"He comin', he comin', that's all. An' if he ain't comin', he ain't," said Linda. "You can't push that train any faster or flop them signals up and down. What time he say he comin'?"

"Seven-fifteen he said the train was, here for half an hour, on his way to New York, and he'd stop, said he'd just take that taxi right here, said not to try to meet him at the station."

"He ashamed, that's why," sneered Linda.

"You shut up, or get on home!" said Susan at her daughter. "He's a good man. I worked for his family when he's no bigger'n my hand. Used to carry him downtown on my shoulder. He's not ashamed!"

"That's a long time ago, fifteen years; he's *big* now."

"He sent me his book, didn't he?" cried Susan indignantly. She reached out her hand to the worn chair and picked the book up and opened it and read from the inscription on the title page. "To my dear Mammy Susan, with all my love, from Richard Borden." She snapped the book shut. "There you are!"

"That don't mean nothin', that's just writin', anyone can write that."

"You heard what I said."

"He makes a hunerd thousan' dollars a year now, why he goin' to bother with you, come outa his way?"

" 'Cause I remembers his mother an' his father an' his grandma an' grandpa, 'cause I worked for all of 'em, thirty

years I worked, that's why, an' him being a writer why wouldn' he wanta see me, an' talk about all that?"

"I don't know." Linda shook her head. "Don't ask me."

"He's comin' on that seven-fifteen train, you watch and see."

The Grafanola started to play the Knickerbocker Quartette singing "Pretty Baby."

"Shut that thing off," said Susan.

"I ain't botherin' nobody."

"I can't hear."

"You don't need your ears, you got eyes, you see him comin'."

Susan went over and flipped the switch. The voices died. The silence was sharp and heavy. "There," said Susan, looking at her daughter. "Now I can think."

"What you going to do to him when he come?" asked Linda, looking up, eyes white and sly.

"What you mean?" Susan was careful.

"You goin' to kiss him, hug him?"

"I don't know, I didn't think about that."

Linda laughed. "You better start thinkin'. He's a big boy now. He ain't no kid. Maybe he won't like being hugged and kissed."

"I'll do what I'll do when the time comes," replied Susan, turning away. A little frown formed on her brow. She felt like slapping Linda. "Stop puttin' ideas in my head. We'll just act natural, like always."

"I bet he just shakes hands and sits on the edge of his chair."

"He won't do that. He was always one to laugh."

"I bet he don't call you Mammy in person. Bet he calls you Mrs. Jones."

"He used to call me Aunt Jemima, said I looked just like her, always wanted me to fix his pancakes. He was the cutest little boy you ever seen."

"He's not bad now, from the pictures I seen."

Susan shut her eyes for a long moment and said nothing. Then she said, "You ought to have your mouth washed out with lye." She touched the window curtains, searching the land again, looking for the smoke on the horizon. Suddenly, she set up a cry. "There it is! There she comes! I knew it, I knew it!" She glanced wildly at the clock. "Right on time! Come look!"

"I seen a train before."

"There she comes, look at that smoke!"

"I seen smoke enough to last me all my life."

The train roared into the station below, with a clangor and a belling and a great burning sound.

"Won't be long now," said Susan, smiling, showing a gold tooth.

"Don't hold your breath."

"I feel too good, talk all you want; I feel *fine*!"

The train was stopped now, and people were getting out. She could see them, small, small, at the base of the hill, in the

concrete station, moving and milling. She thought of him and what he looked like now and what he had been like then. She remembered the time when he had returned from school, when he was seven, and had missed saying good-bye to her. She lived at home in the outer part of town. Every night she took a trolley at four o'clock. And he had missed walking with her to the trolley. Crying, he had run down the street after her. And found her just in time and embraced her, sobbing against her legs while she reached down and petted and cooed over him.

"That's something *you* never done," said Susan, angrily.

"What didn't I do?" asked Linda, surprised.

"Never mind." Susan lapsed once more into her remembering. And then that time, when he was thirteen and had returned from two years in California and had found her in the kitchen of his grandmother's house and whirled her around, laughing and embracing her. She smiled with the thought. It was a good thought. And now, fifteen years after that, him a big Hollywood writer on his way to the opening of his play in New York. And in the mail six months ago his first published book, and yesterday the letter saying he would stop to see her. She hadn't slept very well last night.

"No white man's worth all this," said Linda. "I'm goin' home."

"You sit down," commanded Susan.

"I don't want to be here when he don't show up," said Linda. "I'll phone you later." She walked to the door and opened it.

"Come back here and sit down," said Susan. "He'll be here any minute."

Linda stood with the door half open. She shut it and waited a minute, leaning silently against it, shaking her head.

"There's a yellow cab comin' up the hill now," called Susan, bent to the cold windowpane. "I bet he's in it!"

"You'll be poor by mornin'."

They waited.

"Oh," said Susan, blinking.

"What?"

"That fool cab turned down the other way."

"I bet he's just sittin' down there in the lounge car, drinkin' a drink. I bet he's in with a bunch of other men an' can't get away, afraid to tell them what he wants to do in a small town, take a cab an' come up to see some colored woman friend of his."

"He ain't doin' that. He's in a taxi now. I *know*."

Ten minutes and then fifteen passed.

"He should be here by now," said Susan.

"He ain't."

"Maybe that ain't the train; maybe the clock's wrong."

"Want me to phone 'time' for you?"

"Get away from that phone!" cried Susan.

"All right, all right, I just *thought*."

"You just thought, you thought, get away!" She raised her hand and her face was twisted.

They waited once more. The clock ticked.

"You know what I'd do if I was you?" said Linda. "I'd go right down to that train an' get on an' say 'Where's Mr. Borden?' an' I'd hunt till I found him, an' there he'd be, I bet, with all his friends in the lounge car, drinkin', an' I'd walk up to him an' say, 'Looky here, Richard Borden, I knew you when you was all damp! You said you was comin' to see me! Why didn't you?' That's what I'd say, right in front of those men friends of his!"

Susan said nothing. It was seven thirty-five. In ten more minutes the train would be pulling out again. He's delayed, she thought. He has to come up. He's not that sort.

"Well, Mom, I'm goin' home. I'll phone later."

This time she did not try to stop Linda. The door shut. Her footsteps faded away down the hall.

With her away, Susan felt better. She felt that now with the evil influence of her child gone, Richard Borden must certainly arrive. He had just been *waiting* for Linda to leave, so they could be alone!

He's down there somewhere, she thought, on that train. Her heart sickened. What if he was in the club car now, drinking, as Linda said? No! Maybe he forgot, maybe he didn't even *know* this was his hometown! Some mistake, the porter's forgot to call, or something. She twisted her hands together. Sitting down there in the warm club car, drinking. Sitting down there in the nighttime after fifteen years. All the yellow bright lights on the train, the slow steam rising. Come on, Richard! You don't come, I'll tell your mama! Her breathing was deep

and heavy. She felt very old. You don't come in a minute, I'll do what Linda said, come down an' speak right up to you!

No. She couldn't do that. Not embarrass him in front of his friends. Not that. Let him sit there, then. It was all a mistake, anyway. The clock was crazy.

The train gave a warning shriek.

No, she thought. They *can't* be getting ready to leave.

She saw the passengers climb back on the train. He must be sick, she thought. Not even on that train at all. Sick in Chicago, maybe. Sure. And if he *is* down there now, right *now*, did he get off, did he try and catch a cab at all? Maybe not enough cabs? Did he walk around the station or the town, or even look up here to the hill and the house where she was? Would she hear from him tomorrow, from New York? Or ever again, for that matter? No, never; that is, if he really was down there now. He'd never write again after this.

The train whistle blew again. A big funnel of steam rose up on the night air.

Then, with a jolting, the train moved out of the station, gained speed, and was gone.

Susan stood by the window. The house was silent. She looked at the western horizon. That must have been the wrong train. Another would be along in a minute. She picked up the alarm clock. It made a cheap tinny clicking in her hand. "Crazy old clock, givin' the wrong time!" she cried and dropped it into the wastebasket.

She went back to the window.

The phone rang once. She didn't turn. The phone rang again, insistently. She still watched the horizon. The phone rang six more times and would not stop.

Finally she turned and went to pick it up. She held it in her hands for a time before lifting the receiver. Then she put the receiver to her ear.

"Hello, Mom?"

It was Linda.

"Mom, you come over to my place for the night. I know how you feel," said the voice.

"What do you mean?" cried Susan, angrily, into the mouthpiece. "He was just here!"

"What?"

"Yes, an' he was tall an' good lookin', an' he came in a yellow cab just for a minute, an' you know what I done? I hugged an' kissed him an' danced him around!"

"Oh, Mom!"

"An' he talked an' laughed an' was good to me an' gave me a ten-dollar bill, an' we remembered old times, everybody, everything, that's what happened, an' he went back in his yellow cab an' caught that train an' it's gone. He's a real gentleman!"

"Mom, I'm so glad."

"Yes, sir," said Susan, looking out the window, holding the phone in her shaking hands. "A real *gentleman*!"