THE LONG LIFE OF POKEY: A WORK OF LONG FICTION

by

ELEANOR J. BLOUNT

(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

This creative writing is a group of independent short stories. It sets forth the lives of fictional characters who illustrate the impact of slavery in the southern United States as well as some of the ways in which slavery's legacies impinge upon life into the twentieth century. The life of Pokey, the character who is first shown as an infant born a slave in the 1850's, and later as a woman of more than one hundred years, provides reference points to historical periods from antebellum times all the way into the 1950's. She continues to make statements through her material artifacts which outlive her. The work spends time revealing the role played by needlework in the lives of girls and women over the two centuries covered. It was very often the only mode of expressions allowed to them. The work is exposed through nine stories that can stand alone but are closely enough related that they can also be read as chapters of a novel or novella. In that regard, it may be considered a noveta.

INDEX WORDS: African American slavery, American schoolgirl samplers, Civil War, Miscegenation, Needlework, Race and class discrimination

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MAPW, Kennesaw State University 2001

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA
2008

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August 2008

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If you would not be forgotten
As soon as you are dead and rotten,
Either write things worthy reading,
Or do things worth the writing. – Ben Franklin

Recognize My Voice

It's all about the words.

I savor . . . no, worship . . . no, *crave* words. I am the body logocentric, hiding and abiding in words. Like me and my readers, words are people, too. Words, those primal units of expression, don't mind being manipulated like other people do, so I spend a lot of time with them. They always let me be the boss.

The best place to hang out with a bunch of words that you plan to boss around is in a poem. Yet I dissertate here in a work of long fiction that may possibly qualify as a novella, a work just short of the length requirement to be considered a full fledged novel, or a noveta, a complete work made up of other complete works– independent short stories– that are closely related to each other in theme or by characters and are capable of standing alone, or perhaps this work is more easily seen as chapters of a traditional novel, exposing the chronology of that novel or the back story for some of its characters. Any or all of these descriptions are fitting ones as

far as this author is concerned, and I leave it to my readers to decide how they should categorize it or whether they should. What I hope they will keep in mind is that this fiction was written with a poet's attention imagery (I want them to witness the shock on a four-year-old's face when she hears for the first time that there was once such a thing as slavery, to visualize the sight of two children standing and watching pigs in a pen because they have nothing better to do, and the frozen, dumbfounded, body of a young woman who answers the telephone, hears that her grandmother has died and feels nothing in particular about it except a little guilt for not feeling anything), and to artistic devices like parallelism and alliteration. When making an effort to do so, a writer can achieve these things– at a modicum for most and to a greater degree for F. Scott Fitzgerald, for instance– in fiction. But studying and composing poems is what points the way for writing stories that are more than story.

Considering that poetry, more so than any other literary form, relies on its words to transmute the ethereal into the material, it makes sense that poems require a more economical use of words. Poems have to work harder to milk the words for all they are worth.

Since poems, even when written prosaically, express thoughts without explaining them, they necessarily seek to perform their function with paucity rather than excess. When you write poetry, you are forced to examine every word you choose more closely than you would in expository writing which allows less restricted use of words. Less restriction may sound luxurious, but in actuality, the increased, sometimes forced, structure essential to the writing of poetry can be used as a skill builder for other types of writing. Once you have pored over thesauri looking for synonyms for "happy" because happy is either too long or too short to fit into your line of Haiku, too lackluster for your lofty sonnet, or just plain doesn't rhyme with

"wistful," which is the word you used to end the first line of your villanelle– once you achieve that degree of intimacy with a word you are auditioning, you will use it more efficiently in your next short story, news article, memo to your staff, or e-mail to your parents.

All forms of writing require disciplined attention to rules, both written and informal, but poetry is more insistent on adherence. The brevity inherent in poetry leave no room for dalliance. Hence the need for poets, more so than essayists or novelists, to rely on format and style to help drive the message.

When Langston Hughes employs repetition and rhyme in *Morning After*, he sees to it that you not only hear his blues, but that you are unable to escape it:

> I was so sick last night I
> Didn't hardly know my mind.
> So sick last night I
> Didn't hardly know my mind.
> I drunk some bad licker that
> Almost made me blind.

Words, like paint stroked on by brush, are qualified to create visual images more vividly and more succinctly in poems than in novels. They do it craftily for Roger McGough:

40----------Love

middle	aged
couple	playing
ten	nis
when	the
game	ends
and	they
go	home
the	net
will	still
be	be-
tween	them

Gimmickry, inserted gratuitously, would have overwhelmed and obviated the poignancy in McGough's message. His use of space between syllables, however, leaves you with more than a statement, or a page full of statements about a couple grown apart. It provides a lingering, mental portrait of them.

That words are so capable of playing tricks when skillfully manipulated is a joy. Seriousness of purpose need not be diminished in order to demonstrate prowess in word play. When you get right down to it, all writing is word play, even when it's work. Even when the subject matter is grave or the theme disturbing. In many an anagram, palindrome, or acrostic, a message emerges, as if by sneak attack, that is revelatory or otherwise heroic, gripping. African American Beat poet Bob Kaufman, in *Oregon*, eloquently expresses the concept of pariah, imposed via racism, with repeated use of the word "Oregon," a play on "Negro:"

> You are with me Oregon,
> Day and night, I feel you, Oregon.
> I am Negro. I am Oregon.
> Oregon is me, the planet
> Oregon, the State Oregon, Oregon.

Throughout the rest of the poem, he and his are depicted as outside the mainstream. Racism is never explicitly mentioned, and you might not be inclined to have to face it. But you sense it each time you are made to look at Oregon.

There is nothing more heady for writers of any genre than to attend a poetry writing workshop if what they want is to come to see wordsmithing as a weighty craft, marked by sedulity. They will swallow heavy doses of the diligence and discipline that will always be necessary if what they are contemplating is embarking on writing as a career. It was good

medicine for me. Because I have studied the structure of sonnets, can sense the blues situated inside a word puzzle, and know not to say I'm wistful unless I can back it up, I am better able to choose the best words instead of better ones in my fiction writing. Even my e-mails to the old folks at home are sharper, more arousing.

Like all word cravers, I feel compelled to write and re-write my very self on an ongoing basis. Life and fairness not being married to one another, the world heaps daily devaluation on most of us. For me, it is prompted by blackness and femaleness, the blues that edges my parenthood of a special needs child, the exasperation that permeates my quest to understand men and the relationships I've had with a few of them. I have learned to use the power of my own written-down words, those pliable people who are so good at exorcising demonic devaluations, as catharsis and consolation in response to life's miscarriages of justice. Putting the jumbled, confused thoughts on paper helps take the scariness out of them. I need the outlet because it gets me closer to being able to make sense out of nonsense.

In younger years, I limited the outlet to the personal essay and research essays on whatever topic comprised the challenge of the day because I was a devoted reader and writer of nonfiction. Nonfiction is good for you, so good that I don't attempt to do anything (much) without reading up on it first. Over the years I discovered that even mediocre libraries had ample material on how to plan a wedding, how to needlepoint, how to buy a car. In a better library I found out how to litigate a divorce, how to manage single parenthood of a mentally handicapped child, how to handle the *discovery* that the child had handicaps, how to meditate, and how to throw into the mix the re-entry into graduate school after a twenty-year hiatus. If I

had known how to read on the day I was born, I would have checked out books on how to breathe.

A marvelous quality inherent within nonfiction, but less so in fiction, is that it tends not to attract readers on a purely escapist level. I believe in literature and the power of its texts from all genres to provide more than escapism to world-weary readers. True enough, the world is afflicted with scary, ugly warts, but if literature held no purpose other than providing escape, readers would not learn from it how to navigate a convoluted, formidable world, or that warts can, in fact, be benign. I undertake making up stories not just for fun or for my readers to experience temporary respite. I believe that for a work of fiction to outlive its author, it should carry a message that lingers in people's memory banks. Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* comes to mind because appreciation for a woman with guts is more prominent today than when he wrote it in the eighteenth century. The artistry of the phraseology is inescapable in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and in addition, what appears at first to be a humdrum story about the impassive routine of the idle rich turns out to have made a clarion statement about the peril to all humanity when but a small number has more money than intelligence. The message should be subtle enough, however, that it does not overwhelm the piece's art. Some but not all of the stories included in this dissertation have at least a little omniscient narration. An author who writes as exercise in the manipulation of characters and their thoughts can gravitate toward god-like story telling. *Per se*, there is nothing wrong with an omniscient point of view in fiction, but there are drawbacks. It is a voice, though meant to evoke authority, can assert a dominance that overshadows other facets of the story. It is not popular in contemporary American fiction. Joyce Carol Oates once said that this is due to the populace's not having had an unequivocal

belief in God since the nineteenth century. But I relish a little authorial godliness, which should be all right if not applied rabidly.

The stories that appear in this volume are works of pure fiction, yet they are illustrative of *my own self*, and I am very real. I never met any of the people you will meet here, not just because most of them existed a century before I was born, but because, technically, they never existed at all. So why is it that I know them so intimately, know exactly what each one would say in a given situation? Partly, it is because I am god. That is one of the few pleasant aspects of the taxing job of being a self that channels other selves.

I say I channeled them because I am reluctant to say I created them. They appeared to me as if flesh and blood, with contrary minds of their own, begging to be adapted to ink and paper. Remembering that I was the one in charge lightened the load a little. Though my omniscient voice is softer in some sections than in others, it is I who speaks whenever the characters open their mouths.

But the work is a simulcast. Not only do I speak through them, they represent people who, denied the right to expression during their lives, recount themselves through me in modernity. The characters all have composite traits of long gone elders (one believed born in the 1850s) and young friends, all of whom have survived in my memory since my childhood, and possibly a spirit or two that were known to me on some strange level even before then! And, of course, there are the historical prototypes who recurred along my journey to become a scholar of the African American experience during the antebellum and Civil War era.

Somehow, the historical personalities never revealed enough personality as I studied. I think this is true mostly because so large a portion of their stories was recorded by voices not

their own. Since slaves were not allowed literacy, much of the "factual" documentation of their lives, to the extent that documentation was undertaken at all, was left to those who enslaved. I, for one, harbor a healthy suspicion of ostensibly true stories told about a subject by his/her nemesis. Fiction about black slaves by white writers has even greater potential for fallacy, so I decided to conjure up some fully flourished personae, instead of stock actors, based on what could be gleaned from the annals, and apply my African American, twenty-first century hand to their articulation.

I strive, as a matter of respect for the humanity embedded in every character (including the not-so-nice ones), to allow each one to speak individually. I don't want children to sound like adults even if they've been forced into grownup behavior prematurely. Blacks and whites, women and men, have different points of view of the central conflict, and their language patterns should help convey those points without having to rely excessively on declarative statement. This does not mean that the people don't get to exhibit a range of behavior. In the various stories, Pokey, for instance, is both naive and sage in childhood and reiterates those qualities in old age. Priscilla is often impervious to the cruelty she inflicts, but villains seek and give love in peculiar ways. I want them all to have the opportunity to comment on life as they believed it to be, as they would have if the social constraints of the period had not vanquished their voices.

Until mid twentieth century, readers were more likely to have derived their visions of slave life from Margaret Mitchell than from Margaret Walker. But steadily, a stream of black novelists has poured out a wealth of believable, though fictional, accounts. Edward P. Jones, Toni Morrison, and Octavia Butler are my current idols (the list grows daily), and even though

their works all have some element of magical realism, they are far more plausible than the Tara tale which visits the supernatural in its portrayal of happy, singing slaves.

When Ben Franklin to extolled the virtue of authorship as a means to immortality, was it a terribly unimaginable thing for him to do? Easy for him to say, I say. In his own time, people were rapt to listen to anything he said, and in subsequent centuries his writing is consulted as the memorialization of the American ideal. During and since the Revolution, African Americans were, in the main, denied that virtue. I believe many, many slaves performed feats worth the writing on a routine basis, and as I long to write the song of myself, *myself*, I'm sure they wanted that as well. Telling one's own story with one's own voice is so recognizable a human need, there is little wonder that this primordial pleasure was prohibited for those who were officially deemed inhuman.

For most of us, having our voices waft unrecognized is a seldom and innocuous event. The anticipation is half the fun when we finally telephone that nearly forgotten friend and wonder if she'll be able to tell who's on the other end. But it's a different thing, a more sinister thing, when you come to accept that the world– the known world, anyway– has no intention of listening to you or any of your ilk for any reason, any time. People who were born into slavery's brutality– people who looked like me and would have talked and written as I do except for the accident of chronology– once had their tongues cut out, metaphorically speaking, and sometimes in their too graphic, too real lives.

Being silenced is, in a roundabout way, an issue uniquely concerning the contemporary African American writer also. Whether it is the mainstream's prevailing attitude about race (at any given point in history) that determines which of the myriad black literary voices manage to

find themselves on bookstore shelves, is an issue of longstanding debate. When her work unexpectedly became breakout hits in the 1990's, Terry McMillan was as surprised as anyone, and she had no qualms about stating it had a lot to do with her being the "flavor or the month," as she put it, chosen by mainstream, corporate publishing powers based on what they thought Americans, not just African Americans, would be willing to buy at the time. Publishing houses, agents, book distributors, and book sellers all worry about what will be profitable. They apply precious little rumination on the light in which black people are viewed, or are allowed to shine on themselves, as regards to their pluralistic literary profiles. Judging solely on what manages to get published, and without putting forth effort to search for alternatives, people can easily surmise that African American authors write on single subjects in unvaried ways.

In the nineteenth century, publishers were simultaneously claiming to court diverse, previously unheard black voices while showcasing only those that asserted palatable resolutions of conflict. A preponderance of published fiction by black authors before the turn of the twentieth century attempted to discuss race in terms of reconciliation between blacks and whites in the aftermath of slavery. At the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, and others, intent upon shaping an edgier discourse that focused more stringently on irreconcilable injustices, found it difficult to locate mainstream publishers to disseminate their new message. Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Frank Yerby, among others, determined that writing outside the United States was the only way to shield their work from assimilationists long enough for it to come to fruition. Alternative presses rescued much of the racially aggressive material of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's before the mainstream presses deemed it momentarily fashionable.

In Free Within Ourselves, author Jewell Parker Rhodes uses the works of many successful African American writers to look not only at the special attention black artists are compelled to pay to race in theme, voice, and characterization, but also at their theories about how they are perceived by the publishing industry once their homage to race has been made. Rhodes includes this quote from Stan West: "Let's face it, Black writers, like other Black professionals, are judged by a different yardstick, held to different standards than our White counterparts. It's not fair but it's the way it is . . ."[1]

Recently come to the publishing interrogation, an issue frequently on the minds and lips of African American writers and readers of serious literature is the proliferation of a category of writing that burgeoned with so little warning, it has been inadequately labeled. What is commonly viewed as urban lit, ghetto lit, or most often, street lit, is an offering to mass market tastes. More specifically, it tends to appeal to African Americans who live in cities and are youthful though adult. Ironically, labeling is exactly the problem that has coincided with the flourishing of street lit. Mainstream publishers, who quickly recognized how sizable the paying market for it would be, began to place the already limited attention they had reserved for so called ethnic literature onto this novelty. Especially in urban settings, street lit became synonymous with African American literature in publishing houses and bookstores. This racialized pigeonholing leaves African Americans, whose literary tastes are extremely varied, more likely to be corralled into a single misfitting genre. The need to avoid labels is not unique to black people; however, recent trends make it more problematic than is true for whites. There

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[1]Rhodes, Jewell Parker, Free Within Ourselves (New York: Main Street Books, 1999), 288.

have always been greater numbers of ways for members of the majority population to find niches. But now that a profitable newcomer– the kind of writing that was once sold only at makeshift sidewalk kiosks in parts of town frequented only by black people, the kind produced for readers much more interested in entertainment or escapism than in educational sub-texts– has syphoned corporate attention away from literary fiction and poetry and intellectual memoirs, growing numbers of artists and consumers have been prevented from breaking through dubious labels that do not apply to them.

And speaking of Edward P. Jones, lately, people are listening to him when he talks. A Pulitzer Prize has just that kind of impact (not quite the jolt of Morrison's Nobel, but a good catch). He once said that events are not linear,[2] and that the writer, as god, is perfectly perched to see that life is no respecter of chronology. I concur because I have encountered characters of my own who repeat or complete the actions of an earlier one, and this seems to be an emphatic but non-bludgeoning way to accent a major theme. God knows that life is a recursive stream of consciousness and doesn't format her characters', especially not Sugar's and Pokey's, commonalities as if they were successive months on a calendar. God knows that what's said by someone years prior can suddenly become extremely meaningful today, even if the speaker and original audience lack conscious recollection of the utterance.

As far as I'm concerned, that's the beauty of words; it's what they do. They take root sub-strata, invisible and forgotten by those who are preoccupied with things above ground. Like the basal sprouts of trees, words sown casually or planted purposefully grow into something not

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[2]Jones interview.
http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm?author_number=930

merely visible but formidable. They create life, vividly, on paper with ink. I was never a stranger to words. Before kindergarten, I was already familiar with eloquent, articulate, chatty, and "My, what lovely enunciation for her age!" But from those adults who didn't appreciate hyper-talkative four-year-olds, I learned impudent, inquisitive, blabber mouth, and "Too smart for her own good!" Aptitude for language can be a mixed blessing, and I have a longstanding empathy for people who want to express but are quashed. As for that spirit or two I mentioned earlier who made acquaintance with me neonatally and have kept in touch ever since, they were probably in search of a scribe, and they found the right baby. Honestly, I don't see myself as a ghost writer, but I do want to be a truth sayer. I attempt to tease truth out of thwarted tongues, now dead and rotten, that never had an opportunity to say a mumblin' word. They were entitled to voices, if only to say, "I was here, too." Someone should have provided voices for them but didn't. Edward and Toni and Octavia have begun to rectify the oversight. And so have I.

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American literature, having survived and revived numerous culture wars since the 1960's, has struggled, first of all, to assert its place on the shelves of credible, academic discourse. Work written in English by the "new kid" rather than the "mother country" carried no immediate scholastic sway. Until relatively recently, readers and writers in the United States deferred to their British counterparts when seeking delineation of the literary canon. They were reluctant to plumb the wealth of material which emanated from and sounded like an altogether new world. Indeed, weighty analysis of American literature was avoided as a futile pursuit, a wasteful

expenditure, because the material was most often considered dearth rather than wealth. What possible value lay in the musings of a people who consisted, in Early America, of convicts, ne'er-do-wells, petty fortune seekers and servant classes? As these groups were so insignificant within the societies from which they emigrated, why would those same long established societies appreciate what they wrote? Pre-Revolutionary men of means and intellectuals were more likely to see themselves and their writing as inextricably linked to continental influences, and they did not recognize right away that they were contributing to a field of art that verbalized a unique message in a previously unheard voice that, even in infancy, proved hearty.

Even into the twentieth century, the lion's share of serious criticism about literature written in English was devoted to British texts. This was as true in the United States as elsewhere due to Americans' voluntary devaluation of their own texts in deference to those from the more firmly founded English tradition. It is as if they needed a century or two to work through a self deprecating yearn to prove themselves legitimate retroactively. They simultaneously viewed themselves as triumphant over a tyrannical father, victorious in the Revolutionary War, but less facile with, vaguely unentitled to, their mother tongue than were their better born brethren across the Atlantic who had learning and aristocracy on their side. To illustrate, a representative sample of American writers (some born in England) from the Early through the Revolutionary periods– John Winthrop, William Bradford, Increase Mather, Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson– were more like than unlike their contemporaries from the British Isles– John Locke, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, David Hume, Edmund Burke– in many ways. It is frequently overlooked by readers of the present day that it was an emulated eloquence with which the

colonials wrote. As far as rhetorical style is concerned, differences among these Eastern Seaboard Americans and the "foreign" essayists/ philosophers were not sufficient for comment by the bulk of their readership, and this remained so until western expansion when Americans migrated inward on their continent and farther away from Old World sensibilities. In the earlier era, colonials appealed to similar audiences in terms of diction, and therefore evince similarities of verbiage, phraseology, and even sentence length and structure much of the time. In this excerpt from Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, we see that readers of his day were comfortable with multiple dependent clauses, excessive and exotic punctuation (four colons!), and sentences long enough to irreparably strain the span of attention to which modern readers are accustomed:

> Though I have said above, *Chap. II. That all men by nature are equal*, I cannot be supposed to understand all sorts of *equality*: *age* or *virtue* may give men a just precedency: *excellency of parts* and *merit* may place others above the common level: *birth* may subject some, and *alliance* or *benefits* others, to pay an observance to those to whom nature, gratitude, or other respects, may have made it due: and yet all this consists with the *equality*, which all men are in, in respect of jurisdiction or dominion one over another; which was the equality I there spoke of, as proper to the business in hand, being that *equal right*, that every man hath, *to his natural freedom*, without being subjected to the will or authority of any other man.[3]

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[3]Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Civil Government* http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/locke/locke2/locke2nd-b.html

Likewise, as any twentieth- or twenty-first-century fourth grader struggling to memorize the *Declaration of Independence* quickly discovers, Jefferson does not curtly state, "All men are created equal" and have done with the thing. The fourth grader may notice an embedded rhythm in the work which aids memorization and recitation, but s/he will not fully understand the text without taking some time to dissect its language:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.[4]

It is evident that Jefferson has adopted more than the philosophical principle from Locke. Linguistically, he has also echoed his voice.

Here, then, it is appropriate to iterate that one of the many notions of "voice" in literature has to do with writers' own senses of style as exemplified by their choices of diction, but notice cannot be avoided that these individual choices are often shaped according to the heavy influences of the other people or forces which impact or reside within the writers' societies. The need to show through their everyday speech or written correspondence (and most certainly

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[4]Jefferson, Thomas. *The Declaration of Independence* http://www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/freedom/doi/text.html

through their weighty pronouncements which they hope to publish for posterity), which social, economic, or political philosophies they embrace is an important function of language. Asserting just the right voice in this respect immediately alerts the receivers of the message as to the social, economic, or political group to which the senders believe they belong.

That defining war in eighteenth-century America could not have taken place without the writing that inspired it. Whereas Locke and Swift discoursed upon the need for social change in the face of injustice, Jefferson and Franklin made urgent pleas for fervent action in that regard. While it is true that Locke wrote emphatically in his excerpt, Jefferson's, though sophisticated, is louder. Volume, in this case, is a function of emphasis.

There may be no greater masterpiece of sarcasm than Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, but the incisive humor in so many of Franklin's aphorisms is what has rendered him so readily quotable to this day. In "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately," and "There never was a good war or a bad peace," we hear a subtle voice made louder by the inescapable humor. Puns, all by themselves, can turn up the volume on a message that may otherwise be too faint if the communicator is determined to provide the audience with the necessary inspiration for imminent rebellion. Swift's essay that pretends to propose cannibalism as a solution to the problem of rampant hunger among the Irish sounds increasingly ludicrous as it proceeds. At its close, the author makes his most forceful barb:

> I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in endeavoring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the public good of my country, by advancing our trade, providing for infants, relieving the poor, and giving some pleasure to the rich. I have no children by

> which I can propose to get a single penny; the youngest being nine years old, and my wife past child-bearing.[5]

It is here that the reader is most certain, not only of Swift's sober intention, but of his comic wit. Yet, the piece is quiet enough that that intention does not become contagious as occurs with Franklin. Whereas we have come (as did his contemporaries) to appreciate Swift's wittiness for its own sake, Franklin is just as much revered for the social and political change his utterances provoked. He incited real revolution and not just politically in tandem with Jefferson. The new United States relied on Franklin's cryptic calls for industry and level-headedness to help instill that ethos which was to identify the country's national character– Yankee ingenuity, the American ideal. Examples include:

> "Genius without education is like silver in the mine."
>
> "Those who in quarrels interpose, must often wipe a bloody nose."
>
> "Work as if you were to live a hundred years, Pray as if you were to die tomorrow.

And that twenty-first-century fourth grader will probably be asked to memorize the cherished "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise" not merely because it is catchy but because its voice as well as its message is so instructive.

Aside from individual authors' personal styles or unique perspectives which were produced according to the hierarchical position occupied within society by the various social groups to which they belong, voice can also be explained as a distinctive speech pattern

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[5]Swift, Jonathan. *A Modest Proposal* http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/modest.html

employed by a highly specific group. In its own way (often subconscious), the group conveys its own rules of syntax, phonology, morphology, semantics, and these rules will differ from those of the larger or more dominant group. In his study of black ontology, George Yancy refers to the dominant group's language as the LWC, language of wider communication.[6] He agrees with the common observation that any language existing within, but not substantially identical to, the LWC tends to be sensed as inferior by all except those who belong to the subset group which produced it. Ontology, however, is concerned with the nature of being and the devices used by entities to help themselves discern the characteristics by which they identify themselves and similarly situated entities, and it recognizes that language is highly prominent as such a characteristic. A shared language or language system existing within a previously established language, is literally capable of bestowing identity upon its users. The "Negro dialect" in work by Paul Laurence Dunbar is an example:

> An' yo' enemies may 'sail you
>
> In de back an' in de front;
>
> But de Lawd is all aroun' you,
>
> Fu' to ba' de battle's brunt.
>
> Dey kin fo'ge yo' chains an' shackles
>
> F'om de mountains to de sea;

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[6]"Geneva Smitherman: The Social Ontologyof African-American Language, the Power of Nommo, and the Dynamics ofResistance and Identity Through Language." Yancy, George. *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 2004, Vol. 18 Issue 4, p. 273-299

> But de Lawd will sen' some Moses
>
> Fu' to set his chillun free.[7]

It effectively delineates treasured, protective boundaries around the subset group lest it be wholly consumed by the larger. Prescriptive Standard English, seen as the LWC, and its relationship to vernacular African American speech of the slave era seen as a dialect of it, point to a vividly colored portrait of the kinship between the respective speakers of each. There is no difficulty seeing that the dialect reveals more about its speakers than merely their lack of formal education in English.

The black French Carribean intellectual, Frantz Fanon says, "Every dialect, every language is a way of thinking. To speak means to assume a culture."[8] His assertion is that one cannot utilize a language *without* making a statement about the cultural significance of voice in addition to the content of the message being conveyed.

> For Fanon, being colonized by a language has larger implications for one's consciousness . . . Speaking French means that one accepts, or is coerced into accepting, the collective consciousness of the French, which identifies blackness with evil and sin. In an attempt to escape the association of blackness with evil, the black man dons a white mask, or thinks of himself as a universal subject equally participating in a society that advocates an equality supposedly abstracted

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[7]Excerpt, *An Ante-Bellum Sermon*, Paul Laurence Dunbar Digital Collection, Wright State University

[8]Frantz Fanon in *The Negro and Language– Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press Inc, 1967

> from personal appearance. Cultural values are internalized, or "epidermalized" into consciousness, creating a fundamental disjuncture between the black man's consciousness and his body. Under these conditions, the black man is necessarily alienated from himself.[9]

There is every reason to believe that African American political activists have at heart a driving desire to further the cause of racial equality by heightening the level of respect that society should pay to blackness and the sense of personal identity it confers, uniquely, upon those who identify themselves as black. But in Geneva Smitherman's sizable body of research into Ebonics, ontology, and the statistics that indicate African American children's greater ability to achieve literacy when they are taught in their own vernacular as well as in American Standare English, the author has pointed out that Civil Rights movements initiated and operated by African Americans do not always extend to black people's linguistic characteristics or seek to heighten respect for or validity of them as cultural entitlements. For instance, in "Black Language and the Education of Black Children: One Mo Once," she reminds us that NAACP leader Roy Wilkins (among many others before and since) once famously said that "Black English is black nonsense."[10] She suggests that the tendency of prominent black leaders, who adopt as their mission the "advancement" of their people, to recommend to their following that

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[9]Jennifer Poulos, Spring 1996 http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Fanon.html

[10]Smitherman, Geneva. "Black language and the education of Black children: One mo once." *The Black Scholar* 27, # 1, 29-35. http://books.google.com/books?id=1ScPpy5z7UMC&pg=PA49&lpg=PA58&ots=m3PnX-BPfW&dq=every+dialect+every+language+is+a+way+of+thinking+to+speak+means+to&ie=ISO-8859-1&output=html&sig=lvRgn2mITE91vHTu05nnr4Kxmiw

imitation of white language standards is the only way to realize American dreams, stems from a need to have themselves and those who are like them seen as presentable, acceptable to a mainstream culture that has historically refused to tolerate pluralism. In an effort to work within existing systems because legitimizing additional ones is impractical, they sacrifice, in her view the "existence, dynamism, and systematicity"[11] of one the most valuable of all cultural markers, voice. If this is so, then contrary to Yancy's and Fanon's conclusions, the speakers of a subset language, not just the speaker's of its LWC, become complicit in the devaluation of that subset.

Audre Lorde was fond of saying the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Toni Morrison wonders about that. She said in her Nobel Laureate oration that she was unsure as to whether slavery, in particular, can adequately be articulated from the slaves' points of view through our modern, standard English. What Morrison seems to worry most about is the extent to which the master's language can be considered oppressive. "Oppressive language," she says, "does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge."[12] In her masterful examination of slavery, *Beloved*, Morrison shows us so many ways in which white slave holders used their language to oppress black slaves with viciously phrased recriminations and degrading naming. Yet she uses all the subtly beautiful attributes at her disposal inherent within that same language to write an equally beautiful tale about the horror of oppression and genocide.

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[11] *Ibid*

[12] Morrison, Toni. http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html

The stories that follow, about slaves and women and slave women, were written with a clue taken from Morrison. They are discursive of historical horrors but are not devised to horrify readers. The real oppression that is revealed through the fictional characters' actions was facilitated with the English language, but so was the careful "re-minding" of it, directed in part toward those who have not been mindful of it though it is the story of their ancestral and ongoing lives. It is that story, not only for black Americans, but for anyone who identifies as American in any way. In part, too, it is directed toward those who are indeed mindful of inescapable, possibly irreconcilable, ugly truths that should not be given leeway to infect the varied beauty that accompanies modernity. The past's stories become viral, however, not because they are unleashed on unsuspecting readers, but when they are silenced. Pokey's stories emanate from a voice ever mindful of its own history and its reverent assignment to lend a little voice to the facsimiles of those who died choking on their words for fear that they would be killed if their words were made audible, in any language. It has been a pleasure to unite my vernacular with theirs in service to them.

Sugar Names

"Hosiery was invented so that kindergartners could have stationery, apparently," she thought. As far as Sugar knew, all little girls began their days standing, watching impatiently, as their mothers, who hoped in vain to get dressed in peace, sat on the sides of beds cautiously easing the tissue paper from around and between the two, delicate, silk stockings that hid in the thin, flat cardboard boxes named Hanes.

Surely, all children were eager to be handed, at last, the daily supply of writing tools. These consisted of the stocking papers from the mothers first. Then, find the pencils the fathers had left– had whittled sharp the night before with dinner knives while lingering at the tables to leisurely complete the stories about what had gone on at work– the pencils they had left, as they headed out to work the next morning, on the mothers' vanity tables, for their four-year-olds to pick up.

It was a good system, but Sugar wondered if all children experienced the same trouble she did form time to time remembering not to touch the stockings or to write on newspapers. Sugar loved to run, but, according to her mother, stockings did not. She didn't understand it, but if she caused the stockings to run, she would be given a spanking instead of paper. Her father said he was tickled to death that she had learned to write so well, but that she had better not do it on his evening newspaper again. She didn't understand that either– newspaper being more important than stocking paper– but she knew she wouldn't find a fresh pencil point waiting for

her on the vanity if she didn't resist the urge to write on everything in the house that qualified as paper. Maybe her father just didn't like being tickled as much as she did.

Sugar had always known her real name and could clearly enunciate every syllable of it by the time she was two years old. Sadie Ursula Gertrude Armstrong Rust was the long version that her parents wished they could shorten. They didn't dare, though, because it was easier to comply with generational christening traditions than to rekindle longstanding arguments with their own parents about why these names, as venerable as they were, sounded downright archaic when applied to a baby born in the 1950's.

Before Sugar was even born, her parents had resigned themselves to saddling their progeny with a pretentious Roman numeral after its name if they had a boy, and with a foot-long series of antiquated monikers if they had a girl. The prescription for girl naming was handed down through Gertrude's side of the family. The formula: maternal grandmother's first name + mother's first name + mother's maiden name + mother's married name = baby's name. When Gertrude's mother-in-law, Sadie, learned of this, she made a fuss about having as much right to be represented in the new baby's name as its other grandmother did. She didn't know it, but she needn't have gotten so worked up. Gertrude was already looking for an excuse to affix another name at the front, dismembering a chain that predated her and her personal desire to appear modern. This way, the other names would be pushed down into the realm of middle names, allowing the first, firstborn daughter of a firstborn daughter in the last 55 years to have a first name that was not Ursula or Gertrude. Until she was herself placed in this predicament, Sugar's mother had not understood why no one had had the guts to cry "enough of this!" and break the cycle she found ludicrous.

While not exactly freed from it, she had dodged the thrust of the tradition with the unwitting help of her bully of a mother-in-law. And almost like a bonus, adding "Sadie" to the new name created a handy acronym they could use as the baby's nickname.

Fifty-five years was the longest period of time this practice in Gertrude's family had gone unchecked. Around the turn of the century, there had been an uncanny spate of male births, and with "colored" people tending to die young, there were no senior Ursulas or Gertrudes at family functions for quite some time. They just seemed to disappear for a while. At these functions, however, if your ear was sharp, you could hear talk, in very hushed tones, that a female had been born in the family in 1899 and was given one of the revered names. That was until a committee of elder relatives got wind of a scandal, got on their high horses, and got that baby's mother to agree to a name change. The scuttlebutt was that she wasn't legally married to the baby's father, and strictly speaking, could not fulfil the formula requiring her to contribute a married name. Since she wouldn't deny the rumor, they insisted that she had forfeited entitlement to the names, in accordance with the proud customs of a fine family that had enjoyed an exemplary reputation all the way back to Reconstruction. The committee wanted the name saved for some future female relative, one more considerate of her ancestors and more careful to become a young wife before a young mother, one who would recognize and honor the craving their enslaved forebears had had for their strong sense of family to be seen as "legitimate" by others.

"Before Emancipation," said the elders, "squandering the right to obtain a marriage license would have been unthinkable, and it should be still. Without legal documents, what's to

become of all our efforts to prove ourselves fit for membership in the highest levels of decent society as opposed to those rungs of the ladder occupied by lower whites and foreigners?"

"Being free, for *our* family, should mean being well bred and upstanding, providing examples for the less fortunate of the race, and the names of our women have come to be associated with principles," they said. Tired of being accused of tainting the heritage of the Ursulas and Gertrudes that preceded her, and being reminded how hard it would be to escape the negative legacies of the "people of the old time" (her relatives' polite euphemism for the word, "slavery," which they consciously avoided), the young woman named her baby something else. No one remembers what.

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"Sugar" was the first word Sugar learned to write. She had learned the alphabet months earlier– her mother was surprised at how fast she picked up the phonetics– and now she wanted to write her whole, real name. Her mother called each letter out loud, and Sugar wrote them down. She had so much fun doing this she didn't want to stop After she wrote all of her own names, she had her mother call out the letters for her father's, her cat's and several of her friends' at kindergarten. Soon, she had memorized them all and could fill up the front and back sides of the tissue paper from the stockings with the names she had learned to spell without bothering her mother for help.

All by herself, she was perfectly content to do this all day. Her mother was happy to have such a smart child and even happier that she didn't have to worry about any mischief

making as long as her child had paper and pencil. But before long, Sugar wanted to know the names of more people and more things and spent most of her time asking her mother about them. She asked how to spell the names of all the different flowers in their garden, and when she learned that "rose" was much shorter than "geranium," she felt bad for the rose. She listened to her mother talk about how she had passed her maiden name on to her, the next generation, but didn't understand why her father hadn't done the same thing. When she was told that men don't have maiden names, she didn't know which parent to feel sorrier for– the one that didn't get a maiden name or the one who had to lose it. When friends or relatives came to visit, she grilled them about their names and how they were spelled. Without reservation, she told people if she thought their names were in any way unsuitable or if someone else's was better. She thought this was information that they needed and were entitled to have. Her parents told her to stop doing this; she tried, but it was hard.

When she stayed one day at a neighbor's house, because her mother had to run some faraway errands, she asked the lady, Miss Spoon, how she came to have such an odd name.

"Well, it's really Witherspoon, Sugar. But that's too big for a little girl like you to say, so I thought I'd just teach you the last part," she said.

Sugar had to prove to herself and to her neighbor that there was nothing difficult about this new name. "Witherspoon, Witherspoon, Witherspoon," she enunciated perfectly. "And I can write it, too," she went on. "You have to call out the letters for me the first time, but after that I can write it all by myself as much as I want."

Miss Spoon looked impressed but didn't realize that this was her cue to go and get Sugar a pencil and paper. She didn't move.

"Well, aren't you going to let me write your name?"

"Uh, I don't think so, Sugar." The woman wasn't sure what she ought to say next, but she was certain the child was not going to allow her to simply change the subject.

"But I always– "

"Yes**,** I know and I wish I could play write games with you like your mama do, but I don't know how," she said. "I never got a chance to go to kinny garden and be a smart little girl like you. I just never did learn to read or write. Colored people wasn't much allowed to when I was your age. We had to go to the cotton fields instead. Lots of us did."

"Are you sure?" Sugar asked, stunned and wondering if her neighbor was playing some new kind of guessing game.

"Oh, I'm sure." Miss Spoon was laughing out loud. "The only letter I can call for you is X. If I have to write my name for somebody, I just mark me a X."

Sugar felt sad the rest of the evening. She didn't know if it was because of the fussing she got from her mother after they got home about having asked too many embarrassing questions lately, or because she had learned that some colored people never went to school just because they were colored, or because Miss Spoon was all alone in that house next door, deprived of 25 letters, with nobody for company but an X.

She meant it when she promised her mother not to ask people about their names anymore. But it was hard.

One Saturday, she rode in the car with her father who was taking their baskets of laundry to Miss Pokey's house. It was long drive, that she always enjoyed, to the outskirts of town, where the houses were very far apart and looked nothing at all like the ones on Sugar's street.

Miss Pokey's front yard was the largest she had ever seen, but it didn't have grass or roses or geraniums. Instead, it had large, black cast-iron pots sitting on the bare, rocky ground. Each time she had visited, one of the pots had a fire underneath, even in summer. Sometimes Miss Pokey would be sitting in a wobbly chair next to the fire, but on this day she was standing over the pot stirring wet clothes with a huge stick. Sugar guessed this must have been difficult because she could see– no, feel– the strain on the old woman's face, the achy quivering in her arms. Miss Pokey was small and frail and old, the oldest looking person Sugar knew. Sugar had never seen her hair because there was always a red or navy bandana tied around her head. She wore strange clothes, too. Her skirts touched her shoes and kicked up dirt as she walked around the yard. She had trouble walking around in the first place because she was so old, but the long skirt and apron pinned on top of it were made of coarse material that looked heavy and made walking around even harder.

But as curious as her yard and clothes were, her name was stranger still, in Sugar's opinion. What in the world kind of name was Pokey, anyway? It didn't sound like any of the others she had learned to write.

"Come on here and give Pokey a hug while your papa go back to git the rest of them baskets out the car," she said.

Sugar was happy to oblige, but first, she'd need to take a second or two to look harder at her father while he was walking down that long yard, so she could judge how fast he was walking, how far it was back to the car, and how much time she could count on before he could hear what she was up to. She needed to know how long she would have to ask what she needed to ask before he could make it back up the yard and within earshot of her.

After the hug, “Is Miss Pokey your first name or your last name?”

“Honey, hits the only name I got. People of the old time didn’t need no last names and white folk didn’t fool with givin ’em none. The fambly I belonged to did own another Pokey, but we just call her yella Pokey and me black Pokey. But she dead, so now I just Pokey.”

Sugar’s mouth could not close. She was frightened and fascinated at the same time, even though she really had no idea what the old woman was talking about. But she knew, just the same. She knew that she had just heard something important that she did not understand. She wanted to keep thinking about it. Maybe she would figure it all out all by herself, later after she was at home. But she sensed it would be hard.

For a very long time after that, she did not ask people questions about their names.

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Real school was not really harder than kindergarten. Sugar never knew why everybody kept telling her it would be. There were so many things about the real, big school that were better than kindergarten, she didn’t know why her mother had not taken her there sooner. In the new school, the teacher actually wanted her to write. When she needed paper, there was always plenty of it in a box on a shelf behind the teacher’s desk. She didn’t even have to ask first. She could just get up and get some more. It wasn’t white like the stocking paper; it was a dirty shade of yellow, but it had red and blue lines that stood up in an interesting arrangement. The unbroken blue lines looked like children holding hands to make a chain, and the red dashes that formed the broken lines looked like a row of children who didn’t know that holding hands was

fun. The teacher told her to never write on the broken red line– that it was important to learn to stay on the smooth blue lines at all times. For days and days she wondered why the red lines didn't just learn to hold hands so they could have writing too. But after a while she stopped thinking about it.

She wondered about the numbers sometimes, too. She knew how to count in kindergarten, but at big school, numbers knew how to do other things besides being counted. She was having fun with addition and subtraction but wondered why some of the numbers had to be smaller than the others. Why didn't the 6 know that it could be as big as a 7 if it would just hold hands with a 1?

As she got older, she didn't have as much time to worry about them. Once she learned to read, she was eager to spend as much time as possible finding books in the library that she could take to Miss Spoon's house and read to her.

It wasn't long before she was in the fourth grade. Her teacher gave lots of history assignments to read. The textbook was called *America's Story*, but except for one picture, none of the Americans in the pictures of history looked like Sugar or any of her family or school friends. They all looked like the people on TV. There were pictures of smiling matronly looking women standing next to voting booths in the Women's Suffrage chapter, triumphant looking pilots standing next to airplanes in the World War II chapter, and in the one picture, the one from the Great Depression chapter, there were crowds of colored people standing grim faced and half-clothed, in long lines, waiting for bread and soup. It made her wonder why the TV people had not had a Great Depression and the colored people had not had suffrage or airplanes.

Miss Spoon didn't like her to read from the history book. She told Sugar she had seen and lived more and truer history than that book had. Sometimes she would start to talk about the stories her late husband had told her about his time in the Army in World War I, how he had had to sleep on the wet ground under a tent when he got sent to a makeshift camp on his way to Europe, there being only one small barracks and it was for white soldiers only. And how when he boarded an Army train on his way home from Europe, there was only one too small car for all the colored soldiers to stand in while the white German prisoners sat in the larger comfortable cars next to the white American soldiers.

Miss Spoon remembered, said she would never forget, a relief worker who came to her town during the Depression with a truckload of food packed in boxes marked "White" and "Colored." The white boxes had potted meat, fruit, fresh eggs, and peanut butter, and the colored boxes just had peanut butter.

She told Sugar she had never been inside a voting booth like the matronly looking TV people in the book. She said her parents had taught her that voting was too dangerous and "wouldn't ever help our people no way," which confused Sugar because her own father constantly told her, "the vote and the college degree are the tickets to your future."

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By the 1980's, Sugar had voted numerous times, had earned a college degree and was working on another one, not really sure that it was securing her future in the way her father and other "colored" people had envisioned 30 years earlier. But she kept studying because she loved

that with each new slave narrative she uncovered and read from some obscure archive, she learned more about herself as well as about the millions who had looked like her but had not been made apparent to her in her first history books. Judging by the slave narratives, there had been many– so many– long before her, who like herself had always wanted to inscribe themselves on paper.

Occasionally, when she could afford to splurge, she would venture from her tiny college town to some city that still had one or two of a dwindling number of old, classy department stores– the kind that employed uniformed elevator operators. She was foraging for inventories of soon-to-be obsolete flat boxes named Hanes with honest-to-goodness silk stockings. Women had started wearing synthetic pantyhose, scrunched up and packed in "eggs" made of plastic. They were economical and were sold everywhere– convenience store, discount stores, grocery stores. The boxed hosiery, to the contrary, had become hard to find and unbelievably expensive. But they conjured memories of shopping trips to grandiose buildings, with a chicly dressed mother, and writing. Sugar could imagine nothing more worth the cost.

Mustard Grows

"I just gonna stay here with you forever. I ain't going to that house no more. I hear 'em the whole time they be talking 'bout me, Maw. That girl, she say she don't want no nappy headed picaninny to take care of, cause she hate niggers and they stink."

He cried so much, his mother couldn't tell if his face and body were wetter from the hastily ordered bath she was giving him or from his tears. Bitty had been told to keep for herself some extra of the last batch of soap she made several days earlier. So she had already given him a bath that week, which was always a labor intensive occurrence for a slave child who had to help carry water from the creek. Even a four-year-old knows that two baths close together must mean something important, something life changing, something amiss. He didn't like how that made him feel. He didn't want to go outside the cabin to that house or to any place. He remembered when the others who lived there were given soap and bathed, and they went outside to some place called Auction the next day. And they stayed there. Forever. He was used to staying with his mother alone, now, and all he wanted, now, was for her to dry him and let him go snuggle into the mattress she made for them to share, out of rags and straw since she was not allowed any tick cloth. He would make sure he stayed there. Forever. Tonight, he decided, he wouldn't complain if he happened to get poked by some sharp straw that managed to work its way through the thin, finely stitched casing.

"Well, pretty boy, y'all both done got it all wrong. That girl don't supposed to take care of you. You be there to take care of her. And you is too going back to that house and that's

where you gonna stay. That girl's papa done decided that for good. She ain't got no say so. You ain't got no say so. Me neither. And I don't believe they hates niggers no worser than everybody else hates 'em. Maybe if you was nappy headed like the rest of them picaninnies be around here, I'd hate you too. But ain't nothing nappy 'bout this pretty hair you got, naw sir. And when I gets through soaping it up and rinsing it out and drying it off, I'm gonna take that knife I got hid and cuts me off a little piece. Then I wrap that pretty piece of hair in a rag and, soon as I can get that new wife of Massa's to gimme a needle and some thread of my own, I sew that rag under this here mattress just like I do that knife. Don't you worry; won't nobody know it's there but me and you. Lord knows I'd a been sewed me up some of this pretty hair long ago if I coulda got my own needle and thread like I used to from that first wife. This new wife wouldn't even a let me keep this extra soap, 'cept she wanted me to get you real clean before you goes to stay in that house.

"Well, you don't pay no mind to what that girl say. You sho nuff will not stink! Wait til she see your clean light skin and this pretty gold hair. If she ever get to see Massa Redhart's grown boys, she'll see you just as pretty as they is. Lord knows you belongs to one of them boys. Massa Redhardt knows it too. He just don't know which one, exactly. Me neither.

"But that don't make no difference. They all look alike and you look like 'em. Massa knows it, and he won't let nothing bad happen to you in that house. Naw, don't you worry 'bout that. Cause Massa sho nuf did love them boys. And he liked to died too when they left from here after they maw died. He ain't gonna love this girl and this new wife, her maw. Not like he did them boys and they maw. Don't you worry, though. Bitty won't never forget 'bout you."

He was sure that "forget about him" was exactly what his mother was trying to do later that evening when she had him follow behind her to the girl's house. He knew that everything he owned was on his back, that he was clean, and that his hair had been cut off just so his mother could put it in a rag. He knew that he should and would remember this day. His mother was walking too briskly. The more he tried to catch up to her, the faster she walked toward the house. It was as if she intended to keep him ten paces outside her grasp– on purpose. But he didn't know the purpose. The rag with the hair was tucked into her linsey woolsey blouse. He had seen it peeking through the garment's holes before she abruptly walked out of the cabin while hollering back to him, "Come on outa here."

It looked to him like the walk must have been a breeze for her. She moved with a speed that suggested she was enjoying what could have been a short trek– less than ten minutes– from their door to the big house's back porch. Yet, she didn't talk or sing to him like she usually did when they walked about in the low quarters. She didn't hold his hand. And instead of heading directly for the house, which was plainly visible after the first five or so minutes' walk, she took off running, around instead of through the large front yard, and led him alongside the burned out patches of dirt where Old Maw had been teaching her to fire up the big black pots for washing clothes and cooking soap. Then back behind another slave cabin, down through the sparse rows of pole beans and poke salad its occupant had been permitted to grow for his own needs. Then they passed a sizable plot that hosted many slightly raised mounds of dirt. Some were tiny, some much larger. Some of them had crossed wooden sticks on top. The little ones had tiny wooden cups, spoons or broken crockery– one had a corn husk doll, complete with teeny-weeny knitted cap. It looked so interesting, he wanted it but didn't wander over to get it, fearing a scolding.

As he walked, though, he wondered why anybody would leave such a fine toy unattended. The next time he came by here, he would be sure to get it if nobody else was playing with it.

Finally they cut through the little meadow. It was not lush green like the bigger, farther away one where most of the Redhart's livestock grazed, but it was grassy enough for the one, half-dead bull the slaves were allowed to keep for themselves. Bitty was nearly out of breath but able to yell back to him, "It's plenty of piles out here from where that bull been harnessed this morning. You bet not step in it to save yo life." That was the only utterance from his mother the whole time, so he didn't mind its feeble attempt at sounding threatening. He didn't mind having to be extra careful not to step in it, even though her skirt tail kept kicking up stinking black-brown clumps for him to dodge. Enough of it stuck to her skirt that by the time they reached the back porch, a child's lifetime later, she was way dirtier than he.

He was out of breath and wanted some water, too. His new white mistress, four years old just like himself, was standing on the other side of the back porch door and saw him and Bitty approach the steps. He heard the little girl say, "Mother Dear, that dirty mustard looking boy is here, and I suppose I ought to water him." Her mother answered, "Why, what a Christian gesture, Priscilla, darling. You go right ahead." The little girl opened the door, and he walked in as his mother fell down, right where she stood, mouth wide open and silent, at the foot of the steps. She did not get up. Without knowing how he knew it, he knew that it was this new arrangement that would last forever and forever and forever.

The knowing caused him to become something other than himself, yet he remembered the self he had been a long, long time ago when his warm, beautiful, loving mother had given him a bath and cut his hair. He knew it. He knew it for sure the next day, when Massa Redhart

walked with him back to those mounds of dirt. There was a new one. It had crossed sticks like some of the others, but this one also had Bitty's scrap of rag, the one with his hair sewn inside, draped over the sticks. While this man who really was his grandfather stood, for a quite a while, looking down at this new mound of dirt, the boy noticed that the behatted corn husk doll was still where it had been, waiting for its owner to come back. He didn't want it.

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The girl decided that Mustard would be his name. He was hers, brought there to be her own property, so she could call him whatever she wanted. She tried to teach him her name, but it kept coming out 'Scilla, so she decided that would be all right. The two got along just fine from the beginning. Taking care of her was his job, explained the girl's mother, and he was to sleep in the trundle that pulled out the bottom of her bed in case she needed anything, like the chamber pot, or a cup of water during the night.

Each morning, he got up first, built a fire in the bedroom if it was cold, or stood over Scilla and fanned if it was hot. His stirring around usually woke her up and that's when it was time for him to run down through the indoor kitchen that was not far from the outdoor pump to catch enough water in the crockery basin for the two of them to wash up. At first, he'd wash her teeth, face, neck, hands, and hind parts if she'd had an accident in bed that night, and then help her put on stockings, bloomers, chemise, waist, petticoat, skirt and sash, and button-up shoes, and then brush her hair and tie it down in back of her head with a piece of grosgrain ribbon. Just like the big mistress taught him. Then he'd use the leftover water to wash himself, jump into a

flour sack blouse, linsey woolsey breeches and brogan shoes, and run back down to the indoor kitchen where the cook would have his cracked hominy, cornmeal cake and molasses ready. He would hurry and eat while the mistress of the house was up in the bedroom undoing the ribbon so she could put curled finishing touches on Scilla's hair and check to see that he hadn't missed any buttons on her shoes or left sleep in her eyes.

That was on days that weren't too hot to cook indoors. In the worst of the summer, after getting the two of them dressed, he'd have to run all the way to the older, bigger but farther away kitchen built onto the smokehouse for his breakfast (the consolation was that the cook usually gave him a slice of ham and some gravy in addition to the usual hominy), and still get back to the bedroom in time to take their chamber pots out to the privy, wash them and bring them back, and then dust the little wooden table and chairs where Scilla's breakfast would be brought momentarily. After a few scoldings from Scilla's mother about him taking too long in the mornings to get everything done before Scilla was ready to eat, he figured he could save time if they washed at the same time. At first, the little girl pointed and laughed loudly when she got a clear sight of the funny little thing Mustard used to make water. When she asked her mother why he had to use a thing like that to make water, and she didn't, her mother told her the thing was just something that God didn't bother to cut off of niggers when they were born, but that since she was a sweet, precious, darling little white girl she would never have one to worry about.

Scilla Marries John Moore

Scilla couldn't have been prouder to receive John. Why wouldn't she be flattered? She was only 13, and he was so much older and so, so handsome. Prettier than she, she thought. And it certainly wasn't as if she could expect many other suitors to come beating at her door, not under the circumstances.

He came almost every evening now. Mustard could tell by the sun how much longer it would be before he could hear the carriage trotting up the incline toward the house, at first so faint he had to strain to be sure he heard it, again, on yet another one of Scilla's evenings, the only time he had for doing things that didn't amount to work and he kept hoping he could do them with Scilla like before, could maybe catch her alone for long enough to get her to talk to him some. To his disgust, no matter how hard he prayed that John would not come, every evening that horse's trotting would get so increasingly loud and strong, his head ached from it by the time the carriage's single occupant stopped, getting as near as he could to the front door without his horse's hooves trampling the front garden. Mustard wished sometimes that John would forget himself and drive right over the peas on one side or the potatoes on the other. That would have to get Scilla or her parents mad at him, wouldn't it? It didn't look like anything would. They loved him for no reason that Mustard could see. They treated him like Jesus.

Since cotton had started to draw such a remarkable price at market, Mr. Redhart had had the field slaves stop planting the family's food crops on the side acres that had been devoted,

from the time that farm began, to corn, carrots, sugar beets, rutabagas, cabbage and various other leafy green vegetables. Instead, nowadays they planted cotton everywhere there was a speck of land fit to sustain it because there was so much money in it. Yet, they couldn't afford to buy all their vegetables in town or from the poor white farmers who could afford to plant vegetables but nothing else, so the Redharts did what many wealthy planters did. They relocated the food crops to the smaller space that comprised the curtilage of their house, almost up to the porch. It made it difficult to walk into or out of house without doing a balancing act so as to avoid damaging the crops or to avoid coming into contact with snakes, rodents and insects that are attracted to plant life, but which used to indulge their attraction much farther from the humans' domiciles.

These days, he found lots of things were unlike they used be. It was hard for him to get used to it, but any minor infraction of a rule committed by Mustard was punished far more harshly than he could remember since moving into the house to wait on Scilla 10 years ago. He secretly hoped the bad temper of his owners would extend to his rival as well, but that never happened. It looked like John was their newest delight in life, but an unfamiliar chill filled the air and draped over Mustard whenever he got close to, much less talked to, any of the Redharts. He couldn't say for sure that they didn't want him anymore. In fact, he was pretty sure they needed him and would protect him from some of the worst of being a slave when they felt like it.

For instance, once, after small snakes started finding their way as close to the house as the vegetable crops did, he got a large spade and started to chop them to pieces. The problem was that, having never worked as a field hand, he wasn't adroit at wielding a spade, and he chopped up as many beet roots as he did snakes. It was his bad luck that the slave driver, a white man hired in from town, who was usually out in the cotton fields with the bulk of the

slaves, happened to have passed by on his way into the house for a meeting with Mr. Redhart. He walked over, took notice of the waste Mustard had created and backhanded the boy, hard, while cursing him so loudly both Mr. and Mrs. Redhart heard the commotion and came out to see what was amiss. Mustard's master ran screaming to the driver, "This is not one of your field niggers, I'll have you to know," and that if any punishing of him was to be done, the boy's master must be consulted in advance. The driver looked angry at first, and Mustard thought there was about to be an argument, but then the driver's face turned a deeper shade of red than his neck as he looked first at Mustard, then back to Mr Redhart and finally back at Mustard again for a longer gaze and finally said, "Oh, I see now, Mr. Redhart, and I surely do apologize to you and yours."

That didn't mean that he had become immune to other humiliations inside the house. When he accidentally spilled cider on the floor from a too heavy jug, Mrs. Redhart yelled that he was as low a varmint as the rest of his kind. Bigger spills than this one had gone without such comment in the past. And the hardest of all things for him to understand: he had been made to start sleeping on a pallet in the kitchen at night instead of in Scilla's warm bedroom. He tried to tell himself it was just because the little baby took up so much room, with its crib and all, and the new wash tubs Mrs. Redhart put in there to dunk and soak its diapers. If it weren't for that baby being so pretty and smiling at him all the time, he would have been mad at it. He made up his mind a few times to be mad at it, but it sure was a pretty thing. The baby loved it when he played with her, and he loved her right back. Everything these days confused him so bad. It was probably just as well that he sleep down there in the cold because he kept such a bad feeling nowadays-- every time he thought about Scilla, and that was most of the time. She didn't laugh

or even talk to him about fun things anymore. She hardly talked at all. To anybody. She slept all the time. Even when the baby cried and cried and he couldn't make it be quiet and Mrs. Redhart would have to come in and get it and take it to her own room that she and Mr. Redhart shared. Scilla still slept. He wondered if, since Scilla no longer seemed to want him to take care of her, they would have him move back to the cabin where he and his mother used to stay, and if he would have to start going to the fields with the others before day each morning. But before too long, in addition to having him help the cook all day by hauling water into the kitchen from the pump in the yard, or hauling meat into the kitchen from where it hung in the smokehouse, or firewood from where it was kept stacked inside a little shed, Mrs. Redhart said that there were new duties for him. She said Scilla would begin receiving gentlemen callers and that he would have to wear the little red coat she handed him, along with the new black boots she handed him– they could both tell by looking that they weren't big enough to fit him. She ordered him to keep the coat neatly pressed and the boots highly polished at all times and wear them in the evenings when he would answer the door to the callers and then stand the rest of the evening near the back of the parlor, waiting to see if Miss Scilla (he would have to add the "miss" whenever he addressed her from now on) or her gentlemen needed anything, like refreshments from the pantry or wood for the fire.

Although he didn't understand it, he was glad when Scilla looked like she was happy about John Moore coming to call, even though she still had no interest in talking to him or singing songs she had taught him, or running through the meadow, or watching the animals in the barn the way they used to for so many years. And he didn't know why Mrs. Redhart always talked about gentlemen callers as if there were more than one. None ever came except John.

In the beginning, Scilla and John and Mr. and Mrs. Redhart would all stay in the parlor and talk about the latest sermon at the Methodist church, or about the gossip from the latest newspapers John had read in town, and then they would have Mustard bring in the cold lemonade or hot tea with cake on a large silver tray. Once he set the tray down on the tea table in the middle of the room, Mustard went back to standing in the corner. He had been instructed that actually pouring the lemonade or tea and handing the cake to Mr. Moore was for Scilla to do. He didn't understand. They had trained him since he was four years old that Scilla was never to have to wait on herself in that way– that it was his job as her own little retainer to do all the pouring and serving. But before John came the first time, Scilla's mother made her practice pouring from the silver teapot, just so, for a very long time. And she kept saying that Scilla was not doing it right until the girl started to cry. Then she said, "Your dearly devoted mother would not have you so upset for the world, my sweet, sweet darling," as she, too, started to cry. "You are just *so* young, and as your ever loving mother knows, our precious Jesus himself knows you are doing the best you can. We must trust that God will help you in this important time of need. Oh yes, my angel, when it comes time for you to prove yourself and pour this tea like a *decent* girl should, our Lord will help you just like he always does for fine southern womanhood. Just like he helped you through your confinement and misery. But we must pray, for your life depends on it." She was crying so beseeching so furiously now that Mr. Redhart came running from his study. "We will pray without ceasing," she continued, "that the Lord God will make Mr. John Moore love you." Then the three of them got down on their knees. Mustard did, too.

In later weeks he prayed some more, but by then it was to make the gentleman caller go away and never come back. And for Scilla to be like her old self again. He had no friends at all.

The cook liked to talk to him while she worked in the day, but she went back to the cabins early in the evenings, earlier than the field slaves came in from the cotton. Mustard's prayers were not answered by the Redharts' god. Scilla seemed to hate him worse and worse the more she looked forward to John Moore's visits. After the first week, Mr. and Mrs. Redhart no longer stayed with the couple in the parlor. They would sit in Mrs. Redhart's drawing room, where she had just begun teaching Scilla to weave rugs and needlepoint settee cushions, before there was a baby and no time left for learning needlework. Mr. Redhart would sit and pretend to read while his wife sat and pretended to sew, and they both eavesdropped on their Scilla and John. When it got very quiet, they glanced fretfully at each other and then pretended harder at the reading and sewing.

After three weeks, John rode out way too early one Friday morning, parked the buggy and knocked at the Redhart's door. The cook let him in, and on her way to go get Mr. Redhart like John asked her to, she ran to the kitchen to tell Mustard to put on his coat and boots and start doing his standing wherever it was he was supposed to do it when Mr. Moore was visiting. Scilla's beau and her stepfather went into the study and stayed most of the day. When they came out, way past dinner time, the master looked like he was sick, just like when he had the grippe that time and couldn't eat for days. Just the same, he announced that a celebration supper should be prepared and that he was exceedingly glad John was to become his son-in-law on Sunday directly following the sermon at the Methodist church in town.

Scilla couldn't contain her happiness. She grinned and grinned, and her mother, looking pleased– no, relieved– nodded. The men cracked nary a smile.

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Not that a 13-year-old would recognize it, but it was clear to nearly everyone else that John Moore, hailing from only God knew where or whom, was a social climber and a woman hater who, nevertheless, had sense enough to understand that he could never on his own acquire a sufficient amount of land to become a proper planter. Lots of land for planting, that was his heart's desire, so he carefully set out to acquire the next best thing:: a well-to-do wife who would bring it to him as part of a dowry. He also recognized that there were certain accommodations one could expect from a wife. Except for sexual activity, he hated associating with women, and when necessary he could go for astonishingly long periods without sex if his mind was preoccupied with some project he deemed worthy of his thoughts. He just might appreciate not having to go for such long periods after all, he concluded. He thought all women were idle and superfluous, their brains were befuddled and their natural interests and inclinations were so frivolous as be to inconducive to any meaningful life endeavor except for providing a man's lineage. To become the man of gentility he wanted to be, he knew society dictated that he needed a family, which meant first finding a wife who would be up to his standards and aspirations. To get the wife, he knew he'd have to set up residence at least temporarily in some town where there was little chance that anyone would know anything about him or try to find out. His aim was to become the same kind of man of independent means as was the owner of the highly successful southern farm where he grew to the age of 10. It was 1847 and he had survived to age 25 by hook and crook, sometimes working for low pay, alongside slaves, at jobs unfit for what he thought himself to be: a "decent" white man. He committed a lot of petty crime, too, and it tended to pay better. But this was the year he felt like he was ready. He was masterful at imitating the mannerisms of well off men he had worked for and had sometimes

been mistaken for a man of education. Now, he was determined he had learned enough by watching others, could act the part well enough to get a toehold into "society," and that once he snagged him a wife with land, he could get started breeding a line of his own and would never be made to feel like dirt, indecent, again. Mr. Redhart made his acquaintance through the Methodist circuit preacher who introduced John as his bosom childhood friend, the very vision of human kindness.

Scilla started to allow herself a little hope that she might still have a life after the reverend came out to pay a call on the family, to let them know he had been assigned to the town for a spell and was counting on seeing them on Sundays. These days, she couldn't move a muscle that her mother didn't notice. She hadn't decided, and it really didn't matter, whether her mother was worried and watchful because she believed her threats to poison herself with lye soap, or because she believed her when she said, first chance she got, she'd smother that ugly black thing that did nothing but bellow at the top of its lungs all day and night. "After all," she screamed, "it came out of me. I'll do what I please with it!" What mattered was that she was hardly prepared for the slap across her face she received from her mother after saying it. Nobody was acting the same these days, and Scilla made up her mind to stay to herself as much as she could lest she be taken by surprise again. Her mother had never struck her before. Not for any reason. Not even when she knew full well she was being bad just because she could get away with it. Not wanting to be caught off her guard again, she put up a little resistance when Mrs. Redhart told her get out of bed and dress to receive Rev. Isaacs as a family for dinner. She said she wouldn't be hungry at dinnertime and preferred to get her rest.

"You'll eat dinner this day, Priscilla Redhart, and I don't care if you're hungry. Do you

really think I can have that jack leg come here and go back to tell the whole town that you're kept confined to your bedroom?" her mother said. "If there's a tongue left that's not wagging already about why you stopped taking needle and painting lessons with the other girls at the female seminary, it sure would have a tale to tell once news got out that you were being hidden right here in our own house."

"But I look so big and terrible," Scilla argued. "And isn't that why you said I couldn't go to the seminary anymore? That's why I can't finish my silk sampler or the French handwork that Miss Renee was designing for me to stitch, isn't it? Mother Dear you know how much I loved learning the needle and the music lessons and how to paint flowers on the chinaware. Why did I have to stop all my lessons if it wasn't that you were ashamed of me getting so fat and ugly?"

"Child. Child. Child." Mrs. Redhart kept repeating the word. She had to convince herself that this conversation was really taking place, and that the woman she was trying to talk to was none other than her own precious baby, the baby she had kept clean and pure and apart from the debasement that came from consortium with men, but who had despite the cloistering provided by a devoted southern mother become pregnant at 12 years of age and given birth at 13. She would have fainted if there had been time, but it would be dinner time soon and the preacher was coming. She decided that the time to die of apoplexy brought on by the shock and shame of the pregnancy had passed. She had missed her chance to die honorably in the throes of dishonor. Why God had not taken her as he should have, in front of witnesses who could later testify to the penetrating magnitude of her womanly southern dignity that caused her to breathe her last, right there on the spot, when learning of the disgrace, she did not know. She had served God to the

highest degree, had she not?! Why would he turn from her now, she wondered, at a time when scandal was potentially even more costly than 13 years ago when she herself had cause to leave home with a newborn in tow. At least *she* had had an ample inheritance, coming from such an aristocratic planting family as she had. She set up housekeeping in a neighboring state where her people were not well known, and told everyone who would listen in her new community that she was recently widowed and starting life afresh, away from the gripping memories of her true and dearly departed "husband." Keeping that up for the whole year it took her to find and latch onto a much older man and "remarry" was no small feat, and *she* had an inheritance to comfort her. She gratefully transferred every penny of it to her new husband just like she promised she would within minutes after they were pronounced man and wife. And she counted it a bargain. She was unsure as to whether he intended to settle any money on his stepdaughter. He had been good to Priscilla and was the only father she would ever know. But under the circumstances, one should not expect. Oh, what she would give to spare her sweet darling the very onus she had adeptly evaded.

But who had time now for all that reminiscent falderal? Certainly not Mrs. Redhart. The preacher was on his way and her husband had told her the man might have a connection to someone who could prove to be their salvation. She had to get that ignorant girl's hind parts up out of bed and down to the dining room in time to make a good impression. Well, as good an impression as could be expected under the circumstances.

"Priscilla, my own dearest," she started, "I don't want you thinking your Mother Dear believes you are fat and ugly. Child, no. That's not it at all. What's wrong is, we cannot continue telling people any longer that you have been ill with the grippe. It'll be a tricky thing,

but we want you up and about but without anybody knowing about that . . . that . . . Oh, Priscilla, by rights, you can't even call that a woods colt. It's a picaninny! But you are *not* to smother it. Do you understand me, girl? Whatever it is and for whatever reason God visited its shame on us, God made it and sent it here and you can't kill it. Lord have mercy if word of a half white picaninny being murdered in this house ever got out around town!

"Then you mean I can to go back to the seminary and finish learning to be a good and proper lady like you, Mother Dear?"

"Child. Child, you must listen and understand quickly. You can never go back to the female seminary. That's for girls who can still look forward to debut parties and pretty weddings. You are forever ruined and have no time to spend painting flowers on chinaware and stitching samplers with some tacky, foreign old maid.. The best we can hope for, darling, is that a man will come along who doesn't know that you've endured the martyrdom already. Lord help us, at 12 years old you should not have had to go through it. It saddens me that you had to. But when you told me what your father's boys had been doing to you when they were here, well, what was I to do? I couldn't go to him with anything so sordid as that. After all, hasn't he been a good provider and a blessing to you and me? Would you want to see him hurt over those boys of his? He loves those boys more than a little, and he'd believe whatever they chose to tell him. So it looked like it was better to keep still about it. Until, well, until it came out of you looking so . . . dark. If ever I had dreamed that you and that Mustard . . ."

"But, Mother Dear," Priscilla interrupted. Mustard didn't hurt me, and you said somebody must have hurt me or I wouldn't have gotten that old woods colt. All Mustard and me used to do was play like we were animals sometimes. It was just for fun, doing just what we saw

the pigs in the pen doing all the time when we would be outside playing. And one time we saw the horses doing it too in the barn, but the slave driver and two of his darkies were having to coax the horses to do it, not like the pigs, and then they saw me and Mustard standing there and they yelled at us to go away. That hurt my feelings. I yelled back that I was the little mistress of this plantation and that I could stand on it anywhere I pleased without being yelled at by slaves and a hired man. But that didn't hurt me so bad that I cared any more about it the next day. No m'am. The only time it hurt was with those boys he loves so much."

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After coming to talk with Mr. Redhart and eat dinner three more times in one week, Rev. Isaacs made it clear to him that rumors about his daughter were indeed beginning to spread in town. The preacher counseled him that there was no shame that the savior would refuse to forgive as long as the "affected" parties were willing to make things right in God's sight through the state of holy matrimony. Then he convinced him that he could put him in touch with someone, a handsome young man with great potential for importance, who was more than ready to take a wife and start a family immediately. The reverend did not have to say it twice.

When John Moore showed up the next evening, empty handed, he and Mr. Redhart stood eye to eye, staring at each other for a while before Priscilla and her mother came downstairs to be formally introduced. Mr. Redhart knew that John's gesture, or lack thereof, was a signal as to how the negotiations would proceed if at all. It was well understood that John intended to stay on the receiving end of whatever deal they might work out, and was not going to make any

offerings to damaged goods. He didn't know whether John knew the whole of the scandal, but the family was in no position to scrutinize. If this vibrant looking man with so much potential for importance knew only half the story and still wanted to give Priscilla the once over, they could scarcely afford to quibble with him. For about five minutes, Mrs. Redhard worried that this 25-year-old man really was too old for Priscilla who was still such a child, so tiresomely innocent . But then she remembered that her own husband was nearly 20 years older than she was and how glad she had been to get him. Then she thought about how good looking John was and decided the girl ought to be doubly grateful, plain and simple. God only knew how, as a young "widow" with a baby, she had prayed and prayed for rescue to come in the form of a handsome face in addition to deep pockets so that it might go especially easy when she resumed the womanly duty with someone new. She was grateful for Redhart's wealth, but he was another of her prayers that God had not fully answered.

She had to break herself out of reminiscence, again. Getting back to the job at hand, she remembered agreeing with her husband that they would let John come to court as much as he liked, and that if he kept it up for more than a few times, he'd probably be worth whatever he asked for. It took about three weeks before John showed up one morning to see the old man, not Priscilla, anxious to cut the deal. John had hoped it would take less time than that. He was in a hurry. But it took longer than expected for him and Ike to find out all they needed to know about how much the Redharts owned. Turned out they had land scattered through two different states, both deep inside cotton-raising territory. He and Ike also wanted as much confirmation as they could get on the stories they heard in town about the girl. Some of them were awfully wild. Could she really have serviced a slave when she was only 12? He doubted it. Was it her own

blood brother that ruined her? He doubted that too, and eventually he learned from a reliable source that Redhart's daughter was really his stepdaughter, so there was no blood brother in the first place. But to cut to the quick of it, the hard tack truth was that he didn't much care. No matter what she was like, he knew he would find her tedious, and pathetic, merely a hurdle that would require traversing. She could be a strumpet or an aristocrat. He found one woman the same as the last or the next. The only truly bothersome thing about this one was that the Redhart girl was just that, a girl of only 13 instead of a woman. After pondering on that particular problem for a few days, John calculated that unbridled youth in a paramour-soon-to-become-wife could work to his advantage. She would be more conditioned to doing as told and less susceptible to a grown woman's wants for things he didn't wish to provide and she didn't know existed. Not being citified, she wouldn't want imported underwear or trips abroad, and had never heard of Paris or Rome, he would bet. She would be backward. Her upkeep would be cheap. He would be wrong.

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The female seminary in town was not at all like the school for males who wanted to become men of the cloth. It was the closest thing there was to education for girls, but it didn't concentrate on reading and writing. There was just of enough of that to ensure that the six or seven girls it could accommodate would be able to sign and recognize their names. Any more than that took time away from what elite planters' daughters inherited as their purpose in life. They were to be exhibited, as beacons to lower society, so that all may see how refinement,

which God had chosen to imbue within the female of the species, was at the root of modern civilization. Owing largely to the funds pooled by the three or so well of families that had daughters, the seminary was able to hire a highly trained and experienced instructor and bring her to this country from France. She was recommended by the eldest daughter of the Grueltons who had been married off to a landed Irishman who returned, with his new wife, to his country after an extended visit to America only to find out that half of his lands and most of his buildings, except for the manor house, had been plundered and left to decay by his tenant farmers who claimed to be starving. He thought them lazy, filthy liars and had all those he could catch taken to the stockades.

Regardless their motivation, their lack of loyalty to him as their patron had left his agricultural endeavors in near ruin, and instead of planning the Grande Tour the bride had so looked forward to as a wedding present from her groom, the newlyweds found themselves planning cutbacks on paid household service. They could not afford Miss Renee. Because she had been with the family for years and was long past prime marriage age, the lord of the manor wanted to secure an alternative placement for her if possible. He imposed upon his wife to write to her family and beg that they take her in. He wrote, and the bride signed a letter that said Miss Renee would prove an invaluable asset in the "finishing" of the community's high quality girls. She could teach them so much of what should comprise the skillful attributes of women from the South's most important families just as was the case in the North: the needle, both Fancy Work and plain sewing, needle lace, bobbin lace, and shuttle lace, crochet, knitting, floral painting on china and canvas, sketching, paper cutting and quilling, silhouette cutting, piano and singing, tea and table setting, flower arranging, elocution and recitation, fashion in clothing and home decor,

other feminine arts as necessary, the alphabets and rudiments of reading and writing in French, Italian, or English.

Indeed, there were southern men who recognized this need. When invited into high tone northern homes during business trips, they could not ignore the more pronounced penchant for the decorative arts and what powerful statements such niceties made about a man's status. By their reckoning, no decent southern woman could be matched in rectitude, fortitude, pulchritude. The next step for them, however, should be to equip themselves with the skills, already mastered by the fairer sex in Europe and in the northern region of their own country, that would render them capable of outfitting worthy southern gentlemen's homes and families in the style to which their positions in the community entitled them, they being the business and political power holders. The families that could afford it didn't mind one bit paying to send for Miss Renee to open an honest to goodness finishing school in their nearby town for the female progeny of those from a certain class. They made the travel arrangements, and while she was en route, they settled the criteria that outlined in detail the classes whose children may not attend the seminary. The only problem encountered was by the Grueltons. Before it was all put to rest, they had to insist to their daughter, with far more firmness than was pleasant, that she desist in her attempts to book passage along with Miss Renee back to America, as her husband had made it abundantly clear that he intended for her to dutifully accompany him in their home in Ireland no matter how long the financial crisis and tenant uprisings persisted.

Priscilla started in the seminary just before she turned 12. She loved every minute of every lesson. She was a quick study. As soon as she completed an arts project, she clamored for a new one, and Mr. Redhart never refused to send additional money for supplies and for Miss

Renee to create customized designs for her to tackle. She pored over pictures in French ladies' magazines that she couldn't read but understood. She enjoyed the embroidery and French hand sewing the most because she had seen how the older girls who were marriageable effused gleefully over one another's satin stitches, bouillon stitches, stem stitches and daisy chains as they used needle and thread to add the well placed flowers on their damask tablecloths and napkins, muslin pillowcases, and chemises and pantaloons they called lingerie, made of silk so sheer you could see through it. They would put the finished pieces in cedar boxes, honed and assembled by their own slaves, or sometimes purchased ready-made from Miss Renee. They called them hope chests as they spent a lot of time hoping they would quickly find husbands who would be impressed by the trousseau items stored in the chests which would become part of their dowries. Their teacher told them often how she had seen many a girl whose family being temporarily dispossessed of ready cash, still made an honorable marriage because the items the girl had created with her own hands and set aside over her youthful years in a cedar chest were sufficient to convince a gentleman– or his mother– that she would be well worth her upkeep while waiting on money payments to be made by her parents.

Scilla loved listening to the older ones talk about the kinds of petit four that had been served at this one's wedding celebration or the punch at that one's cotillion, the draperies and settee ordered all the way from New York for another's new townhouse recently purchased by a groom-to-be.

And she loved playing, running through the meadows without any shoes on at her farm, even on extremely sunny days, until her mother would caution her to come inside lest she get as dark as the house nigger boy she had played and run with ever since he was given to her as her

very own when they were both four years old. She named him Mustard because she could see just enough of a tinge of gold in his creamy yellow complexion to serve notice that he was not white. It had been his job to take care of her every want for most of her life. And for most of her life so far, what she had most wanted was to play outside. Sometimes they'd just roll around in the dirt to see how much of it would stick to them, and to see the shocked expression on the face of Old Bit, the washerwoman who came up from the cabins every few days with a basket full of clean clothes which she carried atop her head. She would mutter to herself when she gathered up the newly soiled clothes to take back down in the basket that never fell from its perch despite the woman's not offering it any assistance from her hands. Scilla thought the muttering was hilarious, and she loved to laugh at and play tricks on Old Bit every chance she got. Like the time she made Mustard wrap up a whole handful of earthworms in a dirty bed sheet that the slave came to collect. When that sheet started to crawl and the woman jumped straight to the ceiling, Scilla thought she would bust a gut laughing. The woman knew not to say anything to her, but thumped Mustard on both his ears instead. Scilla laughed at that, too.

On good weather days, she and her companion/servant/best friend/servant would catch butterflies, chase chickens, ride goats, bark at dogs, or just watch animals do things to one another. Except for the hottest part of summer, the pigs did it a lot. If the children stood around and watched the pigs root for a while, they were bound to see a couple of them start doing it. "Ooo-ee, they havin theyselfs a fine time now," a very old slave who grinned toothlessly as he walked by once told them. "Y'all chillun has seed how these pigs gets more pigs. Just like folkses makes more folkses. A fine old time for sho." He laughed and kept walking toward the cabins and Scilla thought him a fool. She knew how folks made more folks because her mother

had already explained to her that babies had to get harvested late at night in cabbage patches while the cabbages were asleep so they wouldn't see the babies leaving with their new mamas and get mad.

What she really wanted to know was how that old slave ate without any teeth. She liked oatmeal and stewed apples fine enough, but her favorite foods were roast turkey, fried ham, and corn on the cob. How in the world did he manage good food like that without teeth? When she went in the house and asked her mother why the field slaves she had seen never did seem to have teeth, her mother said, "Because I promise you they don't have to worry about turkey and ham as long as I'm in charge of their rations. What corn they need is in the meal they get for their mush. They can eat plenty well without teeth, thank you m'am."

When they were four, and Mustard had first come to live with her, and he slept in her room in the trundle of her bed, and it was his job to get her dressed every morning as well as himself, and they used chamber pots in her room in plain sight of each other at night when it was too dark to go out to the privy– back then she caught her first glimpse of that odd looking little thing Mustard used to make water. When she asked her mother why he had to use a thing like that to make water, and she didn't, her mother told her the thing was just something that God didn't bother to cut off of niggers when they were born, but that since she was a sweet, precious, darling little white girl she would never have one.

When they were 12, she had reason to wonder if her mother had been truthful. Mr. Redhart's boys came for a visit all three at once. They were grown men. The youngest one of them attended university up in the high hilly part of the state and was nearing the end of his studies. He wasn't all that much like the other two. Scilla couldn't say how it was so; she just

got that feeling. He didn't exactly look like his father, but he acted more like him. He didn't talk loud and cuss all the time like his brothers. And when the servants brought in water for everybody to wash their hands before and after meals like they always did, he actually washed. They went to live with their mother's people soon after she died. The older two had a big rift with their father because he would not let them have their inheritance from her side of the family unless they enrolled in the university. He was a university man and would rather die than let his earthly possessions fall into the hands of uneducated sots, including the possessions that belonged to him only because his wife's wealth was legally his to handle as he saw fit. He and his first wife knew their teenaged sons were prone to strong spirits and slave women, and it was feared that without education they would do nothing but carouse their entire lives. Had their father not been so preoccupied with his wife's bad health over the two years it took her to die, he might have been more able to straighten them out before it was too late.

His wife's maiden sisters eagerly took them in, relishing an opportunity to mother motherless nephews in the absence of children of their own. The older boys were quite beyond the aging women's aptitudes for disciplining wayward youngsters. They bullied their aunts for money at every turn and grew into precisely the embarrassments that had horrified their father in his predictions about them. The small boy had appreciated having two loving maternal figures in his life as well as knowing that his father would support his aspiration to read for law exams when he was old enough. True to his promise, Redhart had paid every cent the university charged him and often sent the boy "walking around money" for when he had time to peruse the town that was blossoming around the university. Now that he was preparing to graduate, the young man knew his father would settle the inheritance. The older ones knew it, too. And they

were afraid they were in danger of the old man settling it 100 percent on their little brother. So they followed him to their old home to plead their cases again to be given what they believed their mother surely would have bequeathed them if she had retained any entitlement to her own wealth after she married.

Scilla had never met them before, but Mustard had. Whenever he thought back to the days when he and his mother lived together, before he turned four and had been summoned by the woman his mother only spoke of as "Massa's new wife" to live in and work in the house, he remembered being told that Massa would be bound to treat him well because he was the spitting image of those boys.

During their visit, the youngest boy spent a lot of time reading in his father's study and the others roamed the grounds much like Scilla and Mustard did. On a day when she was not scheduled to be at the seminary, and her mother had taken Mustard with her to load into a wagon the extra vegetables she needed go buy in town, Scilla entertained herself outside without any particular purpose in mind. She ran from the barn to the chicken coops and back again, just for exercise, when she noticed her two stepbrothers standing over near the pig pens.

"How're y'all doing this morning?" she asked as she sauntered over. As she got closer, she heard them laughing and cussing. When they noticed her there, they got quieter.

"Well, I guess we do just fine," said one of them. "Fine as wine." He laughed again as he took a silver flask out of his pocket, turned it up for a drink but cussed some more as he discovered it was empty.

"Gimme that," said the other. "I'll go refill it. The least we can expect in our brief time in our own father's house is to avail ourselves of his magnificent selections of Madeira, don't you think? Wouldn't you say so, too, little girl?"

He must not have expected her to answer because before she could, he had started to wobble back toward the house. He had his flask in his hand, trying over and over to stick it in his pocket but he was too drunk to get it in. He staggered all the way to the porch waving it around with a drunk's weak aim and solid intention to fill that vessel to the rim and finish getting satiated as quick as he could.

"Y'all drinking wine mighty early in the morning," she said to the remaining stepbrother.

"Oh, it's a celebration," he said.

"What're you celebrating?" she asked.

"The good time these pigs are having." He blurted it out while slapping his knees and laughing so hard he almost fell over. "Go head and look at them get at it just like people. Go ahead. They aren't shy." He tickled himself with every sentence he spoke.

"People wouldn't do that like pigs." She was assertive, sure that she knew what she was talking about and surprised she had to explain it to a grown man.

"Then how do *you* suppose people make more people, missy?"

"Not like that. My mother says that at night, cabbage patches . . ." She didn't get to finish her sentence; he laughed so loud.

"Naw, naw, naw. The plug and the pocket on people don't look exactly like they do on pigs, but they're close enough. And the way you use them's the same. Come here and I'll show you." He had grabbed her wrist before she noticed him reach for her. She didn't know what to

say. In fact, she discovered that she could say nothing because her mouth was wide open but no words came out. She didn't know what to think– she thought she should try to run away and she thought she should go along with him. She was starting to feel kind of stupid about the cabbages, and if the story was wrong, she wanted to learn better and be the first to tell Miss Renee and the other girls at the seminary the next day.

Laughing all the way, he pulled her so forcefully by the wrist to the barn, she never felt her feet touch the ground until they reached the back of the structure, where she hadn't intended to walk today because there was always brittle straw scattered back there, and she remembered, as something pricked her foot, that she came outside with no shoes on.

"So how about it, missy? I'll gladly show you mine if you'll show me yours," he said, still laughing like crazy while trying to unbutton his pants. It popped out suddenly and startled her more than she was already startled. She had trouble catching her breath. He was breathing hard.

"See there. What did I tell ya? I didn't lie, did I! The equipment's not all that different if you try to look at it in just the right way," he said.

She saw. She decided it looked a lot like what Mustard used to make water, only a whole lot bigger. But her mother had told her way back when that only niggers had them because couldn't be bothered to cut them off before they were born. But her stepbrother was white; she was sure. No. She wasn't sure about anything anymore.

"What are y'all doing, boy?" The voice at the barn door startled her again. She jerked her head around too fast and got a catch in her neck, trying to see who it was, hoping, hoping, hoping it wasn't her father and at the same time wondering why she felt like she was doing

something wrong that she wouldn't want him to see. She need not have worried. It was the other brother, back with the flask in his hand.

"Why don't you get on in here, brother. Little sister, here hadn't ever seen a snake, I don't believe, and I wanted to disabuse her of any foolhardy notions she might have picked up along the way." He laughed. "Why, don't you want to do your part, make your own contribution toward her education? Go head and show her your snake, boy."

The second one reached for his buttons so fast, he dropped the flask and she could smell the wine as strong as if she had bathed in it. Now they were on either side of her, both with their pants unbuttoned and "snakes" showing.

"All right, missy. I didn't lie to you and I showed you what I said I would. It's your turn now. You can't do nothing with two plugs and no pocket. Let's see what's under here," he said, making a motion to lift her skirts.

She shook her head, which made her neck hurt more, and pushed his hand off, and she thought she might faint. She was sure now that she wanted to run away.

"Aw, don't ruin the party so soon. It could be a real good time," said the first one.

"Well, if you don't want to open up," said the second, "just come over here and touch it. That can't hurt you, can it? You could at least do that much."

Scilla said, "The cook will be out here calling me soon. My mother told her I could help her shell peas today since she's got so much extra work with y'all being here. I ought to go."

"Then come here and touch it, and then you can go," he said.

She had to pass him to get to the barn door. She started putting one foot in front of the other until she was real close to him, and it moved. It looked like it jumped at her. She thought

about touching it, and as she held her hand out closer to it, she could swear she heard it hiss at her. She screamed, "SNAKE! SNAKE! SNAKE!" and tore off running back to the house. She could still hear them laughing when she made it to the porch.

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The shouting that came from the study, up the stairs into Scilla's bedroom was like nothing she or Mustard had ever heard in the house before. She had been taught by her mother that a raised voice never made its speaker more believable, just more common. "Common" was what Scilla never wanted to become. She learned well at home and seminary that it was way worse than "tacky," which meant almost the same thing but was suitable for white people. The difference, as far as she could understand, was that a tacky white person was probably just low on money and probably just temporarily. Somebody like that could still be good on the inside and improve his or her behavior or standing in society with a little training or a little luck. Being common, on the other hand, was hard to undo. It meant that the person was born low, like Africans and some of the other kinds of foreigners, and nothing you tried to teach that kind would stick. That kind would be worthless on the inside forever, even if you dressed them up in fine clothes or showed them how to imitate good manners. Her mother said there was no surprise in hearing voices raised down in the slave cabins because nothing better could be expected of niggers. They could not be refined. Taking them out of that dreadful place called Africa, giving them homes in America, especially the American south that was favored by God, and exposing them to the love of Jesus the same as white people were did nothing to make them

respectable. Not on the inside where it really mattered, she said. They could be counted on to bicker over trifles, like table scraps, and quarrel and bout most uncivilly. When Scilla's mother was a child, she saw a grown male slave punch another over a biscuit.

It was the four white Redharts who made the row this time. The three boys and their father were arguing something fierce. They had been at it for most of the evening, and her mother would not let supper be served as long as her husband was "indisposed," as she put it to the two children. They closed the bedroom door and tried to busy themselves singing songs and reciting rhymes to drown out the commotion until time to eat. Scilla didn't much mind. She had eaten a marvelous dinner at noon– fried chicken, boiled potatoes, corn on the cob, watermelon, and for dessert since she couldn't make up her mind between peaches and cream and apple dumplings, she took both dishes– and wasn't hungry anyway. Mustard wished they would hurry up and kill each other in that study or come out so Mrs. Redhart could give him what the cook had ordered to leave him for his last meal before she left the house at around 2:00 to go back to the cabins and tend to chores in the slave quarters before the field workers returned. There had been no chicken for him. At dinnertime, he and the cook each had a boiled potato drizzled with the leavings from the fried ham the Redharts had eaten for breakfast, they divided a pan of cornbread– she let him have most of it, even the little piece of bacon she had been hiding and secretly folded into the cornbread batter– and they each got a handful of raw, shredded cabbage. For dessert, she let him drink a whole cup of milk while she stood watch to be sure nobody noticed On most days, the cook's orders were to pack a little basket of dinner leftovers for Mustard's supper. That was fine by him, because it meant that he was always better fed than the field workers, not matter how slim the leftover pickings were. He hoped his basket

would have a piece of chicken in it tonight. It was a possibility, but since the boys had come to visit, poultry, for him, had gotten scarce. The cook was unable to keep up with the demand. She couldn't pluck and fry a chicken or spit-roast a turkey fast enough to satisfy those boys' appetites.

Scilla could hear his stomach growling. "You're making noise just like a rooting pig," she said.

"I can't help it. I'm hungry," he said. "And you talking about pigs makes it worser cause it gets me thinking about ham."

"Thinking about pigs puts me in mind of something else altogether after this morning," she said.

"What?" he asked.

"The strangest thing happened after you and Mother Dear left to go for the vegetables."

She stopped talking, and he had to jar her out of a momentary trance to make her go on.

"What?" he asked, again.

"Two of those old pigs were doing it again and I saw my brothers looking at them and one of them told me that people do it just like pigs do it and I said naw they didn't though I remembered that old slave that told us once that they did and my brother said people did too do it and that was how they made more people and then he took me in the barn and showed me what he had that he said could do it just that way and my other brother's got one, too."

She talked faster than she ever had before, and Mustard was afraid she would never stop to take a breath. When she did, he couldn't breathe. Her eyes were wide, and he figured his

were too because he had never been so surprised to hear anything in his life. After a few seconds she calmed down, so he did too.

"What in the world are you talking about, Scilla? I don't understand nothing you say," he said.

"It's that thing you make water out of," she said.

"What?" he asked.

She walked over and grabbed his crotch. "Each of them has got one of these like you do but I don't. Mother Dear told me you only had one because you were a slave, but I'm going to tell her that that's not right because I saw them on two white men. Unbutton those breeches and I'll show you what I mean."

He knew he didn't need the privy and it wasn't time for him to bathe. There was no reason to unbutton his breeches that he could imagine. He also knew that he was supposed to do whatever Scilla told him to, give her whatever she wanted, and he knew, without knowing why, that he wanted to.

"You see right here?" she asked, as if either of them could avoid seeing it. He had barely undone the buttons before she had pulled his breeches down to his knees and wrapped her hand around it. "This right here is what I'm talking about," she went on. "Each of them's got one and they said it can plug up a pocket just like with the pigs. According to them, what I've got is a pocket, but I wouldn't let them see it."

"You sho nuff?"

"Well, I ought to know if I let them see it, I should think!

"Naw. I mean, did you understand right about what they said, what you saw?"

"No doubt about it. They've got plugs just like you, except bigger. Of course, now that I look good, yours is bigger than it used to be.

"You reckon they know what they talking about?"

"Of course they do. Didn't you ever hear Mother Dear say how all the Redharts are men of distinction? Miss Renee always tells the older girls to set aim for a man of distinction because they'll show them the world. I wouldn't be surprised that my brothers didn't know everything in the whole wide world." Then she said, "I suppose we could try it out for ourselves, just to be sure."

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Scilla was sure she was much better at serving tea than she had been the first time John paid her a call. Evidently, her parents were satisfied that she could manage it all by herself because they gave up their habit of staying in the parlor with her and her beau. God only knew how badly she wanted to go back to the seminary if for no other reason than to say to everybody, "I have a beau, and I can serve tea all by myself just like any southern lady, and I'm only 13!"

Her mother said she would never be allowed in the seminary again, but with her new prize, John, for comfort, she no longer cared. She suspected it had something to do with that pokey old varmint that had come out of her and now was ruining life as she knew it, and that made her mad. She couldn't even get anybody to tell her *why* the hideous thing had come out of her and what gave it the right to cause her to be treated so unfairly. But she could put all that out of her mind as long as she had John. Surely, having him meant that she could pretend what

happened never happened and continue to be important and to keep learning new things. Maybe she couldn't go back to Miss Renee's, but she would get her dear mother to teach her the rest of what she needed to learn in school. She could still order silks and paints and sheet music and chinaware from town or from up north. It was all so much fun. And what a bonus, she surmised, that it was all that "finishing" she had started that made her so attractive to John Moore, despite the way she looked now that she had gone through that night of misery when the thing first came out and showed itself to her.

Her parents told her she was getting back to her old self more and more every day and looking better and better. It was true that she was less hefty looking after two months, but, after what she had been through, she wondered if the puffiness under her eyes would ever go away. With that pokey old thing caterwauling upstairs all day and half the night when it first came, she didn't believe she would ever get another night's sleep. The wet nurse they sent for from the cabins said she was doing all she could. She kept sticking her tit in its mouth, but that would only work for a little while. Finally, a day or so before John started coming, they decided to let the woman keep it with her in her cabin 24 hours a day and tend to its needs whenever it needed anything. That was an expensive solution, her mother had her to know, because it meant the woman had to be taken from her duties in the cotton field. When she had nursed other picaninnies, they got what she could give them during the two break periods per day she was allowed to go back and feed them. She fed them again before bed and early in the morning before she left for the field, and most of them survived off that just fine.

But Scilla's stepfather decided this one was different, and he could stand the loss of a cotton picker for a little while if it meant the difference between keeping the new one healthy

alive or dead from some kind of cradle disease. Scilla still thought keeping it healthy was silly. If they would just let it die, everybody's problems would be over. But no, they preferred to let that slave mammy it. Well, at least she didn't have to see it anymore. She hoped it would stay down in that cabin forever. It was then that Scilla got to close her eyes for more than two minutes at a time, and she tried her best to sleep until she died. Until her mother got her up when the preacher came, and soon after that John came and she was so glad to be alive.

"Tell that boy to leave," John said, the first time they were without parental chaperone.

She looked over her shoulder at Mustard. "We're done with you. You can go."

After Mustard had carefully shut the door behind him, John went on. "Miss Priscilla," he said, keeping company with you has been a distinct pleasure for me. I would like to think you feel the same way."

"Oh, of course. Yes, indeed I do find it a pleasure to have your company."

"Then I won't beat about the bush. My object is matrimony."

She said nothing because she was trying hard to re-hear what she thought she had just heard. She didn't want the sound of her own voice to drown it out.

"Didn't you hear me, or are you displeased at what I just said?"

"Yes, I heard you," was all she could manage.

"Well, then?"

"Well, then?" She had become a parrot.

"Can't you give me an answer, girl?"

"Oh dear. I– I mean– oh– what is the question, exactly?"

"I am proposing marriage to you. For God's sake, I realize you're young, but I was given to believe that you would be amenable to marriage."

"YES! I mean, why, yes it is true that I am indeed amenable to marriage. Please forgive me. It's just that this is an answer to my prayers and I expected a longer wait and I've been so miserable and . . ."

He interrupted. "Why are you blathering on so? Are you consenting to it or not?"

"I do. Oh, yes, I do indeed consent. I would absolutely love to get married and move away from here to a townhouse in a big city or in Europe just like the older girls at the seminary who talk about it *all* the time while they complete their trousseaux . . ."

"Stop it. You get ahead of yourself, Miss Priscilla. The first thing was for me to make the proposition and for you to accept it. There are business arrangements to be made between Mr. Redhart and me before we can discuss one word about houses. Not in cities, not in the country, not anywhere. Not yet. Do you understand that?"

"Of course I do. I'm sorry I got too carried away already. Of course you men will want to talk and you'll want my parents' consent before we make any plans."

"And I'll thank you to let *me* broach the subject with them as soon as I'm good and ready. They don't need to know for a few days."

A knock at the door kept her from answering him that she would keep secrets or cut somersaults. Whatever he wanted, as long as she got to leave home and become a dignified lady in her own house.

"Enter," she said.

"Scilla, Mrs. Redhart wants to know if you and Mr. Moore want I should bring in your tea now," Mustard said without coming all the way into the room again. He was afraid John didn't like him and he didn't want to anger him by sticking too close.

"No! We won't want any tea this evening. Go away." Her temperament improved immediately once Mustard retreated and the two of them were alone again.

"So it's 'Scilla', is it?" John was smiling, so she knew he wasn't too terribly upset that Mustard had addressed her with familiarity as if they were still playmates.

"Please don't give him a second thought. I assure you I'll have him to recognize his place and address me properly from now on."

"Oh, it's not the darkie I was thinking about. It just now occurred to me that I know another Scylla. Well, not "know" I don't suppose. She's someone I've read about in history."

"Why, do tell. Then she must have been quite famous."

"Yes, she was, dearest. She was one of the most harlots of Ancient Rome. You do know what a harlot is, don't you, "Scylla?"

"Well, I . . ."

"It's a woman who will open up her pocket to a man without being married. Any man who wants her to. As many men who want her to. It's a terrible thing, a harlot. In the Bible, whenever the good people in a town came up on a harlot, they threw stones at her until she was dead. Decent folks can't abide them and won't be caught dead in their company. Only poor white trash or niggers would have anything to do with one, and I am neither of those things."

For the second time in the same evening, she was struck dumb.

He waited, but she was not poised to say anything, so he continued. "Can you imagine any reason a quality man of distinction like myself would ever risk harming his impeccable name and status in his community by letting himself be tricked into getting yoked to a harlot of all things? You can see the problems that would cause for such a man, can't you. Why, I would suppose that if a man ever discovered that he had been tricked that way, he'd be within his rights to kill the sow with his bare hands."

She looked as if in a trance. He could tell she was fixed on every word he said, understood what they meant, and was scared. Just like he wanted.

"But you know, maybe he wouldn't be within his rights to do such a thing if he hadn't really been "tricked" into anything. If whatever arrangements he and the wretch had made between them were done after both the parties had aired their dirty laundry where the other could see it, made all the facts known up front so that the other would know in advance what he was getting, then that might be a different story altogether. In a situation like that, a man might find it in his heart to look a bit more kindly on a girl who lost her way young in life but was ready to turn things around for herself. I'm talking about a situation that didn't keep the man in the dark about the past. You know, a man and his wife might have cause to keep secrets from other people, even close kin, but never from each other. Never."

"John," her voice cracking but clear, "I want to tell you something, dear heart," she said.

John Moore Marries Scilla

Sure as hell's hot, this ain't gonna be easy, but God and the devil both know I'm used to hell and ain't scared of it. If an orphan gets to be my age in this godforsaken age, you'd better know he's lived through plenty of hell, been there more times than a little, and made his way back up to shake his fist at the world that spawned and spurned him. Oh yes, I'll get it all right. Won't be easy but I ain't scared. I'll have to remind myself not to say things like "ain't," and I've got to see if there's anyplace in the town that lets rooms that's near a bathhouse that's open regular. Oh yes, it'll be more trouble than a little, but I ain't never– I haven't ever– gotten a thing that was worth its salt that wasn't worth the trouble.

A white man who was raised no better than a picaninny grows up tough and smart if he grows up atol. I know how to plantain. Maybe I'd better stop saying "plantain," too. Sounds too much like the darkies. I'll bet the proper gentlemen around these parts say they "plant" like north of here they say they "farm." But God and the devil both know they don't do neither one. All the work, whatever they call it, is done by the darkies and the poor cracker bastards they treat worse than the dung they scrape off their boots when they visit one of their freshly plowed fields. Visit, indeed. Well, one real fine day coming up real soon, I'm going to "visit" one of my own fields, 'cept when I get out there, I'll know to dodge the dung, and I can tell the difference between a furrow that was dug too shallow and one that wasn't, and I can hardly wait to be able to beat the skin off of whoever was in charge if I ever find one that wasn't dug right. Oh, yes.

"How do, m'am. And happy new year to you."

"Thanks, suh. And what will you be needing on the first day of 1847? I almost decided not to come downstairs when I saw your buggy from the window. I figured you must be passing through, headed out to spend the holiday with some of our land people. You related to the Grueltons or maybe the Ketch boys? Can't imagine you'd be trying to reach anybody farther out than them late as it already is this morning. I'm pleased to give you directions if you're lost."

"Not atol, m'am. According to your sign, you have rooms to let and I want one."

"Oh. I see. I seee. Well, yes suh, you sure did come to the right place. The only place in town for that matter. How long should my husband and I count on having you with us?"

"It could be for quite a spell my dear landlady. It may take several weeks. Well, I mean to say, I'm not sure but I might decide to linger in your peaceful looking town for a more than a week or two, but not less, I wouldn't think."

"Good, good, that'll be just good."

"But before I get ahead of myself, is there a bathhouse close by? I absolutely require a bathhouse."

"Oh. I seeee. Listen, mister, my HUSband and me run this establishment as a reSPECTable boarding house. We don't cotton to too much carousing. This ain't no low house!"

"You listen, lady. The last thing you'll have to worry about from me is low catting around. That's not my purpose here. I inquire about the bathhouse because I'll have you to know that I intend to be a regular bather. Or is that a habit not yet in fashion in these parts?!"

"There's them that do and them that don't. I beg pardon. I didn't mean to– mean to– uh. Well, what I mean to say is, there'll be no need to look for a bathhouse. I got a shed out back

near the pump. There's a tub plenty big enough, and there's always some picaninnies around here to help with that. Their owners allow them to come up here and tote water from the kitchen stove, shine shoes, empty chamber pots or provide any number of accommodations for guests of mine who want a little extra personal touch to their care while they're here. They'll tell you how much they were told to bring back to their mistress or slave driver for their day's work. It's usually just a few pennies. Will that suit?"

"A shed out back sounds fine for right now; it's not real cold yet. But I told you to expect me for several weeks."

"Well, I suppose I could close the kitchen half and hour earlier after supper on Saturdays and Wednesdays and let you have your tub in there. It'll be nice and toasty in there."

"You make it Tuesdays and Thursdays AND after DINNER on Sundays, and we've got a deal."

"Are you serious?"

"I intend to spend my Sunday evenings being received in some fine homes, and I can't afford to be too casual about personal hygiene under those circumstances."

"I seeeee."

Humph. And what exactly does this old hag think she *seeeeees*? She's got just one more time to act like she's all superior to me, and I'll knock that tight gray bun off the back of her head and then I'll send the head with it. She wouldn't be the first woman to find out the hard way what not to say to me about rectitude. God and the devil both know that I ain't– am NOT– ending up letting rooms for a living. And for her to think I'd want a cathouse just because I ask for a bathhouse. Boy did she peg me wrong. She doesn't know the half of it. I can go without for

way longer than most men. Especially when I'm working. Trained myself to it. That's the difference between me and some. Like Ike. It wasn't that Ike didn't have a good head on his shoulders. If only he would have trained himself to think with his brain instead of his hoe handle every now and then, he'd have been well off. But he wanted women for the wrong reason. Of course it wasn't exactly the same for Ike as it was for me. I knew I could take a piece or leave it or come back and get it later with no trouble. A handsome face has its benefits. It did even before I knew how to add a little charm into the mix.

One thing Ike never will be accused of is being handsome. God knows he let the devil take over when they were putting Ike's face together. Guess maybe that's why he always seemed to lust after it more than I did, seemed to be scared that if he didn't get it on a particular occasion, he might never have another chance because any girl who looked at him once wouldn't be too anxious to have to do that again later. Oh yes, he partook without a second thought whenever he got the chance. But what he never could see was that once a woman learns she can lead you around by your gonads, you're undone. Well, not me. I guarantee that no bitch in heat will ever be the cause of my undoing. I'd kill her first. It's a good thing I haven't had to kill one yet, but if I ever have to, I will. With no trouble. Instead, the best way to go is to undo her first. You've got to fix a woman's situation such that she ends up with no choices. Ruin her. She'll have to come around to your way if she's got nowhere else to go. And then, only then, you can wring every bit of what you want out of her, as often as you want it, without worrying about becoming the poorer for it.

If Ike's learned this by now, I'll eat my hat. He'll never learn, but I sure do wish I could hurry up and find him. It'll be good to see my old boyhood chum, but mostly, I need him.

Whatever else is wrong with him, he's the man you need when you want someone who can put his ear to the ground and help you find out what you need to know.

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"Good morning, Mr. Moore."

"Morning, m'am. So much hustle and bustle so early in this morning, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh dear, Mr. Moore. Is that why you're up and dressed already? Begging your pardon suh. I had no idea I was making enough noise to disturb your sleep. But I've only got until this evening to finish cleaning out this old storage room for the reverend. Tomorrow's the third Sunday in January, you know."

"Dear landlady, is there any reason I should bother myself to care that tomorrow's the third Sunday in January?"

"Churchgoing folks around here have to wait on the Methodist circuit preacher to make his way around to us. We get third Sunday in January all the way through to first Sunday in May. Last year we only got him through March, but cotton prices were good last year, so now we can afford a preacher for at least three months at a time. I'm proud to tell you, there's talk that the Redharts are planning to settle a tidy sum on the church– an offering, you know– and this old town of ours might get a preacher to keep for the whole year. Keeping a preacher full time costs money. And if we get one, we'll be the only town this size in the whole state what's got one. That and the new sawmill will make this a mighty popular place to live. Anywhere

that's got cotton money, and a place where you can go to work if you don't have no land to grow cotton on, and a place for folks to go church regular is about to be a fine little city. Won't that be wonderful? Don't you think?"

"So the reason I couldn't notice any worshipers passing by either of the two Sundays I've been here is due to want of a Methodist preacher?"

"Not so much a Methodist preacher, Mr. Moore. Any preacher at all. The thing about Methodists is they have a bishop assign a preacher to stop by pretty much every little town in the state, no matter how little, at least a few times a year. Whether they know the people can pay him or not. The bishop pays him at least enough to get to where he's going. And then it's up to him. If he's in a town what's got cotton money and his preaching is what the folks want– I mean what folks need– to hear, they might pay him to stay longer or come back more. The church here in town was built by the Baptists some years ago, but that preacher was run off– I mean we ceased need of his message– a while back and nobody went looking for another Baptist man after that. So when the Methodist circuit man comes, we just use the old Baptist church. Back when the Dillards were still a big family, they had a Quaker meeting house built right on their property. But folks around here don't cotton to the Quaker's message, and the few Dillards still living were convinced they didn't need that meeting house on their land. So we'll be pleased to keep the Methodist reverend if he'll stay. He usually gets the room you're in, but he can't pay as well for it, so I'm cleaning him out this old storage room; it'll be plenty good for what he'll want to pay. Yes, we sure enough will be glad to see him so we can get back to having something to do and something to wear on the sabbath."

"Do your well off families come into town from their plantations on the sabbath when the preacher's here?"

"Well the Dillards really are getting too old, and the Redharts . . . oh my, you'll have to excuse me, Mr. Moore. That's the bell downstairs. Mercy, I hope it's not the reverend here so early . . ."

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"Oh, as I live and breathe, it really is Rev. Jacob Isaacs right before my eyes, and me just this second telling Mr. John Moore that I hoped you wouldn't arrive until I had more time to tidy up your beautiful new room."

"I certainly don't want you going to any trouble . . .uh, did you say you talked to a Mr. John Moore?"

"Why, yes I did, reverend. He's a boarder whose been with me and my husband since New Year's Day. So I hope you understand why that other room is not available."

"Well if you don't think he'd mind, I'm heading right up these stairs to go and make his acquaintance. No time like the present to welcome a newcomer."

"Of course, by all means, reverend. You two get acquainted while my husband and I rush over to Gruelton's store. He'll have to help me carry a whole lot more potatoes and onions than I've got here right now, my not expecting you for a meal until late this evening and all."

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"John Moore, you up here?"

"Ike, godammit, it really is you!"

"John, boy, you just don't know how glad I am to see you!"

"I truly missed you, Isaac Jacobson, but what the hell is this black getup you're wearing? For sure, you're not about to tell me *you're* fine preacher that old woman's been blithering on about?"

"I am, John. She told you no lie. Well, better to say, what she told you, she believes to be the truth, if you follow my meaning. And from now on, you've got to remember that my name is Rev. Jacob Isaacs, you understand?"

"Ike, you know you'll wind up in hell over this masquerade."

"Already been to hell, John, and you oughta know since we were there together on that plantation all those years, practically sold for our labor like common niggers until we were big enough to run off without being missed too soon. Even after we ran off, we were still nothing but pups. And not so much as a teat to suck from did we have."

"But, Ike, this area is teeming with cotton money. The town's thriving, which means the outlying plantations must be, and I intend to end up owning one of them. You'll never have to put on this black money suit and scrape for pennies from a collection plate again."

"Well first off, who said I had a problem wearing the suit? It's true, the money's not good, especially since, not really being a Methodist clergyman, I get no stipend from a bishop or nobody else. What's in the collection plate on Sunday morning is all I get unless I give them a good enough performance that they'll come back for a revival meeting one or two nights during the week and pass the plate again. But, John, boy, let me tell you that there are other benefits

attached to this suit. The trick is to work in places that are sizable enough to have a sufficient number of families to support you. But you don't want them living all close to each other in too citified a place where they're smart enough to find out about your background and spread the word around. You want a place where there's plenty of cotton money, but like you said, the cotton plantations lie outside the town. Some of these rich families don't have contact with one another for weeks or months. I haven't starved to death yet. If I'd let them, these plantation mistresses would fight each other for the honor of having the preacher over for supper on any given night, and sometimes they want to feed me at dinner in the afternoons, too. But most of all, and this is the best of it John, my boy, lots of them have got daughters! They've got pretty young daughters or ugly old maid daughters, or the gamut in between, and all those daughters get lonely out on those big fat farms where giving the good reverend a tour of their grounds can lead to things. Things undetected, my boy. Nobody's father or older brother suspects a man of the cloth, and the girls are encouraged to spend time with me while I'm on the premises. They don't even think about arranging a chaperone like city girls' parents do!"

"Ike, you haven't changed a bit."

"Not likely to, John. As I recall, absence of congress with females had no disquieting affect upon you. Not for long periods of time at least. I have never been that way. So, on more than account, this job ain't so bad. But here's a question for you. What do you mean when you say you're planning to own one of these pieces of planting land?

"That's easy, Ike. Just like half the rich men in this world, I'm going to marry it. Wanna help?

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"You've got to listen to me, boy, if you're serious about this. You've got to go about it just so. There's a right and a wrong way to do anything," Ike said.

"And look who's talking!" John was quick to come back at him. "One thing I know is that while I may not always choose to do what's right, at least I know it when I see it. If I decide to ignore it and go for what's not right, you can bet your last dollar I've got my reasons. I ain't– I mean I *am not*– saying that right is always best, if you can understand that, but with you, you're more likely to go with what's quick or easy, and that's hardly ever right or best. So stop talking to me like you believed you really were a preacher. I'm the one person in this town who knows better."

"All I'm saying is that now that we've scouted the territory, it's time for you to get on the silver tea circuit if you intend to be married and plantaining by spring."

"And I ain't balkin at that, ya goddamned scamp."

"Language, John. Be mindful of your language."

"You, of all people, don't have to remind me of that. 'Plantaining,' indeed. I'll be married and a planter by spring, all right, on land of my own, even if I did come by it by dowry instead of birthright. I'll guarantee you– and I'll swear this on that Bible you carry around– my seed will come by wealth with no strings attached. You needn't worry about that. And don't worry that I'll forget myself at tea because I won't. I never said I wouldn't open myself up to being received by the ladies, partaking of their offerings from sterling tea sets and stemmed claret glasses. I won't enjoy it, but I'll do it. What I'm trying to get you to see is, we haven't studied on this enough. I don't want to waste any more time than I have to wooing these

chickens. If I knew the best one to set aim for in the first place, I could dispense with sampling the rest of them."

"But I already told you the best girls come from the Gruelton place, and their ma and pa are kind of shy at the moment about allowing any more of theirs to marry. They got stung with the last one they pawned off on a foreigner they thought was a rich Irish lord. And after he took her back to his country, she found out he was nobility and all, just like he said, but that didn't mean he had two bits to rub together. All she did for months was clamor all the time to be sent for to come back home, and now they're sure enough stuck with her on their hands forever. Who's going to look twice at a girl that's already despoiled, and by a husband she wouldn't stay with at that?"

"Now, you see, that's just the problem I mean when I talk about the way you look at things, Ike. Or better to say, you don't look at them. If you took the time to study on what you just said, you'd realize that it's predicaments like the one this Gruelton girl is in that make her one of the 'best' possible candidates. Like you said, they don't expect there's anybody dumb enough to ever want her and they're feeling like they're stuck with a bad penny. So how grateful do you think they'd be if some gentleman of potential showed up, offering to take a sack of shit off their hands and in a way that wasn't unseemly even a little bit?"

"Language, John! Language!"

"Go to hell."

"Well, maybe you're right about looking at what makes a woman good in terms of your own peculiar needs instead of in general terms. And it's not as if you weren't proposing an honorable solution to one helluva mess. But Gruelton is the richest man in the county, and

anybody who's got that kind of money will want to see the color of yours before he strikes any deals with you. He's smarter about that now than he was before. And besides, I doubt there's any dowry to speak of for that ruined girl. That's the thing about one that's been ruined; it was somebody else that got to do the ruining. I'll bet that the money she had was spent in Ireland by the husband who was entitled to it, and if there was any left when she left, I'll bet he made her leave it with him. Wouldn't you if a woman dragged you and your family name through a scandal like divorce?"

"So maybe not this one. But if you catch on to what I'm trying to teach you, you'll see that we need to gently interrogate this town a little more, scout around for a little more information and we might find another one in a similar situation."

"Then let me ask you something, John. If providing for your seed is so important to you, how come you're so anxious to yoke up to a girl that's liable to carry some other man's as easy as yours?"

"Hey, now. You trying to make me think twice about the *glorious* state of holy matrimony you preachers are always recommending to us godfearing single men? And I seem to recall that you belong to that category as well as I do, yet you haven't gotten around to recommending connubial bliss to yourself, by golly. Just the same, I thought you'd be willing and highly qualified to help conduct me into it. But if you don't want to do this thing my way, just say so. I'll manage on my own."

"Don't jump so salty. You know I wanna help."

"Then let me worry about how to keep other men's plugs out of the pocket after I get me one. There are ways to put the fear of a husband in a 'godfearing' woman and you don't have to sew her legs shut to do it, either."

"I hear tell, in China they break a girl's feet and bind them up real tight so they never grow big enough for her to put them to use outside your eyesight."

"For all I know, that's a good idea, but I don't intend to go to that much trouble. If I find a girl that's made her family desperate enough to beg me to take her off their hands, I'll make sure she never forgets why. And unlike that Irish fop you were talking about, reverend, I'll make sure she knows that there will be consequences to pay if she's so loggerheaded as to try and go back to her people. Serious, ugly consequences. For her and her family. It won't be hard to do, neither. When you get a desperate little thing and keep it isolated with you way out of town on a plantation the size of the one I'm planning, she'll come around to doing as you bid soon enough. Just be sure you stay in strict control of something that matters to her, something you can take away from her or something you know about her that she doesn't want anyone else to know, something you can use to threaten her, scare the bejeezus out of her. Plus I'm hunting one that can keep herself occupied with other things after I've advanced to point of buying a sufficient number of slaves to do all the household chores. You know, the womanly arts and such. Maybe I'll find a needlewoman in the well-bred pile I'm searching through."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I swear I think there are some girls that are made like men. Born that way, you might say. They honest to goodness like doing it, and if you get one that's used to doing it and likes it, you could heap all the household duties and female distractions in the world

on her, and she'll still get lonesome for it. Especially if she's way out on a plantation with no other women to socialize with. I ought to know."

"Yeah, Ike, I'll just bet a good reverend like yourself ought to."

"I'm a man, John."

"And so am I. The difference between us is I'm no glutton. I can plow into a good looking piece of tail as well as the next man. But I won't let my appetite cloud my judgment or distract me from getting what I really want, which is a big piece of land to plow into. The other will always be there when I need it. Don't worry yourself. My wife can count on me to do the job regular enough. She'll get it as much as she needs to to provide me the dynasty I'm building.

"Brother John, for somebody who started off so low, that's a mighty highfalutin word. Dynasty."

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Not that I can be 100 percent positive, but I'm satisfied that I was born in 1822 and was four, almost five years old when that old hag left me. I remember turning three a long time before then, at least a year, and after that she didn't bother to make mention of my birthday. I was young and backward and couldn't remember what month it had been in, and until Ike came along, it didn't seem to matter.

I ain't ever– dammit, I just *have* to watch my language– I have never wasted much worry over that period of my life. What would be the use? It happened just this way, the way I am telling you, and I can't change the way it happened. Why bother weeping and blaming an old

impoverished woman for doing the only thing she knew to do with a woods colt of a grandchild foisted on her by a trifling son and the harlot he had taken up with? That old thing couldn't feed herself much less an extra mouth. She tried, though. For a while. She hired herself out as an itinerant field hand, walking from farm to farm, like the white trash she was, until she was too old to pick cotton. She tried to get work as a washerwoman after that, but the people would find out right quick that she didn't know a thing about washing, and word even got around to the little nearby town that folks ought not to fool with letting her have a try at their laundry. According to the recollection of her I still have, she never was clean. Me neither.

That one night, after she had walked what must have been a whole day, all bent over, with me following behind her, the two of us finally came close enough to a big farm house that we could see candles lit in the windows, and as we got closer, wood torches burning outside the slave cabins for light. I don't reckon we were all that far from where we came from. I doubt a four-year-old and a stooped-down crone were making good time. So if I wanted to, I could probably go back to that farm where I ended up and discover where I started out. You know, by scouting around and talking to people maybe. It's not so far from here. Three, maybe four days' ride on a fair-to-middlin horse. But I don't want to. I don't want no parts– *any* par*t*– of it any more. Ever. I'm slated for bigger and bolder things in better places. You could say it's my manifest destiny. I can see it like a painting right in front of my face. I will own land. I will make it make me wealthy, and I will breed a dynasty that will ensure that my name will still be important long after I'm dead. I'm determined that nobody will ever make me or my kin slaves again. In England– I know this because on my off time, I made a point to socialize and play cards with English gentlemen who frequented that high class west coast whorehouse where I

worked as a liveried footman all that time– in England, whether to the manor born or country bumpkin, they all sing the same song. They love to sing it. *Rule, Britannia!* They all get to sing it because they're all born free even if they're poor. They sing it because that song tells them Britons "never never never will be slaves." It's a good song because there's nothing worse in this world than being a slave. I ought to know.

When my grandmother and I went up to that house that had a porch that wrapped around to the back where we figured it was all right for beggars to knock, we were surprised when the planter himself came to see who it was instead of sending a slave or some other servant. The old woman said we were hungry, not that anybody with eyes would have needed her to say it, and wanted to work for food. He told her he had things a child could do around the place to earn his keep, but there was no use for an old woman. Anywhere. He offered to give her a meal and a place to sleep for one night as long as she promised never to return for me or make a claim on any profits from my labor. She said, "Yes."

I guess she might have thought that I would indeed get wages. I was white and male, after all. Maybe she had it in her mind that since it would be against the law to enslave me, he wouldn't have tried to get away with that. Or maybe she was so old and tired and hungry and bad off anxious to be rid of me, she didn't care that the place existed so deep in the back woods, the arm of law rarely reached it. And if there was no adult around to collect the wages, then my "benefactor," as he referred to himself, need not worry about paying any while the boy was yet a minor.

That next morning, I helped her up from the pallet we both slept on in a little hallway, and she crept out the door, headed for the road we came on. I yelled, "Goodbye." She was so crouched, all I could see was her bowed back, but I heard her: "Do what you're told."

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I got used to it. I had never really worked before, but I learned quickly that it was best to be a quick learner if you wanted to avoid the lash. The man trained me himself. He couldn't spare a slave to come in from the cotton fields to teach me to slop hogs, milk goats, collect eggs, and spread manure on the vegetable patch after I weeded it. Then there was the work inside the house. His wife, who never talked, did all the cooking and the laundry. Everything else was my job. I emptied chamber pots, scrubbed floors, polished furniture, beat rugs, made beds, and toted bath water every day for a month before Ike came.

The plantation owner came into possession of another orphan child, Isaac Jacobson, whose parents had just been lynched in town for "religious reasons." His first night on the place, Ike told me he had heard people at the scene discussing how expensive his upkeep would be while they searched for and waited on his relatives up north to come and claim him, so they might as well hang him, too. That was when our benefactor stepped up and agreed to take the boy and raise him as a "servant" if no one objected. No one did, and that's how I came by the best friend and closest thing to a brother I ever will have.

Ike knew how to read and write and precisely how old he was. He had just turned five. We were about the same height and weight, and we looked about the same age, so I adopted the

year of his birth, 1822, as my own. Whereas I had been so tired and achy at night after being worked so hard in the day before Ike came, after I was told to show him what to do so he could take on half the work, I started to feel like a human being again. And in return for showing him how to avoid making the man mad when chores weren't done just so, Ike taught me how to read when we could sneak the time. It was easy when the man would go off for a day or two to buy new slaves or other livestock. Even if his wife saw us reading his books, we knew she wouldn't, or couldn't tell him. I mostly liked the ones we found on ancient Rome, about how the Caesars kept the world's greatest empire going for centuries. I'm not saying it wasn't a rotten way to live, because it was for sure. We were worked too hard and fed too little. But if there hadn't been the pair of us, chums who could sing songs, make up stories, and play games together every now and then, shore each other up for the beatings every now and then, I doubt I would have survived it. Except for the obvious fact that we were white, we never saw ourselves as anything other than slaves, just like the dozens of Negroes that man owned outright.

We talked about it for years, but one day when we were 12, we screwed up the nerve to run off. We took nothing but the clothes we had on. Not a morsel of food. Absolutely nothing. Oh, come to think of it, there was one thing. Ike said we had to look in the man's Bible before we tore out. "What for?" I asked him. "We can worry about getting religion when we get to where we're going." But Ike insisted, and when he opened up the book he said, "See, this is where he keeps it, but he can't keep it any more." He pulled out the dingy, folded up newspaper story of his parents' hangings, printed right next to the other recorded events of that day, just a matter of fact. That man knew what Ike hated worse than a whipping. If he really wanted to get his goat, he would throw the news story up to the boy and tell him how losing his people was

the best thing that could have happened. "If it weren't for this and for me taking you in, you never would have lived in a Christian home. You owe me your gratitude for that alone," he would say.

"I've read this 'good' book of his," Ike said as he held up the newsprint to look at it one last time before we left, crying just a little bit, "and, I swear, nothing about this house is anything like Christ. Well, I'd like to see him try and use this piece of paper to disrespect God or my parents again." He led the way out the door, and on our way off the property, he tossed the paper into the pig pen.

We had nowhere to go. No idea of what to do. We had made no plans. We just ran. If that old farmer had wanted us back, he could easily have caught us like he did the Negroes with dogs and paid patrollers. He probably figured we had gotten old enough to realize that he couldn't keep wages from us like he did the slaves. We were bigger by then, and he wouldn't have wanted to fight us physically if it were to come down to that. So he just let us go is all we can figure. He could afford to. He ended up getting way more out of us than he spent on us. Whereas the loss of slaves' free labor was always a financial catastrophe and could not be stood without reparation.

We ran until all day, stopping only when we had to relieve ourselves. We made good time, and just as night was falling, we got to the river. By then we were confident no one was coming after us, so we slept through until morning. When we got up and walked around the area, we found out that we could count on barges, ferries, tugs and other small boats to need help on deck just about all the time. We did that for a while; it usually paid us enough for eating. If we ran real low on funds, we'd give a go at stevedore work. It paid better but was a heap harder

and you had to compete with slave labor for it. From what I heard from white men on the banks, the only regular money to be found was in working on big ships that took folks out to sea and landed in foreign ports. I wanted to catch the first river boat I could find that would get me to one of them. But Ike was scared. He said he remembered his parents talking about how they came to America on ships like that from Europe before they met each other, and how unpleasant their trips had been. He preferred to stick to the small water craft, and when the weather was too bad for that, petty crime or begging.

We went on like that for years until I just had to go my separate way when we were 16. I needed to see if my chance to get rich was waiting for me on one of those ships, since it didn't seem to be nowhere near the banks of that river. I thought, if there turned out not to be a way to get rich aboard ship, at least I'd get to sail all around the and see and learn all the things rich men do when they travel. We split up, and I was alone again, working my way to a big ship that would help make me rich. The opposite coast of my own country is as far as I ever did get. I still haven't seen the world, but like I said before, I made a point of getting in the company of men whose habits and backgrounds were far more fortunate than mine. That proved beneficial in more ways than one. I watched and learned their mannerisms and that's why I'm no oaf today. And I kept detailed records of their habits, especially as regards whores, and that's why I'm not what you'd call a pauper today. I can make very believable impressions on people when I have to.

So I'm back now.

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"Are you sure? Who did you talk to?" The thing about working with Ike is that you have to keep reminding him to be careful of the details. There's nobody in this world that's sharper, can scout out a situation and plot the right moves on it. That's why I hoped to goodness I'd run up on him again if I came back. Figured he wouldn't be farther away than two or three towns from where I left him, and I was right. Figured I could count on him to still love me like a brother after all these years, and want to help with the scheming, and I was right. But I ain't crazy (did I just say "ain't" again?); to stay on top of things I've got to stay on top of Ike. He loves a good scheme as much as I do, but he'll stray off task, get careless about details if I don't take care to reign him in. The first pretty little chicken, or ugly one for that matter, that gives him to believe he can get under her skirts without getting shot can turn his head around backwards. And here I am, trying to fix me a situation that'll secure me a permanent piece of tail when I want it, right where I want it, ready and willing in my own house. Well, what do I care if she's willing? She'll be my lawful wedded wife, won't she?

"What do you mean, 'who did I talk to?' John, you act like I don't know how to scout, sniff out money. I can sniff it better than most people can detect a steaming pile of bull shit. If I couldn't, I wouldn't have survived long enough to be standing here talking to you again. Not that you would've had time to think too terribly much about my survival these last few years."

"Ike, now it's you that's jumping salty. I was just wondering for my own sake how reliable your information is."

"It's damned reliable, I'll have you to know. Just like I figure out which towns have enough money to support a church and a full-time preacher, I figure out which families have the most of that money. And in this case, the man you need is Redhart and for more reasons than a

little. Everybody thinks it's Gruelton that's got the biggest fortune of all because his is the biggest plantation. But that's only half of what you've got to look at. Turns out that, never mind all the cotton money he's made of late, that bank won't advance Gruelton another penny to plant more. Plenty of land but he couldn't put his hand on more than a few hundred cash dollars in a hurry to save his life. Now Redhart, on the other hand. There's a story if ever I heard one. He won't increase the size of his farm for fear his sons will get their hands on it. Two of them's no accounts, and he told them about a year ago that they were embarrassments and wouldn't get a cent's worth of inheritance and might as well be dead to him. The one other son, he's reading for the law, which pleases the old man to no end, and he's to get fully half of all that would've been for the three of them combined. Now if you ask me, any man intending to horn in on any of that farm by marrying his daughter had better be real careful; stay mindful that a whole lot of that land was bought with dowry money from Redhart's first wife, those boys' mother. They just may try and make a claim on it some time down the road. The old man seems to think, though, that the good son, the one with the legal mind and a financial motive to halt additional inheritors, could put estoppel to a claim. And you won't believe why, but it's God's own truth– the other two had to agree to the deal because their own pa threatened to have them tried for rape if they didn't. It appears they're notorious for it farther south of here. As long as they stayed away from these parts or limited their consorting to slave women, he didn't too much mind. But when they came up this way with their carousing a year or so ago, and him having learned that they had raped a white woman together but got away with it, he threatened them; yes, he did."

"Their own pa, you say. Damn. That old buzzard will be a tough one to bargain with, then. I might ought to think of somebody else, Ike."

"Just shut up and let me finish. You're not curious about where the remaining half of what he leaves is supposed to go?"

"Yeah, sure I am."

"Well, there's the daughter, you know. She's only 13 now and we were thinking maybe a tad too young. Turns out she's only a stepdaughter, but no need for you to worry about that. It won't poke holes in your plan for a couple of reasons. First, Redhart loves her like she was his owing to her being just a baby when he got her and she never knew anybody else as a father. So he told those boys he was reserving a bequest for her and one for his grandchild. They knew he didn't have no grandchildren and thought he was playing some kind of game until he reminded them that he full well knew that the companion/ retainer they kept in the house for the girl was really one of those boys' son, and he intended to settle freedom and some money on him in his will unless Armageddon or the like came through here and did it first!"

"You mean he's gonna reward miscegenation with manumission *and* money?"

"You bet that's what I mean. Surprised me too until I heard the rest of the story. You've got to brace yourself for the rest of it, John."

"The girl just had that mulatto's woods colt."

"The wild rumors we heard were true?"

"It's true, John. She's only 13 and ruined to the high heavens already. Since you're hunting one whose folks are so ripe to get a girl taken off their hands they're ready to make a bargain in your favor, this one's your chip. Especially since they've got way more to offer than

what a more shortsighted man would have credited them with. Not only does Redhart have plenty of ready cash right here in the bank, there's other farms in other parts of the state. He runs them absentee. One of them is on land he got from his current wife's inheritance. Marrying her was a major boon to his pocketbook, I tell you. You might look at it like this: he was of a mind to settle something on the girl in the first place, way before this potential scandal, and she already owned his boy, Mustard's what they call him, because he gave him to her outright when she was still knee high, and he looks at that boy as something close to family."

"What to do you mean 'potential' scandal? What could be worse than a white girl with a picanniny?"

"Not everybody knows it just yet. She hasn't come out of confinement yet. But it's not the kind of thing that can be kept secret too much longer. If you and I know it, everybody else will before long. Unless, that is, you step up and strike an attractive bargain with the old man. Considering what he did to his own sons, I'm guessing he'll go a long way to avoid scandal."

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One thing you cannot beat is the value in the element of surprise.

After a few weeks, I could tell what the Redharts were thinking. It hadn't been any time at all that I'd been calling and they'd leave that simpleton in the room with me all alone. And the door closed. Alone except for that Mustard, that is. I could tell he wasn't no dumb cluck like the girl. I'd have to figure out a way to get rid of him altogether or keep to use as an insurance policy. I chose the latter, and wisely so, I think. I would say the girl's parents were

dumb, except I don't believe that's really what it amounted too. They were just plain old desperate. The old man had his good sense, and if I had to, I'd wager the ma did, too. But people get mighty, mighty worried when situations arise, the kind that gives them believe they're about to lose everything, or, at least, everything that symbolizes life itself as far they can reckon. I bet they prayed night and day– the ma as much as said they did toward the end– that some dude, too ignorant to suspect, or a backwoods bumpkin, for that matter– they couldn't be picky– would come along and they could pawn off some damaged goods on him. Well, I may have looked like the answer to their prayers, but what they hadn't counted on was that I knew better. Better than to accept damaged goods unless the price was right.

If I hadn't needed to hurry up and get to my land in time to plant before the season, or possibly the year, were finished I'd have allowed them more time to get comfortable and lazy about me. As it was, I shouldn't have minded all that. Of course, catching them off guard helped a heap. I got there that Friday morning so early they hadn't even risen from bed. Nobody stirring but the cook and Mustard, Mr. Tried And True, as I'm fond of calling him.

When Redhardt made it into the study, still in his gown and slippers while I was decked out in a new suit of serge trousers and silk jacket with matching waistcoat, he was annoyed. At first.

"What the devil is the problem, John?" he asked.

"Nothing. There's no problem whatsoever, Mr. Redhart, sir. I'm just a young man godawful anxious to get married. I fear for my mortal soul if I don't."

He was surprised, but I was paying close attention to his gestures and his mannerisms and could see the ingredients of a smile start to mix together to cook up a smile on that face that was turning red hot as any stove.

That's when I walked behind that big mahogany desk of his and took my seat. I motioned for him to sit in the small homemade chair across from it. "No need to draw this out unnecessarily, I shouldn't think. I want a wife and you've got a superfluous girl. We might as well do business," I said.

"Well it's not that we don't like you, John, but see here . . ."

"No. It's you who's got to see. Here's how it's gonna be. I'm gonna take her off your hands, and you're gonna deed over to me all that land you've been accumulating from over where you found her mother after you lost your first wife."

"What would you know about my first wife or any land I might have other than what you can see right here with your eyes?"

"Get this straight. I know everything, and I don't have time to dillydally with you. It's not as if we'd be staying close under foot. We'd be a whole state apart from you and the position you've built for yourself in this one. You and the Mrs. could go on as if nobody around these parts knew a thing except that your stepdaughter had dreams of becoming a bride as young as possible, and that she married a wealthy man and moved to his plantation. And you'd be telling the truth if you told people that, now wouldn't you? You could attest that it was a natural born fact that I was wealthy because you would personally have seen to that being arranged. And the strumpet would indeed by married, and that would take three younguns off your hands

in one fell swoop. Why, I declare, the color is draining from your usually rosy complexion, Mr. Redhart"

"I– I– I don't know . . ."

"Oh, I did make it clear, didn't I, that I would be taking with me *all* the property I was entitled to? That would leave you minus the worry of caring for three children, counting Scilla, Mustard, and their woods colt."

Since, the old man was struck mute, I took the opportunity to proceed with the outlining of my proposition. "Come to think of it, I don't suppose you can really call the new picaninny my 'property' to be honest. Condition of servitude is determined by the status of the mother, and since this one's mother is definitely a white girl, strictly speaking, it's freeborn, nigger that is. That's according to the law anyway. But I think we both know what kind of life span it could look forward to around these parts once word got out that it was a free black, born of a southern belle. If you want it to stay alive, you'll bundle it up and send it packing with its rightful ma, and for good measure, throw in its mammy you've got it with down in those cabins. And you know how I know you probably do in fact care about whether it lives or dies? It's your wife's grandchild and your great-grand. I know what a soft spot you've got for kin. You proved that by that third youngun I'm relieving you of. I'll own Mustard because you made him Scilla's own years ago, and what she owns, I own as soon as the ink's dry on the wedding certificate. I know how you'll hate to see him go, him being your own grandchild and all. Yep, I'm willing to wager that, seeing how you could disinherit your very own white seed without batting an eye, and then turn around and file a will that favors the black leavings from one of them, you've become a tad 'attached' to him, one might say. But you hear this, old man. If I marry Scilla for

you, he's mine. And you might as well get it out of your head that I'll ever set one of his kind free while decent white folks of my own kind need them for plantaining."

"No need for you to be so magnanimous about that poor unfortunate nurseling. Scilla doesn't want it, never wanted it. She won't even acknowledge it. It's fine right here. It can stay down in those cabins with some mammy or another as long as I like. No need for you to . . ."

"Do you misunderstand me, old man? I want all that's coming to me. That includes Scilla's issue and her property. We'll talk in a minute about cash as well. I know that will of yours settles a sum of it on her, a sum that you had no qualms about denying those two boys of yours. Well, as my wife, she'll not be in a position to wait on you to die before she gets it. And you need not be so magnanimous as to worry about what Scilla will or won't acknowledge. As my wife, she'll do as I tell her, and I intend to tell her that she might as well get used to being a mama. I want sons and quick. We already know, don't we, that Scilla's good to go in that regard. And while we don't exactly have to explain to our new neighbors in our new town just how we came by a slave still a babe in arms, we will always keep it close by so Scilla can see it every day and be reminded of what I know about her. In fact, the more she hates the varmint, the better, from where I stand. That ought to keep a 13-year-old grateful for and thoroughly obedient to a benevolent and handsome husband, wouldn't you think? As long as she remembers that, keeps in mind that I'm more a savior to her than Jesus himself, she'll be safe in my care. Same goes for Mustard. I'm sure I can disabuse the boy of any loggerheaded notions he may have picked up around here that he was different from any other darkie owned by a white man. At 13, he may too far gone, living in here like a white man all these years, to make much of a field hand. But he'll be put to work on my place, all right, and he'll know which side

his bread is buttered on when it comes to how he acts around his master. Don't worry yourself. I'll have your 'family' trained in no time once they become my family, and you'll be a free and honest man again; none of your acquaintances will be ashamed to say they know you."

I let the old man make a pretense of arguing with me. He carried on for hours. Tried to get out of ceding the whole of the land; claimed I could have a plenty fine plantation on two thirds of it and wanted to wait until the year ended. Said he wanted to give his wife a chance to plan a proper wedding for Scilla, just to be sure all wagging tongues had were waylaid. Must've thought I was a fool and couldn't see that he was trying to leave his cash in the bank a little longer so he could squeeze a little bigger year's end interest payment out of it. Can you imagine? Trying to finagle me like that? Looking for interest off of *my* money. He saw the light before too long when I made a move for the door and wished him luck finding a better solution to his predicament since the one I was proposing was about to ride off in its carriage as quick as I could crack it. We agreed that on Sunday, there would be an open-church ceremony following Ike's sermon at the church where an upcoming, sizable donation in memory of the first Mrs. Redhart would be made. Sizable enough for Ike to have steady employment for years.

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There's young, and there's stupid, and then there's young and stupid. I made sure I had gotten Scilla the simpleton to come out and admit everything to me before I wolfed up at the old man. I suppose I trusted Ike and his reliable sources, but there was nothing like hearing it right from the bitch's mouth. She tried to play it coy at first. But I knew how to settle her hash. I had

her thinking that a ruined girl never would have a chance to leave home and set out with a husband unless the husband was given the opportunity to forgive her and set her penance beforehand. I let her go on and on, as if I didn't know a thing. She never did catch on that I had laid a trap and she was in it. She really thought she was telling me a tale of woe I had never heard before. And what a tomfool tale she did tell about playing with snakes and such nonsense. When I'd had as much of it as I could stand, I told her to shut up, come over to me, pull up those skirts and let me see if she was all healed up from her recent martyrdom and if it had left her permanently disabled in any way. She was and it hadn't.

Mustard Grows Old

"It's 'cause y'all is so much like," he said.

"What the devil do you mean addressing me like that?" Priscilla was hissing at him through her clenched teeth but it still managed to sound like a scream. He didn't look nearly as threatened as she'd hoped, and he kept talking.

He dropped his head just the right amount and quickly developed a stammer that he couldn't maintain, and for some reason rolled up the sides of the once straw hat, that was now mostly holes, which he took from his head and fidgeted it from one hand to the other and back and back, like it was something hot. Unlike Priscilla, his hair was graying; he had aged much faster than Priscilla though they were same age, still in their twenties.

"I- I just mean- is all- is, she just like you for the world, Miss Scilla. Look more like you every year is-is all I mean to say and was hoping- I- I guess you'd feel good 'bout that and see it don't mean nothing if it look like y'all don't get along cause it's just y'all too much like one another. And I think that's good."

"*You* think! Do you mean to be so brazen-faced as to stand there and speak to me about my daughter? To speak to me about *anything*?" Priscilla wanted to spit into Mustard's face but her mouth was too dry. She was finding it hard to talk, and since she wanted to say so much, that made her mad.

They both looked hot, especially Mustard who had begun to sweat again even though he had cooled down immediately once he dropped the large ham onto the table and the two armsful

of fire wood onto the hearth, all of which he had brought from the smokehouse in one long, taxing trip. Walking in on Priscilla and Sister having at each other the way they were was chilling to him. He wasn't really afraid of Priscilla and didn't believe he ever would be. But witnessing her harshness toward her daughter, the person he knew to be the thing she loved most in the world, gave him an icy feeling that he didn't believe had anything to do with coming directly inside to the large kitchen– the kitchen that, despite the fire Priscilla had just started for the day's cooking in the hearth, was unusually temperate– from the sweltering smoke house across the long yard on a hellish, hot day with a swagging load and swollen, arthritic knees. Not knowing exactly why, he decided it might be risky for him to speak out, but potentially more dangerous for Yellow Pokey if he missed this opportunity to try and salve Priscilla who was sure to soon spew out some of the torment she was withstanding into the handiest vessel. A hated slave girl would be as good as or better than a spittoon.

He was standing still and looking right at Priscilla now, but not getting a clear read on the emotion welling up in her eyes and beading up on her forehead. Since she wasn't talking, he went on. "I mostly want to say something about the other one. There ain't as much difference between the two of them, either. Not as much as you woulda wanted, that is, 'tween Miss Sistah and the other one, " Mustard said. He did not stammer. "They loves you. Both of them. Pokey be a good companion to Miss Sistah and she just a good old nigger gal who don't try to get out of no work. She just a good old work gal who don't need to be beat all the time. I swear on the lord she don't need to be beat so bad."

Priscilla turned away from Mustard to check the fire. He talked to her back. "She know she yellow, but she don't let that cause her to put on no white airs. She don't figure she

supposed to get nothing the other niggers don't get. She don't eat much. She just want to work good for her Miss Scilla. and her Sistah. Her *Miss* Sistah, I- I- mean." He stopped. Hearing nothing from Priscilla's back, he started again. "My Pokey love you like she woulda loved a mammy if she'da had one. She ain't had nobody but me to teach her how to do, and they's a lot I jes don't know 'bout how to live in the white folks house. But I sho don't mind you beat me if she do wrong. Yes'm. Please mam just beat me all you want if she do wrong. It ain't her fault. She ain't had nobody but me. And you."

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"Hey there, chile, with yo yella self." Yellow Pokey yelled back, "Hey to you, too," without slowing one little second to see who it was that had made the attempt to greet her. It was probably that real black boy– didn't sound like a woman and not exactly like a full grown man, either. Her mind wished it could wander a second or two to contemplate the differences she was beginning to notice lately, but never had before, between boys and full grown men, but Priscilla had ordered her to go all the way down to Old Bit's cabin and bring back a whole bucket of lantern oil and some candles before time to put supper on the table. Time to think was something she never had, thanks to Priscilla who had told her over and over again how time and thinking did nothing for slaves but get them in trouble.

The girl could not forget the last time she was told, so she kept walking in spite of the "hey" and the draw she felt toward it. The last time she saw that real black boy was when he followed Mustard into the kitchen, both of them carrying croker sacks of turkeys and hams they

had brought from the smokehouse when the Moores' cousins from California visited. She knew Priscilla was afoot, stoking the hearth fire one minute and darting over to a corner of the room to inspect the latest barrel of apples for worms the next minute, more focused on making things right for this visit than any of the servants had ever seen her. Yellow Pokey knew this but thought it would be okay to give Mustard a quick quiet hug because Priscilla had never begrudged them that the entire time she had had the girl who lived right in the family house. It must have been the boy that made things different this time.

"Hey, gal," the boy said. She saw that he still had all his front teeth, unlike herself, and she didn't know too many slaves of her age or older who did. He kept smiling, and she kept seeing, or feeling, how dark his skin was against the brightness of the very many very white teeth. Since she hadn't touched him, she knew she wasn't really feeling his skin, but an odd sensation made her want to touch him and continue looking at him smile for a long time. He was a slave who looked like a slave and not like her or Mustard. She wondered if touching him would help her understand the difference– the difference between being what she was, a low, mean, black varmint according to Priscilla, and being what she looked like, a near replica of Sistah, Priscilla's doted-on daughter whose proper name is Angelina; the difference between knowing you had a proper name, despite what people called you all day long, and knowing you didn't; the difference between a true though fleeting hug with a man who is your father and an imagined, lingering one with a no-named boy who is no one in particular; the difference between the boy's blue-black face with big white smile and her own creamy yellow one which she sometimes feared had no mouth at all, and not just because of the missing teeth; the difference between her kind of creamy yellow skin which was not as golden yellow as Mustard's and not as

creamy white as Priscilla's, and why she knew, without ever having had it explained to her, that this last difference was the most different.

"Hey. How you?" she answered while still holding onto Mustard's waist and neck. "What yo name is," she asked. Mustard knew she had been too loud, too happy because he saw Priscilla spin around in the spot where she was standing near the apples. She spun a few times and looked like she was trying to drill herself into the floor, and he was the only person in the room who had seen this awkward, excessive thrashing about before and knew that it said more than words could about how instantly angry she had become. To keep her attention off his child, Mustard spoke, much louder than was usually safe in this house. "Gal, you don't need answer this simple nigger." He peeled her arms from him. "This just a fool don't know his place when he be in the family's house." He moved closer to the boy and yelled, "Get on back to that smokehouse and stay there til I gets back to whup you good." The boy ran so hard out of the room and so fast down the foot-rutted path to the smokehouse that Yellow Pokey could see the kitchen door still flapping long after the boy was out of sight. The girl began to feel warm when Mustard and the boy entered, but now she started to feel hot, out of fear this time.

She looked at Mustard and believed he must be hot too because his face was now moist where it had not been earlier. He was standing straight and tall, so she guessed he was not afraid, but when he talked again, she noticed that he again had the stammer that didn't always accompany him. "I- I'ma wh-whup him, Miss Scilla. I-uh-I'm good to beat him, Miss Scilla, cause you, you know, Miss Scilla, hit was all his fault. I could uh, let me uh, Miss Scilla, why don't you let me be chastizin this one, too?" He pointed at his girl and said, "She ain't mean no harm, uh no mam I know she ain't. Mam, uh Miss Scilla, Pokey be a good gal, but she just don't

know." He spoke louder as Priscilla moved nearer. "She don't know . . ." Before he finished, Priscilla had come close enough to slap the girl across the mouth hard enough to break the skin and leave a thin trickle of dark blood running down the pale skin. Mustard tried to pick up where he'd left off. He recovered his clear voice. "She need be rightly chastize, Miss Scilla and I'll do it for to save you the trouble. I swears it, I will."

"You get your nigger hind parts out of my house this instant," Priscilla said to Mustard "or I'll have *you* whipped." As he walked to the door he kept saying, "Please lord just try and remember, she don't know." But Priscilla could not hear him or anything else by that time. She couldn't hear the screams as she grabbed the girl by the thicket of light sandy brown hair that was never covered with a head rag like a slave woman's usually was, ought to be, in this woman's view. "Just who do you think you are? Do you think me a fool? You're no nappy headed picaninny, no babe in arms! What the devil do you think, walking all around this farm, and here in *my house* with your head uncovered, shaking that hair in front of men, white and slaves alike, trying to entice them, you harlot. Harlot! I always knew you were good for nothing but a harlot, but you won't be one in my house. Not even the shame to act decent around your own pa. Holding on to him and shaking that white woman's hair all around. Do you think you're *white*? Do you?! I'll show you you aren't. I'll beat you black and blue and you'll know who you are then."

Yellow Pokey was barely struggling by the time Priscilla had labored up the stairs to the bedroom she shared with John, when he cared to share, still with a death grip around a once hefty hank of the girl's hair that became increasingly thinner as portions of it gave up, leaving

evidence of the day's activity as they vacated the head and lay lifeless on each of the steps the girl was yanked up.

"I'll teach you who you are this day. No matter what you look like. You are a nigger bitch and you belong to me as long as I let you live." They were in the corner of the room where a mahogany washstand stood, with three drawers and a recessed space on the top for the large crockery scalloped wash bowl and matching pitcher, painted blue with red flowers by Priscilla herself when, as a girl of 12 (Pokey's own age) she began learning the decorative arts in finishing school. Above the washstand, hanging on the wall were two small samplers she had needlepointed way back then. One said "Cleanliness Is Next To Godliness" and the other, "God Bless Our Home." Also from her school days was her prized cross-stitched show towel proudly displayed by hanging through the handle of the top drawer. She didn't notice how it had caught and snagged when she jerked the drawer open to pick up the brand new cake of lye soap, or how it had gotten slammed shut inside the second drawer when she opened that one to get her husband's straight razor. Yellow Pokey had never been good at mending dress clothes or anything else that needed to come out looking better than a patched up rag, so she knew that tomorrow, after her mistress had calmed down, she would get mad all over again when she discovered how much time she'd have to spend repairing the prized piece of needlework herself. While she thought about this, the girl's attention drifted away from what Priscilla was doing with the razor. She didn't feel a thing while the woman sawed through hands full of the silky, sandy locks. She had been only semi aware when her mistress tried to shave her head, scraping the blade, grown dull, across her scalp, leaving a few occasional strands in her haste. She was startled to attention when Priscilla took the a fresh soap and dunked it in the water that was left

in the bowl from John's morning shave, and rubbed it against the already irritated skin that was growing blisters where hair been moments earlier. The soap was so fresh it was still as pungent with the bleachy smell of lye as it had been the day before when Old Bit had cooked it and caked it out in the yard behind her slave cabin. The lye burned so much that crawling over to the bowl that had what was left of the morning's water was all the girl could think of. At last, Priscilla was exhausted, looked ashen. She loosened her grip on the child's neck and shoulders. But she produced a final gust of energy when she saw Pokey reach for the cool water. In a quick motion she snatched the bowl from her black/white slave/daughter and threw it to the floor. A shard of the broken crockery hit Priscilla's forehead and left a tiny cut that was just beginning to bleed as she walked back down the stairs; she didn't feel it.

She went back to the kitchen to finish preparations for her cousins' visit, satisfied that no ugly nigger harlot was going to bring her any lowdown nigger grandchildren any time soon, satisfied knowing now that she was capable of doing whatever she had to to make sure there would *never* be any.

Sistah's Sampler

The threads and needles were more than sufficient. The threads were the right weight and the needles were the right girth and length, and there were plenty of them. Pokey was lucky. Most of the time, she could only get her hands on the long, fat needles with large eyes made to hold multiple strands of cotton for sewing rough linseywoolsey, or worse, croker sacks if she were making clothes for other slaves. But not this time. She had some pure silk thread and some floche she could use in single strands in smaller, delicate needles more fit for the large piece of evenweave linen. She was positive she could make it through the winter with these supplies she had stashed in the old trundle that nobody cared about anymore. Sistah once told her that that trundle was where she had slept when first taken in to be raised as a house servant by the benevolent white girl, just as before her, another little dower nigger belonging to her mother, Priscilla, had slept in before Priscilla married and moved her good bedroom furniture to this house where she started her life with John Moore. When Sistah became a teenager and wanted to move to a nicer room without the trundle bed, Pokey was allowed a real bed, though its mattress was only a combination of straw and ticking, right next to Sistah's big new soft bed with the big new pretty canopy in a bedroom much bigger than the one where the trundle bed was now stored and used only when company stayed overnight..

Yes, Pokey figured the supplies were ample for the project she had in mind. What she was less able to measure was the size of the chance that they, and she, might be found out. To the best that she could reckon, the likelihood of discovery by Priscilla was slim enough that she

could proceed. But it was still a tricky thing. She was getting bolder in her pilfering and stowing– yesterday she plundered Sistah's trousseau and came out with a whole yard of pink ribbon, real satin– and later she worried that this was getting too easy.

Half out of love for Sistah and wanting to make a gift to her from the only talent she possessed, and half out of her selfish desire to avoid the tedium that was sapping her will to keep living her juvenile life as a detested nuisance, who, at the same time, was an unexpendable source of free, nonstop, necessary labor, she was willing to risk rousing Priscilla's wrath.

Before she convinced herself that she could conceal and conclude a piece of "fancy work" such as this would be, she tried so hard to be satisfied spending the night of November knitting stockings and gloves, and piecing quilt blocks in her lap like Priscilla expected of her or any slave whose job it was to sew the family's utilitarian textile objects and no others. What she had heard Sistah and Priscilla and the ladies who visited them refer to as Fancy Work was solely the province of white women. But she had been responsible for the family's knitting and quilting all her life and it didn't excite her anymore. She barely cared about the quality of the material. Whether the batting was too heavy or too light, the topping crude or refined, was immaterial. She just used whatever Priscilla handed her without making any suggestions, and she seldom paid attention to the number of stitches she made. Unless, of course, her owner took a notion to watch over her shoulder and bark orders to her to rip out, redo, or replace something. Priscilla insisted on ten tiny handsewn stitches per inch of quilt topping. Even if Pokey were only repairing a 20-year-old ragged remnant of a bed cover that would never see another night's use, the old slave driver would not slacken her standards where Pokey was concerned.

When she began teaching the girl to sew, back when her own daughter was eleven or so and Pokey only four, she always gave the slave a harder time of it. Sistah so hated having to sit still for such long periods, she did everything she could think of to get out of the lessons. Deliberately, she messed up more good linen than a little. She hoped that would make her mother mad enough to banish her from the sewing table to the outdoor activities of the boys. She would have much preferred playing with the boys– their games looked like such fun. But instead, her mother would lavish her with more and more encouragement. "You'll find your stride before sampler time," Priscilla would say.

Yet, when Pokey erred in any small way, allowing a seam to pucker or failing to tack one thoroughly, the woman scolded and humiliated her in front of Sistah. Twisting the child's ear was another favored method of punishment. Sometimes, when the infraction was more serious, if buttons were mismatched, hooks left eyeless or stockings half-darned, the child's stuck out tongue would have a needle stuck into it for a split, painful second. Pokey preferred the tongue to the palm of her hand, which had also done its duty as the mistress's pincushion. An ailing tongue could sulk in silence for the rest of the day without further upsetting anybody, but a hand that throbbed and remembered the wrong inflicted upon it did not easily manage its remaining daily chores. And since she actually enjoyed using her hand for sewing, despite the hellish time spent with Priscilla that sewing came to represent, she did not want a bum hand.

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Pokey wanted to be just like Sistah because she had been good to her. Angelina. Like the people outside the house, the ones who slept in the cabins and worked mostly in the fields, she called her Miss Ann Lena out loud. But in her mind, where she could not be overheard, she called her Sistah just like everyone else who slept inside the house, Priscilla and her husband John, and the boys.

The washer woman who came up to the house from one of the cabins every day or two to gather and take away big bundles of dirty clothes, tablecloths, bed sheets and pillow cases told Pokey that sewing and laundering cotton was better than hoeing and picking it, so she should be glad that she had been bought and brought to this place as helper and eventual dower for Miss Ann Lena instead of being sold someplace worse. In time, she pieced together that that meant someplace where there was no nearly marriageable daughter who required help with her "finishing," the study of the womanly arts. Having a girl at that stage of life usually meant a slave might be needed to help attend to all the sewing that went along with preparing a trousseau while there was still time before a suitor officially became a *proper* fiancé who would require evidence that his intended could *properly* produce Fancy Work– samplers, mourning pictures, doilies and other ornamental textiles– while still keeping up with routine sewing, even if that meant having a slave to handle the Plain Sewing. Such a young miss would hardly have time to do her own mending and darning while in the midst of piano lessons, china painting lessons, church auxiliary meetings, and studying at her mother's elbow the correct way to handle a crew of house niggers to cook and clean during the day without robbing their masters blind, whisking nonessentials like food and household goods back to their cabins at night if not supervised closely.

Yes, over time Pokey realized that even though it meant not being able to live in the cabins with the people who looked like her, living and working in the house with Sistah was a better arrangement than most girls who looked like her got. She learned, over the years due to her expert eavesdropping skills, that though they were still slaves, on most plantations house servants did not look like her.

For instance, the first Pokey had been a yellow Negro girl, and back when she was alive, the younger Pokey had trouble deciding whether the girl was white. She didn't look like her, but she looked a lot like Sistah, especially since they both had different color eyes. Each one had a light brown and a dark brown eye. Only Yellow Pokey's light eye was the left and Sistah's was the right. And Yellow Pokey was yellow, unlike the younger one whose skin was dark, a deep black-brown and glossy.

Unlike Yellow Pokey, the younger Pokey was not born on Priscilla's land. She was part of a package deal– a negotiation the Moores entered into for the purpose of acquiring a grade A blacksmith and a fair-to-middling bull. They were willing to skimp on the caliber bull they could afford so they could put more money in the blacksmith. It was the mid 1850's, and war with the North, which had so far been averted but still left everyone ill at ease over its prospect, was always on the lips of at least one participant in any conversation. Not knowing for sure whether ruin and upheaval were far away, John Moore wanted to be careful in his spending. He could not afford to be extravagant when it came to livestock. So he decided to concentrate more on the smith and less on the bull. Everyone knew it was harder to breed a nigger who could manage his anvil and hammer with speed and economy than it was to breed a topnotch bull. He and Priscilla knew that they wanted Jasper as soon as they learned that the elderly Dillards a few

towns over were advertising him for sale. But old man Dillard needed to rid himself of some dead weight, too. He offered John a deal. If the Moores would agree to take off his hands the two slaves he owned who were too young and too old to work, the old man said he'd sell them cheap and throw in a bull for free. They really weren't worth anything to him, both females. The baby had no mother. Hers died along with five others from the cabins during the previous winter's spate of influenza. The other, an ancient woman, had no sense. Most days, she could not remember her name, much less instructions for chores. Sometimes Mrs. Dillard could get her to shell peas or shuck corn and sometimes not. Beating her didn't help. She didn't notice. Old man Dillard assigned first one and then another of the women cabin dwellers to look after the pair, but it was just tying up too much of their time. The two were useless, so he wanted them gone, needed them sold. Priscilla's husband wanted a blacksmith. Bad. He needed to convince his wife, though, that there was still kitchen work to be gotten from the old hag, and that the baby, though an annoyance right now, would either grow into its potential as a pricey dower slave for their Sistah, or would die soon anyway.

The old woman spent one night on Priscilla's land and expired. The baby thrived. She was shared property, suckled by a slave whose own nameless baby would not eat, was passing away slowly from something untouched by prayer, the only medicine the Moores allowed their slaves to keep. Passed from one person to the next, none of whom had much time for the care they tried to give her, this newly arrived orphan spent most of the day and night crying. She cried like someone who knew she had been abandoned and carted off to hell. Her infantile gut let her know she wanted to go home but it could identify no such place, and her caretakers had none to offer. Sistah heard how much trouble the never-quiet baby was causing, and out of a

deep concern she would not explain, she began bringing it from the cabins and taking it to the house to sleep in her trundle at night, and the crying stopped. In the house, the tarnished-looking foundling hardly ever whimpered. Sistah thought this was a good sign, despite Priscilla's dismay that her daughter was not interested lately in anything more important than playing nursemaid to a grimy, foul smelling nigger baby. Priscilla called it Pokey. That there was another girl called Pokey, a slave a little older than Sistah, already staying in the house posed no problem for the mistress of this house. Priscilla had grown up with dozens of Negro children that she called whatever came to mind. They didn't get real names until they were much older or were about to be sold. That was when it mattered, for the sake of giving or keeping good receipts of purchase. Plus, she didn't think this new Pokey would last too long.

But this new Pokey lasted. She got older as Sistah got lonelier and more afraid of the future– mostly her own future, but also her family's and her country's. That year that she was four and Sistah eleven, Sistah developed some quirks. First, there was an unreasonable phobia of fire. After all, lighting and minding fires was a big part of what housewives spent their time doing. What could you cook or wash without fire? It was a good thing that the Moores always had at least one kitchen slave working alongside the mistress of the house who was more than eager to hoover about the servant, barking orders at her, barring her from eating, brandishing switches off a branch which she applied without blanching to a hand, neck, or face when she decided she had been shown some disrespect. As long as there were slaves, Sistah escaped having to learn at her mother's elbow the grimier aspects of household management. The other odd thing was how Sistah had started keeping the little slave child, Pokey, closer and closer, eventually making sure she always kept either the child or Priscilla within her sight at all times..

Unless she knew the little girl to be sewing, safely stuck in a corner someplace other than in the kitchen, someplace away from flames, away from her mother, Sistah was uncomfortable.

For a while, before she became so suspicious, Sistah would send Pokey down to the cabins, sometimes just to spend time with the washer woman, and sometimes to learn how to launder. The washer woman enjoyed the company so much. She never had anyone for company. No children of her own, though she had given birth to five. All were dead or sold away. She had been mammy to another four, Sistah and her brothers, and Sistah took it to heart that they had once been so close. The other cabin dwellers usually left for the fields before daylight each morning, leaving the woman to her duties at the wash pots all by herself. She had come to look forward to the days Pokey would visit, eager to teach her how to light a big fire under the black, massive, solid iron wash pots outside her cabin that almost touched the ground but couldn't quite because they were suspended by chains thrown over stout wooden racks. She appreciated having someone to talk to, to pass her knowledge on to, while she stirred the white folks' heavy, wet clothes with a heavier tree limb in the boiling potato starch and lye liquid that burned the eyes with the steam, while the rest of the people, who left so early each morning, worked worse jobs. She knew that passing on a skill like this one– fine laundering, not just dunking clothes in a stream like you would do for black folks' clothes– would ensure the child's entitlement to a life better than a field hand's.

But after *Yellow* Pokey caught on fire in the open hearth in the kitchen that year, Sistah persuaded Priscilla to let Pokey stick to sewing. She told her mother she could better keep the little picaninny out of mischief if they both busied themselves in other parts of the house every day. What a sacrifice from a girl who hated staying in the house!

Yellow Pokey never did look big enough to be doing the kinds of work Priscilla put on her. All day long it looked like she was either bent down under the weight of carrying buckets of water from the pump to the house, or bent down trying to light a fire under a tub to heat the water from the pump for the Moores' baths, or to heat the stove for the Moores' meals. Hauling and heating sounded like easy work to some people, but Priscilla had never taken the time to show Yellow Pokey how to light a fire and stay out of its way at the same time. The girl, nearly a mirror image of her own daughter, didn't know how important it was to gather up her floor-length skirt in her hand and hold it securely behind her back while holding the lit wood torch with the other hand. She didn't know not to try to carry the torch and the open bucket of lantern oil at the same time, trying to save time. She didn't know not to run, ablaze, into the yard screaming for her mistress who heard the yells but did not come.

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Pokey would never understand as long as she lived why Sistah hated to do all the things she wished she could do. Master John didn't believe in girls going to school, but on occasion, he would allow the boys' school headmaster to come by the house and tutor Sistah if he needed extra money to make ends meet. She could do simple arithmetic, read well enough to find the important passages of scripture in the good book, and write, as her mother insisted, letters of invitation to necessary functions she would sponsor when she was a grown up lady with a rich, respectable husband. Priscilla, herself, had to rely on paid help from the stationer in town when she wanted to correspond with anyone in writing. She was never quite sure that he had put

things down precisely as she told him or if she had been overcharged for the service. She wanted Sistah to have a better time of it once she was out on her own.

The headmaster didn't mind Pokey being in the room for the writing lessons as long as she was very small. Once she was five or six, he said she'd have to go elsewhere because he'd never have it on his conscience that he had abetted the literacy of a black slave, not even by accident. What he didn't know was that just for fun, Sistah had drawn out the P-O-K-E-Y for the child on a piece of paper long ago, just so she could see herself on paper. What Sistah didn't know was that the little girl had memorized the look of it, so enthralled she was at the visible evidence of her identity. Not that she had been given the opportunity– she knew better than to ever touch a pen or writing paper that belonged to white people– but she knew that if she ever got the chance, she could draw her name. Sistah, on the other hand, was frequently chided for penmanship so sloppy he could not read it. He begged her to take it more seriously.

What Pokey loved more than anything was looking over Sistah's shoulder at the new cross-stitch patterns in magazines called Petersen's and Godey's. Some were for stitching pictures of flowers, especially cabbage roses, some were for birds, some were for prized spaniels perched on satin pillows. The ones Pokey liked the best, though, were the ones with writing. They were called samplers and Sistah said they said things like, "Home Sweet Home," "Bless This House," and "What Is A Home Without A Mother." Not being able to read all that, Pokey really didn't care what it was that they said. All she knew was that they must have said something mighty important because it took Priscilla a long time to finish one. And those were the easy ones, it seemed. Priscilla told Sistah at least once a day how much she had paid a lady

she used to know from another state to design one that was much, much bigger for Sistah to do and show off to folks as her most special work. It had writing all over it:

When I am dead and in my grave

And all my bones are rotten

Then look on this and think of me

That I be not forgotten

After that, it had what Sistah said were the names of everyone in the family and when they were born. Priscilla said that particular verse and the flowered border and the cartouche for the stitcher's initials were this year's "done thing" a proper girl's tribute sampler. The best Pokey could tell, a tribute meant you stitched the fanciest and most difficult of all the samplers you ever did stitch to pay thanks to your parents for loving you so much they paid for all those threads and linens and patterns from distant places so you could spend your days writing yourself on cloth with a needle. Just by looking at how Priscilla did it, Pokey learned that cross-stitching was no harder, but more fun, than the plain sewing that was left for slaves to do.

Bring the needle up from the back of the cloth at the bottom left of the stitch and cross over to make a little line when you bring the needle down again at the top right. Then bring it up from the back again, but this time at the bottom right, and cross over the first little line to form an X when you take it back down at the top left. If you made dozens and dozens of little X's in exactly the order shown on the pattern, you ended up with a big pretty picture that people who could read, could read. She knew that Priscilla could not read, but could follow the right order from a pattern, forming her X's just so, right down to "signing" the piece of art with needle and

thread, with her first, maiden, and married names, all plotted on the graph paper pattern for her by the paid designer, with the rest of the "picture."

"Do not neglect to sign even the tiniest finished piece," she told Sistah. "One day, your own daughters will need to be able to distinguish your creations from mine or my dear mother's. What else does a woman leave behind for her daughters and the world, to show that she was here on the Earth? Can she put her name on a business, or claim to have built a church, or, for that matter, a plantation that was bought with her own money for a husband? No m'am she cannot!"

It didn't do any good, all that prodding. Sistah continued to hate the very sight of the sewing table and the drawing room that housed it. She was only happy when she was finally told she could go out to ride. She loved riding, but not so much because she had a fancy for the fine horses John bought and traded regularly. She made a point of riding each new one over every inch of the place as soon as they were broken in and fit for it, fantasizing that this one or that one would be the one. She could stay on horseback all day long if they would just let her. Aside from the thrill of the ride, it was the pleasure she took in daydreaming that she would one day simply ride off the property on a steed so sturdy, he would take her so far, they would never find her.

Party Pretty

By the time Scilla started in earnest making sure that her aging daughter had all the accoutrements of a lady ready for betrothal, war loomed, gripping and choking every bit and piece of the South off from material comforts more and more each day. She was afraid it was already too late to get the remaining pieces of sterling flatware and china delivered from England and Germany. Nobody had the wherewithal for formal dining these days anyway, so if her daughter found a husband soon, he would just have to get used to eating from cheap crockery and burnished tin utensils. Clothing, however, Sistah should not think of doing without. Thank god, she had had the good sense to stock up on dry goods years earlier when other girls her daughter's age were becoming ardent needle women, learning the difference between common weave and even weave fabric, petit point and needlepoint, show cloths and samcloths. But unlike the others, Sistah was never thrilled when they found that a large quantity of floche or silk threads had arrived in town by train, and she didn't pore over new issues of Godey's Lady's Book for the latest camisole patterns from Paris, France. Her dear, precious Angelina, her only daughter, had not finished so much as a single marking sampler, and Scilla worried whether the girl could possibly have any suitable Fancy Work ready for display in the parlor in time for her birthday party. Eight-year-old Pokey, however, was so good a seamstress that Scilla had no choice but to let her help make the rolled hems and entredeau inserts in the many petticoats Sistah would need. The child taught herself to embroider the french knots and eyelets on the nightgowns just by watching and imitating her mistress. Scilla didn't like having a low

picanniny feeling herself important enough to create white women's art, but at the same time, she began to relax a little, knowing that she could count on the pokey old thing to complete what beloved, sweet Sistah, her angel baby, would not even start. She believed there would indeed be a sufficient number of undergarments after all.

At the same time, she knew there was a larger problem. Would her Angel even bother to try and make a good impression at the party and attract a decent man's interest? Sistah's stubborn streak had widened as she grew up, and her mother couldn't be sure she wouldn't sabotage her own party out of spite. She wondered on a daily basis how Sistah came by such meanness and why it was only directed toward her. What if this streak was apparent to the men who would be at the party? And even if it were not, what if a proper but unsuspecting suitor had with him a mother or sister or any other well brought up female to coach him on what to look for in a quality girl's background? There were so many important questions to worry about and so little time left to plan the best way to manipulate everyone.

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Pokey knew she could teach herself to sew anything. All she had to do was look at an item of clothing– simple chemise or elaborate ball gown, it didn't matter– and she could create another one just like it or one that looked even better. At first, she worried about not cutting out the pieces just so. Miss Scilla didn't allow no cloth to be wasted, so the pieces couldn't be laid out too far apart before the cutting. When she caught Pokey cutting out cuffs and a collar to her first flour sack blouse without her permission, she slapped the scissors right out of the child's

hand. Though she, herself, would never put that much detail or material into a garment for a slave who could do just fine with a hemmed sleeve and an open neck, the next day, after it was finished and Scilla was so surprised at how well accomplished it was, she calmed down. But a few days later, when she found the girl sitting at the little wooden table and chairs in Sistah's room, stitching the sleeves into what appeared to be a full length dress, she lost all composure again. "Why that must have been my bolt of blue sateen!"

"Yas'm. I heard you say you wanted Miss Ann Lena to have a new blue dress for her party, but you didn't know how you'd get the time to make it."

Scilla had hoped Sistah would finally get excited about the closest thing to a coming out party she was ever going to have, and offer some help with the planning for the cooking and the entertainment. Or maybe at least a suggestion or two about the kind of embellishment she wanted on her dress. Under the circumstances, there was no way John would agree to a big fancy *white* dress, but they all agreed that a low key get together on a smaller-than-usual scale with a smaller, colored dress would be all right. But her daughter didn't seem to care one way or another. She made no attempts to finish any embroidered work in time to be displayed, nor to finish any of the china paintings that she had personally helped her to sketch, nor to commit to memory any of the Schumann piano pieces John paid the head master from the Boys' Academy to come by in the evenings to teach her.

"Where are my scraps, you impudent little varmint? How dare you act as if you had any idea as to the value of my precious belongings! What could you know about making a proper party dress?"

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It was true; now that the war was making it hard to get nice fabric, threads, and trims, whatever dry goods could be found in town cost triple what they once did. The sateen had been so expensive, Scilla had, frankly, become almost afraid to cut it. She had bought just enough, without a bit to spare, and if she made a mistake laying and cutting the pieces with utmost parsimony in mind, she'd have a disaster on her hands. As far as she was concerned, Sistah was flirting dangerously with disaster, and Scilla was already taxed to her limit trying to avert that one.

She couldn't make hide nor hair of any possible motivation behind her daughter's actions. Aversion to action and abject disinterest would be more to the point. She didn't understand why a girl in Angelina's place– her place in the hearts of her parents, her place in society– would not be overjoyed at this time in her life. It was time that brought with it so much pleasure and beauty to look forward to.

Of course, 16 is such a young age. Preparing oneself for marriage overwhelms some girls. Attracting, impressing, and securing a suitable man could be as much work as fun, and a girl who wasn't in the right frame of mind for it, wasn't brought up to it, might have trouble finding her footing. The tasks came easy to Scilla who had basked in the headiness of it all and was married by age 13. From the very first time John brought her to the place that was to be their new home, not terribly far from the place she grew up, but half a world's distance in the mind of a juvenile whose dream it was to be far away from all that had gone wrong where she grew up, she showed him, and herself, how capable she was of being a tony wife of a wealthy

husband. She had managed to learn it all in time, despite the heavily accepted setback she blamed on Yellow Pokey, whose crime was that she existed. Scilla was enraptured of John and euphoric when he asked– no, agreed– to marry her. She would finally be rid of Yellow Pokey and the memories that went with her. She would get a chance to have a proper life of her own, befitting her natural born station, after all. Then, after arranging with her stepfather a slapdash wedding that prompted not a single prenuptial party or affair of any kind, John told her she would bring Mustard and Yellow Pokey along with her.

She didn't believe he had actually said it; it was incredulous that a man would allow, much less request, that such horrid reminders of his wife's former misery follow her into her brand new life with him. She balked, but to no avail. He told her it had all been settled, that the Redharts had been apprised that he would not seal the deal unless the two, both of whom he would consider his chattel property, came as part of the bargain. She cried, but he was trenchant. He told her he was counting on her never having to look any farther than at the two of them, fixtures in her home, to remember where she had come from and how he had saved her, and that if he took a notion to return her to her previous state, he could, without anyone thinking the worse of him. She hated him then.

But that didn't mean she hadn't loved him mere minutes before he said it, and that he hadn't the right to say it. She knew she would go with him, regardless, while continuing to pray without ceasing that the Lord God would make Mr. John Moore love her. Sixteen years later, she was still praying.

She gave him all that she had from the beginning. Whatever she was capable of doing for him, she did. What he most wanted from her was sons. He talked nonstop about being

determined to start his own dynasty. He fashioned himself a Caesar, like the ancients her read about in the books they owned. He could afford to buy more books than he did, but his interests were rather limited. He was extremely fond of Mr. Edward Gibbon's work and any other work that detailed the ways of the old Romans. He told her the Romans had a society much like his: dynasty and slaves. He intended to have both. He told her so many times– so many more times than she had thought she could stand– the story of Claudius, who was an emperor and whose wife was such a harlot, she challenged Schylla, Rome's most notorious prostitute to a contest to see how many men they could service in one night. "Claudius," he said, "had better, more important reasons for marrying Messalina than the average poor man could recognize. He was smarter than to let her whoring keep him from paying attention to his empire."

If a dynasty was what he needed to start an empire, for a long time it looked like he wouldn't make it. As surprisingly as she had become pregnant at age 12, she remained barren for longer than John had planned. He thought she'd be pregnant again within a couple of weeks and would give him his first son before she turned 14. But she was pushing 15 before the first one came, and it was no son. His unhappiness was visible; he made no attempts to conceal it from Scilla, and he told her not to get it into her head that he intended to give her more than a couple of weeks before she'd have to start trying again, to get it right. They argued about the baby's name. Scilla was dead set on Angel. She saw this legitimate daughter as her sign from God that she was not meant to be saddled with the first revolting one. John said he was thinking ahead, and that was no name for a full grown white woman of standing in her community. He was partial to Leeanna. They settled on Angelina, seeing that as a compromise of sorts. When Scilla redeemed herself in his eyes by having three boys over the next four years, they picked up

their sons' habit and were more disposed to referring to her as Sistah, and the slaves called her Miss Ann Lena.

Having boys who paid her about as much attention as their father did, Scilla doted on her Angel. On her she heaped all the aspiration she had once held for herself as far as growing into a happy adulthood was concerned. She wanted Sistah to want for nothing. She wanted Sistah to want what she had wanted. There was no school dedicated to putting "finishing" touches on a girl's image near where they lived like there had been for her when she was young. But she was certain that she was capable in every way that mattered, her illiteracy notwithstanding, to give Sistah the tutelage that would transpose her rough tomboyish exterior into the highly polished veneer of a cultured lady, a lady of careful breeding.

At first, Scilla was too busy with being pregnant, furnishing her house and training house slaves as John's means increased to enable him to afford more and more antique chairs and chattel of all ages. She left Sistah alone to play outside like a boy until she was six or seven. At around that time, Scilla recognized that her girl was losing precious time, and that she was at a good age for her grooming to begin. She especially hoped it would take the child's mind off that pokey old picaninny she'd grown so attached to. That thing would just have to learn to survive without any tending while Sistah was at study with her needlework. She started her daughter with needlework, just as Miss Renee had started her, mostly simple cross-stitch. She would escalate to Fancy Work samplers, painting and piano as soon as she mastered making small samplers with rows of X's created from tiny crisscrossed threads.

She was disappointed when Sistah turned each lesson into a quarrelsome test of wills. She had just assumed that the girl would share her natural appreciation for not only the beauty

highly apparent in the products of the female arts, but also for the opportunity her renderings would present for her to express herself, her innermost creativity, in the precious few ways a female was permitted to. By the time Sistah was 11, Scilla was lots more than disappointed. She was angry and constantly astounded that the much younger picaninny, the latest Pokey, was able to pick up on her instructions and darn, mend, and knit to perfection while her own child couldn't or wouldn't. If she weren't so afraid of darkies' natural inclinations toward waste and theft, she'd turn over the full responsibility for the clothing of all the slaves to the little black thing. But with talk of secession and war having heated up so in 1859, she was far more conscious of frugality than she ever had been. Everybody said there would surely be embargoes if the worst came to pass and the government, in the North, resorted to punishing its own people, good white people of the South by blocking their access to all kinds of necessary goods. It would have been a great help as well as a comfort to her if she had been able to expect her daughter to pitch in and do her part with the routine sewing if not the Fancy Work, but she couldn't. In fact, Sistah was more insolent by the day. She did more than refuse the mother whose only motivation was the best interest in her heart for her Angel's welfare. Sistah made it clear that she wanted nothing to do anything that would put her in closer contact with her mother. To save her life, Scilla could not figure out why that was.

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In just the same way she had managed to get herself the materials and the out-of-Scilla's-sight time to start working on that tribute sampler, Pokey had given herself a present by sneaking

into the cabinet where Scilla kept the cloth she intended for fancy dresses, removing the luxurious sateen that was such an intoxicating color, and cutting out pieces from it to make the pretty party dress Scilla had shown Sistah in the magazine. The drawing of the dress on a lady with the hair piled high on her head and the pearls draped around her neck looked elaborate, but the drawing that was a diagram of the dress's individual pieces was simple. She knew she could follow the instructions that she couldn't read just by looking at the two drawings. She knew it was a serious chance to take. Getting Scilla riled up about anything these days usually ended up in pain for somebody.

It wasn't Scilla all by herself who had trouble keeping explosions of anger that were just underneath the skin from bursting out. Pretty much everybody stayed in bad temper on account of the war having lasted so long, still lasting after she had heard her master say back in 1861 that it wouldn't go so much as a year. According to him, Damn Yankees would have crawled with their tails between their legs, stripped of guns and ammunition, blue uniforms in rags, back up to where they came from. Pokey didn't know exactly where that was, but from what she heard, it was a godawful place where people had no sense of the way God intended for decent folk to live. But when she decided to go ahead and risk her mistress's ire so she could make a 16th birthday present for her beloved Sistah, she wondered why that blue suit looked so fine, in 1864, on that Damn Yankee she and Sistah rode into town to visit almost every day.

It was time for Sistah to "come out," Scilla had been saying to John for more than a month. "Out" of where, Pokey couldn't reckon, but knew for sure it got great big quarrel out of her master every time his wife brought it up. They made a terrible racket. Scilla would say how it would amount to a lifetime of shame if Sistah didn't come out, and not just for Sistah but for

him, too. She would say that the Maddens or the Hudsuckers or some other family she would name had found ways to give coming-out parties to their daughters, despite the war, and that if the Moores didn't do it, they would be outcasts when things were all settled down again. She said people had to go on living if the war hadn't killed them already, and that there was no way Sistah would ever get married without a proper party, or at the least, the closest thing to one they could make All her husband kept saying was that he didn't give a damn about what the others were doing because their daughters had not presented their fathers the same circumstances.

"I should have known," he said, "that a harlot would beget another one. A fine mother you turned out to be. She could have met up with that traitor to his race right here in the house for all you'd know."

"Well, of *course* I wouldn't know. What do you take me for, some kind of abolitionist sympathizer?! If I had known anything at all about a liaison with a northerner, and, my God, not to mention a northern newspaper correspondent down here to concoct all those lies about our people, our battles, and, my God, our women, I'd have put a stop to it right away. The only thing worse would be a flesh and blood Yankee soldier. And I wouldn't be surprised that they don't start raping every belle in town directly! It's all their fault, not ours. There are so many of them. If we don't get out from under this blue-suited occupation soon, *all* our women will be defamed. That's what they really came down here for. To sully southern womanhood! But I still say I don't believe in cheap gossip. My sweet precious says it is a lie, a vicious, vicious lie meant to besmirch the reputation of a perfect girl who comes from a family better than the liar's."

"Now that's just what I mean. You're a fool and always have been. There were witnesses enough to fill a town. Everybody who was there saw it and is talking about it. You want to believe her lies because you don't what to believe that she is what you were. And from what I've heard, she makes the *third* generation."

"You're too, too cruel, John. I don't deserve it. Neither does my daughter."

"And what about your other daughter? Did she deserve what she got? Don't you ever call me cruel again. And another thing about your little darling. Even if I didn't believe she rode into town for the purpose of meeting up with the enemy, in plain sight of all those Union troops stationed there right on the square so as to put us under marshal law which is the North's way of placing their godless spying eyes on us while we try to conduct business as best we can– even if I believed what she says about it being a happenstance conversation, I'd thank her to behave as the rest of our belles do and cross the street when she gets within a few feet of a northern man."

They fought the same fight for days. Sistah took Pokey with her an equal number of days to the town square, where she didn't mind being– no, relished being seen, exchanging public words and furtive gazes with the fascinating young writer who told her he'd find a way to get her out of hell no matter what. Even if it killed him.

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It had served as a tonic to Scilla's spirits, John finally meeting her half way, agreeing to let Sistah have a low-scale sweet sixteen party in lieu of a full blown debut. He was comfortable

vouching for her age if not her innocence. She had to admit to herself and to Pokey that the child had time for an additional project, whereas the mistress of the house did not, and would be the one to make the blue party dress. For a while, Scilla continued to hope that Sistah would see the party as she did: an invaluable opportunity to show those whose tongues had wagged that she was brought up well and knew the ins and outs of entertaining guests. There would not be much to serve them. Food was scarcer as the war wore on and the South sustained more and more losses. She had scrimped and saved the fixings for a sizable cake and John had ordered a year earlier that a small crew of slaves be put to making apple cider whenever the family was low on it. He would not abide the rest of the war without cider. So cake and cider comprised the entire menu, but that was as much as anyone would expect, considering. What chance there was for this soiree to distinguish itself from those recently held in other people's homes was whether Sistah would come through by distracting the attendee's from the problems of the day with sophisticated repartee, recitations, or musical renditions. Like the Hudsucker girl, for instance. At the last silver tea meeting of the Confederate Women's Auxiliary, that girl had sung and accompanied herself on the piano, providing temporary solace to all who were present. Sistah could do as well with the Schumann pieces if she only would. She absolutely would not, she announced, display art needlework or art of any kind, for the cackling hens (mothers or other female relatives of the handful of eligible bachelors, mostly returning war wounded) to inspect and judge.

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Sistah knew she hated her mother before Mustard died. He asked her not to, for her own sake, he said, but she couldn't help it. He said it just wasn't the way a mother and daughter were supposed to be with one another. She asked him if he realized the absurdity of what he had said, given that his daughter was her mother's as well, and that Scilla had acted as anything but motherly toward her. Yellow Pokey was dead, and Mustard had steadily declined in health since it happened. She was all too aware that mentioning her half-sister would bring him hurtful memories, but she felt it needed to be said, at last. He seemed surprised that Sistah knew. She was surprised at how easily everyone– her mother, father, Mustard– took it for granted that she did *not* know, did not have the sense to figure out.

She had never known her father well enough to hate him. He was fond of saying he had little use for females, his wife especially, and she came to realize that he included his daughter in that category. He was never downright mean to her, but her whole life, he remained calculatingly distant from her while lavishing time and attention on her brothers. She learned at an early age to feel nothing for him. She thought nothing in particular about his having a slave child. She couldn't help but think it mattered to her mother and that that was the source of the ever present tension between her parents. They really seemed not to like each other. But her mother said many times that it was a white master's due if he got into relations with black concubines. They were his property, after all, and it was his benevolence they depended on for food, clothing and shelter. "Get used to it, and do not worry about it," she raised Sistah to believe. She wanted her prepared for that kind of thing once she had a husband of her own.

Sistah figured out when still a small child that Yellow Pokey had to have been her father's woods colt. Yellow Pokey was her mirror image; they looked almost enough alike to

have been twins. The slave was a year or so older, but she was smaller, not as plump as Sistah. The true giveaway was their eyes. Each one had a dark brown eye and a light one. Only Yellow Pokey's light eye was the left and Sistah's was the right. The slave didn't live in the cabins like the others. She lived in the house with the family, and for a long time, Sistah thought that was the one admirable thing she could commend her father for. Her mother had repeatedly thought up tricks to have her sister sent down to the other side of the plantation with the others: there were sick slaves down there who needed nursing back to health so they could hurry back to the fields, or the washerwoman who never went to the fields needed a full-time helper if the family was to get its laundry done carefully instead of haphazardly. But her father would never hear of it. He put his foot down loudly on that issue. "Yellow Pokey will always stay right here in this house with you," he'd say adamantly. Sistah only wished that he had some inclination as to his wife's hatred for the visible evidence of his infidelity and would put a stop to the torture she subjected the girl to. She could understand that a woman would have a hard time living with her husband's bastard child under foot all day long. But if it had been a husband of hers, she would have heaped all the venom she could summon up on him instead of unleashing it on the child who had no control over the thing, couldn't help being born. As far as she was concerned, handling Yellow Pokey the way she did made Scilla an unredeemable monster, as low a snake as was possible for anyone, ever, to stoop to become.

Then came that summer her mother's cousins, from her own mother's side of the family, were coming to visit. Scilla rarely spoke of any of her relatives and her children had stopped wondering if they would ever meet any of her kin, or their father's, for that matter. These cousins had lived in California, hoping to find a fortune, ever since the first gold rush. But that

summer, Scilla got a letter from California saying they had made more money than they ever expected to, that their son was about to enroll in an exclusive, expensive college back east, and they were about to accompany him on his trip out so they could help get him set up in living quarters. When she learned that they were rich, Scilla couldn't stand not getting the chance to show them that she was, too. She had John write back that the Moores wouldn't hear of them coming all that distance without making a stop for a week's visit with them. When they arrived, Scilla introduced her cousin, Mae, Mae's husband, and their boy to her own children and husband. Sistah heard nothing of the conversation the rest of the day. All she could concentrate on was that her mother's Cousin Mae had a dark brown eye and a light one, and so did her boy.

Once she knew that her mother, not her father, had been the source of her half-sibling, Sistah had trouble reconciling it with the lessons she had learned about the brutish nature of men and the necessity to excuse them, for society's sake, for their dalliances with black wenches. She had also been taught that its belles were the pride of the South and how it would always be up to the women to instill in southern society the heightened sense of propriety and piety that no northerner could ever hold a candle to. She ruminated on the discrepancy between the way she was taught and the way it was– a discrepancy made obvious simply by a cousin having come to visit– for months without coming to a satisfying conclusion. Then there was the fire.

Mustard was no older than her mother, though he looked like someone's great-great-grandfather. After that fire, he had no chance of becoming a grandfather as Yellow Pokey was his only child. The last time she spoke to him, not long before he died of the heartache that came with knowing his girl had burned to death and that her own mother had calmly watched the spectacle, he told Sistah that he tried and occasionally succeeded in remembering Scilla as she

had once been. He said he had been with her longer than anyone on the plantation, since the two of them were four years old, and at a time long gone, she had been lovable.

Sistah paid him no heed. The excruciating hurt she could not escape as the very thought of it ran through her head every minute she was awake, and sometimes in her dreams, came from realizing that she had been birthed by the devil.

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In 1863, not quite a whole year before the sweet sixteen party, armed Union soldiers rode onto the Moore's property right up to the porch, as close as they could get to the door without having to dismount and knock. One of them yelled at the top of voice for the owner to come out. When John did, with Scilla not far behind him, the soldier said they were there because it reached their attention that the farm may yet have enslaved laborers on it. They had come, under the law, to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation, word of which had spread like wildfire among nearby plantations. It was more than a little curious that Negroes known to live on the Moore place had not turned up at any of the makeshift shelters for the newly freed.

John replied that he had told his chattel that they were free to go but that none of them wanted to. The soldiers were not going to take his word for it. They demanded to be shown the slave quarters where they would go into each and every hovel, if necessary, and read the President's proclamation to them all. And that is what they did.

Within an hour, John, Scilla, Sistah, and the boys were standing on their porch as a single file line of black men, women, and children began to stream by. John yelled out to Jasper, who

had nothing with him but the clothes on his back and in one hand, a smithy iron he had brought with him from the Dillards at the same time they bought black Pokey. "Where in hell you think you going, boy?" he shouted. "Don't know, Massa Moore," Jasper hollered back, "just going."

John said they were damned fools, every one of them. "Who do they think is going to look out for their livelihoods," he wondered under his breath. "Not a one of them has got a bed, a cracker, or a pot to piss in."

"I'd better hurry up and go get Pokey and ask one of them to look after her before they're all gone," Sistah said.

"Are you so ignorant as that?" her mother asked.

Sistah was taken aback and had no reply.

"That picaninny's too young to know the difference between being free and being mine. And just which one of these ungrateful wanderlusters do you think is going to welcome a child that small who can't do a thing but slow down their foraging in the woods," Scilla continued. "You mind your p's and q's and leave that one asleep in this house where she's going to stay."

That's how the place lost all its laborers except one, and why later, throwing even a small get together left Scilla too busy and harried to see about all the arrangements and make the dress at the same time. She had never tried to do much of anything without slave labor to do most of it.

After she saw how pretty the blue sateen party dress was once it was all made up, Sistah decided she wanted to wear it. Not that she had any intention of staying one minute longer than she had to on that place with those people. But her newspaper man would be waiting at the train station to make sure she made it, and he might get a thrill out of seeing her dressed like a queen

for a change. The needlepoint piece in her parents' bedroom said there's no place like home. But if this plantation was the best she could manage, she didn't care if she ever had another home again. There was no way she would sit in the parlor and pretend to enjoy having cake and cider with hypocrites.

It was such a stroke of genius, coupled with luck, this plan that her gentleman friend had come up with. A soldier he knew to deal in war contraband, and who had amazing ways of smuggling it in or out of the South as the need dictated, wangled Sistah a space on a Union rail car slated to come through town, headed for the North, on the same evening as her party. It would be the most ideal time to sneak off without being missed while her mother would be so busy decorating, cooking, and putting on airs once the first guest arrived. She had John's fastest horse ready for them in the barn, and Pokey, so much older than her years, understood every word when Sistah told her that this would be their last day there unless one of them slipped up and said something to give it away. Just like she explained to her groom-to-be that she couldn't leave without Pokey, she explained it to the child too. Pokey understood that it was a better life that they would both make a run for that evening. Sistah explained how she had already been kept enslaved, against the law, for a year and how neither of them would ever get any freedom as long as they stayed there under Scilla's or John's peering eyes. Days earlier, her newsman had told her about the soldier and how he thought he might be able to call in a favor and get her a space on a train that was allowed to transport civilians only in instances of life or death emergency. If she was willing and brave enough to travel alone, he could arrange for her to get to his parents who would be waiting to receive her and to welcome her as their daughter-in-law as soon as he could get back home to marry her. She told him she was more than willing and

plenty brave, but that she wouldn't do it if it meant she had to travel alone. He would have to get her and the child on board, or she would not agree to marry him. The next time they met, he told her he had warned his soldier friend that she would be accompanied by a child, a Negro servant she couldn't do without. And more important, he had an idea about what to do with the little girl once they had made it to the North. He had learned of an order of colored nuns residing just north of the Mason-Dixon line, and that they took in orphaned runaway slaves and war refugees and trained them for suitable paid employment up there. Sistah decided that sounded like exactly what she wanted for Pokey, so she resolved that she would find that place, and if it looked warm and safe, she would leave Pokey with the nuns before continuing on to meet her new family.

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The school for the orphans taught reading and writing to boys and girls as well. After that, they split up for vocational training. The boys were given lessons in the industrial arts, which Pokey discovered meant carpentry and brick masonry, and the girls studied home economics. That was just fine with Pokey when she found out that it meant she could keep busy with a needle and thread and not get reproached for being creative with them. The nuns encouraged it. In time, they saw that she was more experienced than the rest of the runaway and refugee girls and had a sound grasp of the basics. Since they needed not to waste breath repeating what she already knew, they let her leave the little school room/ sewing room that was attached to the orphanage, and walk one city block down to the proper school building they

operated for the serious students who had paying parents. At the bigger school, the children learned to read and write not just in English, but in Latin and French. Pokey wasn't allowed in those classes, but from what she could tell by eavesdropping, those serious looking students were mighty smart and had lessons in all kinds of things she didn't at the orphanage. And they looked a little different, too. The orphans were never raggedy, but they wore what the nuns and the students made in the little room from the scrap material donated to them by the city's several large textile mills. The other students dressed in finer style. Their shirts always had collars and cuffs, sometimes with lace on them, and the girls wore ribbons in their hair to match the color of their dresses. They came to school looking finer than any white child she ever did see in the South. They sounded different, too. Except for the few who had grown up in the South and had been adopted by well off colored northerners, they said "okay" a lot instead of "all right," and they did not pepper their sentences with "yas'm" and "no'm" like she did. They were a curious bunch in the big city of the North, and it took Pokey a while to get used to their language. Probably the oddest thing to her was that they always, *always* expected her to say "colored" and never refer to herself as a nigger.

What made her fit in with those fancy girls was the art needlework lessons. When the academic lessons were over for the day, the students at the big school divided themselves into the girls' room and the boys' room, just like at the orphanage, and the boys learned drafting and financial management while the girls were trained in the "decorative arts." They were supposed to qualify as needlewomen by the time they left school, primed to become members and officers in needlepoint and embroidery clubs. For the most part, the clubs sponsored fashionable charity events which were reported in the "colored notes" of the city's largest newspapers. The nuns

doubted that much stitching went on in the club meetings. They were certain, however, that no female graduate of the school would be accepted into a club without samples of her work to prove her familiarity with a field of endeavor that spoke volumes about the young woman's status in polite society– or more to the point, her parents' or her husband's. No plain sewing was taught here. That could be learned easily enough almost anywhere by the occasional girl who could not look forward to hiring paid labor for that kind of thing. For what these girls' parents paid in tuition, they expected Fancy Work taught by a highly qualified nun, whether colored or white, who most likely took her vows and training in Europe.

On the days she was sent to the big school, Pokey sat with the well fed, well dressed girls as they were all shown how to block a Penelope canvas, how to make a French knot that didn't look like a colonial knot or a Palestrina knot, how to keep leaf stitches from tightening into sprats heads, when to choose a long-armed cross-stitch in favor of a long-legged cross-stitch or a regular cross-stitch, why satin stitch must be avoided when you run low on expensive silk or metallic threads, and the like. A lot of it was new to most of the girls, but not to Pokey. Thanks to Scilla, she had the broadest repertoire of stitches of anyone in the class.

Those children had a lot of work to do, what with their stitching and the other classes they took. How they learned to read and write in all those languages was more than Pokey could fathom. She had so much trouble with English, the nuns finally stopped bothering her about alphabets and spelling.

"Don't think that I believe you're too simple," Sister Peter Sapphira told her, "because that is clearly not the case. You should be able to learn to read and write as well as the others of

your age. Why, I've seen you copy whole lines of verse on cross-stitch samplers without a letter out of place!"

It was true. Pokey's favorite verse for samplers was exceptionally popular for American schoolgirls at one time. Sister Peter Sapphira had shown it to her in books. The nun said the book said that eight- and nine-year-old white colonial girls "wrote" it on samplers before the Revolutionary War and girls have liked it ever since. The book had some photographs of samplers with it written on them, and some of the ones that hung on the walls of the corridors at the big school used it too:

Jesus permit thy gracious name to stand

As the first efforts of an infant's hand

And as her fingers o'er this canvas move

Engage her tender heart to seek thy love

With thy dear children may she share a part

And write thy name thyself upon her heart

At first, Pokey liked it just because everybody else liked it, but the more the nuns read it out loud to her, the more she started to love it for what the words meant. They were nicer words than the verse she had stitched into Sistah's tribute sampler.

She had come pretty close to finishing that tribute sampler, too. She stuck to it diligently, whenever she felt she could sneak a few minutes without being detected by Scilla. She was so committed to it, not just because she had such a good time working on it, but because she planned to give it to Sistah for a birthday present. It was something Sistah could use

to keep her mother from being so frustrated with her lack of interest in sampler making. The best part of the gift would be seeing Sistah show it off to people, claiming it as her own work. But when Pokey got permission to go ahead and make the girl's party dress, she worked on that instead and didn't have time to finish the tribute to the Moores. The pattern Scilla had paid to have designed had the names of all Sistah's relatives plotted on the graph paper. Pokey had no idea which plots spelled which names, but she knew she could follow a plain graph and that the names could not help but to show up on the cloth in just the same way they were on the pattern. The names were the least fun about the project. Making all those little X's to memorialize the importance of family got her to thinking about how she would never know if she had ever had one. Except for Sistah, she didn't have any family-like feelings for any of the Moores.

She planned to get back to the piece as soon as she was done with the pretty blue dress, but they had run away from all the beautiful supplies she had worked so hard to store in the old trundle. She tried to go after them and pack them in a bag to take along, but Sistah wouldn't let her. "We have to travel light," she had said. "We can't take anything that I haven't already packed, and that sampler sewing is silly and not worth the trouble anyway." Then Pokey showed her the half-finished sampler and asked if she could at least take that one piece so she could finish it later and give it to her for her next birthday. Sistah said, "Oh my goodness. Yes."

When the nuns saw it, they praised her dedication to craft over and over again. Pokey discovered that she liked being praised, though it was a new and strange experience. It made her feel all the worse when Sister Peter Sapphira got around to telling her not to tax herself anymore about the reading and writing. They would just all have to be content for her to learn to make an X for her name, for now, and maybe they could try the whole alphabet again next year.

What Pokey didn't understand was how *they* didn't understand the difference between her "writing" the verse on cloth with needle and thread, and trying to read its individual letters and words as if they were no longer integrated areas of a single, total picture. When she asked someone to draw out her name or words of any kind on a piece of graph paper (even paper without any lines at all worked okay if the drawer was careful about proportion), what she saw when she looked at it was one big picture. Art, if it was a pretty picture, and just a plain old picture if not pretty. Like looking at her hair in a mirror. When she wanted to see what her hair looked like, she didn't search the reflected image for each individual hair on her head. She looked at a single, whole picture named hair, and if any one individual hair stuck out, it made the picture ugly and she smoothed it down or plucked it out like she did with an errant stitch that threatened to ruin a pretty sampler. It made no sense to her that writers were supposed to look at each stick on an alphabet all by itself, then figure out the next stick, from a different direction, to add to it. It took forever to finish one, with all the thinking and remembering. The I and the X were the only two she liked. The numbers were not good, either. Only the 1 was good, but when they learned Roman numerals, she was okay with the I and the X, of course.

She hated that it disappointed her teachers, but honestly, at the orphanage, she was happier staying with the cloth and pins and scissors on the days she was assigned to make chemises, weskits, or breeches for the other children. And on the days she walked to the big school, she was more than content to create petit point flowers on silk gauze. This was the best time she had had in life. Nobody beat or swore at her. Not having spent entire days in fear of what would happen to her before nightfall, she always slept soundly, without nightmares. She had enough to eat, and she was always clean. But she wanted to find Sistah and go home.

Jennifer

"On days like this, I guess you might as well sew. It's not as if there was anything important left for you to do. But you know full well it'll fly all over Trell's nerves if he catches you with that bourgie foolishness."

"So here we go again with the insults," she thought. She didn't say a word because she had the feeling her father was "in his tea" as she had heard him euphemistically put it when he talked to his friends about things he had done while drunk but didn't remember doing. If he wasn't at least a little tipsy, she'd be surprised, considering the stressful last couple of days. That was his MO. Stress brought out the beer and the wine and the worst in her father. She didn't feel like getting into a pointless argument with an almost drunk right then, so she let the comment slide. And she didn't have time to worry about what wouldn't fly in Trell's esteem, or what would fly over his nerves. The truth was that she'd just as soon see him and Trell both grow wings and fly away. In fact, once Daddy put used the word "fly" in that silly turn of phrase, she couldn't help but conjure up imaginary moving pictures in her mind– this one had him and Trell both airborne and then falling full-face into a gigantic pot of tea. Silly euphemisms had a way of jump starting her overly vivid imagination.

On days like this, when propriety and weather dictated that you stay indoors in case a friend or neighbor decided to disregard the snow– an extraordinary amount of it for a city in the South– to come over with a casserole and condolences, why shouldn't you practice your

needlework skills on your free minute if it made you happy and didn't hurt anybody else? Why not, especially if you had to brace yourself for being on stage later on in the evening, performing fake smiles and pretending to be so happy that everyone had come to be with you in your time of need? And especially if one of the wake guests will be the boyfriend you now know you don't want because he's like your father in too many ways and gets along with him a little too well, and has no hesitation about explaining to you why you shouldn't do or be any of the things you like doing and being? Why not just stitch unabashedly and dare anyone to challenge your choice of pastime?

People would be coming over later, and if she didn't grab these few minutes for herself and her cross-stitch samplers, she'd end another day dog tired from all the work of getting rid of a dead person and would have wasted another day of her vacation without having any fun.

When her godmother, Sugar Mama, heard about Granny, she called Jennifer to say how sorry she was and to make a date to take her to the movies to lift her spirits a little. Jennifer wondered a lot about why all the callers seemed to think there was any reason for her spirits to be down. All she felt was aggravation that her vacation plans were interrupted by this inconvenience.

The movie had been a whole week ago. The salvation of this vacation was that while they were out together, she and Sugar Mama started an ambitious needlework project, and she learned how to make cross-stitch samplers in the process. She loved them and was hooked on cross-stitch immediately. She went to the needlework shop the next day after casket and shroud shopping, and bought patterns for more samplers than she'd ever have time to stitch, but she liked just studying the graphs and the instructions.

So on this particular evening, now that they were sure they had located all the out of town relatives that were still alive, and finally decided that there was no point waiting any longer for any of them to show up for this funeral, they were going ahead with the wake and the funeral the day after. They had suffered a whole, dragged out week of waiting to hear from people, and picking up death certificates, and being stuck in general with hundreds of tedious, picayune arrangements that had to be made, with no one else to make them. Considering how unpleasant it must have been for him too, Jennifer recognized that she should probably cut her father a little slack. True, he had a history of abusing alcohol whenever things stopped running smoothly, and she was sure excess drinking would coincide with the current bad news. That didn't speak in his favor, but how's a middle aged man supposed to react at the death of a mother-in-law he's hated since the day he met her when he was teenager?

On her first day home on her first vacation from college, Jennifer answered the phone when Nursing Home called to say that her grandmother had died, had expired despite their attempts at resuscitation, had evidently drifted peacefully in her sleep while seeking Jesus. Still holding the phone in one hand, and trying to think with the other, unoccupied side of her body, Jennifer finally heard herself say to Nursing Home that it should just pick a funeral home and send the Granny thing there, and that she or her father would make the rest of the arrangements later, and that, "No, we're sure you did all you could. She was just old. An old lady. That's all." After she hung up, the overriding impression she had was that it was surprising that this Granny thing had reached its "expiration" date already. She had seen her mother's mother no more than three or four times in her entire life. She always felt like there would be time to go see the old lady if she ever wanted to; she certainly wasn't going anywhere. Nursing Home.

She'd been in there since shortly after the massive stroke that kept her from walking or talking or recognizing anybody. Nobody took the time to explain much to Jennifer, but she eventually pieced things together on her own– like the quilt she made years earlier after Sugar Mama taught her how. She figured out that Granny (is that what you're supposed to call your mother's mother?) had collapsed after an apoplectic fit when she learned, all in the same day, that her only baby, possibly her only kin, had died of her own stroke while giving birth, and that the unrefined dullard (Heathen Oaf was the only name she ever called him, he said one day while drunk) who was the baby's father was refusing to give the little girl to her to raise.

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She grew up without a mother, but Jennifer got cooking and sewing lessons like most other girls just the same. Her friend, Marynette, had a mother who loved cooking and tried to teach it to her daughter and Jennifer at the same time when Jennifer spent nights at their house. At Sugar Mama's house, she got sewing lessons, and unlike the cooking lessons, they were a pleasure. For one thing, her godmother was good at stitching. And aside from that, she had so many interesting stories to tell about the origins of the various techniques they worked in. She learned that the Elizabethans regarded blackwork embroidery as an affordable alternative to lace trims when the masses saw that Elizabeth, herself, was fond of it. It was one of the first embroidery techniques Jennifer learned because even a child could handle the simple running stitch or backstitch it utilized. After the very first line drawing she completed, with a single ply of black floss, she was hooked. When her godmother showed her how that simple motif could

be expanded into a more intricate pattern called a diaper, she found it hard to stop herself from making them past her bedtime every night.

When Sugar Mama saw how good she had gotten with all that practice, she bought her a package of iron-on transfers with a greater variety of designs she could stitch onto the hems of pillowcases and tablecloths. It was common for Jennifer to spend a lot of time alone, afraid to have any but her very best friend over to visit, not knowing whether her only parent would come in from work, miserable over some perceived injustice, determined to drown the misery but not before visiting it on his only child in the form of sharp barbs over minor foibles. For a girl in that position, needlework proved a perfect pastime. She embellished all the linen in the house and some of her clothing, too. When she learned to do surface embroidery with Chinese flat silk, and three-dimensional Brazilian embroidery with boucle, she stitched pictures of flowers as gifts for a favorite teacher, Marynette and her mother, and for her godmother. Lap quilting was the only thing she learned to do but failed to summon up much enthusiasm for. Compared to the fancy, highly decorative techniques she had become familiar with, pieced together quilts now looked profoundly boring.

The night they went to the movies after Granny died, Sugar Mama came straight from one of her needlewoman's club meetings to pick her up, and when she got in the car Jennifer caught sight of something unusual peeking out of the top of the sewing bag lying on the back seat..

"What's this? You working on a new project?" she asked.

"That's a cross-stitch sampler I bought from an antique dealer, and I think it's an authentic piece from the late American schoolgirl era. If it really is from the nineteenth century

like I think it is, it's worth a lot more than I paid for it. The man in the shop thought it was just a dusty old rag."

"What makes you think it worth anything? And what's this American schoolgirl era, anyway?"

"Well, before the 1900's, little girls, by and large, didn't go to school regularly like boys did. Instead, they were supposed to start learning needlework so they'd be good at it by the time they married and had to decorate pillowcases and tablecloths by hand out of necessity, not like you do just for fun. Back then there weren't any stores that sold quality household textiles like now, so anything you didn't know how to make, you didn't get. The samplers were the girls' practice pieces and some of them were honest to goodness works of art. But once girls started going to school, their sampler making days were numbered and after a while, hardly anybody made them. Oh, I guess I ought to add that these were white girls only."

"How come they had to be white?"

"Slavery and the period of time right after the Civil War. You know. Just like you learned in African American history class. These things were popular before black women were allowed to do anything but menial jobs. The black women had to do the common run-of-the-mill sewing like mending and darning, but you pretty much had to be white to have the leisure time to spend whole days stitching things for decoration instead of utility.

"So nobody black ever made an American schoolgirl cross-stitch sampler? You sure?"

"Well, not many did. I used to know an old black lady when I was a kid who did. She said she learned how just by watching it being done when she was a child. In fact, she's the one

who taught me how. Now that I think back, to the time I used to spend with her and to being so young while she was so old, it's a wonder it worked out so well."

"What did? You mean learning to stitch a sampler like this one?"

"I mean learning all the stitching I know. She was so patient with me. The very young and the very old don't always work well together. Children want to find out about everything in a hurry, so they ask an awful lot of questions. And old people are usually too tired to be bothered. But not this old lady. She was less bothered by my constant asking than my parents were. Would you believe she had been born a slave? Not very many today can say they had gotten to know or even meet a live survivor of black people's holocaust. But I did. So you can figure how old she had to have been. She was 100– no had to have been just a tad more than that– when I was in kindergarten. She told me she learned to make samplers by sneaking peeks at the woman who owned her while she stitched some of hers. She told me all about what slavery was like. So much stuff I didn't fully understand while she was telling it to me. But I got it that it was awfully painful. Must've been pure hell."

"Why in the world would a 100-year-old woman be talking to you about the horrors of slavery when you were a kindergartner?"

"Oh, I don't think she had any intention of horrifying me. She just talked to me about her life, like I was a real person, not a juvenile annoyance. I absolutely loved listening to her stories. She talked as matter-of-fact about it as I do to you about what you did at school today. Or about this sampler. There was no big introduction to anything she said, no fanfare surrounding any of it. But after she got finished telling you about something she had done during the Civil War, you felt like there should have a ceremony to commemorate a very special

lecture. It was like being transported back to the time of those African griots you read about in your class. I was in awe of that old lady. And not just because I was only four and didn't know any better. Little kids can be so much smarter than people like to give them credit for."

Sugar Mama didn't say anything for a minute.

"Keep going. What else about the old lady and the stitching?"

"Actually, I guess my parents did worry about me being horrified. They didn't necessarily like that I was being exposed to the gruesomeness of it all. And it wasn't just my parents. It was the same for my friends. Once we were far enough along in school to get history books that at least acknowledged slavery, we wanted to hear the details that the books had obviously left out. We were black– no, "colored" back then– and in segregated schools with hand-me-down textbooks that had been written primarily for the use of white children, and the authors for sure didn't want their kids horrified over their own history. So the books just glazed over the whole thing, whitewashing the truth, I guess you could say.

"A typical fifth-grade history book might have a page and a half on slavery. A big thing like that, that lasted in this country all the way back to black folks' first arrival here in 1619 to the end of the Civil War in 1865! More than 200 years. A big thing like that! I know all about it now, but I was almost your age before people started clamoring for black history in public schools, with books that filled in the blanks. Before that, all our books said about the Civil War was that the South fought to preserve their rights and not over Negroes because it was going to free them in a little bit, anyway. Oh, now I remember. There was this one book that said "nigras" instead of Negroes. Can you believe it! Our teacher complained to the principal, but he told her that there was nothing he could do since the superintendent's office had no plans to

replace books for our schools for another year. Probably just a poor black man trying not to lose his job by insulting his white bosses. But the teacher gave us permission to black the word out with ink and write in 'Negroes' over it.

"My friends and I knew we were the descendants of those slaves, so we figured we could just ask our parents to tell us rest of the story, pick up where the books left off on this business of Negro slavery. But they didn't want to. They'd say things like, 'those old times are all behind us, now, and we might as well forget all about it, so you just concentrate on getting good grades so you can get into a good college.' Practically every sentence they ever uttered before I started college ended in 'get into a good college.' You know, I think their reluctance to tell their kids too much about what they viewed as a blow to their dignity as a race, some kind of embarrassment, as if it had been their fault, had something to do with not wanting their next generation to stay so stuck on it, stay so mad about it, that they neglected to take advantage of all the opportunities adults in the 1950's thought were just around the bend for us. They really believed that their kids would be the generation to escape racism because they'd be as educated as white people and, consequently, as respected as white people, by white people."

When Sugar Mama paused again, Jennifer asked her, "Could they really not have known any better than that, predicted how racism would get camouflaged, go underground without going away? And, by the way, what did you mean about hand-me-down books? Handed down from where? You sound like it was something bad."

"Believe me. It was. I don't know how it worked in the North, but in the segregated South of the '50's and early '60's, when school systems adopted books for a new term, they only bought enough for the white schools. Whatever those schools had left on hand was sent to our

schools, which meant that our books were always out of date before we even opened them. And when I think about opening a so called new book back then, all I can remember is how the excitement would turn to disappointment as soon as I saw how dog-eared the pages were, how somebody else's name was written on the *ex libris*, and sometimes, the answers to the study questions had been scribbled in the margins. Denying children the pleasure that ought to be associated with a new book goes a long way toward keeping them from developing an appreciation for books. To me, there's nothing nicer than getting that Christmas-morning-under-the-tree sensation from a new book– a for real new book, that is– that you're opening for the first time, except for trying to write one of your own, maybe.

"I was like that about books and writing even back then. But my parents never quite understood it. Scribbling all over everything and asking them how to spell new words all the time, kind of bugged them sometimes. They liked that I read a lot because it showed that I would probably be good at learning all kinds of things that they weren't taught in schools of their day, but they wanted me to be more practical about it. To them, education was all about winning in the class struggle, which they hated to admit was really a race struggle that they couldn't make disappear for me by waving a wand. They really wanted to believe that if blacks who were already middle class gave their kids knowledge and professional skills that were superior to those available back in their own school days, even if white people wanted to hold on to racist attitudes, they'd soon realize that it was pointless. We would have overcome, and that would be that. So they were only truly happy when I was reading things that would have helped prepare me for medical school, like biology or some other science. They were way less

interested in the stories I used to make up for entertainment. But that's where Miss Pokey comes in."

"Miss who?" Jennifer asked.

"The old lady who had been a slave was named Pokey. I guess she got a whole name somewhere along the way, but she told me her name was just plain Pokey because that's as much name as her white owners had given her. They didn't look at slaves as anything but live property, so why bother to give them names any better than we'd give a puppy today."

"How'd you come to know somebody like that? Was she a member of your family?"

"No way. You can bet that if my folks had any kin older than dirt, living like this old lady did, they would have put a stop to it, made her live somewhere else, 'like regular people' is how they would have put it. Pokey had no means of support as far as we could tell except for what she earned as a washerwoman. She lived out in the country all by herself in a huge but rundown house that she said had been a mansion before the war. I had to learn that whenever she mentioned the war, she meant the Civil War, which was not the same war as in the stories from WWII when Daddy talked about the war. That's how he found out that Miss Pokey had told me there was such a thing as slavery. One night at dinner I asked him if he had been a Confederate soldier or a Union soldier. At first, he laughed real loud, but then he asked me where I had heard about Confederate and Union, and I told him.

"Miss Pokey did our laundry. We had a washing machine and all, but my parents knew Miss Pokey needed the work, and if we took our laundry to her, my mother had more time for her grocery shopping and clothes shopping and club meetings. Almost every family in my neighborhood let Miss Pokey do their washing and ironing, which was fine for those that had a

car. One or two families near us didn't. It was about a 15-mile drive out to where she lived, and you had to make that trip to deliver the clothes and then again to pick them up. I used to enjoy going along for the ride, mostly because everything about where she lived and how she looked was so unreal to me. You'd be surprised at the kinds of thing that can captivate a little kid's mind. One day when we got there, Daddy saw he had forgotten the money he meant to bring to pay her, so he told her he'd have to make a quick run to the bank, and he asked if it'd be okay for him to leave me with her while he was gone. She told him there was nothing she'd love better than to have a little company, so I stayed. She had been sitting in her yard making lace on a bobbin pillow when we got there, and I asked her if it was hard to do. She said she'd teach me, and that was how it started. I had so much fun, memorizing which bobbins to throw over which other ones on the weird shaped pillow, I asked her if she'd let me do some more next time. She said next time, she'd show me how to crochet if my papa would let me stay long enough. When we got home and he told my mother, she said it was probably a good idea for a little girl to start learning needlework. So everyone agreed. They would pay her a little bit extra and let me stay with her a couple of afternoons a week after kindergarten.

"As far as I was concerned, she knew everything. Everything that was important to know, anyway, except how to read and write. I wasn't all that surprised to find that out about her because another lady I knew, not nearly as old as Miss Pokey but older than my parents, had already told me that lots of colored people grew up not going to school to learn how. She was a good teacher just the same, and before long, I knew lots of needlework techniques. The one she saved for last was making samplers like this one. She had some old patterns from the 1800's for some that had been designed for schoolgirls, and a few more elaborate ones designed for

ingenues who used samplers to show off their prowess to boyfriends. According to her, men didn't make samplers but thought it was important that their girlfriends did.

"I was so anxious to please that elderly friend of mine. You see, unlike young parents who always had so much to get done in a day, she always had time to listen to whatever it was I wanted to talk about. She honestly looked like she enjoyed my chattering on and on about things that would have been entirely too trivial to most people. I knew that being a little kid didn't annoy her, and I could tell her all the made-up stories I wanted to. They often prompted her real-life memories of things that happened when she was a child, and that's when she'd tell me all about what things had been like for what my parents called people of the old time. It's true that truth is stranger than fiction, and her stories sounded mighty strange. Thinking back on what she told me, I'm still gripped by the thought of anybody growing up that way and how she survived it.

"She talked about how the couple that owned her were mean pretty much all the time, even to each other, but that their daughter was not like them at all. It was this girl who helped her escape to the North to freedom. She was running away, herself, to be rid of her abhorrent parents and marry a northern newsman who was down here to cover the war for his paper. She took little Pokey with her to spare her any more mistreatment at the hands of the couple. That was a good thing, of course, that she made it to freedom, but they got separated somehow and Pokey never saw her again. She looked for her, had people write letters to mayors, county clerks, and white people who operated freedmen's schools in places near where she thought her friend might be living, based on where she said she was headed when they left the plantation. But they never heard from anybody with good news about how she could be located. I

remember her saying she could have had a good job as a seamstress in a factory in the North, but then she surprised me and said she didn't take it because what she really wanted was to come back home.

"She kept hoping she could be with her friend again. I guess she felt kind of like that young woman who saved her came closer to being family than any other thing in the world she ever did have. So Miss Pokey decided she would return south and maybe meet up accidentally with the person responsible for her freedom if the daughter ever came back to visit her parents. She was pretty sure she could find work here just as well as where she had been living, since by then, southerners had to pay wages to blacks just like anybody else. I think the living she made had to have been awfully meager. All she could get was washing and ironing for people and a little bit of mending work. Even though the city had started to grow, there couldn't have been all that much money in it from the small number of people who could afford to pay. She said she managed just fine, but I don't see how.

"Then she heard from somebody how her old owners' plantation had gone to seed after those people lost their unpaid labor and never could stay enough ahead to have money to pay hired field hands to look after it. They had several sons, but after the place went bankrupt, they left. Just rode off and never came back. A few years later, she heard that the old man had died and that his wife was in poor health. So Miss Pokey went back there to work. Can you believe that?

"She was pretty sure the old woman couldn't afford to pay her very much if anything, but she also knew that she could raise enough food for the two of them right there, by herself, maybe sell off some of the nice furniture she figured was still in the house, and, of course, take in

sewing and laundry. She was willing to live like that because she thought that was the surest way to get reunited with the old woman's daughter. Talk about delusional. That girl never showed up there. Not even after the old lady died. In fact, no relatives showed up from anywhere to make a claim on the property, so Miss Pokey simply stayed. For a period of years, not too many, she said, she had to rent parcels of the land to other blacks who wanted to sharecrop because that was the only way she thought she could make the place yield up a little money. But it didn't work too well. The renters never could get ahead, and after she pinched off the part of the profits she was setting aside for the rightful owners or their kin, if any family ever did appear again, she had hardly any money for herself. What saved her was that word of her knowledge of Fancy Work got out.

"After the Civil War, this city grew a lot from the small town it used to be because whites from other places started moving here when they learned that defeated southern land holders had nothing else to their names and were willing to sell off parcels of their land cheap so they could have enough money to live on. People who had never been in the landowning class started buying plots that were once pieces of fam land and building houses on them. And that's how the area lost its old upper class for good, and gained a new middle class striving to become a new kind of urban upper class. The new folks came from families that didn't have much in the way of traditions. They didn't bring a lot of fancy decorated linens or embroidered wall hangings with them. And since there weren't many solvent retail places left in the South, if they wanted those kinds of niceties to prove that they had arrived, they had to pay people on commission to make that stuff for them. Using what she made from taking in Fancy Work, and

the money from plain sewing and dress making, she managed to stay and support herself here all those years until the day I met her."

Jennifer listened to all this but had trouble with it. "You're pulling my leg, right? That's way too wild a story to be true. How stupid would a former slave have to be to come back to where she'd been tortured and work for free for the same people she had escaped?"

Sugar Mama said, "I don't know that it sounds exactly stupid. She was in a rotten time period, and I don't suppose she had any alternatives that weren't rotten in some way. And remember– I was there to hear her tell all of this and to look at her while she did it, and I remember how calm and sincere she seemed. Plain and simple, what she was telling me was just the story of her life, the way it actually happened, for good or for bad. In one breath she'd say how terrible it was when she was being worked half to death with too little to eat while still a child, and you could feel her pain and hunger landing on your skin like a hot iron. And in the next breath, very matter-of-fact, she'd say, 'That's just the way it was in them days and it sure is good they is gone.'

"I'll tell you this, Jennifer. Reading a slave narrative in a book has nowhere near the impact of listening to a former slave speak. And unlike my parents, she was more than happy to speak about that era. I think she must have felt most of her life that the voice had been strangled right out of her, so when she got a chance to revive it, she made use of that chance, even if only for the benefit of an inquisitive kindergartner."

By then they had reached the movie theater, but neither one made a move to get out of the car right away. They kept looking at the sampler.

"How about this Jennifer?" her godmother finally asked. If you're really interested in whether this sampler is worth money, you can help me find out. You see, it so happens I'm thinking it could be a rare example of some pieces that really were done by blacks way back when. So I took this little gem to the meeting today to see if anybody there was expert enough to tell if it could possibly be from a designer or a student at this old Catholic school some black nuns used to run up north for black children. It resembles the design of one I saw in a library book. Not a needlework book, but one about what the educational opportunities were like in the antebellum time for free children of color in the North. There wasn't much for them, I don't think, but that one nun's school stood out. I don't guess you'll be surprised at how excited I was to read that when they made their girls learn to sew, they taught them the fancy kinds of things and not just the boring stuff.

"Not that I'm surprised, seeing how everybody in my stitch group is white except for me, but none of them was willing to agree with me that I was on the right track about this piece. But I'm not giving up. I'm hoping to do a little research into its provenance, and the sleuthing will go faster if both of us work on it. Okay?"

Jennifer couldn't follow the movie because she was too preoccupied thinking about the chance she was getting to combine two of her favorite things, reading in the library and stitching.

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Tuna casseroles with crushed potato chips on top, ground beef casseroles with crushed bacon bits on top, and Marynette's mother's you'll-never-guess-what-this-is with crushed bread

crumbs, canned artichoke hearts, and scalloped cucumbers on top set up shop in the refrigerator. When Jennifer added that last offering that Marynette delivered, there was no room left for the beer. Her father said he'd take it upstairs to the bathroom and put it in the sink with some ice. Instantly, she suspected it would only make it as far as his bedroom. There were two whole six-packs, and she knew they would likely be consumed before morning. But if the snow got cleared, he'd have to get up for work in the morning. Not being able to take time off from work during the busy season was the only plausible excuse he could come up with for not attending the funeral. Jennifer didn't mind going without him, but she didn't want to be stuck with that chore alone if he was just going to stay at home sleeping off a hangover. She wanted him ready for work as soon as the roads were clear, so she decided to work fast and make sure all that beer made its way into the bathroom one way if not another. Plotting a purgative that was sure to sicken him, but not so bad that he couldn't get up for work, was a new low for her that gave her a guilty high.

People were never complimentary of Marynette's mother's culinary creations. "That woman's cooking will make you sick as a dog," and "Don't eat it unless you want to spend all night in the bathroom," were more the norm.

"What do you suppose is in your mother's dish this time?" she asked her friend.

Marynette just stared at Jennifer, as if she hadn't heard the question though they both knew full well she had. She waited until Jennifer turned her back to reach for the refrigerator door before she shrugged her shoulders, not wanting to say out loud what she knew about the stuff in the bowl, especially since Jennifer must have known it, too.

Jennifer pulled the 5-quart Pyrex bowl out and set it on the side of the sink.

"You gonna pour it out?" Marynette asked.

"No. Think I'll take a little tray up to Daddy."

"You gonna give him that to eat?" Marynette wasn't sure what was going on. She knew that Jennifer knew whose handiwork the dish was, so she naturally expected it would get tossed. She had gone to a lot of trouble to hurry over with it before her mother had a chance to, because sometimes, drunk people at Thanksgiving dinners, church socials, and school picnics forgot their manners and discussed her mother's potluck contributions right in front of the cook's face. Wakes were probably no different.

People tended to get mean if they had to interrupt friendly community activities to go spit out something vile tasting or leave for the nearest convenience store in search of Alka Seltzer. "Where the *hell'd* you find that recipe, Sister?" asked the preacher's wife one time right in the church fellowship hall. Marynette's mother had overheard another couple of women on the way to their car– ". . . and she always cooks so damn *much* of whatever the hell the mess is." "Yeah," said the companion, "but it's always decorated so nice on top you get fooled into thinking you're fixing to get something fit to swallow."

If Marynette had been half an hour slower getting dressed for the wake, her mother would have been ready first, would have packed the Pyrex into her most expensive, highest tech thermal tote bag for casseroles and driven it herself to the home of the bereaved where she might have overheard her oldest family friends remark on the foolishness of spending the kind of money she spent on fancy kitchen gadgets like cucumber scallopers, bread crumbers, and thermoses for bowls that housed garbage can fodder that need not have been so carefully insulated against bacteria. Anybody who ate it was bound to get sick anyway.

"Oh," said Marynette. Her dimmer than usual light brightened a little as she figured out what her friend was doing, why she was avoiding so many other casseroles when making the tray to take upstairs.

" 'Oh' what?" Jennifer asked the question but wasn't paying attention except to the glass-inlaid bed tray she was trying to pull down from a shelf without breaking it. So Marynette knew what Jennifer knew and both were glad that no further answers or discussions were required.

Marynette was thoroughly familiar with Jennifer's dad's drinking. The girls had been friends since the first grade. Now they were of college age– Jennifer went to college, anyway– and Marynette had become so close to her best friend over the years that she could read Jennifer's unspoken expressions over the phone. The first time it happened, when they were around nine and had compared homework answers and told each other secrets and giggled on the phone for nearly an hour one evening, Jennifer's tone changed instantly when she said, "Oh, no. He's home. I gotta go." She sounded so scared, Marynette was scared not to mention it to her mother. Her mother called back and asked to speak to the girl's father. After repeating over and over for several minutes, with slurred speech, how he didn't need anybody's help seeing after his daughter, she convinced him that it wasn't that he needed it, but that Marynette needed the company, and he agreed to let her and her daughter come over and pick Jennifer up to spend a night or two with them. After that, Marynette could just tell whenever Jennifer acted a little strange that her friend was having a hard time at home, most likely trying to get herself up and ready for school, pack her own lunch, come home to any empty house, do her own laundry and make her own dinner. She stopped asking her mother for permission. When her friend seemed to be having a hard time, she'd just bring her home with her after school, and her mother would

call Jennifer's father on the phone, late at night, to let him know where she was. The system worked well.

She knew that, according to her mother, Jennifer's dad drank too much sometimes, and it seemed like that was a bad thing, "especially when children were at risk," her mother said. But the way it looked to Marynette, Jennifer at least knew her father, and that was good thing. Her own had died before she was born, and photographs of him did little to answer any of the questions she had about him.

Jennifer thought Marynette had the best thing any girl could hope for, a mother. Her friend got to shop for clothes with her mother, attend the church's annual mother/ daughter silver tea with her mother, and eventually get fitted for her first bra and purchase her first sanitary protection with her mother. She, on the other hand, wore whatever clothes her dad brought home for her. He would stop by the department store just before school opened each year and buy what he thought she needed. He always went by himself after work saying he couldn't stay in a store for more than half an hour, and that he wouldn't be able to get in and out quickly if she tagged along because she wanted to stop and look at too many things.

If she wanted anything in addition, that was just too bad. It would have to wait until his next shopping day, which would be Christmas Eve. One year she had to put cardboard in a shoe that had grown a hole in the sole. It was only three weeks before the Christmas shopping, and she knew better than to ask him to rush the season just a bit.

She was surprised to see him waiting for her in the car after school that day she got the bra. She had almost finished her first year of junior high school, and all her friends had worn bras the whole time. The day he picked her up without notice and said, "Looks to me like you

ought to wear a bra," and drove to the ladies boutique he had never entered and would not, she was confused and happy at the same time. She wanted one so she could be like the other girls, but she hadn't planned how to go about getting it yet. All of a sudden she found herself in a strange place not knowing what to do, with her father waiting in the car for her to come back and get the money once she knew how much it would cost. He gave her thirty minutes. A white sales woman asked if she needed help, and she almost said, "No," but she decided to get through the embarrassment, get it over with, and never come back there. The woman took her into the dressing room where she stripped to the waist and stood with her arms outstretched while the stranger took a tape measure and wrapped it around her chest. She told Jennifer she should be pleased that she was developing so nicely. That's when a creepy feeling added itself to the embarrassment she was already working with. When later that year she got her first period at school not long before time to go home, she put a big fat wad of toilet tissue in her underpants and stopped in the drug store near her house on the way home. A different white sales clerk watched her staring at the products in the feminine hygiene aisle for a few minutes and came over and asked if she needed help. When she answered that this would be her "first," the clerk offered a suggestion as to which she might want to try, and said she'd help her with it in the ladies room if she wanted. Remembering the earlier creepy feeling for the first time since the bra purchase, she thanked the clerk and said, "Thanks anyway, but I'll figure it out." She went into the ladies room, figured it out, and then remembered she didn't have any money. When she came out and told the clerk, and asked if she could bring the money the next day, she was told, "Sure. This one time, but be sure to bring it tomorrow after school." She did exactly that, after

getting over the flushed feeling that came over her at breakfast when she had to explain to her father why she needed three dollars.

Jennifer knew that things like these had not been embarrassments for Marynette, but were instead opportunities to talk to about growing up with an understanding grown-up who wasn't too busy for her. It wasn't that her father was actually mean to her. In fact, when he was sober, which was most of the time, he made sure he was home in time to help her with her homework before dinner and talked to her at length about all the things she could become if she continued to perform well in school and get into a good college. Turning a conversation toward the value of literacy and higher education always put them on common ground, and she enjoyed that part of their relationship. He didn't just talk about her studies; he participated. He had never gotten around to reading *Huckleberry* Finn, but when she said she was reading and liking it, he read it too, so they would have something educational to converse about at mealtime. She liked that, and part of the reason she was so careful about her grades was knowing how happy he was when she got A's.

Marynette, however, as fun a friend as she was, impressed all her teachers as being just a bit on the wrong side of competence. In their last year of high school, while Jennifer was pondering which of the colleges that had accepted her would be the best choice, her best friend still didn't have a firm grasp on the multiplication tables, and couldn't conjugate the verb "to be" in English, much less a foreign language. But her mother, always the cheerleader, always reminding her daughter of her strengths and not her weaknesses, was supportive no matter what the report card said. If Jennifer had brought home grades like Marynette's, during the off-the-wagon spells, anyway, her father would have saturated her in insults and then left the house to

satiate himself with beer and wine in private. It was odd how he could be at his best and his worst at the same time.

During an unusually long binge, back when she was still in elementary school, her godmother, Sugar Mama, offered to keep her indefinitely, until he was sure he could get himself together. Either because he had never really liked Sugar in the first place, or because he took offense to her offer and disliked her on that account, he was not diplomatic, and didn't intend to be, about the way he told her get out of his business. He had her to know that, whether or not she could see it, nothing meant more to him than his daughter and that he'd fuck up anybody who tried to fuck with his relationship with her. As much as she loved spending time with her godmother, she liked what her father had said. As a child, she didn't know why, exactly. But by the time she was preparing to leave for college, wondering if she would return afterward, she reflected on what she had overheard him say all those years ago, and surprised herself at how gratified she felt recalling his assertion of parental love, it being totally lacking of civility notwithstanding.

At Marynette's house, her mother couldn't wait to get the two girls into the kitchen and teach them to cook. Long before they were teenagers, they learned to have excuses at the ready to get out of the cooking lessons from the worst cook in town. In the beginning, they could get away with saying they had homework, but eventually that ruse was poked full of holes as it became increasingly evident that Marynette and school work existed on parallel planes.

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She made a point of having less and less to say when they asked over and over what they could do for her.

"Can I help with anything? Anything at all? Now you just let me know whenever you need something. I'll be right here for you; you can count on me."

She wanted to say, "I need you to go away and leave me alone so I can have a minute's peace, but on your way out, leave me enough money to pay for this funeral and all the other inconvenient crappola that went along with it, including Daddy's missed time from work, all done for a woman I barely knew, and, dammit, y'all *know* I barely knew her! And the few of *you* who knew her eons ago didn't like her even back then!" Where does all this temporary, platitudinal, "I'll-make-a-more-sincere-sounding-expression-of-sympathy-than-you-can-and-therefore-be-more important-in-the-eyes-of-these- grieving-fools-than-you-are" come from when "friends" die?

And worse, most of the crowd of people in the house were obviously just there for the food until they recognized who had cooked the biggest part of it.

Jennifer fantasized that when the house was empty again she could get back to her real friends. She missed them but knew better than to bring them out amidst the throngs. Especially as long as Trell was there, she'd have to be content to just daydream about Rachel Allen's and Mary Pets's samplers. The more she looked at the pictures of them and the patterns for reproducing them, the more they took on lifelike stature, like dolls had done when she was little. She kept thinking about the one she and Sugar Mama were going to research. The mental picture she had taken of it stood out in her mind. In some odd ways, it was different from the pictures she had bought in the stitch shop the day after she first saw it. When she left the shop

that day, she went to the library to brush up on the sampler making. It was a new technique for her, and Sugar Mama was coaching her, but she discovered she didn't really need a lot of help. It was easy as long as you knew how to cross two threads into the form of an X. But her godmother had whetted her appetite about the background significance of making these things, so she what she wanted to read in the library mostly was their history– how and why they had come about in the first place and the reasons so many girls made them.

The books said the children learned to sign their work, even if they didn't know how to write with pen and paper or even to recognize alphabets. So it was kind of strange that the one her godmother had didn't have the stitcher's name on it anywhere. It was easy to tell from all the pictures in the books, and there were lots of pictures of samplers from America, a few from Mexico and dozens and dozens from England and France, that most of the work was done freehand. But she read that wealthy women could afford to purchase professionally designed patterns that tended to have a more uniform, symmetrical appearance. That was an unusual thing about Sugar Mama's sampler, too. It had a row of neat alphabets, all perfectly spaced, and then another with screwy looking alphabets, as if the stitcher had tried to copy the first row but without success.

Jennifer could catch a minute to commune with her new imaginary but real friends and the books she had checked out if the hordes would catch a hint and go home so the wake could be over. So the less she spoke when spoken to, the more they had to weigh the value of continuing to hang around, making sure they'd made an appearance sufficient to leave them in good stead during tomorrow's gossip sessions. She knew there would be gossip, that there would be a more than a few people attending the service just to see and talk about how well

Granny had been "sent off" or how poorly the fallen queen had been "put away" by distant family. Over the week following the death, Jennifer had heard from Marynette's mother, Sugar Mama, her own father, and even the undertaker that when Granny was alive and well, before Nursing Home took her away, most people had a love/ hate relationship with her. She was a troublemaker not to be underestimated. But she knew everybody who was anybody, knew everybody's business, could make or break people's reputations depending on whether she liked or mistrusted them, because so many people paid attention to what she had to say. So even if the didn't remember her fondly, the undertaker suggested, they should expect a sizable showing at the funeral because people were apt to take the time off from work or whatever else they could have been doing, to do the right thing. It would be right to go pay respects to someone who had once singlehandedly served as the matron of black society and arbiter of its rules, through self appointment, no less, and had run and ruined the social lives and aspirations of so many people who were black, as was she, but whom she deemed beneath herself and her "kind," as she often put it.

The very highly educated Benjamin O. Davis, Senior, war hero and the first Negro general in the U. S. Army from way back in the buffalo soldier days, notoriously once said to lower class black folk, "I'm your color but not your kind." From what she was learning about her grandmother, it sounded to Jennifer like he copied that one from Granny. "We should put that on her tombstone," she thought.

Sugar Mama

"Trell" is short for LaTrellis. Short is how I remember him, actually. And looking back on his short-assed self, I think he had a complex about it. Funny how clearly I can see all of that now, now that it doesn't matter, now that I've learned to give less than a damn about what other people think they can tell me to be or not to be. But if I'm to be honest, and I guess maybe I should be, can afford to be at this point in my life, I'd have to say he served a purpose, of sorts. I should let him have a little credit for letting me see in advance the kind of life I did not want to lead. And I sure am glad I caught that show while still a teenager, before it was too late.

When I was in high school, I read *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Second Sex*, *The Female Eunuch*, and *Ms. Magazine*. I loved that stuff. But Trell hated it and said Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer and Gloria Steinem were white bitches hell bent on depriving the black man of his help mate and his means of social advancement, and that they were the last authors in the world I ought to be paying attention to. Or, depending on the day of the week, it was "his" this or "his" that or "his" something else that the women's liberation movement, in its whiteness, was designed to rob him of. And then I found that seminar at the public library on black feminism, and I got hooked on Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lourde, and Alice Walker, and he hated them even worse. It kind of started to look like it wasn't necessarily the whiteness that bothered him so much about me getting a clue about male chauvinism. I was such a child, though.

You see, when I was in high school, it was all about the pairings. If you weren't paired up girl-boy with somebody before your junior prom, you were the invisible girl. At all the school sanctioned social events, all the private parties, all any of those kids at that school could think about was getting themselves attached to somebody else. It didn't matter how intellectual a conversation with one of them started out, it only took a minute before it degenerated to, "So how're you and your boyfriend doing?" and "Don't you think so-and-so and what's her face look just so cute together?" and "Which one of us do you think will get married first?" If you wanted to talk about something else, you talked to yourself and then you looked even weirder.

So that's why I needed Trell for the time that I needed him. Daddy absolutely loved him. They were alike in ways. The ways about Daddy that I didn't much like, that is. He was never what you'd call abusive, I don't suppose, unless you count telling people you claim to love what they can't read and can't think. But it didn't take more than one or two beers for him to be real different. Meaner. I learned early on that Daddy wasn't so much a bad parent; it was just that he parented in spurts. And beer had a lot to do with the inconsistency. I hated that. So why I was so willing to put up with the same shitty treatment from a boyfriend, I can't tell you. Did I really need a boyfriend who might become a husband who thought it was his male prerogative to tell me how to live my female life? The longer we went together, the surer I was that I did not.

Teenagers think they know everything, and I'm not discounting my own proclivity toward that theory when I was in the throes of adolescence. But still, you might think an18-year-old would have been a little less self-assured than he was. He should have been, but he was nothing if not cocky. He was a self styled black militant who knew he was born almost a decade too late to take his rightful place next to Bobby and Huey in history's record of the liberation of

our people, and he deeply regretted that. The Panthers were no more, certainly not in any visible way, so the best Trell could do was to appoint himself the conscience of any black people he came in contact with, even for a minute, and instruct them on the proper ways to prove their blackness and dedication to the "cause" to the wide, watching world. It was like he was on a mission and on it All. Of. The. Time. Do you know how tired that can get and how quick?!. It didn't take very long before I was weary of being dragged into his personal concept of freedom every time saw each other. His most favorite harangue was the eradication of Uncle Tomism. He was totally committed to it and, judging from the way he acted, was prepared to fix that little old problem single handedly if necessary. He was extremely sensitive to anything a black person did that struck him as a "minstrel's ignorant imitation of the slave master." Jesus. I'm shocked at how easily that phrase returns when I think about him all these years later. I always felt like I was under a magnifying glass when we went anywhere or just hung around at my house. He objected to my chemically relaxed hair. I told him to take it easy, that he need not worry where my head was at, that I had worn a cute afro when I was younger. But this was 1986, and nobody else was 'fro-ing, and I didn't want to be the only person I knew who looked out of place. He said I should consider getting a Jheri Curl like his.

He even asked me to think about changing my name. He said "Jennifer" was far too white and had become far too common for a black woman who ought to want to see herself as more distinctive than a garden variety Anglo Saxon. Now, I agreed– still do– that my name has been worked to death. There were always several Jennifers in any class I took, and not to help prove his point and all, but rarely were any of them black. But I couldn't for the world see that that was much a reason to change something as intimately felt as my name. According to

Daddy, my mother chose it months before I was born– he didn't know why– and had called me by name when she cuddled and cooed to her pregnant abdomen. That alone was sufficient reason for me to hold onto it. I had so little of the mother I never got to meet. And besides, who the hell was he to disparage somebody's name! If he had left mine alone, I wouldn't have had any problem with his name, but since he kept up such a rant over it, it was hard for me to utter "LaTrellis" without envisioning a French garden fence. A *feminine* French garden fence.

I kept thinking I should tell him that one day. But I never did. I tried never to respond, not verbally, anyway, to the bait he used to lay for an argument. Living with the Daddy that fate or God or Granny or *somebody* had entrusted me too, I learned in my wee years that you can't win arguments with bullies since they only engage in the ones they've practiced bulldozing you with. But I found my voice and put down my foot when it came to the needlework. The needlework, the American schoolgirl samplers specifically, is what drove Trell the craziest.

"You just can't find anything more bourgie than a black woman reproducing white women's personal testimonials to the grandness of their lifestyles with rags and strings. A *sister's* needle ought to have a more practical purpose than that. What's next?" he asked. "A cotillion, ballet tickets perhaps?"

There was no way I'd make do without my sampler stitching. With each pass of the needle through the cloth, I was slowly imprinting my psyche with more bits of information about the real difference in being black instead of white, female instead of male in these United States of America. My godmother understood that. Nobody else did, for sure not Daddy or Trell. So when Trell's pompous ass would get going on one of his pontifications about what would have been a more practical purpose for my needle, I'd tell him what he could kiss the next time he

came looking for a kiss, and he'd back down. Unless Daddy was around, that was. If it looked like I was in danger of being double-teamed, I'd hold my piece until I could catch my beloved alone and then I'd set him straight. I'd take the sewing underground, meaning I would only do it when I was home alone for a while. The absurdity of that, in hindsight, strikes me as eerily akin to how slaves had to hide in root cellars with precious, contraband books if they wanted to learn how to read. But you have to realize that when he teamed up with Daddy, a man whose dashiki-wearing days were behind him but who held onto ideas about racial equality that didn't give any consideration to gender fairness, the two of them comprised a powerful menacing machine.

Daddy loved having Trell come over. As soon as Trell was in the door, one of them would call out, "What time is it?" "It's Nation time," the other would respond. After the second repeat, they'd embark on a handshake that took fifteen minutes to complete. Nice that they got along and all, but whereas Daddy could be excused, maybe, as someone dancing a momentary quickstep into nostalgia , Trell, on the other hand, head aglitter with Jheri juice looked– well, I'm not sure what to say he looked like– an anachronism spun off into modern times? How about just plain silly. A boy of his age knew nothing more about Nation time than I did, and that didn't come from Mau Mau or Panther warrior training but from books. For sure, what Trell did not look like was my future.

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I wonder if other people ever wonder about motherlessness. Unless they grew up without a mother, probably not. Maybe it's no different from fatherlessness. Since I had a father, I can't

be sure. All I know is, it wasn't so great a deal for me, living in a single-parent home. Could be different, I suppose, if you lived in a top notch single-parent home, but that wasn't my situation. . Of course, since I had a father, technically speaking, that meant wasn't an orphan, technically speaking, but it didn't mean I didn't feel like one. A man who self medicates with alcohol now and I guess all the way back to the time his wife dies and leaves him with an infant, and when any misfortune of any type hits him, that kind of man is an absent father even if he spends every night in the same house as you. You can never count on him to be truly available to his family at any given time. Yeah, I learned that long ago. Like I always say, he parented in spurts. He'd be great, overly attentive even, for months at a time, only to go on a binge eventually, leaving me to fend for myself. The closest thing I have to compare my situation to is Marynette's.

Her mother is the most nurturing woman I have ever known. More so than Sugar Mama who I absolutely adore. Sugar Mama never treated me like a child and never had any of her own. She always said she wasn't good with children, not even when she was one. That meant that when I was with her, I was treated like a younger but respected friend. I liked feeling on par with a grownup, but at the same time, I liked the very different treatment I got at Marynette's house. Her mother thrived on domesticity, especially childcare activities, and would have died without a child to fuss over and, unfortunately, cook for. Her mother cooked all the time. She made her own candies, pasta, bread, everything. And Marynette was getting overweight by the time we were in junior high and was there for real by twelfth grade. The strange thing is, her mother's cooking was so bad, you'd have thought Marynette would become anorexic instead of the other way around. But in that simple fact lies the difference between their relationship and mine and Daddy's.

They were so supportive of each other. Symbiosis is the word, I think. She ate all that slop and learned to love it because she knew how much her mother loved providing it for her. Not just because she had nothing better to do, but because to her, after losing her too young husband whose throat cancer eventually prevented him from eating at all, cooking looked like the way to keep things she loved alive. And she wasn't stingy. She didn't limit her need to supply nourishment to her daughter. As if hoping to fortify her whole community with vitamins and minerals, she took atrocious casseroles that tasted like science projects gone bad to everybody's wakes and church pot luck dinners at her own and other people's churches. She took the marbles she thought were cookies and an assortment of gummy scones to every PTA meeting and young widows' support group meeting. She even donated a dish a week to at least one resident of the senior citizen high rise, Lord rest their desperate old souls. If she hadn't been so bad at her craft, her good hearted offerings would have provided far more sustenance and advancement to all of us black people whose paths crossed hers than all of Trell's admonishments put together.

Now don't get me wrong. Marynette's a truly sweet person, and she's been my best pal for most of my life. But when I think about her, with that hyped up visual imagination I've got, a picture of a puppet on a string comes to mind, and not just because her name sounds so much like one. She's the kind of person who's so anxious to please other people, after all this time it's still hard for me to get a true read on who she really is inside. She's too chameleon-like for her own good. When she's with you, she wants to do whatever you want to do, and when she's with someone else, she wants to do what that person wants. That could be part of why she was so bad at school work. Instead of trying to get a solid understanding of whatever the lesson was, she'd

just try and guess at what she thought the teacher wanted to hear. I wouldn't be surprised that Marynette doesn't know what untapped talents or aptitudes she might be harboring internally and could pull out and put into practice with effort. She's scared to look down into there because it's been easier for her to just mirror other people and stay on their good sides. Nowadays, I couldn't act like that if my life depended on it.

Even so, one nice thing she's got going for her that I don't is that her mother dotes on her so unconditionally, she has never once berated her for what she fails to accomplish. She just tells her it'll be better next time and bakes her a cake. Okay, so maybe a good parent is supposed to be more insistent than that about a kid's school work, but I swear I think I'd be better off today if my dad had been a little tenderer, less conditional with his love. I brought home a lot of A's out of sheer fear.

There's no doubt that Marynette appreciates the hell out of her mother. That's what I mean about them being so reciprocal. Sort of like a way of saying, "thank you for loving me no matter how dim and fat I am," Marynette spends a fair amount of time encouraging her mother, being the one appreciative voice for all the effort she makes to feed people as best she knows how. She's got a sixth sense about mean spirited comments that are waiting their turn to be fired at the cook who can't cook. She understands why her mother's so fanatic about food, and whenever she can, she'll make an end run around or act as a shield against careless comments that might seem harmless enough to others but have the potential to wound a woman who's more fragile than she appears.

Oh yeah, I asked her about her name once, by the way.

"My name is really common," I said, "and sometimes that bugs the hell out of me. But yours is so uncommon, I wonder what that's like. How'd your mother come up with 'Marynette?'"

"She says she had first wanted it to be Marie Antoinette. But when his cancer worse so fast, they both knew my father was not gonna make it to the birth of his first child, and she told him, if it was a girl, she'd name her Mary after his mother so the baby could carry something more of him than just his genes with her at all times. He wrote on a pad, he couldn't talk, that she didn't have to, that he wanted her to call his baby whatever made her happy, because knowing she was happy would make him happy and like that, you know. So she kind of mixed the names all together, like to compromise, and came up with "Marynette."

Compromise is not always a good thing, in my opinion. If you're not careful, it can leave with something that's neither one thing nor another, something that looks or sounds so highly irregular that it becomes impractical, ineffective. Sugar Mama says so, too. And that's why Daddy says she'll never catch a husband. The chauvinism blinds him. He can't see that she's not interested in any fishing trips for the time being. Oh, she'll be the first to admit that being her own woman, not taking no guff off of no man, cost her a few romantic relationships. But she says when she runs up on a 100 percent nonsexist black man, she'll take him. And until then, she'll just get on with life. Which for right now means more graduate school. She's totally enthralled in her studies these days, and I don't get to see her nearly as much as I'd like. Her independence and her being so smart is a large part of why Daddy doesn't like her any better than he does. He says it makes her think she's better than everybody else. But I can see full well

that he's plain old jealous. I know he'd have loved to stay in college if he hadn't needed to drop out when he and my mother ran away to get married after her mother forbade her to have anything to do with him.

Sugar Mama. Now she's my ace. To this day I haven't found another black woman who shares my needlework addiction. Of course, to be fair, I guess you'd have to say that I contracted it from her in the first place.

Her real name's Sadie Rust, but her friends called her Sugar since she was a kid. She was a younger but real close friend of my mother, and even Daddy has to admit that she thought nobody else she knew would make a better surrogate mom or special friend to be her baby should the need ever arise. She wanted her to be my godmother. He balked at first but later said okay. He's never had a problem letting people know he wasn't thrilled about the idea. He'll bring that up to me even now, when he's drunk, if I let him. He says he could never get more than lukewarm about Sugar because she came from the same impenetrable, narrow minded, black bourgeoisie, would-be aristocrats (if honkies weren't so diligent about finding ways to remind the world that one black was as much a nigger as any other) that he was trying to help my mother escape.

You know, I probably bought half a load of that shit when I was still in high school, bouncing off the stereophonic waves of his chauvinism and Trell's blacker than thou self-importance like I was. But that was then, this is now, and I'm a much better judge of people's characters and their philosophies than I used to be.

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