

DANCE OF RESISTANCE



The
JOSEPHINE
BAKER
Story

"Magnificent"
SITA BRAHMACHARI

CATHERINE JOHNSON

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The JOSEPHINE BAKER Story

CATHERINE JOHNSON

With illustrations by
Katie Hickey

Barrington  Stoke

*Thanks to Harry for all her help, and Mr Smith
for everything else*

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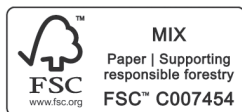
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CHAPTER 1

East St Louis, USA

Some people say I changed the world. I like that. I reckon this world needs a heap of changes. My name is Josephine Baker. I was a superstar. Maybe even the first Black superstar in the world.

I was born in the heat of summer. I don't remember just how hot it was, but my birthday was June 3rd 1906. My mama's name was Carrie. She told me my daddy was a man called Eddie Carson, who played the drums. But sometimes she said she didn't know who my daddy was. Some people say he was a white man, which would explain why I was a different colour to the rest of my family.



Mama married a man named Arthur, who wasn't mean like some folk. Mama and Arthur had three more babies. There was my brother Richard, who we called Brothercat at home, and my two baby sisters, Margaret and Willie Mae. My nickname was Tumpy, given to me by Mama because I was as round as Humpty Dumpty.

We lived close to the rail tracks in East St Louis. Me and Richard spent our childhood running wild with a gang of children. We'd steal coal from the train yards and watch the pleasure boats that ran up and down the river.

But when we had enough pennies, there was only one thing I ever wanted to do: go to our local theatre, the Booker T. Washington, and watch the shows.

"C'mon, Tumpy," said Brothercat one day, tugging on my arm. "I wanna go see the boats." Both of us had just come home from school,

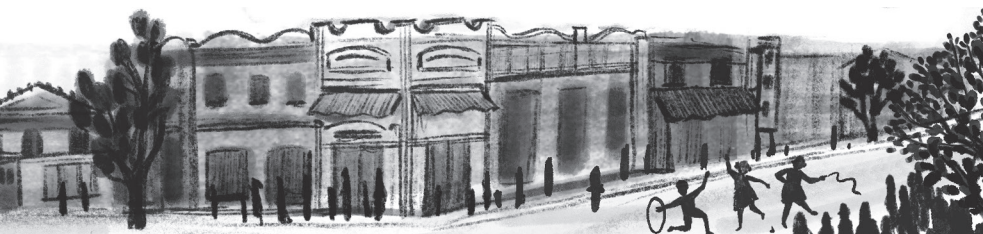


but I'd made a few cents running an errand on the way.

"Go look at the boats yourself if you wanna see them so bad!" I told him. "*I'm* going to the theatre." But of course poor little Brothercat didn't want to run off without me, so he followed me to the theatre instead.

"Two, please!" I said to the attendant. I had to stand on my tiptoes to hand over the ten cents it cost each to get in.

That afternoon's show was a little troupe of performing dogs. They were ever so sweet and funny. Next to me, my brother squealed with laughter as they stood up on their back legs and hopped around. But my eyes were on the man who told us their names and gave them their instructions and held up the hoop for the dogs to jump through.



The way he talked about those dogs made it feel like we were looking at the smartest animals that'd ever lived. Even back then, I knew I wanted what that man had – not those three little dogs doing tricks, but the audience watching him, hanging off his every word.

Brothercat loved the performing dogs, but I loved the music and dancers at the theatre. Nothing made my heart sing like hearing that music play and watching the dancing girls and boys.

One day, I told myself, that would be me.

*

We lived in the meanest, most run-down part of the city of St Louis. Our rent was cheap, but we still couldn't always afford it, so we had to move around a lot.



With six mouths to feed, we were very poor. Mama Carrie worked hard taking in washing and all sorts, while my stepfather Arthur never lasted more than a few weeks in any job.

But the pennies I saved to go to the Booker T. Washington were always worth it. I would play theatre whenever I could, dressing up in old coats or curtains and pretending to be on stage. Mama told me my ratty old curtains belonged in the trash where I'd found them, but to me they could become gowns and cloaks and long, long hair.

Every day before school, me and Brothercat went out to the market to collect any vegetables people didn't want. But one morning, when I was just seven years old, Mama caught me by the elbow.

"You go ahead," she told my brother.
"Tumpy, you're coming with me today."



She brought me back into the house and scrubbed my face so hard it hurt. Then she made me put on my Sunday-best dress.

“Where are we going, Mama?” I asked.

She sighed. “You know money’s tight, Tumpy. We need every penny we can get. I’ve found you a job.”

