

anything, nor seemed inclined to rip buttons off their shirts to help her in her plight, but a kindly man wearing outside overalls standing by the filling station gave her part of his sandwich and told her that if her eyes were good and her fingers could move fast, they were always hiring this time of year up the road a ways in Ottawa.

It took her two days to get there. The first day she walked because she didn't like the look of the drivers of the few vehicles that went by. On the second day she had three rides that took her fewer than ten miles each and then a fourth, in the early evening, that drove her right up to the Radium Dial Company's doors. The office was closed but there was a sign on the window that read "Hardworking Girls Wanted." She was standing under it first thing the next day.

She was to sit in a large, airy room in the converted high school and paint the numbers on clock faces with luminous paint. This was, she was told, important work. Not just households across the region but the mighty armed forces of the nation were depending on it being done well. She received twenty minutes of instruction, which included several comments about the safety of the dull yellow powder she was supposed to dip her wet brush into before placing it between her lips to point the tip. The powder tasted like metal mixed with the late roots her aunt had always insisted they boil and eat, even when there were other options in the pantry cupboard, and her first few attempts at making lines and numbers on the practice faces were a mess. She soon saw how it could be done, though, and her instructor nodded, patted her once on the shoulder, and told her she could now work on the real thing.

When the instructor was gone, the girls on either side of Zorrie rose as one from their places, took her by her elbows, and led her into the adjoining, windowless lavatory, where with some ceremony they had her stand in front of the mirror over the sink before flipping the lights off. First Zorrie saw that her lips were alive with yellow, and then that her fingertips were covered in glowing splotches. The girls behind her were glowing too. One of them had painted a heart on her cheek. The other had painted an eye on her forehead. Their hair and dresses shimmered. Their lips and teeth too were golden. They waved their arms and shook their shoulders and, as they giggled, sent off little clouds of glowing powder to drift through the dark.

“I’m Marie Martins,” said the one with the heart. “And I’m Janie Clemmons,” said the one with the eye. Zorrie’s head felt like it might float off her shoulders when she came out of the bathroom behind them, and her feet felt just as light. She thought she might rise entire from the floor to twist and float against the ceiling beams. Marie and Janie shared their lunches with her. They ate at their places and had a bowl of peppermints they encouraged Zorrie to help herself to. All the girls kept candy near them to counter the taste of the paint. They laughed a great deal and made their brushes fly over the clock faces and almost never stopped talking as they worked.

Zorrie had slept the night before in the hayloft of an abandoned barn behind a wheat field that ran green and sloping in its new growth down to the banks of the Illinois, and when the day had gone to its grave, she started off for it. Janie called her back, though. She said Zorrie wasn’t going to sleep in any barn. Zorrie asked how Janie knew where she was heading,

and Janie laughed and said Ottawa was just a little bitty town. For her part, she planned to move to Chicago as soon as she had tucked enough away, she told Zorrie as they went back to her house. She would live in her own apartment and take the L each day and never come back home to Ottawa. Well, except maybe sometimes on holidays. She didn't like Christmas much, but Easter and the Fourth of July were fun. Zorrie asked her what the L was. Janie laughed again and hooked her arm through Zorrie's. When they got to her house, Janie hugged and kissed and shoved her way through a horde of younger brothers and sisters, and, once they were in the small room she got to herself because she had started bringing in money, showed Zorrie a picture postcard of an elevated rail line that ran thirty feet off the ground. "You'll think about clock faces tonight, but stay here a while and you'll be thinking about trains that can drop you off in the stars."

Zorrie was too tired to think about clocks or anything else that first night and the ones that followed, and was happy for it, but she never grew tired of listening to Janie talk about Chicago. Sometimes Marie came over and took a seat at the huge table Janie's mother set, and when they had finished helping clean up afterward, the three of them would step out into the quiet streets. Once or twice they met up with other girls from the plant and would walk in a large glowing group through the town. Zorrie saw her first movie in their company. She ate her first ice cream sundae with them. She collected her first paycheck with Marie on one side of her and Janie on the other, and that was the way they sat together during Sunday services. They swam in both the Fox and the Illinois. They lifted their hands above their heads and kicked their heels and shook the fringes of their dresses at the boys who

were always just a soft holler away, always ready to joke and dance. Zorrie talked about home and Indiana so often she didn't even know she was doing it. One of the other girls at work started referring to her as "Indiana," but the nickname didn't stick. People in town called everyone who worked with a brush at the radium plant "ghost girls." One night Zorrie and Janie painted the bed frame of her littlest sisters with circles and squares so that it would glow while they slept. They told them a story to go with the design about a magical country filled with fairies. Zorrie thought of the landscape around her aunt's house when she told her part of the story, though she didn't say this. Marie almost always kept a tin of the company's Luna powder on her, and whenever an evening out on Janie's porch grew too dull or just quiet, she would toss a glittering pinch of it up into the air and break into song: "Ghost girl, ghost girl, why'd you grow your hair so long?"

The subject of hair was a favorite one of the assistant supervisor. He thought the young women should do more than tie it back when they were bent over their brushes and dials, that they should wear it in special hats or nets for safety, but the girls all laughed this off and told him it would look too awful. The assistant supervisor was full of ideas to combat the dangers of the world. He was somewhat deaf, from a bout of fever in his childhood, and, it seemed to Zorrie, spoke more than he would have if listening had come more easily. Radium was a favorite subject. He said it was more marvelous than gold, more precious than diamonds. He said that someday great tales would be written about radium, that they were already being shaped, perhaps on this very floor. He liked to tell the girls that he put a pinch of radium in everything he drank and everything he ate. He even put

radium in the bottles of Coca-Cola he got at the drugstore and drank every day with his lunch. There was dinnerware made with radium and beads made with radium that would allow a neck or wrist ornament to glow and glow. In Europe a company had woven radium with wool to keep children extra warm. "Think of it," he said to Zorrie. "I want to learn how they do it, then try it myself to see if I can get it done."

Zorrie thought of it. She had often felt cold as a child, and even on chilly mornings at church her aunt had never let her sit close enough to warm her. If she had been able to wear a layer of warm radium, perhaps she wouldn't have missed the mother she had barely known quite as much. She asked Janie what it was like to have a mother, and Janie leaned over and gave Zorrie a kiss on the top of her head and then turned her around and gave her a quick kick in her seat and told her that having a mother was those two things, and that if sometimes it was more of one than the other, it all balanced out in the end. Marie said it wasn't kisses and kicks with her mother. It was more like breeze and wind or rain and snow. "You have to shovel snow when it starts to stick," said Janie. Zorrie wasn't sure why this was funny, but when they both started laughing, she joined in.

Often as they walked through town or down along the river, Zorrie would think of Mr. Thomas, and her sharp eye would spot something worth picking up. She took to making gifts of the abandoned nests, arrowheads, monarch wings, turtle shells, and fistfuls of four-leaf clovers she would find. Marie got a river shell that seemed to glow as beautifully as Luna paint when the sun struck it, and Janie an overlarge pearl, lost some long-ago season in the back of an otherwise

empty drawer in an abandoned house they explored one Sunday after church. Janie said there wasn't anything you could buy in a store that was prettier. Both wore their gifts on strings around their necks the next time they went dancing. Hands and cheeks had been painted to glow, but it was the shell and the pearl that caught the most light. Indeed the boys that night turned into moths, crowding Janie and Marie so closely that more than once Zorrie had to help swat them away. "You are a giver of gifts and a gallant defender and we will love you forever," they said in unison, staring into her eyes during a break in the dancing. When the evening had come to its close, and the crowd had started to disperse, the three of them joined hands and went off running through the empty streets, leaping and shrieking and laughing under a giant moon.

It was times like these that Zorrie knew she would miss the most when, near the end of her second month, she gave in to the call of Indiana and climbed onto a bus and waved to her friends through the dusty window and went home. Only there was no home to go to. She had had vague thoughts, encouraged by Janie, about trying to lay some claim to her aunt's property, but the county official she worked her nerve up to speak to said that because her aunt's considerable, long-standing debts had remained unsettled at the time of her death, it had already been auctioned off.

Still, it was Indiana, it was the dirt she had bloomed up out of, it was who she was, what she felt, how she thought, what she knew. Janie had tried to convince her that the Illinois dirt was the same as the Indiana dirt and that the Illinois skies were the same as the Indiana skies, but she had failed. Zorrie sent Janie the letter she had promised and got one back