CRUMBS FROM THE TABLE OF JOY
Lynn Nottage

The Play: A complex, thought-provoking play, Crumbs from the Table of Joy tells the story of an African-American family recently relocated from Florida to Brooklyn in search of a better life: the recently widowed Godfrey and his daughters, Ernestine (Ernie) and Ermina. Once arrived, their lives move through a series of unsettling incidents as the girls' politically and socially active aunt, Lily, makes her presence felt. Godfrey, who has turned to religion, eventually finds a new wife in Gerte, a quiet German immigrant who suffered through the horrors of World War II. Godfrey attempts to keep the family together, but the girls, particularly Ernie, is closer to her spiritual mother, Lily, and sets off for Harlem to find her and a new life.

Time and Place: 1950s. Brooklyn, N.Y.

The Scene: Ernestina, having escaped to the movies for awhile, finds herself on a crowded street corner in Harlem looking for her aunt, Lily Ann Green.

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ERNESTINE: (To audience) In the movies the darkness precedes everything. In the darkness, the theater whispers with anticipation . . . (Ernestine stands, she's on a crowded street corner in Harlem. Lost and confused on the noisy street corner.) Finally, Harlem . . . Lost, “does anybody know how I get to Lenox Avenue? Lenox Avenue? The Party headquarters! You know, Lily Ann Green. Lily Ann Green. Lily . . .” (Ernestine holds out a sheet of paper) Nothing’s there but an empty bar “Chester’s.” Blue flashing neon, sorta nice. I order a sloe gin fizz and chat with the bartender about the weather. It looks like rain. It’s only men. They make me nervous. But they remember Lily. Everyone does. So I tell them, “I’ve come to enlist, in the revolution of course. To fight, the good fight. I got a high school diploma. I’ll do anything. I’ll scrub floors if need be. You see, I care very much about the status of the Negro in this country. We can’t just sit idly by, right? Lily said we used to live communally in Africa and solve our differences through music by creating riffs off of a simple timeline building out toward something extraordinary, like . . . bebop.” The bartender tells me he knows just the place I’m looking for, address 137th Street between Convent and Amsterdam. And here I find myself standing before this great Gothic city rising out of Harlem. Black, gray stone awash. At the corner store they tell me it’s . . . City College. (A moment.) In the movies . . . well . . . Years from now I’ll ride the subway back to Brooklyn. I’ll visit Daddy and Gerte and we’ll eat a huge meal of bratwurst and sweet potatoes and realize that we all escape somewhere and take comfort sometimes in things we don’t understand. And before I graduate Ermina will give birth to her first child, lovely Sandra. She’ll move home with Nana for a few years and she’ll be the one to identify Lily’s cold body poked full of holes her misery finally borne out. Years from now I’ll read the Communist Manifesto, The Souls of Black Folks, and Black Skin, White Masks and find my dear Lily amongst the pages. Still years from now I’ll remember my mother and the sweet-smelling humid afternoons by the Florida waters, and then years from now I’ll ride the Freedom bus back down home enraged and vigilant, years from now I’ll marry a civil servant and argue about the Vietnam war, integration, and the Black Panther movement. Years from now I’ll send off one son to college in New England and I’ll lose the other to drugs and sing loudly in the church choir. (She lifts her suitcase, beaming.) But today I’m just riffing and walking as far as these feet will take me. Walking . . . riffing . . . riffing . . . riffing. (Lights slowly fade as Ernestine continues to repeat the line over and over again.)

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song like “Some Enchanted Evening” gives way to a bebop version of the song. Blackout.)