

Walter Mosley

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For Sally McCartin
—W.M.

The story you are about to read concerns certain events that occurred in the early days of my life. It all happened over a hundred and seventy years ago. For many of you it might sound like a tall tale because I am no older today than I was back there in the year 1832. But this is no whopper I'm telling you; it is a story about my boyhood as a slave and my fated encounter with the amazing Tall John from beyond Africa, who could read dreams, fly between galaxies, and make friends with any animal no matter how wild.

There are many things in the world that most people don't know about. For instance, when I was young nobody ever dreamed that there would be radios and televisions and powerful jet planes that could fly across the ocean in only a few hours. But all of those things were possible back then even though nobody knew it.

My story is like that. It's about science that seems like magic even today and about the barbaric practice of slavery that so many of our ancestors had to endure.

I'm putting down these words because I'm the only one left alive who remembers what it was like to be a slave in the land of the free, the United States, and I think that it is important for other people to understand what this experience was like.

I made an oath all those years ago not to inform the general population about the science I was exposed to back then, but I don't think that by telling this tale I will be breaking my vow because most people who read these words won't believe in the incredible inventions that were revealed to me by Tall John.

You have to have quite an imagination to believe in his Sun Ship or his power over dreams.

I hope that you will enjoy this tale of adventure and derring-do. But even as you thrill to the dangers and valiant trials of the heroes that lived back then, I hope you will get a little understanding of what it was like to live as a slave at that time. Slavery might be the most unbelievable part of this whole story but I assure you—it really happened.

I lived as a slave on the Corinthian Plantation my whole life up to the time that Tall John ran out of the back woods and into my life. I have no idea exactly how long the time before Tall John might have been, but I was most likely about fourteen years old at that time. Slaves didn't have birthday parties like the white children of Master or the white folk that either worked for Master or lived on the larder of his home.

Slaves didn't have birthday parties and so they didn't have ages like the white people did. Big Mama Flore always said that "White peoples gots as many ages as you can count but slaves on'y gots four ages. That's babychile, boy or girl, old boy or old girl, an' dead."

I loved Big Mama Flore. She was round and soft and always gave me a big hug in the morning. She was one of the only ones who ever showed me kindness when I was little.

My mother died when I was too young to remember her face. Big Mama told me that my mother, her name was Psalma, had a boyfriend over at the Williams Plantation but she would never tell anybody who he was because she didn't want him getting into trouble for sneaking out to see her in the big house at night.

Flore also told me that that man nobody knew was my father.

"She didn't even tell you his name, Big Mama?" I asked when she would tell me the sad story of Psalma Turner when I was still too little to have to work in the cotton fields.

"No, babychile," Big Mama said. "Master Tobias would'a give a Christmas ham to the nigger told who had fathered his wife's favorite maid's baby. He'd walk through the slave quarters at night sayin' that he would give the man who looked like Psalma's baby to Mr. Stewart for punishment. So if some slave knew who it was that yo' mama was seein' he would'a done hisself a big favor by tellin' Master Tobias his name. An' onceit Tobias iknowed who that slave was he was sure to end up in Mr. Stewart's shack."

Tobias Turner was Master's name and Mr. Stewart was his overseer. The overseer made sure that all us slaves worked hard and didn't cause any ruckus or break the Rules. The Rules were that you did as you were told, didn't talk back, never complained, and stayed in your place.

Mr. Stewart had a shack that stood out in the middle of a stand of live oaks behind the slave quarters. And if you were ever unlucky enough to get sent back there then you were in serious trouble. Many a slave never returned from Mr. Stewart's *killin' shack*. And those that did come back were never the same.

I hadn't seen Mr. Stewart's torture chamber at that time but I knew about it because I had heard stories from those few souls that survived his torments. They said that he had a pine table that was twice as long as a tall man is tall and that there were leather straps on both ends that he would tie to a slave's wrists and ankles. The straps were attached to baskets filled with heavy stones that would stretch a poor soul's legs and arms out so far from their sockets that afterward the slave could hardly even lift his feet off the ground to walk and he would have to use both of his hands just to get the food to his mouth to eat.

"Yes, sir," Big Mama Flore would say in the backyard under the big magnolia tree that Una Turner's great grandfather planted when he settled the land back before any living slave, even Mud Albert, could remember. "Yes indeedy. If Master Tobias knowed who your father was that man wouldn'ta stood a nigger's chance on the main road at midday."

I was brokenhearted when Big Mama would tell the story about my mother and her sad end. Whe

Psalma died giving birth to me, Una Turner told Master Tobias that I was to remain on her family's plantation for as long as I lived as a remembrance to my mother.

Una loved my mother because of her voice. It was said that Psalma Turner had the most beautiful voice that anyone on Corinthian Plantation had ever heard. Miss Una had a weak constitution and bad nerves and when she would have an attack it was only my mother's singing that would keep her from despair.

Miss Una loved my mother so much, Big Mama Flore said, that she would have been sure to keep me up in the big house with her—if she had lived. But three years after my mother died Miss Una had one of her attacks and without Psalma's singing she succumbed to the malady and passed over to the Upper Level and back to the place that all life comes from.

Some time after Miss Una died Master Tobias named me Forty-seven and told Big Mama that when I was big enough I was meant to live out in the slave quarters and work in the cotton fields with all the other slaves. Master Tobias didn't like me because he blamed my mother for getting pregnant and stealing herself from his property by dying. But he didn't want to sell me off because it was Miss Una's dying wish to keep me on her plantation near my mother's grave.

Until I grew Master Tobias made me live in the barn, feeding and grooming the horses and running any errands that the house slaves had for me. I made myself pretty scarce out there because whenever Master saw me he'd remember my mother and then he'd get mad and look to see if I'd done something wrong. And if there was one straw out of place he would tell Big Mama Flore to get her razor strap and whip my backside. Big Mama didn't want to beat me but she did anyway because Tobias was watching.

After these beatings, when Master was gone, Big Mama would fold me in her arms and apologize. “I sorry, babychile, but if'n I didn't make you cry he would'a took the strap,” she'd say, “and whip you hard enough to draw blood.”

“Why he hate me so much, Big Mama?” I'd whine.

“He blame you for his wife dyin',” she'd say. “He just hurt so much inside an' you the on'y one le alive that he could blame.”

“But I din't do nuthin'.”

“Shhh, baby. You just stay outta Tobias's way. Don't look up when he's around an' always do all your work an' more than that so you don't give him no reason to have me beat you.”

We both knew that when I got big enough to work in the fields he'd give me over to Mr. Stewart when he got mad. And Mr. Stewart would use a bullwhip on my bare back. He might even stretch my bones until I was dead.

We both knew that I was safe from Mr. Stewart until I grew big enough to pick cotton, so Mama Flore didn't feed me meat or milk so that I'd stay small and not have to go to work in the cotton fields.

I wasn't allowed in the big house. The only times I was ever there was when Big Mama sneaked me in so I could see how grand the white peoples' lives were.

So I lived in the barn my whole life until just before Tall John came to the plantation. In that time Big Mama Flore made my acquaintance with Mud Albert and Champ Noland. Mud Albert was the oldest slave on the plantation and Champ was the strongest. Champ once carried a full-grown mule across the yard in front of the mansion. Albert and Champ loved Big Mama and so they told her that they would take me under their wings when I had to go out in the slave quarters and live with the rough element out there.

I spent most of my time working hard and avoiding Master's angry attention. But it wasn't all hard work and beatings. The barn was very large and it had a little window at the very top for ventilation. When nobody was looking I used to climb up to that window and pretend that I was in the crow's nest of some great ship coming from Europe or Africa. I had heard about these ships from some of the slaves that had been brought in chains from across the seas and from some of the house slaves who had seen pictures of the great three-mast sailboats in books from Master's library.

I'd sit up there at the end of the day, watching while the slaves picked cotton in the fields, pretending that I was the lookout put up there to tell the captain when there was some island paradise where we could drop our anchor.

And sometimes, if I was very lucky, I would catch a glimpse of Miss Eloise—Tobias's daughter.

Eloise. She was dainty and white as a china plate. Her pale red hair and green eyes were startling. In my mind she was the most beautiful creature in all of Georgia.

When Eloise would come out to play I'd squeeze down behind the sill of the open window and watch. Even when she was alone she laughed while she played, swinging on her swing chair or eating sweets on the veranda.

Every time I saw her in the yard behind the Master's mansion I got a funny feeling all over. I wanted to go down there and be happy with her but I knew that a nigger* like me wasn't allowed even to look at someone like Miss Eloise.

One day, when Eloise was sitting in her swing chair alone, I stuck my head out to see what she was doing. But I didn't realize that the sun was at my back and that it cast the shadow of my head down into Miss Eloise's lap.

She looked up, squinting at the sun, and said, "Who's up there?"

I ducked down under the windowsill but that didn't stop her from calling.

"Who's up there spying on me?" she cried. "Come out right now or I'll call my daddy."

I knew that if Miss Eloise called her father I'd get more than a whipping from Big Mama's razor strap. He might whip me himself until I was knocked out and bleeding like the slaves I'd seen him bullwhip while they were tied to the big wagon wheel in the main yard.

I stood up and looked out.

"Yes'm, Miss Eloise?" I said. "I been workin' up here. Is it me you want?"

"You were spying on me," she said.

"No, ma'am," I assured her. "I's jes' workin'."

"Doin' what?"

If ever you tell a lie you should know where it's goin'. That's what Mud Albert would tell me. I should have heeded those words before telling Eloise that I was at work. Because there was no work for a groom like me up in the high part of the barn.

"Breshin' the horses," I said lamely.

"There ain't no horses in the top'a the barn," she said, pointing an accusing finger at me. "You're malingering up there, ain't you, boy?"

"I's sorry," I said, near tears from the fear in my heart.

"Come down here," Eloise said in a very serious tone.

I climbed down the ladder from the roof and ran through the barn and to the yard, where the young white girl stood. She wore a yellow bonnet held under her chin by a red ribbon, and a yellow dress with a flouncy slip underneath the skirt. She was eleven years old and pretty as a child can be.

I came up to her with my head hanging down and my eyes on the ground.

"Yes'm?" I said.

“Were you spyin' on me, boy?”

“I was jes lookin', Miss Eloise. I didn't know you was down here.”

“Why you lookin' at your feet?” she asked. “You know it's rude not to look at someone when you're talkin' to 'em.”

“I ain't s'posed to look at you, ma'am. You's a white lady an' niggers ain't s'posed to look at white ladies.”

It was true. Even Fred Chocolate, Master Tobias's butler, was not supposed to look at a white woman straight on.

“You were lookin' at me from up in the barn,” she said.

“No, ma'am,” I lied. “I mean I looked out but I didn't know that you was there.”

“That's not true,” she said.

“I swear it is,” I said, still looking at my feet.

“Look up at me this instant, you insolent boy,” she said then.

I raised my head slowly. I had to look up because Eloise was elevated above me, on the porch. When I saw her face there was a big smile on it.

“Don't be scared,” she said. “I won't tell.”

My heart skipped at her kind words. I felt as if she were saving me even though it was her threats that I was afraid of.

“Do you want a molasses cookie?” she said.

“Yes, ma'am,” I replied.

From a tin can on the swinging chair she brought out a big brown cookie. She knelt down in her pretty dress and handed it to me.

“Now run along,” she said. “And don't worry, I won't tell that you were lookin'.”

I ran back into the barn and up to my crow's nest. Mama Flore had let me taste the crumbs from cookies before but I never had a whole one, or even a proper piece. I sat up next to the window and ate my cookie, thinking of young Eloise.

I was hoping that somehow she would remember me and make me her page. That way I could always be near her and eat sugary cookies every night of the week.

That was all before I met Tall John and learned that no man or woman should serve another because that made them a slave.

Time went by and I stayed pretty small. But even still Master Tobias one day told Flore that he reckoned I was old enough to begin the lifelong chore of picking cotton.

“Maybe a few months out workin' will make him grow into a man,” I heard him say to Flore.

He told her that the next day he would send Mr. Stewart up to the barn with orders to drag me out to the slave quarters. I knew that I had to go, and Big Mama Flore had spent the night before talking and singing to me so that I wouldn't be so scared. But when that mean-eyed, rat-faced, red-necked Mr. Stewart came to take me I went into a fit of kicking and screaming. The whole time I kicked and shouted I worried that Mr. Stewart was going to take me out to the killin' shack for being so unruly. But as much as I was afraid to be stretched I was even more scared of the slave quarters.

Nothing I had ever heard about the slave quarters sounded good. It smelled bad in there and it was too hot in the summer and freezing cold in the winter. And every night they chained your feet to an eyebolt in the floor. The men out there were mostly angry and so they were always fighting or crying or just plain sad. But the worst thing they said about the slave quarters was that once you were there you stayed there for the rest of your life. You either worked in the field or you stayed chained in your bunk. And so I knew that once I went out there I'd never spend any time with Mama Flore again.

Mr. Stewart would get hold of my wrist and drag me half the way across the yard and then I'd twist one way or t'other until I slipped from his grasp. Then I made a bee-line back for the big house, screaming bloody murder and for Big Mama Flore to come and save me.

Three times the evil overseer dragged me into the yard and three times I broke away and tried to make it back to Big Mama Flore's skirts. The white men who worked for the plantation were all around the pigsty laughing at Mr. Stewart, which made him start to curse me.

He grabbed me by the shoulder and shouted, “You little nigger, you better com'on like I say or I'll whip you until you're so bloody red that they'll call you injun!”

I knew he was trying to scare me into being tame but between the pain in my shoulder and his reputation as a slave-killer I couldn't help but bolt again. That time I was so scared that I outpaced the overseer and made it all the way to the side door of the big house. The door was open and I could see Mama Flore standing there. I ran as fast as a wild pig but just as I got to the door Mama Flore slammed it in my face. I could still see her through the little window, but then she pulled curtains closed.

All I could do was to look up at the fancy cloth and cry out her name.

“Big Mama, help!”

I pulled at the door handle but it was latched. As I grabbed onto that knob I could feel Mr. Stewart's grip on my shoulder again. He dragged me off while I was yelling for Big Mama Flore to come save me. I didn't fight any more. I just let him drag me. I was still yelling but the pain in my heart was no longer fear of the slave quarters; I was hurting because Mama Flore had abandoned me like Judas in the story Mud Albert once told me about the man who became like the plantation master of the whole world.

My first moments in the slave quarters might have been frightening if it wasn't for my broken heart over Big Mama slamming that door on me. I had run to her my whole life. When I'd fall and skin my

knee or when the thunderstorms would rage in our valley. If I woke up from a nightmare in the barn I could always run to Mama Flore's bed in the small alcove next to the kitchen.

I was an *inconsolable soul* as Tall John once told me that all of mankind was.

“Human beings,” John said, “are lost in the needs of their bodies. Most of the time they're hungry or hurting or sleepy or looking for something to satisfy those needs. They're so busy taking care of bodily things that they don't see the world all around them.”

But John, and all of his big words, came into my life a little later on—after my early experiences in the slave quarters.

It was afternoon when Mr. Stewart tossed me into the man-slaves' cabin.

“Not one more peep outta you, Nigger Forty-seven,” he said, “or I will take you back to my cabin and drive knives into your spine.”

This threat cut off my crying for the few seconds that the brutal overseer stared at me. I held back until he stamped out of the room.

The slave cabins were long and narrow like the barracks for soldiers in the army. The one that was to be my new home was made all of wood with twenty-three two-tiered bunks down each side and one feather bed with a pitted brass frame up front.

There were, I knew, ninety-three slaves in the men's slave cabin at any one time. When a man-slave died or got too old to work or ran away or was sold off for one reason or another there would always be a new slave to take his place. It was the same with the women field slaves. The women had one extra rule that the men didn't have—that was female slaves were not allowed to get pregnant. If one did, without Master's permission, then she was punished and sometimes killed. Master Tobias didn't want to care for a slave if she was pregnant and could not work. And he didn't want worthless little pickaninnies running around eating and taking up the women's attention.

Sometimes Tobias would want to have his strongest male slaves reproduce and other times he might want to take some comely slave woman to his bed. But other than that there was no unauthorized congress between slaves or between the white workers and slaves. And so the women had their separate cabin and numbered eighty-nine.

The stench of the slave cabin was unbearable to my spoiled nose. There were the odors of sweat and urine and vomit and general rot. And it was hot in there too. Between the heat, the thick air, and my broken heart I felt that I might die right then and there.

“Well, well, well, what have we got here?” said Pritchard, man-slave Number Twenty-five.

He was the only other soul in the cabin. That's because Pritchard had broken his leg three years earlier and it had healed badly. Him and the slave Holland and some others were helping Master Tobias move a big flat stone from out of the backyard so that Miss Eloise could grow a dozen rose bushes in memory of her mother, the late Una Turner.

Holland and Pritchard, with the help of six or seven other slaves and a mule, had dragged that boulder to the edge of the garden and stood it up so they could let it fall down the side of the small slope there. It was Master Tobias's opinion that when the granite stone fell on the smaller rocks down the hill that it would shatter and make for smaller pieces that would have been easier to remove.

But they used the mule Lacto with a grappling hook to stand the stone up and Lacto must have seen a snake or something down the hill and bucked and ran before Holland and Pritchard could make it clear of the falling flat boulder. Pritchard tried to run but Holland was frozen with fright. So Pritchard just got his leg busted while Holland was crushed underneath the giant rock. You couldn't even see his body the stone was so big.

Master Tobias had been wrong about the stone shattering. It stayed in one piece and so Tobias sa

that they'd just leave it there for Holland's gravestone.

They called the horse doctor for Pritchard. After he surveyed the damage to the screaming slave's leg the veterinarian advised Tobias to put Pritchard down.

"That nigger's never gonna walk right again, Tobias," he said. "It's no different than I would tell you about a plow animal."

But slave Number Twenty-five cried and begged the Master not to kill him. He said that he could do carpentry work around the cabins and on the house.

"I's still useful, Mastah," I remember the miserable man crying. "Don't do me like a dawg. I's still a useful nigger, you'll see."

Tobias told Pritchard that he would think about it on the ride to Atlanta. He said that he'd be gone for nine days and when he came back he would make the decision of whether or not to put Twenty-five to sleep.

Before Tobias left that rat-faced Mr. Stewart asked what he should do about replacing Holland.

"What was his number?" Tobias asked.

"Forty-seven, sir."

"Save that number and give it to Psalma's bastard when he's ready."

It was the custom on the Corinthian Plantation to give all field slaves numbers. If they got a name along the way that was fine but they would be known to Master and the overseer by number in all of their record-keeping books.

For the first years of my life the only name I knew was babychile because that was all Mama Flo ever called me. Her friends in the big house all called me Baby for short, and if Master Tobias referred to me all he ever said was *Psalma's bastard* with acid on his tongue.

For nine days after the accident that maimed him Pritchard cried and dragged himself around the yard trying to work even though his leg must have hurt terribly. At night he would cry to himself and pray out loud to God to save him from being put down.

Master Tobias came back to find that Pritchard had made himself a rude crutch and a toolbox and he hobbled right up to Tobias's horse and said, "What you want me to fix up first, Mastuh?"

The sight of Pritchard's pain made Master laugh. I guess he thought it was funny how a pitiful slave would struggle so hard to keep his miserable life. Anyway, he let Pritchard live and in the days after that Pritchard would always say that going lame under that stone was the best thing that ever happened to him. He ate better and staggered around the yard fixing fences and doing odd jobs. And if the Master and Mr. Stewart weren't looking he'd sleep up in the trees on the south side of the plantation.

I never did understand how a man could be happy about being crippled but Mama Flo said, "A slave sometimes would rather kiss the Master's whip if that kept him from feeling its sting."

And so on my first day as a field slave this broken man, Pritchard, was there to greet me, leaning on a crutch cut from a poplar sapling and standing next to a small cast-iron stove. And even though it was a hot day, and hotter still in that close room, he had that stove going. He was holding an iron stick with a rag on one end and with the other end deep in the glowing embers.

"Well, well, well," Pritchard said again. "If it ain't Fat Flore's little puppy dog."

I didn't like him calling Big Mama fat, even though she was, and I didn't like being called her dog either. But I didn't say anything because even though Pritchard was lame he was still a man and I was only half his size and a little less.

"You know the first thing a nigger got to do when he come out chere to the slave quarters," Pritchard said in a loud voice that made me both frightened and angry. "He gots to get his name."

"I ain't s'posed to have no name!" I shouted, and this was true. Master Tobias had said, after his wife Una had died, that I wasn't to be called by any name because I was going to be a field slave and all a field slave needed was his number.

"That was before you came out to here." Pritchard smiled, showing me his brown, broken teeth. I was so scared that I was moving backwards and didn't even know it until my back touched up against the wall behind me.

"Mastuh told Mama Flore that she couldn't name me," I said, not understanding what it was that Pritchard meant.

He pulled the iron stick out of the stove and showed me the bright orange tip.

"Fat Flore ain't out here, boy," he said. "It's just me and you and I got your name right chere on this stick."

When I saw that glowing brand it dawned on me what Pritchard meant.

He was stripped to the waist because of the heat. And on his right shoulder I could see the scars from his branding. Every field slave on the plantation had their number branded on their right shoulder. This was the custom ever since Miss Una's great-grandfather had started the farm. The slaves all talked about how much that branding hurt, but because Flore had never been branded, I assumed that it wouldn't happen to me either. That's because I saw myself as different. I lived in the barn and didn't have a place like everybody else. I saw myself as a kind of young prince in that big shed—like Master Turner's daughter, Eloise, was the princess of the big house.

But at that moment I realized that being put in the slave quarters meant that I was going to be branded just like all the other slaves there.

I shouted "No!" and tried to run away, but the wall was at my back and Pritchard was right there front of me.

He had been a tall and hale man before his accident. But now he was bent and misshapen as if the damage done to his leg had gone all throughout his entire body. He was light-colored compared to Mud Albert or Fred Chocolate, Master Tobias's manservant. I was darker than Pritchard too.

"Don't do it!" I cried.

He dropped his crutch and reached for my arm but I ducked away and ran off into the long cabin. When I saw that I left him by the only door I realized that I was trapped.

"It's better to come and take it like a man, Forty-seven," Pritchard said in a scary voice. "Because if I have to fight with you, you gonna get all beat and bruised on top'a bein' branded. Take it like a man and it will only hurt like hell."

He picked up his crutch and grinned. I couldn't understand why he was so happy at the thought of causing me pain.

I was miserable then. The numbers on the end of that brand were smoking in the hot air. And I knew that if he marked me I would have lost any chance I ever had to be the prince of my dreams.

"Please don't do it! Please don't do it!" I shouted.

"I got to do it, boy," Pritchard said with that sickening grin on his lips. "It's my job to brand all the new niggers."

Pritchard moved with the shamle of a dead man, taking a step with his whole leg and then dragging the other. He was hunched over too. And he had a smile on his face all the time but you knew he wasn't thinking about anything funny. He moved in my direction and I inched away.

"I got to burn these numbers in your shoulder boy. Got to. That's my job. Here all this time you been layin' up in the barn, huggin' on Fat Flore an' eatin' corn cakes while us niggers be out here eatin' sour grain and strainin' in the cotton fields. Now you gonna know what it's like to sweat and strain an'

hurt.”

“It ain't my fault that they made you work so hard out here, Pritchard,” I said. “I din't want them to do that to you.”

“I seen you laughin' at me, boy. While I was carryin' them bags'a cotton, while I be hobblin' around on this broke down leg.”

He took a step toward me and I took a step back.

“I never laughed at you,” I pleaded. “If I laughed it's just because I was playin'.”

“You ain't gonna play no more, niggah,” he said as he crept forward. “After I burn these here numbers into yo' flesh you gonna know what it's like to be a nigger-slave workin' sunup to sundown until you vomit up your guts and die.”

As he said these words he took a quick step and threw the crutch at me. I tried to get out of the way but that twirling stick got between my legs and I went down. Before I could get to my feet again Pritchard was on me. He got both of my wrists together in one big hand and he lifted me up off of the ground. When he pulled me up next to his face I could smell his rotten breath.

“I'ma burn that numbah so far into you,” he said, “that after you die they gonna find it burnt into bone.”

He dragged me back across the room and no matter how hard I struggled I couldn't break his grip.

When we got back to the iron stove he dropped his crutch and pressed the iron, which had cooled back into the red embers.

“Please don't do this to me,” I begged. “Please don't. Please.”

“I'ma burn you good, boy,” was his reply. “I'ma burn you good.”

I screamed and pulled and kicked and bit trying to get away from that iron. But try as I would Pritchard got me down on the floor, pulled off my burlap shirt, and held my arms down with his knees. Then he pulled that poker out of the fire and said, “Here it come,” and then I felt a pain that I had never imagined a person could feel. It went all the way through me and I yelled and then I passed out for a short while.

I would have rather stayed unconscious but the pain in my shoulder was so great that I woke up crying. I wanted to touch the wound but it was too sore. Pritchard was saying something but I couldn't make it out because the pain wouldn't let me know anything else.

But then Pritchard yanked me up off the floor and yelled, “You bit me, niggah! Bit me on my arm!”

I heard him but somehow it didn't make sense. I was the one who hurt. How could anything he felt be so bad?

“Little bastard,” Pritchard said. “Just for that I'ma brand you again. See if'n you bite me this time.”

He pulled the brand out of the fire again and when I saw it I screamed louder than I ever had before, or since. Pritchard threw me on the hard floor and then held me down with his knees again.

“Here it come,” he said, but the brand never touched my skin.

“Get up from there, Twenty-five!” a man shouted.

It was Champ Noland.

Suddenly Pritchard was gone from on top of me. I heard the iron fall on the floor. I sat up and saw him backing away, brandishing his crutch. Then I saw Champ. He was very tall and powerful with a handsome black face except for a scar that ran over his right eye and back toward his ear.

Champ picked up the brand and put it back on the stove and then he went for Pritchard.

Pritchard was in for it because everyone on the plantation knew that you didn't mess with Champ

He was strong and fast and didn't even know what the word *pain* meant.

Champ moved in and Pritchard swung his crutch. It hit Champ on the shoulder but he didn't even grunt. He hit Pritchard so hard that the crippled slave fell to the floor and rolled away. Champ moved fast then and picked Pritchard up by his shirt.

"You know it's Mud Albert that s'posed to brand the new slaves," Champ said. "You know it ain't your job."

"But I was just tryin' to help out, Champ," Pritchard whined. "I didn't know I was doin' somethin' wrong."

I almost felt sorry for Pritchard in spite of the pain in my shoulder. He sounded like a lonely child wanting a playmate or a toy. In my mind I could see Champ letting the poor cripple go and walking back to see if I was hurt.

But instead Champ hit Pritchard and hit him again. He kept hitting him even though the poor man was screaming and begging for his life.

"Don't kill me, Champ!" Pritchard cried.

"Why you wanna make that little boy hurt?" Champ asked, and then he hit him.

"Don't kill me, Champ!"

"Do you like it when I beat on you like this?" Champ hit Pritchard again.

"No. No. I'm sorry. I's jes' doin' it to help out. I's jes' tryin' to help Mud Albert out."

"If you evah touch that boy again I will kill you," Champ said, and then he hauled off and delivered a terrible blow. "Kill you." And he hit him again.

Champ beat Pritchard until the lame slave wrapped himself around the big man's ankles, dripping blood and tears on Champ's bare feet.

I wanted Champ to stop hitting Pritchard but I knew that you couldn't interfere with men when they were fighting mad.

Finally Champ stamped away, leaving Pritchard like a heap of bloody rags.

"You okay, boy?" Champ asked me.

Looking up at him I thought I knew what angels must be. Because even though I was in terrible pain I realized that Champ had saved my life. And having those feelings I began to cry. I thought that a strong man like Champ would be disgusted with a crybaby, but instead he sat down and put his big hand on my back.

"It's okay, boy," he said. "We all cry when they burn us like that. I'm just sorry you didn't have us around you to help you feel bettah about the pain."

Mud Albert came back that evening with the rest of the slaves. Everyone was tired from a full day of picking cotton.

Ernestine, the cook's helper-slave, dragged a cast-iron pot out to the cabin and served us sour porridge in dirty wooden bowls. We were each given a big serving of the foul slop. I couldn't eat a bit of it.

“You gonna eat yo' suppa?” a small man I came to know as Julie asked.

“Naw.”

“Then hand it ovah to me.”

Julie took my bowl and started feeding himself with both hands. This is because they didn't give us forks or spoons to eat our mush. After all, we were slaves, not civilized human beings.

Mud Albert was the oldest man on the Corinthian or any nearby plantation. He walked with a limp and had many folds in his black face. His forehead was high and elegant. The only hair he had left was at his temples and gray. But for all his age Mud Albert was the most respected man among us slaves. He was fair and deliberate and he never, in anyone's memory, did a wrong thing to another man or woman.

Albert had sent Champ back to the cabin to see if I was there. Champ was to bring me out to the cotton fields but instead he stayed with me after Pritchard crawled away.

Albert and the other slaves came back at sunset, after fourteen backbreaking hours of picking cotton. That's the way ninety-nine percent of the slaves worked back in 1832—from sunup to sundown, seven days a week, three hundred sixty-five days a year.

When Albert saw my branded skin he took a jar out from under his brass bed. That was his bed because Albert was the head slave in charge of all the other field slaves. It was his job to make sure that we were all chained in every night and that we worked hard and that we didn't run away. For all that responsibility Master Tobias gave him a brass bed that was too old for white people to sleep in anymore.

Albert scooped a handful of foul-smelling paste out of the jar. Then he smeared this glop on my burns. It hurt even more and I yelled out but Albert told me that the lard and herbs would help to heal my shoulder.

After that Albert assigned me to Champ's cot.

The slaves all slept two to a bunk. We didn't have the space for the luxury of our own beds.

Before Albert turned down the lantern he went around chaining each one of us by our ankles to an eyebolt in the floor. They chained us down at night because it was accepted as general knowledge that a slave was most likely to decide to run in the dark.

I was happy to be there next to Champ but it was hard going to sleep with such a big man. He tossed and rolled in his sleep and sometimes pushed me almost out of the bed. But I never complained. I knew that Albert put me there so that Champ could watch over me and protect me from any other slaves like Pritchard who were jealous of the easy life I had before coming out to live with them.

One day, after I had been working in the cotton fields for a while, Mud Albert told me that it was hard for most young boys out among the man-slaves.

“Boys is soft and tendah,” he told me. “And men are rough. Boys need a mother's touch, but they won't put them among the women because it's forbade for male and female slaves to live together—

that is unless the master says it's all right.”

“Why?” I asked in the hot morning out among the cotton plants that seemed to go on forever.

“You'll know one day, boy,” Albert said. “But right now you don't have to worry acause Champ done said that he's lookin' out for you and after they seen what he done to Pritchard they gonna know bettah than to mess wit' you.”

“How come Champ ain't mean an' angry like Pritchard, Mud Albert?” I asked.

“Because Champ is the biggest, toughest, hardest-workin', friendliest slave anybody done ever see'd. He gets to visit with slave women all around the county and because'a that he don't get so rough.”

I counted my blessings that I knew Mud Albert and Champ Noland. But for a long time I forgot that it was Big Mama Flore that made my acquaintance with them.

The morning after Pritchard branded me they had us up before sunrise. You could see the stars shining through the cracks in the ceiling of the cabin as Mud Albert walked up and down the rows with a kerosene lantern shining in our eyes. Then he used his big brass key on each man's leg manacles so that they could get up and go to work.

Champ grunted and turned over, almost crushing me.

“Sorry, boy,” he said, and he lifted up so that I could crawl out to the floor.

We went to relieve ourselves in the ditch out behind the cabins. Across the way we could see the women and the girls crouching down and doing the same.

Then we were marched out into the cotton fields for the day's work. Even though the sun wasn't up yet you could feel the heat of the day rising. The air was full of biting flies and gnats and there was the strong smell of animal manure in the mud. It's strange the things you remember. The worst part of the first day was the sharp rocks sticking into the soles of my feet. The only piece of clothing I owned was a big burlap shirt that felt like sandpaper on my skin. I had no pants or shoes or hat to wear. My sleeves came way down over my hands.

Before the sun came up I was paired off with a woman named and numbered eighty-four. She was quite a bit taller than I but not much older: fifteen or sixteen the way white people counted. She'd already given birth to two children by slave men that Master thought would sire strong backs.

Her children had been sold off right after they were born and so Eighty-four had turned sour.

Her hands were rougher than my burlap shirt and I hardly understood a word she said.

Eighty-four had lived almost her whole life out among the slaves in the women's cabin and had nothing to do with white folks except for Mr. Stewart and his cruel work-hands. Me and Champ and especially Mama Flore spent time learning how the white people talked and acted.

To tell you what Eighty-four looked like poses a peculiar problem for me. This is because I remember her in two very different ways. The first was the way I saw Eighty-four as a scared slave boy looking upon a big, angry, black girl. She never smiled or uttered a kind word. She never once asked how I felt or if I needed help. She was, as I said, black like I am black—very dark. And back then, in the days of Negro degradation, white people either laughed at our color or, even worse, felt sorry for us because of our obvious ugliness and inferiority. In my childhood being black meant poverty, slavery, and all things bad. I was, before Tall John came, ashamed of my color and of everyone who looked like me. And so when I first looked upon Eighty-four I was afraid and disgusted.

But when I remember her now there's a wholly different image in my mind's eye. Eighty-four was tall and slender with high cheekbones and large, almond-shaped eyes. Her skin was a dark black that

had depth to it like the night sky. In later years I had the pleasure of seeing her laugh many times and so I know her teeth were ivory of color and powerful. Eighty-four was beyond good-looking, beyond beautiful—she was regal.

I know her beauty now, but when I first laid eyes on her she was a fright to me.

“Bes' scurry n' hump,” were Eighty-four's first words to me.

“What?” I asked.

She replied by pinching my arm till it hurt terribly and repeated the words, pulling a cotton boll and pushing it into her big burlap bag.

I learned right away to watch her gestures as she spoke. That way I could keep from getting pinched. As it was the place where she tweaked me hurt for over a week.

It was dark when we started but it was hot too. I pulled cotton for a long time, cutting my hands more than once on the tough husks of the pods. I wasn't bothered by the cuts at first because my shoulder still hurt pretty bad.

The moment they started working the slaves began to sing. They sang songs that were not in English and they sang songs that were hymns learned from the monthly service that the traveling Negro minister, Brother Bob, delivered. Bob was one of the few free Negroes in the county who was liberty to move about. There were a few other freed slaves around that had little cabins. These were favored slaves who got too old to work or were granted their freedom because of some brave act they committed. Usually they saved their Master or one of the Master's children from death.

Most slaves prayed that the Master would have some accident so that they could run in and save him.

“Or at least he could die,” many a man-slave would say, “so then I wouldn't have no master to do me so.”

Eighty-four thumped me on the ear while I was having these thoughts.

“Dey callin',” she said angrily.

And then I heard it.

“Forty-seven!” It was Mud Albert.

I cut out at a run.

It was full morning by then. The sun was up and five kinds of birds were chattering in the trees. I took the high road because it had fewer sharp rocks. I was in pain from the brand on my shoulder, cut feet, and lacerated hands. It hurt where Eighty-four had pinched me and I was bone tired from the hard work of picking cotton. But even with all that I was still happy to be running in the late morning sun.

When I came upon Mud Albert he was sitting on a barrel in a clearing surrounded by dozens of empty burlap bags. All around the clearing were cotton plants and slaves with cotton-filled bags on their backs that were three and four times the size of a man. The sun was blazing but there was a breeze and I wasn't pulling cotton so it all seemed beautiful to me. I ran up to Albert all breathless and hopeful.

“How's that shoulder?” Mud Albert asked me.

“Hurts some,” I said, “but that lard you put on it makes it bettah.”

“Good. Now tell me, how'd you like cotton pickin'?”

The question stymied me for a moment. The first thing any Negro slave in the south ever learned was not to complain about his lot to the boss. *How you doin'?* the boss asks you. *Good, mastuh,* you're supposed to shout.

But I hated picking cotton. My hands were bleeding, my back hurt, and there was something in the cotton plant that made my eyes all red and itching. If I told the cabin boss that I liked pulling cotton he might believe me and give me that job until the end of time.

What I didn't know, or what I didn't want to know, was that almost all slaves picked cotton or some other onerous job for their entire lives. There was no escape from that, no chance at some better life. Hoping that Albert would give me something better to do was a child's dream.

As I've said, I was fourteen at that time but I was still a child in many ways. Living in the barn under Mama Flore's protection I hadn't lived much among the men and therefore had never faced many of the hard lessons of life. Because I was so spoiled I still had the dreams of a child.

Children resist slavery better than grown men and women because children believe in dreams. I dreamed of lazy days in the barn and stolen spoonfuls of honey from the table where Mama Flore prepared meals in the big house. I dreamed of riding in Master's horse-drawn carriage and of going to the town where they had stores filled with candies and soft shirts with bone buttons. I dreamed of roasted chickens stuffed with sweet parsnips and onions. And, being a child, I thought that my dream just might one day come true.

The mature slave knows that dreams never come true. They know that they'll eat sour grain and sawdust every day except Christmas and that they'll always work from before sunrise until after dusk every day for all the days of their lives.

If I were a full-grown slave I would have known that picking cotton was the only job for me on the Corinthian plantation. But being a child I was hoping for a loophole, like a job picking peaches that I could take a bite out of now and then.

Mud Albert smiled because I couldn't answer his question.

“So you don't love Miss Eighty-four and all those long rows'a cotton balls?”

“It's pretty hard, Mud Albert. My hands,” I said holding out my bloody fingers and palms.

The sight of my cuts took the grin from Albert's lips.

“I sorry, boy,” he said. “I know that it hurts pickin' that cotton. It hurts the back and the hands, the eyes and the heart too. Work can break your heart just as bad as a woman can. Every nigger out here works harder than any two white peoples. That's why I let you have the mornin' pickin' cotton with Miss Eighty-four.

“You really too little to be workin' in the fields yet. I don't know what Master Tobias was thinkin' to put you out here like that. But as long as you here I need you to know what it is to chop cotton. An' now that you know I'ma put you out chere as a runnah for the slaves. That means you gonna run heah and theah doin' things for me and the other peoples needs it. So if I have a message you gonna run deliver it. If somebody need watah you gonna fill up the pail and run it ovah to 'em. You understand me, boy?”

“Yes suh, Mud Albert, suh,” I said being as polite as I knew how to be.

“An' don't you forget them bleedin' hands an' watery eyes, don't forget the hurt in your back and your chest. Because I cain't save you from pullin' cotton if'n you don't do the job I give ya.”

“I run so fast that my feet won't even touch the ground, Mud Albert,” I swore.

He laughed and nodded and handed me his water bottle.

That was the first drink of water I had since we got to the cotton fields many hours before.

I know how bad a thing it is to be a slave and I know how terrible it was but I don't believe that there's a free person in the whole world that knows how good a cup full of water can taste. Because you have to be a deprived slave, to be kept waiting for your water like we were to really appreciate how good just one swallow can be. When we finally got a drop on our tongues it was like something

straight from the hands of the Almighty.

From Sunday to Sunday to Sunday I ran water and messages for Mud Albert.

Mr. Stewart was the plantation boss and it was his job to organize the work that the slaves did. But Mr. Stewart relied on Mud Albert to direct the workers. No slave ever did anything bad under Albert because he was much kinder than any white boss would be. The white bosses thought that slaves were always lying but Albert was one of us; he could tell the difference between a malingerer and somebody who was really sick.

So Mr. Stewart would sit around talking to the white plantation workers while Albert oversaw the cotton picking, and even the processing of the cotton gin.

All us slaves hated the cotton gin, the machine used to separate the cotton from the seeds and chaff. It was like the hungry maw of Satan himself swallowing every pound of cotton we could deliver. If the cotton gin were idle Master would think that was because us slaves were too lazy to feed it. But Albert knew how to keep the machine going with the least possible amount of raw cotton and he knew to the bale how much the master needed to be satisfied.

And so all the slaves worked while Albert sent me to bring them water and to keep him informed about how everything was going. If somebody was slacking off or else if somebody was sick and couldn't work I'd tell Albert and he'd tell Champ and sooner than you could count to ninety-three the problem would be solved.

There were only two big problems in those first few weeks. The first was my hands. They were all red and dripping ever since my first day of picking cotton. Albert said that he didn't like the look of it but he didn't want to call the horse doctor either.

“Sometimes that crazy doctor jus' say to cut off whatever limb is hurtin',” Albert told me. “An' if he cut off yo hands that will be the end of you.”

That was all I needed to hear. I carried the water by holding the buckets by their handles on either my wrist or in the crook of my arm and I kept my hands out of sight whenever Mr. Stewart came around to make sure that his slaves were working.

The other thing that happened was that the slave we called Nigger Ned, Number Twelve, died of pneumonia in his cot. Mud Albert tried to take the load off of Ned but by then he was too sick. Three days after my second Sunday in the slave quarters Ned couldn't climb out of his bed. By the next morning he was dead.

Master Tobias allowed us slaves to have a burial service because Ned had been in the slave cabin for many years. Ned was a good man and we all liked him. Nobody except for rascals ever had a bad word to say about him. The slaves all called him that terrible name because we didn't know any better and the white people said it just because they like the way it sounded.

The free colored preacher, Brother Bob, was too far away to make it for to give the sermon and so Master Tobias said that he would say some words.

We all walked to the slave graveyard in the evening after work in the fields. The slave graveyard was situated on the far side of the Master's big house. It was a small plot of land surrounded by a dilapidated picket fence. The slender slats of wood used as grave markers were crowded closely together. I remember that even in death the slaves would never have a place to spread out and rest.

Mr. Stewart let us leave the fields an hour before the sun set so that we could form in lines in front of the grave that Tobias had Champ Noland dig. They didn't give Ned a pine box—after all he was just a field slave. Instead they wrapped him in one of those big burlap sacks and laid him in the ground.

I was standing in front of everyone because I was the smallest of the field slaves. I could see Big Mama Flore standing with the house Negroes across from the grave, behind Master Tobias. She looked at me once but I turned away. I was still mad at her for slamming that door and not saving me from Mr. Stewart. I hoped that she would feel bad in her heart because of the way I ignored her.

A row of jet black ravens stood along the slanted roof on the south side of the mansion. They numbered a dozen or more. The birds watched the funeral proceedings. Every once in a while they made comments in their dry, crackling voices. Back then we saw ravens as an evil omen. Now that I look back on that day I see that it was Master Tobias who should have worried about the portent of those birds.

My hands were hurting terribly. Most of the time I held them up to keep the worst pain away, but couldn't do that at the funeral. At funerals you were supposed to keep your hands down.

"We come heah today," Master Tobias said after we were all in place, "to say good-bye to Nigger Ned, or as I always called him—Slim."

Tobias, who was wearing work pants and a blue shirt, gestured toward the hole in the ground and then continued, "Slim was a good boy. He never asked for more or complained. We only had to beat him twice in my memory and he always worked hard in the field. You know all the niggers who work hard in this life will have a land of milk and honey after they die. The Lord don't want no shiftless slaves in heaven, only them that has worked hard and showed that they are worthy of heaven's bounty—"

"Mr. Tobias!" a man's voice called out.

The ravens cried out and took wing at the sound of that man's call.

All of us slaves, and Master Tobias too, turned to see a grand white man on a towering chestnut mare. He had great black mustachios and he wore a black suit with a white shirt. His hat was black with a small round crown and a wide brim.

"Mr. Pike!" Tobias yelled. "What brings you to our neck of the woods?"

Even though my hands were hurting me and my mind was hoping that Ned had been good enough to be allowed to slave in heaven, I was still indignant that somebody would interrupt a funeral and that the orator would stop his eulogy in order to enter into small talk with some acquaintance, regardless of his race.

"I was hoping that you could help me, Mr. Tobias," the well-dressed stranger said.

"Why you dressed in Sunday best?" Tobias asked.

"I like my fine clothes," Pike answered in an arrogant tone. He moved his head around, exhibiting an unmistakable show of pride. His eyes opened wide while he did this and I could swear that for a moment his eyes were like bright rainbows.

As almost two hundred pair of Negro eyes watched, the fancy white man dismounted his mare and sauntered toward Tobias. As he did so he let his eyes wander across the mass of black humanity.

"I lost a slave," Pike said.

"And you think he run the thirty-five miles from your plantation to mine?"

"I don't know," the man said. "Could be. The boy is called Lemuel. He's young, maybe fourteen, and a strange brown color. My wife wants him back. She thinks that he's a healer. But I think that he's just a shiftless ungrateful cur. Et my food and then run like a thief in the night."

"Well, if I see someone like that I'll tell you," Tobias said. "Now if you don't mind these slaves here is hungry and I have a sermon to finish."

Mr. Pike didn't seem too happy with being cut off for the benefit of a mob of black folk. He stood there for a moment too long, staring at Tobias. But he finally got the point and turned away. He

climbed up on his magnificent mare and shouted for her to gallop off. With all of that noise Tobias had to wait until the rude visitor was out of earshot before he could continue with the sermon.

“Where was I?” Tobias asked. But we knew it wasn't for us to answer him. “Oh yeah. Slim was a good boy...” He called him boy but Ned was nearly as old as Mud Albert. “...better than some white men. Take that no good lowlife Andrew Pike. From the looks of him you'd think that he was better than any nigger. But it ain't so. That man right there sold me a horse that he said could work pullin' a plow or a carriage. He took two good slaves for it but it wasn't four days before Dr. Boggs told me the horse had heartworm. When I complained, Pike didn't even apologize. Took my niggers and left it for me to put his horse down.

“Ned, you can go up to heaven knowin' that you were a better man than that.”

Tobias slapped his hands together as if he had dug the grave himself, or maybe it was that he felt dirty having to speak at a slave's burial. Anyway he walked away from the grave and up to his mansion. He left Mr. Stewart and nine or ten men armed with rifles to guard us while we sang over the death of our fellow man and friend.

Seeing those armed men was the first time I ever entertained the notion that white people were afraid of us. As I said, there were plenty of black folk at that burial. We could have overrun those few white riflemen and killed the Master and his plantation boss. We could have taken the Corinthian Plantation for our own.

For a moment I imagined screaming black men and women overrunning the riflemen, beating them with their own weapons and burning down the mansion. I saw the overboss and his men on their knees, begging for their lives like Pritchard had done when Tobias considered killing him. I saw us all sitting in the Master's dining room, eating ham, and putting our bare feet right up on his table.

I knew it was a sin to have these thoughts and it scared me to the bone. I started shivering, fearful that someone could see the blasphemy in my eyes. And if they did, and they told Master, I'd be in Mr. Stewart's killin' shack quicker than they could call my number.

“Are you all right, babychile?” Mama Flore asked.

She had come up beside me while I was having my evil thoughts and while all the other slaves were singing.

“Fine,” I said, letting my head hang down and holding my wounded hands behind my back.

“Mud Albert told me that that dog Pritchard knocked you down and branded you,” she said.

“It's okay. Albert put some lard on it and it hardly even hurt except if I move.” I shifted around, making sure to keep my hands behind me.

“What's wrong with yo hands, sugah?”

“I got to go back to the cabin,” I said. “Mud Albert said that he wanted me to clean out from under his bed.”

Most of the slaves were singing “Blessed Soul.” Flore reached out for me but I moved away and she only grazed my cheek with her finger. She called after me but I just ran, crying bitterly at my sad fate and for the soul of the slave they called Nigger Ned.

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