

WITNESS

KAREN HESSE

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ISBN 978-1-338-35967-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 40
This edition first printing 2019

The text type was set in Fournier. The display type was set in Canterbury Old Style.
Book design by Elizabeth B. Parisi

Setting: Vermont

Time: 1924

ACT ONE

leanora sutter

i don't know how miss harvey
talked me into dancing in *the fountain of youth*.
i don't know how she knew i danced at all.
unless once, a long time ago, my mamma told her so.

but she did talk me into dancing.
i leaped and swept my way through *the fountain of youth*
separated on the stage from all those limb-tight white girls.

the ones who wouldn't dance with a negro,
they went home in a huff that first day,
but some came back.
they told miss harvey they'd dance,
but they wouldn't
touch any brown skin girl.

only the little girl from new york,
esther,
that funny talking kid,
only esther didn't mind about me being colored.

merlin van tornhout

i pushed the window up in school
to get the stink of leanora sutter out of the classroom
where miss harvey brought her to show off
a dance from last week's
recital.

mr. caldwell
chuffed his arms,
faked a shiver,
ramped the sash back down
saying the day was too cold to leave a window open.

leanora sutter
turned and stared through me
 that witchy girl
 with those fuming eyes
she meant to put a curse on me.
she meant to.

i left school right then.
no amount of air will get the smell of her
out of my nose,
the soot of her out of my eyes.

esther hirsh

i did first meet sara chickering
when i had comings here last year
to be a fresh air girl in vermont.

vermont is a nice place.
they have wiggle fish.
that is what i did tell daddy in new york
when i had comings back to him.
i did ask daddy
to have our livings in vermont with sara chickering
for keeps.

but daddy did say no.

so i made a long walk all by myself.
i did follow the train tracks and
pretty quick daddy did have comings after me.

sara chickering made two rooms to be for us
in her big farmhouse
with her dog jerry.
we have sitting every night at the round table, next to the hot stove.
and i do catch the wiggle fish through
a hole sara chickering does make in the ice.

daddy gives helps when
sara chickering has needs for extra big hands.
but daddy is a shoe man. he has shoe knowings.
my friend sara chickering, she has knowings of all things else.

leanora sutter

in school willie pettibone handed me an article
torn from the town paper.
it said:

*any person to whom an evening of hearty laughter is poison
had better keep away from the community club minstrel show
friday evening at the town hall. all others will be admitted
for a night of fun brought to you by 22 genuine
black-faced "coons."*

felt like skidding on ice as i read,
felt like twisting steel.

why can't folks just leave me alone?

daddy says:

how alone you want to be, leanora?
you're already nothing but a wild brown island.

percelle johnson

roads were bad.
don't blame me.
it's not my fault.
these roads are nothing but hog wallow during a thaw.
folks ought to know that.

wright sutter should have thought
before bringing his wife and child along to town with him.
that wasn't my fault,
his horse and wagon miring down,
stuck in the mud.
i wasn't even on duty.
not my fault he couldn't get help.
no one too energetic about helping a colored man hereabouts,
even if he is a neighbor.
sutter, making deliveries, left his womenfolk in the wagon too long.
wife took a chill,
waiting. she put her wrap around the little girl,
leanora.
sick all year, sutter's wife was. doc flitt said
she ought to go away to a sanatorium to get her health back.
wright sutter didn't have money for that.
even if there was a sanatorium for colored folk.
the sutter woman died this past spring.

don't blame me.
the roads were bad.