

WILETTA [*saying good-bye to the kind of gentle treatment she seldom receives*]:

So long.

[*She rises and walks downstage, strikes a pose from the "old Goby," and sings a snatch of an old song.*]

Oh, honey babe
Oh, honey babe . . .

[*She pushes the memory aside.*]

Yes, indeed!

[*JOHN NEVINS, a young Negro actor, enters. He tries to look self-assured, but it's obvious that he is new to the theater and fighting hard to control his enthusiasm.*]

Good morning. Another early bird! I'm glad they hired you, you read so nice er . . . ah . . .

JOHN: John, John Nevins.

WILETTA: This is new for you, ain't it?

JOHN: Yes, ma'am.

WILETTA: Yes, ma'am? I know you're not a New Yorker, where's your home?

JOHN: Newport News, that's in Virginia.

WILETTA: HOT DOG. I shoulda known anyone as handsome and mannerly as you had to come from my home. Newport News! Think of that! Last name?

JOHN: Nevins, John Nevins.

WILETTA: Wait a minute . . . do you know Estelle Nevins, used to live out on Prairie Road . . . fine built woman?

JOHN: Guess I do, that's my mother.

WILETTA [*very touched*]: No, she ain't!

JOHN [*afraid of oncoming sentiment*]: Yes . . . ah . . . yes she is.

WILETTA: What a day! I went to school with Estelle! She married a fella named Clarence! Used to play baseball. Last time I hit home she had a little baby in the carriage. How many children she got?

JOHN: I'm the only one.

WILETTA: You can't be that little baby in the carriage! Stand up, let me look at you! Brings all of yesterday back to my mind! Tell me, John, is the drugstore still on the corner? Used to be run by a tall, strappin' fella . . . got wavy, black hair . . . and, well, he's kind of devilish . . . Eddie Bentley!

JOHN: Oh yes, Mr. Bentley is still there . . .

WILETTA: Fresh and sassy and . . .

JOHN: But he's gray-haired and very stern and businesslike.

WILETTA [*very conscious of her age*]: You don't say. Why you want to act?
Why don't you make somethin' outta yourself?

JOHN [*is amazed at this*]: What? Well, I . . .

WILETTA: You look bright enough to be a doctor or even a lawyer maybe
. . . You don't have to take what I've been through . . . don't have to
take it off'em.

JOHN: I think the theater is the grandest place in the world, and I plan
to go right to the top.

WILETTA [*with good humor*]: Uh-huh, and where do you think I was
plannin' to go?

JOHN [*feeling slightly superior because he thinks he knows more about the craft
than WILETTA*]: Ohhh, well . . .

WILETTA [*quick to sense his feelings*]: Oh, well, what?

JOHN [*feels a bit chastised*]: Nothing. I know what I want to do. I'm set,
decided, and that's that. You're in it, aren't you proud to be a part of
it all?

WILETTA: Of what all?

JOHN: Theater.

WILETTA: *Show business*, it's just a business. Colored folks ain't in no
theater. You ever do a professional show before?

JOHN: Yes, some off-Broadway . . . and I've taken classes.

WILETTA: Don't let the man know that. They don't like us to go to
school.

JOHN: Oh, now.

WILETTA: They want us to be naturals . . . you know, just born with the
gift. Course they want you to be experienced too. Tell 'em you was in
the last revival of *Porgy and Bess*.

JOHN: I'm a little young for that.

WILETTA: They don't know the difference. You were one of the children.

JOHN: I need this job but . . . must I lie?

WILETTA: Yes. Management hates folks who *need* jobs. They get the
least money, the least respect, and most times they don't get the job.

JOHN [*laughs*]: Got it. I'm always doing great.

WILETTA: But don't get too cocky. They don't like that either. You have to cater to these fools too . . .

JOHN: I'm afraid I don't know how to do that.

WILETTA: Laugh! Laugh at everything they say, makes 'em feel superior.

JOHN: Why do they have to feel superior?

WILETTA: You gonna sit there and pretend you don't know why?

JOHN: I . . . I'd feel silly laughing at everything.

WILETTA: You don't. Sometimes they laugh, you're supposed to look serious, other times they serious, you supposed to laugh.

JOHN [*in polite disagreement*]: Sounds too complicated.

WILETTA [*warming to her subject*]: Nothin' to it. Suppose the director walks in, looks around, and says . . . [*She mimics MANNERS*] "Well, if the dust around here doesn't choke us to death, we'll be able to freeze in comfort."

JOHN: Yes?

WILETTA: We laugh and dispute him. [*She illustrates*] "Oh, now, Mr. Manners, it ain't that bad!" . . . White folks can't stand unhappy Negroes . . . so laugh, laugh when it ain't funny at all.

JOHN: Sounds kind of Uncle Tommish.

WILETTA: You callin' me a "Tom"?

JOHN: No, ma'am.

WILETTA: Stop sayin' ma'am, it sounds countrified.

JOHN: Yes.

WILETTA: It is Tommish . . . but they do it more than we do. They call it bein' a "yes man." You either do it and stay or don't do it and get out. I can let you in on things that school never heard of . . . 'cause I know what's out here and they don't.

JOHN: Thank you. I guess I'll learn the ropes as I go along.

WILETTA: I'm tellin' you, now! Oh, you so lucky! Nobody told me, had to learn it for myself.

[*JOHN is trying to hide the fact that he does not relish her instructions.*]

Another thing. He's gonna ask your honest opinion about the play. Don't tell him, he don't mean it . . . just say you're crazy about it . . . butter him up.

[*This remark really bothers JOHN.*]

JOHN: What *do* you think of our play?

WILETTA: Oh, honey, it stinks, ain't nothin' at all. Course, if I hear that again, I'll swear you lyin'.

JOHN: Why are you doing it? A flop can't make you but so rich.

WILETTA: Who said it's gonna flop? I said it ain't nothin', but things that aggravate me always *run* for a long time . . . cause what bugs me is what sends somebody else, if you know what I mean.

JOHN [*defensively*]: I studied it thoroughly and . . .

WILETTA: Honey, don't study it, just learn it.

JOHN: I wouldn't, couldn't play anything I didn't believe in . . . I couldn't.

WILETTA [*understands he's a bit upstage now*]: Oh, well, you just a lost ball in the high grass.

~~[MILLIE DAVIS, an actress about thirty-five years old, enters. She breezes in, beautifully dressed in a mink coat, pastel wool dress and hat, suede shoes and bag.]~~

~~MILLIE: Hi!~~

~~WILETTA: Walk, girl! Don't she look good?~~

~~MILLIE: Don't look too hard, it's not paid for.~~