

A DARE TO WEEP



A Novel By

MICHAEL SCOTT CURNES

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For my Southern boys:

Russell Derrick Campbell

William John Bishop

*without whose inspiration, support
and occasioned love, such romantic
notions would have been incomprehensible.*

One

This is an odd, though nearly abandoned story, smuggled in clandestine manner through the Southern ages as the vagabond whisper of a lost generation. Once rumored maliciously from behind the raised, bone white hands of tightly corseted women, long since decayed, whilst proud, genuine God fearing men, at war or in the fields, dared not diminish the celebration of their seed with such blasphemous tongues—it has survived, despite the meddling of historians and the altered recounting of those who claimed the privilege of serving witness. Fore among the lingering scent of the rotting magnolia blossom on the ageless forest floor, wafts a memory every bit as pungent, and every bit as sweet as a

thick river breeze swooping o'er the banks of a Georgia cotton field high for pickin'. And from the dusty plantation graveyards and humid, overgrown trails of an unforgiving time, rouse the echoes of unsanctioned love and the reveille of moments thieved so many years ago, honored then but briefly by a court of live oak trees in full Spanish moss regalia and the ever-running, clay orange waters that flow like late mornin' syrup beyond the boundaries and past the secrets of this lawless land.

And so it goes that it was in the crisp air of a golden Georgia Fall in the Year 1843, that two steaming sons would emerge into history on the 26th day of October. The two deliveries, having occurred within seven and three quarters of an hour and less than one hundred feet between them had never introduced two more coincidental souls into such vastly different worlds that would harbor them, through ignorance and tradition, ever so diligently apart.

The first, had been born in a dirt floor shed before a neglected

fire contained by charred field stones in the center of the only room. Had it not been for the defiled conditions that rallied to permeate the very hope of a new morning, the little one's first smells might have been of tender smoke and fallen oak leaves rustling against the wooden slat walls beyond his shelter. Had daylight not poured through the generous gaps between the wooden planks, his first vision might not have included his proud parents for they were as dark as the blackened rocks surrounding the dancing fire. And though a son pleased them greatly, their pleasure was tempered ever so promptly by the knowledge of this small one's fate. Because—though he was born healthy and strong, and would be kept nourished and warm through the winter months ahead, and would grow into a large and hard working man—he had not been born free. He had been conceived in slavery, born in slavery and would now be raised in slavery and if times never changed, and in Georgia it seemed times never did, this little one would die in slavery, like his parents and his grandparents and his great grandparents before him—proud, humbled, even confused but scarcely free until the day he pushed out the very last breath of captivity from lungs strengthened by

decades of service to his white masters. This one would not know the happiness and peace he sailed into this world and this world would scantily reward him for his selfless portage.

For a moment as they held their son up into the narrow light of the sliver moon his parents wondered how they could choose to bring another son into these changeless and dark times and yet they knew the answer at the same time. What choice had they? The little one's father, who the Master called *Ben*, rushed outdoors to spit the taste of his wife's spilled womb from his mouth. He knew why, all right. 'Cause the Massa done told him to. Ben, whose given name was *Tonaben Wuliku*, remembered the Master's words and he spit again. "You put a baby in that woman of yours, Headman Ben, or I'll put one in there for you," he had threatened the long bitter winter before. Ben had told his wife, *Reina*, to start behaving sick in the mornings long before they ever knew iffing she was carrying a child. Still, the Master would threaten Ben.

"When's that woman of yours going to stop complaining day and night and show that she has a *buck* in there?" he would ask on his way to the cotton fields. He would go as far to grab himself in his

pants and shake his hand violently always followed by the threat to make certain she was growing another *buck nigger* for the fields inside her brown belly. And each time, Headman Ben would assure his Master that there was a boy in his wife's womb sure as the cotton grew and that he would be even stronger than he was, someday. "I sure hope that is true, Headman Ben," his Master would say. "You ain't gonna be around forever, you know. I have to keep looking ahead. Always looking ahead," he would preach.

From outside his woman's birthing shack, their house, Ben looked though that damned row of monumental live oak trees running down each side of the front lawn of his Master's domain all the way to orange and red and yellow bushes along Line Creek on the other side. He tried hard to remember how many of the Good Lord's trees he had cleared making way for Master's future. He looked northways to the graying brown cotton fields beyond, the fields that would claim his life some summer day in the hot, wet sun, and he knew as sure as his Master's own woman was with child and near birth too, that Master's son would own his son, long after both of them was gone from this plantation. Nothing ever changed in Massa's Georgia. Nothing 'cept the leaves along Line

Creek and the Flint River, and Ben and his new boy would forever be prisoners between the two eroding, clay banks.

It had not been but five hours since the birth of her own son that Reina was called to the big house to help Massa's wife, Martha, with her own birthin'. Leaning on the edge of the bed for support, she stroked Miss Martha's head and tummy. Not once in this selfish state did Massa's wife ever look into Reina's eyes to ask about her new son. If she had, she would have seen that Reina was nearly white as she was from weakness and exhaustion. Not even three hours of labor longer and Miss Martha had a blue-eyed boy of her own in her nearly all white linen surroundings, the early afternoon sun cutting through a thick meadow haze to beam through lace curtained windows. The smell of rose petals and lavender hurt Reina's nose but she was most sensitive to everything just then and longed for the moment she might be released from duty so she could collapse on the Spanish moss stuffed mattress back in her shack. Massa held his boy into the air, that cord from his tummy flopping into Massa's eyes and proclaimed "This son

shall carry his father's name and his father's father before him. He shall be called William John Bradston the Third and the Lord be pleased." Reina felt faint but kepta smilin'. She had not yet named her own boy but resigned this task until the following morning after she had gained her rest. Massa Bradston patted his wife's head, as proud as the day he had bought this land for his plantation empire. She had given him an heir. Reina took the baby boy from his father and wrapped him in a white cotton blanket while her own son squirmed naked as the hour he was born, atop a dusty mattress in the border house slave quarters of the plantation; just out of view but "not out of rifle range from the plantation house front porch," she had been reminded a dozen times by a bragging and violent boss. Shortly after Martha and her new one fell peacefully asleep, perched on what must have been a hundred pillows, Massa Bradston dismissed Reina for the evening and after wiping her hands on a gray apron and lowering her head in reverence, she stumbled across an October lawn, wet with dew, into the oak tree darkness to her squealing family by the river.

A few restless hours later, Martha Bradston cradled her boy in his white cotton blanket humming tunes from her girlhood to soothe the anxious babe. William John Sr. talked softly but directly to his wife's melodic accompaniment. "This boy will be strong, Martha. Look at him! He won't be sickly like his brother, Beauregard. He will rise up to inherit this plantation one day. He will protect us and our daughter, Josephine and we will offer full charge of our descendants into the Lord's good hands and with our offspring, our name and fortunes will multiply." William John Sr. wrestled the drowsy white bundle from his wife's protective arms and carried William John Jr. out and onto the balcony.

"William! It's too cold out there for the baby tonight."

"Ah, hush it, mother. He's with his papa." And William John Sr. introduced his boy to the plantation that would belong to him someday. His arm stretched wide to the west outlining the banks of Line Creek, that had become a flowing ribbon of multi-colored leaves by this time of year. One couldn't even see the water this late in October but knew, like a good preacher, a force mightier than what they could see on the surface, rippled there just the

same. He pointed forty miles north beyond the acres and acres of cotton fields where his property line was forever diminishing with the claiming of the soft sand banks by the Chattahooche River. He turned his squirming package slightly east to face the headwaters of the Flint River, running swiftly just behind the quarters of his 100 slaves, (he was not yet aware that the day's census had taken his property value to 101 workers). He whispered lightly of his proud possessions into his heir's tender ear. Another full-lunged baby cried incessantly from the slave's quarters to mingle with the leg rubbing choir of the plantation's resident crickets. William John Sr. kissed his Junior between pink puffy eyes and smiled bigger than all of Georgia. Of all his accomplishments in his forty-three year lifetime, it was just possible that the event of his son's birth, could bring it all together in purpose and meaning. He returned his future to the arms of it's mother.

William John Bradston the Second had much to be thankful for that evening, his second and only surviving son withstanding. Fore in his lifetime he had built this plantation from the clay up, in the middle of Indian Territory Georgia, and fashioned a legacy for his

son's inheritance. The son of Savannah elite sharecroppers, he had learned the cotton trade and the management of slave labor from his tyrant father. William John the First, a crude man forever embittered by his financial constraints and the fact that he would achieve significantly short of his own dreams of owning a legitimate plantation, instilled higher standards within his son and in true sharecropper tradition, put up one third of the money for his son's Fayette County spread. Misses Martha's Augusta parents with family business holdings in a Savannah River paddle boat company kindly endowed the young couple with another third and William John the Second had earned the last third of the required land payment and the accompanying house he longed to raise by working as the Slave Driver on three cotton plantations. The land itself came about by interesting coincidence and bungle at the hands of William John's own grandfather, Randolph Bradston, who as a senior legislator, in 1795, convinced the Georgia territorial legislature to sell nearly 35 million acres of Indian land to four competing land companies for a ridiculous \$500,000; -land that didn't even rightfully belong to Georgia to sell. In the forty years that followed, the last of the Creek and Cherokee Indians were

forcefully removed from their Georgia and Alabama tribal grounds and were relocated first to northern Florida and finally to Oklahoma while landowners-to-be rushed across the Ocmulgee River to take part in the Fourth Land Lottery of 1821. Only months before had the Treaty of Indian Springs afforded the surrender of Creek Indians from the territory between the Chattahoochee and the Ocmulgee Rivers, so that land surveys could be rushed in preparation for the lottery. As William John the Second was married and the father of a newborn, though sickly minor son that happened to die of cholera before he reached the age of twelve, he was entitled to two draws in the lottery which netted him Fayette Districts No. 4 and No. 5, each possessing 2,970 square feet of land or 202 and one half acres a piece, according to the rectilinear survey of the time. Using a chain that was sixty-six feet long, William John II had measured much of the forty-five chain square property himself. Gliding through the center of Districts No. 4 and No. 5, ambled the strengthening headwaters of the Flint River from north to south. As four fractional lots lay West of his acquisition, he was allowed to purchase all land east of Line Creek and south of the Chattahoochee

River. Line Creek and the Flint Rivers converged six miles south of the plantation house site on a neighboring district. All told, William John the Second's land mass equaled six Fayette Districts and just over 950 acres of fertile silt, deposited there over the centuries by the three main water ways now bordered and momentarily contained by his property. The longest distance of his new holdings measured forty miles north and south and 19 miles wide east and west. The jewel of this southern crown was his twelve room plantation house nestled between Line Creek and the Flint River seven feet above the flood plain, which he designed and built exploiting his first thirty seed slaves; a brawny breed he had either been presented, had swindled or had purchased by the most questionable of slave dealings. Among these first aborigines was *Tonaben Wuliku* , a wedding gift from William John the First. By his strength and loyalty, Tonaben was appointed Headman of the new plantation slaves and given the nickname, Ben. A descendent of *Tolo Wuliku* who had worked William John the First's cotton fields and of *Timamalo Wuliku I* who had been purchased off the boat in Savannah by grandfather Randolph in a lucrative slave trade established by none other than Virginia's Sir

Winston Bradston, the new baby's great, great grandfather. The Bradston and Wuliku families had paralleled each other for the better half of a century, though neither conceded familiarities and it is possible that neither side even knew or simply lacked the courage to face the pain of such brutal ties. There had been much slave suffering at the hands of the Bradston's who claimed such a brief history of domestic slave ownership. Black slaves were prohibited in Georgia until 1750 when a number of charters were reformed to permit, among black slavery, fee simple lands and the introduction of sweet rum. Randolph Bradston was among the first slave owners in Georgia, whose black descendants would manage to survive and multiply by mandate for three generations under the calloused thumb of Bradston dominion. It had been long contested that Headman Ben's wife, Reina, had been the illegitimate daughter of William John Bradston Sr. himself, though this slight scandal had not born confirmation aside from the sudden gift of status afforded her mother who was brought into the plantation house at once to serve William Sr.'s wife, Leta. And so, Reina, was raised serving in a plantation home before she was handed down like a revered family milk goat to William John II, to toil at the

Bradston-Fayette Plantation with her hard working husband, Ben.

The night's new father, leaning on the second floor bedroom balcony railing, watched a deer with its Spring born fawn emerge from the crudely hewn line of live oaks to eat the wet grass that carpeted half an acre, before the evening's coming frost. Headman Ben had nearly snapped his back clearing most of the trees that had grown for hundreds of years near the spongy confluence of Line Creek and Flint River, leaving his best mark for two straight lines of eight full grown oak trees on each side. The house, which Headman Ben also built, with some thirty captive others, at William John the Second's unschooled direction, sat atop a slight mound of hardened river clay, wheeled from the saturated banks of the Flint, to provide a seven foot foundational advantage over all its owner could survey. For a decade after the house was built and after the yearly cotton had been baled and sold, Headman Ben would direct the levy building on both waterways to ensure the protection of Bradston's mossy empire. Twice in fifteen years the river and its tributary creek forged new courses to the front lawn of the plantation mansion and twice in fifteen years, William John

Bradston grinned at the top of four wide porch steps, while Headman Ben and half the slave camp nursed open, pussing blisters and task strained muscles, their own feet sunk and decaying in the mud of their rudimentary cabin flats.

W.J.B. II momentarily turned his back on his land holdings to return to his wife and child as two slave men sprang from the oak shadows to catch the confused fawn with their bare hands. Its tender neck snapped in the moonlit fog like a twig underfoot, its mother bounding over the opposite levy before splashing dazed into a swollen Line Creek. The fawn's warm blood mixed with weakened mother's milk, would provide protein to three new slave quarter babies born in the past forty-eight hours and nourishment to their exhausted and nutrition deprived mothers. Winter would otherwise proceed to feast on their diminished states hastening to guarantee that the Negro population growth in the Fall would have nothing to show for it come Spring. The Bradston men had made long, historical practice of reducing this desperate act of nature to

nothing more than a creature against creature struggle where the strong survived any way they could.

And while the Bradston's and the Wuliku's attended to the needs and whims of their newly born offspring, Misses Martha's brother, James Meriwether, half clothed and smelling of stale liquor, amused himself by spying upon the Bradston fourteen year old daughter, Josephine, who was bathing the long day away, through gentle lace curtains separating her from the chilly night air and the wrap around balcony outside. There had always been something not quite right with James Meriwether. Though he was twenty-two years old, he had ceased to develop in the mental sense around ten years of age when he had nearly drowned in the Savannah River after falling off his grandfather's paddle boat. Following the vicious murders of her parents by an uprising band of mistreated slaves six years earlier, Martha convinced her husband to board her orphaned and dependent brother. Under William John the Second's attention, Jim was groomed to take the lead as the Bradston-Fayette slave driver. But encountering at least one skirmish each month which often resulted in excessive brutality,

should have disturbed Master Bradston, but family leniency and even encouragement for Jame's aggressive behavior in many circumstances, allowed the wanton abuse to continue. James most revelled in the administering of corporeal punishment which, by Georgia law was not to exceed twenty stripes per offense but often became exaggerated under his unnatural enjoyment of the moment and his inability to count. It was not likely that William Bradston would have been as blindly impressed with the other pastimes of his brother in law, among which was his unfortunate obsession with the gratification of his childlike mind and his awkwardly adult body.

It was sometime after the Harvest Moon had climbed high above the ripples of Flint River and the last oil lantern in the plantation house had been snuffed with a gentle blow, alerting the house crickets to commence their orchestrated vigil, that Headman Ben and his exhausted wife, Reina pulled tightly into each others arms under a tattered blue blanket discarded by the Misses of the big house a full year of seasons ago. In whispers too weak to stir their

little man in his nest of burlap strappings next to their lumpy mattress on the floor, the two discussed the proper naming of their newest world arrival. "We called his brother *Motala* after the father of my father's father," Ben reported boastfully of his African Congo Chief ancestry. "We shall call this little one *Timamalo Wuliku* after another very brave ancestor, -Motala's son." Reina scarcely budged her approval in her husbands arms, the balance of her loins feeling as though they had been dragged beneath her on a rocky, fifteen mile walk. Son naming was husband's work. She would at long last sleep, her day's work more than complete.

Timamalo would be a good name, in honor of the first Wuliku brought to the new world.

And they nick named him *Willy* as they had nicknamed Motala, -*Mo*. Massa did not favor African names he could not pronounce.

Their boy would please Massa greatly and the next Massa after him, who likely slept that very night, seven hours younger, as anxiously as Willy, in Massa's big house, scarcely a muzzle shot away.

Two

It had never rained so hard in all of young William's five year life than it did the night before his birthday party in 1848. His growing disappointment only worsened in the absence of his father who had been standing in the center of the front porch watching ripple after ripple dash against the bottom step of his twenty year old fortress seven feet above a vengeful swamp.

"What will happen if the rain does not stop?" he must have asked his reading mother twelve different times. And twelve different times she put down her book and tried to give him one more way she planned to save his special day, in case the rain kept raining.

But all little William, since nicknamed *Beau* after his dead brother, could think about was the stocky pony that had arrived on loan from a neighboring town, spending a wet night with the other animals before his party engagement. He would give every present that would be his tomorrow, to spend ten minutes with that wet pony tonight. Perhaps his father could be coaxed into checking on the animals in the

middle of the storm. But alas, his father could not be moved from the bow of what was quickly becoming his unintended ship. From between sheets of driving rain, came Headman Ben splashing bare footed across the submerged lawn.

"Massa," he panted, trying to capture his breath. "The levy on the Flint done be broke in two places. All Massa's niggers are workin' to stop that River but the womens and chillen are," he paused to breathe and rephrase his request. "They underwater

Massa. It be bad, real bad."

-Another gasp of air and, "Headman Ben wondered if Massa might have the womens and chillen move to the porch of the big house for the night, just 'til the rain be stopped." Beau watched Headman Ben reveal more white in his eyes than he had ever seen a black man show. He hoped his father would say yes. What excitement that would be to have so much company on such a rainy night before his birthday. But William John Senior didn't even pay a glance in Headman Ben's direction when he snapped back in the clearest reproaching tone.

"You know better than that, Headman Ben. All those kin of yours tracking their muddy flat feet onto this white porch would be back breaking for your wife, Reina to clean up. Why cause her more work than she already has in her pregnant state." Beau's father prepared to dismiss Headman Ben with a roll of his eyes.

"You get back to that levy, Ben. Stop this water from reaching the next step or I'll whip the lot of you."

Without an ounce of good timing, Beau piped up as children often do. "I will help Miss Reina with the porch, papa. I will

spend my entire birthday cleaning this porch, you'll see. Let Headman Ben's people pass the night here where it is dry. I can help, papa. I'm almost five years old."

His papa looked down at him, so stunned to argue with that disrespectful reasoning and embarrassed at the same time to have had his authority questioned in front of a slave. The whites of his own eyes grew like chicken eggs before layin' time and for a moment Beau just trembled, wondering if he would be allowed to turn five years old after all. Slowly, his papa turned to Headman Ben. "All right then. Headman Ben you tell your women and children they may pass the night on Master Bradston's front porch and," he emphasized clearly, "you let your wife know not to worry about the mud on the porch, cause little William Junior has offered to clean the porch on his birthday, -by himself!" With that, he left the step of his night long vigilance and stormed into the house.

Beau forced his tiny face into a slight smile with raised eyebrows and Headman Ben splashed into the night beyond the live oak trees. Beau sat on the top stair cradling his head in his hands balanced by elbows planted squarely on nearly five year old knees.

He had angered his father. If there were a single lesson his first five years in this house should have taught and prepared him for the next five, it was to stay clear of his papa's temper. After all, he could tie his boots, comb his hair and pee all by himself.

Certainly, avoiding his father was the lesser of these big boy accomplishments, yet it duly escaped him. Within minutes, new waves reached the second step below him, pushed by the rush of many dozen slave women and their children wading toward the big house. Beau looked up and began waving his hands frantically.

"Wash off your feet! Wash off your feet!" he screamed, wishing to amend his offer, but they divided on either side of him scrambling for dry sections of the columned porch, not hearing a discernable word he screeched. After the first fifty or so had sloshed past him and began chattering like his grandmother and aunts on his mama's side of the family, he stood to survey the ruckus better and looked down at the white spot on the wide steps of the front porch; -a spot the size of his nearly five year old bottom. His eyes suddenly watered but he knew better than to let them flow and only aggravate his papa further. Instead, he bit his

upper lip, a trick he had learned years ago, to conceal the secret emotions that could wage full scale battles just behind his dark olive eyes. Sometimes he bit his lip when he just needed more time to think through a problem, like when his mother explained a few weeks ago that she was getting fat in the tummy because she was making a little sister for him to play with. Rather than come to understand why his mama had eaten the tiny girl, saving her in her tummy until he felt like playing, he bit his upper lip and walked away. So, he squinted real hard now, looking at the mud flung as far and wide as that great porch extended above the lagoon still churning below, and walked away, his upper lip trapped between two rows of five year old baby teeth.

Headman Ben was having trouble rounding up his small family and he knew he didn't have much time before he should be getting back to that troubled levy. His back would not support another whippin' but his boy was missing and he feared that damned river done swallowed him up. He sent his swollen misses waddling off toward the big house lookin' as though she was a carrying an autumn pumpkin in her apron. "Willy!" he yelled into the driving

rain, his voice coming back at him too quickly to be carrying very far. He raced through the mud

toward the levy. "Anyone seen my boy?" he screamed, nearly hoarse from the cold and all that running. His breath was visible in the chilly, wet night and he was up to his ankles in water the color of butterscotch. He could think of no better way to invite pneumonia into his heaving lungs but he had to find that boy or accept that the river done carried him away. His woman, Reina had only given him two boys and he hadn't seen *Mo* since Massa done sold him to a plantation owner in South Carolina somewhere, on account of that bad leg that caused him to limp to the fields.

Willy's older sister, Rose was about to be joined by a younger sister, according to those feelin's Reina was havin'. Ben couldn't bare the thought of all those women without a son of his own, and trudged back toward the slave quarters hollering his boy's name over and over again. He paused against the slimy trunk of an old tree that had been spared his axe in younger, more fit days. His heart thumped like Congo war drums before a battle, he had to imagine of course, having been two generations removed from his

homeland and any first hand knowledge of what Congo drums must've sounded like. But Willy's great grandfather, who was the first Wuliku in this new, brutal world, had been raised in Africa and it was by him that Willy was given his honored name *Timamalo Wuliku* . Ben became insistent that moment in the rain and shouted, "Timamalo!" Willy looked up into the streaming darkness from where he sat shivering and proud atop Massa's new pony outside the barn. Hearing that version of his name alerted him that his father must be a boiling angry. He continued to whisper into the fuzzy ear of his new friend.

"I will not leave you alone in this storm," he stroked his mane. "I will stay here and warm your neck through the night," he promised. Headman Ben had just reached the edge of the corral fence. Full of relief and exasperation to see his son, he took a moment to steady his breath as he crept along the fence concealed by the shadow of the looming barn. The sheep and goats grew restless by his sloppy approach in the mud of the pens. "Do not be scared," Willy whispered with unusual eyes searching the vastness of the night. "There is no cause to be scared tonight," he tried to

reassure his hooved friend. Just then, Ben snatched his boy from the pony's back and Willy let loose a sheik of terror. "A-a-a-y!"

The animals moored, crowded, whinnied and oinked in reckless calamity. Inside Willy's breathless chest, a whole band of them tribal drums commenced a nervous rhythm and Papa Ben smiled, knowing that his boy had a little of his great grandfather in him.

The air suddenly exploded back inside five year old lungs that had decided to work again after all. Willy coughed in short sputters until he was able to calm down some. His odd brownish green eyes looked back into his father's muddied own, wishing to see the inevitable punishment that was surely headed straight for him. But as he had made frustrating habit of looking his father in the eyes, his father had long resigned his effectiveness as an enforcer and punishment was most often abandoned. And so it was this rainy, black night on the Bradston-Fayetteville plantation that Willy was raised to Headman Ben's shirt drenched shoulders and carried across that grand lawn, since turned pond, to his frantic mother who was surely strugglin' to hush the slave women and children on Massa's front porch 'fore Massa go and change his mind about his sudden guests. Willy had never been this close to the big house

and the temptation to cup his hands against those big glass panes was too much to suppress, though he knew it was wrong. Still, he was fresh from a much more serious infraction of sittin' on Massa's new pony and he had not been smacked. He kissed his wet mama on the cheek and snuck behind her muddy dress to disappear around to the dark side of the porch where there was less commotion. There in the windy shadows, he had the sense to wipe his sloppy hands on his trousers before putting them against the glass. He had never felt a window pane before and proceeded to thoroughly examine this new and fascinating surface before he ever realized he could see right through it into the side parlor, cloaked in red velvet cloths with brass tacks running puckered lines in every direction. His eyes grew bigger and his jaw just plain froze open, steaming the window with his own rapid breath. He giggled out loud and wiped a looking hole in his new discovery and the persistent rain from his face. He wished to touch the red velvet he saw there. He imagined how soft it would feel crinkled between his fingers. He raised his hand to his face and smelled Massa's wet pony all over again and figured that crawling around the barn would probably be the closest he would ever get to

Massa's way of living. But that was just fine too. From what he could see, white folks acted pretty strange...

Beau hadn't spent much time with his Uncle James, the plantation's slave driver and his mother's younger brother. For whatever reason, his mother had managed the five years of his life in guarded isolation from this unruly branch of her family tree.

Tonight was unusual in that Beau's father was off inspecting the levies and his mama was absorbed in her latest novel. His older sister had spent the week away at his grandparent's house in Savannah and Beau had grown particularly lonely. In a gush of energy he had abandoned his general moping campaign and commenced a run of the house on the eve of his fifth birthday to investigate matters that had become quite engaging downstairs and outside the side parlor on the porch. He had moved toward the window for a concealed look when he was intercepted by the large dirty hands of his uncle who had startled him.

"If it isn't the little man," Jim announced, delighted for company

of his own. "Why I think you've grown taller this week."

Beau wriggled some in his uncle's grasp as he watched his eyes to see if indeed, this growth had transpired as reported.

"I am very serious, Beau. You are definitely taller. Let me take a closer look." Uncle Jim lifted him with fumbling hands under his arms. Beau could smell the liquor on his uncle's breath, but it smelled sweet tonight, like candy. James sat him down on his lap.

"Nearly five years old, Master Beau. You are very close to receiving your first special secret. Do you know that, young man?"

"What kind of secret, Uncle James?" Beau pulled the hair from his eyes. His cheeks burned a candy apple red from his abbreviated expedition which had been waged quickly and cunningly around the first floor. He did not like being held at the moment. There was far too much going on outside with the storm and the visitors on the porch to be stuck in a sitting chair with his drunk uncle.

"Do you know that you are not only growing taller but that you

are growing in other ways too?" His uncle whispered, holding Beau's chin so that his eyes focused on his uncle rather than darting from window to window, which were their inclination.

"What do you mean?" Beau squirmed in his uncle's lap until he was more comfortable.

"Well, your hands and feet are getting bigger aren't they?"

"I 'magine," said Beau. "I cannot be sure. Do you think they are bigger?" he asked

holding his hands up close for inspection.

"Why yes, Beau. But something else is getting bigger too. Do you know what that is?"

"What? Tell me," he demanded anxiously.

Without speaking, Uncle Jim took his finger and wiggled it between Beau's legs until he had grabbed the little man. Beau giggled but his uncle hushed him with a hissing finger to his lips.

"This is part of the secret," his uncle whispered, moving his finger around.

"How do you know if it is getting bigger," Beau asked very confused.

"Well, we would have to take a closer look of course, but it is supposed to grow."

Just then, at the end of his uncle's fingers, Beau sensed his little man was growing and suddenly all the feeling in his five year old body seemed to be located between his legs. "See now. Do you feel that. You are growing there right now, aren't you." His uncle smiled showing big yellow teeth and his dimples. Beau reached up to his uncle's face and stuck his finger in the crevice in his cheek. His uncle laughed softly. Beau wiggled again where he sat. His uncle sure was bony. "Shall we take a look?" he asked with big eyes, his fingers beginning the delicate process.

"It tickles."

"Of course it does. But it is a good tickle, right?"

"Yes." Beau's eyes were suddenly glued to his uncle's hands working between his legs. It felt as though he would never stop growing there and he was almost afraid it would grow and grow

until it was too big to walk. His uncle would know what to do, and he waited with shallow breath.

"There he is. My, my," his uncle cooed proudly. Beau was shocked at first by his uncle's touch but waited for his assessment all the same. "Do you know what to call it?"

"It is my *willy*."

"Of course it is. And a nice willy it is, too."

"How big will it grow?" Beau suddenly asked when it seemed his uncle was not coming forth with information fast enough.

"Do you really want to know. I can tell you, but this will be your first special secret with your Uncle James. Do you understand how important that is?"

"Yes," Beau answered swallowing hard and reverently.

"Well, let me see your hand." He took Beau's tiny hand and pressed it against his own pants. Beau tried to determine what was in there but could not fathom the deformity that seemed to be

housed there. "Soon, very soon, your willy will grow to be as big as mine." He continued to manipulate Beau's curious hand.

"How big is that?" Beau asked growing a little panicked."

"Can you not tell with your hand?" He positioned Beau's hand and helped him squeeze around his manhood.

"I think I do not want to be that big then," Beau admitted. "Can I go outside and watch the rain?" He had half escaped his uncle's hold before he had asked permission to leave. Uncle Jim grasped his arm tightly.

"But Beau, you want to be this big when you grow up," he advised him, grabbing himself with his man sized hand. "You will want to grow as big as you can because that is power. We will see this together when it happens, I promise you." James smiled, rubbing himself.

"Okay!" Beau slipped free.

"William John!" James commanded and Beau stopped his anxious feet on the wood floor. "You will be five tomorrow and you must keep this special secret with me. Remember that." He

pointed a quivering finger at him.

"I know," Beau answered insistently, already in flight.

Willy rubbed his eyes and realized for the first time that the day's activities had finally combined to make him very sleepy. He crept around the backside of the house following the slave driver who oddly disappeared behind a red gingham curtain into the pantry off the kitchen. Willy watched the fabric curtain begin to shake as though some strange convulsion were occurring within and then he jumped back from the window as the awful moaning began. He hustled back toward his pregnant mother and wedged himself between her and another slave woman, both sitting with their wet and tired backs to the outside walls of the big house. His mama patted Willy's sweating head, assuming with motherly impatience, that he had been foolishly playing in the rain. She shook off the night's persistent chill and drew her son closer to her bosom. It disturbed her to think she was growing another baby she would have to raise when there seemed so much more she still needed to teach her headstrong Timamalo.

From where he lurked behind the heavy draperies in the front

parlor, Beau watched the water rise to the third step of the front porch. He could now count to five and observed there were only five foot tracked steps remaining before that swollen river would wash the dark visitors and their even darker mud right off the landing. His ears were troubled by the muffled cries of black babies nuzzled so closely to their mothers they could scarcely breathe. It didn't set quite right with him that he should be so warm and dry inside this big empty house while so many were not, just a rattling glass pane away. He sought his mother's counsel.

Lanterns danced a frantic ballet in the windy air, hung on leafless branches or held by hands at the end of awkward bodies sliding down the muddy slope of the levy. Surplus cotton was relayed to the levy breaks from the barn twenty chains away.

Lighting flashed every few seconds exposing the trail of bobbing bales that, at the river's intended edge, were quickly mixed with mud and used to fill the seeping spots like adobe brick. Much yelling could be heard from the second floor window where little Beau, now officially five years old, having stayed intrigued long beyond midnight, had joined his mother.

"Sweetheart, I think the circus has arrived just in time for your birthday celebration." She pointed down toward the Flint River.

"I don't get a birthday this year, mama." He looked up into her face with the saddest eyes she'd seen in five years. "Papa says I have to clean the mud off the front porch after the slaves go home. It will take the whole day, I imagine." He appealed, however obviously, to her intervening desire for justice in the world. She did not rightly belong on this plantation, in this life, and she had made historic practice of challenging the law of her husband's land. She pulled Beau tightly to her side, gently nuzzling his ear and the cheek of his face into her tummy bulging with child. Beau tried real hard to concentrate. His mama had told him to listen carefully to see if his sister was talking to him from inside her stomach, and he tried to listen as regularly as he could, but he was a busy five year old, and such things were often forgotten. He bit his upper lip.

"Now you tell me why there is mud on the front porch and why you have to clean it up tomorrow." She liked to take smaller pieces of the story so that

she could understand it better. It almost always meant that she would see things the way Beau saw them, if he presented it right.

"Well," he prepared. "Headman Ben came to the porch cause his women and children were all wet."

"Be-cause," she corrected him.

"*Because* his women and children were all wet. He was afraid they would be swallowed by the angry river."

"Did Headman Ben say that?" she asked suspiciously.

"He did," Little Beau replied with an anxious and grown up wag of his red head."

"And then what happened?"

"Well, Papa said no! He said it would bring too much mud to the front porch and that the river could just go ahead and swallow the lot of them."

"Did your papa say that?"

"He did. And then I said I would clean the mud off the porch

'cause it was cold and windy and nobody should be staying in all that water."

Mrs. Bradston cleared her throat and cocked her head signaling her son to correct his English.

"*Because* it was cold and windy, mam." He amended himself.

"Hmm," she sighed. "It sounds to me like you volunteered to clean the mud off the porch on your birthday."

"Yes mam, but..."

"But," she claimed her thought back, "you did the right thing and sometimes you have to work real hard for the something that is right. Do you understand that, Beau?"

"Yes, mam." His head hung low and she lifted it with a warm finger to his chin. "And I am very proud of you. What you did is something I would not expect from a *six* year old." He half smiled though not forgetting the consequences of his five year old bravery.

"But they are still shivering, mama. It must be very cold on the

porch tonight with the wind and the rain and I was thinking about those old blankets in my play dresser that I use to use to make Indian tepee's, you know, -when I was four years old..."

"Yes-" she prompted him further.

"I don't need them now that I am five, do I?" His eyes and forehead squinted into a question mark. His mama raised a hand to her mouth to conceal a smile that surely blossomed there.

"That depends on if you want to wash blankets too, after you clean the mud from the porch, that is." She stroked her chin.

"I see," Beau struggled to maintain appearances of being suddenly grown up. "Thank you, mama," he whispered, kissing her on the cheek as she bent, with great difficulty, at the waist she no longer had in her pregnant state, to hug her little man. Then he disappeared down the hall to his bedroom. He had become very sleepy doing the right things. He climbed onto the top of his bed and smiled slightly as his head hit the pillow. Though he was very warm, he could still hear the shouts of the men down by the river and the crying of the slave babies on the front porch. The

wind still threw rain against his bedroom window and rattled the shutters on either side.

Lightning tossed strange shadows onto the ceiling above him every other instant and he jumped with every flash, giggling slightly at the game that kept him barely awake. He was five years old though it seemed very hard to believe. His day had finally arrived in the disguise of a spooky, rainy night and though he felt just a little uneasy about it now, it was here. Rubbing the temptation of sleep from his tired eyes, he scooted to the end of his narrow bed and reached deep down into his toy trunk and lifted his play covers from their resting place. Sufficiently loaded with blankets piled so high he could scarcely see a path in front of him, he started for the light of his bedroom door. He looked back just as a bolt of lightning popped outside his window and he spotted his special blue baby blanket next to his pillow. He wouldn't need that tonight. In fact, now that he was five... Well, there was no more discussion and to the top of his pile it went.

He took the stairs so carefully, expecting each one to send his bundle and five year old body somersaulting to the bottom. But

his passage was surefooted and he emerged on the windy porch, a near sudden saint among the slaves, and had it not been for the muddiest feet of all belonging to his own father just returned from the levy, Beau would have been a celebrated hero and not the devil's own seed, as his father surely thought, trembling there in his rage.

"William John Bradston Junior! Just what do you think you are doing?" he demanded with a barrel voice cut short by a temporary cold building a stronghold in his lungs. Beau's red haired head retreated into his blanket shell like a swamp turtle on the defensive and all he could manage to say in the presence of such authority was,

"You better ask my mama."

His father groaned, stomping his clod feet purposely short of the jute rug. Beau squeezed his green eyes tightly shut and squeezed hard until his upper lip felt as though it would fall clean off. His papa disappeared inside the house managing to slam the screen door against the force of a mighty wind that persisted in holding it

open. Beau quickly walked through the black women and children until he reached Miss Reina to present his contraband bundle before it was recalled by powers higher than the need to do right.

"Oh Massa Beau, you be in a heap-a trouble over this. I can see that now."

"But your family is cold, Miss Reina, and I cannot use all of these by myself."

Her water and wind cracked hands accepted the two armed gift and Beau turned to beat a path to his bedroom when Miss Reina stopped him. "Wait Massa Beau! I recognize this one." She extended his special blue baby blanket and for a moment he had a second thought to take it back but decided to just touch it instead.

"You have to make certain that one goes to somebody special tonight, Miss Reina," he said, yawning as big as a five year old awake long past midnight. Miss Reina winked and waived him off into the house before dividing out the play covers for the babies and children, -mostly wet, sick and cold. Upstairs, from his pillow, all but exhausted, Beau spied a lone twinkling star between the clouds and made a jumbled birthday wish for a white porch, happy

hours riding his party pony, clean blankets, a bed grounding chest cold for his father and mounds of berry ice cream before a blazing sun went down on his birthday; and he fell at last, asleep.

Willy batted his eyes struggling to focus as the rooster hollered his mornin' greetin' from the fence outside the barn. Of course he thought instantly of his new friend, Massa's pony, and wondered how he had fared through the cold, cold night. His eyes, scarcely open, revealed the blueness of a new sky that did not seem quite right somehow. It was not on account that the sky spent the whole night spilling its clouds, nor that the blue seemed more blue than he could ever remember. Perhaps, he thought, it was because it seemed so close today that he might even touch it, and in fact he did just that before discovering that his head was covered by a new blue blanket. One corner tucked under his mama's folded arm and another corner wedged behind his own back nestled against the wall of the big house, formed a tepee just like the Indians he had seen in pictures, in the books his mama had borrowed on over-nights from the big

house. Massa Bradston's wife was real good about keeping Reina in books and from these books, Willy's mother taught him about the pictures, 'cause she could not read like Massa's wife. And though it was illegal for her to give books to the slaves, Miss Bradston simply could not hold back her love for books and knowledge. Willy's mama had always said that she was afraid that if she didn't act like she was paying her attention to Massa Bradston's wife, she would turn right around and give all those teachings to the animals in the barn, just because she couldn't keep them to herself. And there was something about learnin' too, cause Reina would go straight home and give it all to Willy. And though little Willy didn't have nobody to share things with yet, he knew that he would teach somebody something, someday. "That's why we're all here," Reina would explain. "God put us here to learn and to teach others and there ain't one of us getting on with matters until we done a little bit of both, you see." Reina always ended her words with "you see." And it was never like a question neither. You saw things mama's way or you might as well be blind as a

cave bat and she reminded you of that with every sentence that came from her serious mouth. Willy couldn't tell you whether his mama had any teeth exactly. He didn't remember seeing them revealed by even the slightest smile in the five years he had been watching for them. But she was pretty all the same; at least, to Willy. She had told him that she smiled with her heart and that the people who really loved her, would be able to see that. Massa Bradston had never seen that smile. That much was for certain.

And in those matters, no love was lost between them on the Bradston- Fayette Plantation. Massa done sold Reina's oldest boy to a South Carolina farm and he was stirring things again by saying 'ifin' that baby in her tummy be a girl, he's gonna sell her off too.

Willy had heard his folks arguing about this, one night last week. It wasn't likely he would ever forget his papa's desperate words when Headman Ben had said, 'he would sooner drown his new baby in Line Creek than let her innocent little body turn one brown penny for Massa Bradston.' Those words scared Willy, though he didn't let on. He figured those who really loved him would see that in his heart and spare him.

But today was his birthday and he hopped to his bare feet and gave his mama a great big hug, bringing a smile to her weary heart.

She tied his blue blanket around his neck giving him a magnificent cape for the morning's proceedings. Willy felt like a Congo chieftain and strutted about the porch amid scurrying black women and children in a frenzy to get off Massa's porch fore he come down to kill them all for sleeping there or something. Willy couldn't be bothered with their problems today. In fact, if Massa Bradston came down those stairs this minute in some rage, Willy would just have to put him in his place for trying to spoil his special day. But the funny thing was, Massa *did* happen to come down those stairs at that very moment and Willy scooted down those porch steps so fast that he was a blur. It was then that Willy saw the most amazing thing in his entire life.

Massa's boy carried a big wooden bucket and brush onto that big porch to clean up after his muddy feet. Willy sailed under his father's arm to watch. Massa's boy never looked up from those planks but started scrubbing and scrubbing to get that porch clean.

Willy figured he must want to do it seeing as though he wasn't

crying or screaming, but it seemed ever so odd to him, all the same. Massa yelled out.

"Headman Ben! There's a pony in the barn. Once your men are working on the levy's, I want you to take that pony back to Mr. McPartlin's plantation in Palmetto. My boy's made other plans for the day."

"Yessir," Willy's father hollered back as Massa disappeared inside the house. Willy didn't understand what could possibly be wrong with Massa's boy. He never imagined two boys could be that different cause he would never choose porch scrubbin over pony riding, but something was the matter on that front porch, all right. Willy felt sorry for Massa's boy for not knowing better.

Beau spent most of the morning , his arms aching and his heart breaking, waxing that huge porch. Every time he felt a tear, he squeezed his eyes and clenched his lip and scrubbed twice as hard until the tear went away. For a while it almost seemed that his day could be salvaged if he just scrubbed a little faster but when he thought he was nearly done, his father pointed out a whole new set of young'un footprints running around the side of the house to the

parlor window. And it was at that very moment that wise old Bradston took dramatic opportunity to wish Headman Ben and his boy a safe journey as they traversed the lawn in the direction of Mr. McPartlin's plantation, five miles away. Beau could not withstand the temptation to look at his pony one last time and there, on it's back, he spied Ben's son, showing every white tooth in his black head as he rode there, a blue blanket tied at his neck and waving slightly behind him as though he were the crowned prince of the West Indies. Beau felt his face turn red as his hair as his eyes welled with spoon size tears. He squeezed them as tightly as he could, refusing to make contact with the eyes in his papa's evil head and when he opened them again, slowly and deliberately, those tiny mud footprints came into blurry focus and he scrubbed, harder now than ever. It is quite possible that it was that particular day and at that very moment when Beau learned to hate his father, fore all the plantation and possibly all of creation must have surely known, he was a formidable man to be hated passionately. It so happened that until that revealing second, Beau hadn't taken the time to look up to him nor gained the perspective to look down at him. Ignoring him and avoiding him had worked for the first five

years of his life but it became clear that it would be worth every effort to intensify this budding disdain and parade it out in the open every once in a while on those very special occasions, not unlike a fifth birthday party, when he would least expect a mutiny and be most susceptible to his son's own betrayal. His father's lessons had been abundant and William John Bradston the Third, gritted his baby teeth, nursed his calloused tiny hands and learned them well.

Through watery green eyes and a head cocked ever so slightly to afford a vanishing view of his birthday pony as it clopped its way through the mushy grass, Beau daydreamed about Headman Ben's boy and took sudden delight in having provided him a new blue cape and that four legged ride across the grand lawn. He wiped print after little print off the white planks of the porch and felt the strangest pleasure at having sacrificed for a black boy he didn't yet know, but with whom he sensed a wildly thrilling connection.

The pursuit of this friendship would prove a respectable first blow to his father's scheme of things when it came to plantation life.

Somehow, among the mud and brown soapy water that swilled about his tender ankles, Beau managed to wring a smile from the rag that was to be his birthday tapestry. And in that instant he all

out waved to Ben's boy, who had turned his dumfounded gaze back toward the house, most likely from latent guilt. It was as if that five year old Bradston boy understood that from that moment forward he needed to live just beyond his father's grasp.

Willy didn't know what to make of his birthday morning. -A new blanket without holes, hours on the back of this prized pony and now Massa's son waving at him. Had the entire world done changed overnight in the rain? He waved back reluctantly, yet full of intrigue.

"Just whadya think you doing?" His father snapped the reigns causing the pony to jerk back his head. Willy jumped, nearly losing his balance on the wide back of his barnyard friend. "That's Massa's boy! You don't just wave at Massa's boy. Specially when he's in a heapa trouble 'o'er letting you and your mama track the bottom of that damned river onto Massa's porch. Here you sit on top of his birthday pony while he polishes your foot prints from the floor of the big house. He's gonna be Massa someday and you gonna be just one-a his niggers unless you show respect. And you better hope he forgets this day when you went ridin' off on his

pony. Now you climb down from there and you walk beside me 'til we be out of li'l Massa's sight."

"But how can it be his birthday when it is my birthday today?" Willy jumped off the pony, his blue cape rippling in the descent. He looked back over his shoulder then looked straight at the ground when he thought li'l Massa might still be watchin'.

"Massa's wife done berthed that boy a few hours after your mama gave us you. You be older by half a day, no more, but Massa's boy is already older than you can ever be."

"How's that?" Willy jogged a few steps to catch up to his father's gait. "I'm a whole head taller than he is and I ain't spending my birthday scrubbing Massa's porch neither, so I must be smarter too," he offered in his obvious defense.

"Whoa there young fool!" His papa cautioned him, trying to hold back his smile. "That mouth'll be your ruin. You mark my words, Timamalo. Birthday or no birthday, if you want to keep having them, you better start respecting the boy who one day'll be the man of all men for thirty miles." His papa gestured widely.

You may think you be the smart one now but pretty soon you stop learning when all you gots to do is pick Massa's cotton and stop Massa's rivers. 'Don't much need a brain as a good back when it comes to your future. But li'l Massa needs to keep learnin' cause iff'n his niggers ever know more than he do, they be free and he likely be dead shortly after."

"Mama done told me I could be free someday, iff'n I wanted it bad 'nough."

"Well, I guess that means your mama and I just didn't want it bad enough I reckon."

"I reckon so," Willy talked through the biggest yawn his father had ever seen, already more a man at five years old than he had ever been. Once they'd passed the giant oaks, Ben lifted his boy onto the pony's back where he napped for three long miles.

The sun darted behind leftover clouds from the night before. The porch was white again, the birthday pony was gone. Beau had watched the hole between

the oak trees for nearly an hour in case Headman Ben chose to double back, inviting him into the forest for a concealed ride. But the green leaves on the oaks scarcely wiggled in the afternoon wind while the dark, gray branches of the more vulnerable plant varieties seemed almost frantic in their naked dance. This had been the most terrible day of his five year life and though it already stood alone in the journal of such matters, Willy's mama went into labor just before supper time surely timing the whole event to carry on right through the cake and wild berry ice cream. And even though he didn't understand much about having babies, he reasoned enough to figure it must have been another part of his father's plan to punish him, all on account of letting the black folks sleep on his porch. While his mother's screaming and moaning chased the moon across a hazy night sky, Beau snuck off to bed, having grown most tired of sobbing without audience, behind the giant curtains of the front sitting room. To make his birthday complete, Uncle James appeared in the bedroom doorway with the only present Beau had seen all day and though the appropriate hour had long since passed to celebrate the miserable occasion, he modeled his birthday underpants like the Emperor's

New Clothes.

Not two weeks after the birth of Massa's new daughter, Rachel, and on a cold, windy night following the first snow of the winter season, Headman Ben, ill-possessed and enraged, brutally wrestled his own newborn daughter, Magnolia, from the desperate arms of his shrieking wife, and carried her deep into the woods where he stomped a jagged hole in the Line Creek ice and held her tender brown body there, just under the surface until the forest and his frightening world crashed silently about him.

T H R E E

And the cotton grew. Planted in slight mounds six inches apart, the tiny green seeds would yield eleven hundred pounds of short staple cotton per acre. Of course, all this cotton had to be ginned and as the fibers of this particular variety were short and wrapped tightly around the seed, the process was tedious. Bradston had planted long staple cotton in the early years of his plantation but the yield was disappointing and everyone on the coast had already switched to green seed. Cotton had been a tricky commodity for Bradston and it hadn't always grown.

It had been a long Southern fight to regain moderate prosperity throughout the region following the Revolutionary War with Great Britain in 1813. Horrendous inflation had plagued the land for five years before cotton returned to an all time and encouraging high of 33 cents to the pound in 1818. Bradston had watched the fledgling cotton industry for many years, seeking counsel from planters and buyers every time one paused to lend a sunburned ear. He had paid close attention to his teachers and the moment he had a chance to practice his lessons, he invested. It had taken four and a half long years to clear the rugged Fayette County land of its oak

and hickory groves and prepare the soil for planting. Bradston had been told that he couldn't grow cotton between the Flint and Line Creek, that the soil was too moist and the rivers unpredictable, but his stubbornness prevailed; -that and the fact that he frankly had no option but to develop the low grade land he had squandered his family's last penny to obtain, or risk losing it all. Cattle had seen him through those first lean years along with the sale of hardwood to mills in Macon and Augusta. Bradston's first cotton crop came up just when the average New York price for Upland Cotton seemed to stabilize at a respectable 15 cents to the pound, though this was half the price of cotton when he had first dreamed of making it rich off the land. The next decade had been spent dreaming and sweating of just getting by. Cotton dropped to less than a dime to the pound before momentarily rebounding to 17 and a half cents to the pound in 1835. Then, as a result of gross over-planting, surplus cotton and a diminished demand from the textile mills in Virginia and England, the nation experienced its first Cotton Crisis in 1839 and cotton plunged to the root depth of five and half cents to the pound during the severe depression that followed in 1845. Had it not been for the good

price on slaves and the fact that Bradston made nearly a thousand dollars per head selling off his hands to eager Texas developers, the Fayette Bradston Plantation would have surely perished, and Bradston now had a hungry two year old son for which to feed and care. He reasoned Headman Ben would just have to understand his need to sell his oldest son to a Carolina plantation holder. The way Bradston saw it, Headman Ben should have had a great deal to be thankful for that he was spared this liquidation. But Headman Ben didn't quite see things Bradston's way, regardless of Master's argument that he still had his new two year old, Willy, to replace sixteen year old Mo, just lost. No, Ben didn't understand the white man a'tall.

It had been ten years since Reina had delivered Ben his second son and already Willy was tall 'nough and strong 'nough to work with his father in the fields, but Reina babied him and insisted he work by her side in the big house, out of fear of having him be snatched away if ever he got someplace where she couldn't watch him. Master worked that way and she done had her reasons. But

Willy felt more a prisoner and more a slave inside the white walls of that ol' house than he ever would have felt straining his back and blistering his feet in Master's fields. He longed to be outdoors where he could smell the sour animals and run as fast as he wanted along the squishy creek bed. His legs were growing long and they were s'posed to be for runnin' so it didn't make much sense to keep 'em cooped up in trouser's serving the tea and pastries to Missus Bradston and her daughters and visiting friends from the other plantations. They ached the whole day long to be doing something 'sides what they was doing. You see, Willy was one of them fine looking black boys, -his mother had told him over and over 'gain, with struggling eyes and a wickedly perfect smile that revealed the whitest and straightest teeth found in these parts. He was meant for showin' and Missus Bradston demanded he be trained for her private social reserve. This, of course rained fire from Massa Bradston who rather preferred to groom Willy for leadership in the fields, on account of his shortage of good stock following his slave selling years. And Willy used to stick around his parents shack just long enough at night to listen to them argue about the tensions he was causing in the big house. -How Massa couldn't bare to look

at him without teetering on the edge of rage that he wasn't being put to better use and how the Missus would set her eyes cold as gray clouds and threaten a storm the South had never seen if he took one step toward destroying another of Ben's children. And Willy would listen with his ear pressed tightly against the saw-ripped lumber forming a crude wall between his room and his parents, while the same argument persisted on driving, yet a second couple, to blows. And Willy understood, as sure as his father's chapped and shaking finger waved inches from his mama's nose, that the four master's in his life would be reduced to one on his thirteenth birthday when Massa Bradston would see his end of a three year compromise and Willy would spend his days in the fields where he rightfully belonged, according to the men in this savage debate. Until that day, the women wallowed in their victory like the pregnant sow rolling in the Flint River mud in the split rail pen behind the barn.

And when Willy had heard the day's update and considered the foreboding outcome, he bid his flushed parents good night with an exaggerated yawn before crawling from his mattress onto the floor,

and out between a couple of loose boards in his own pen, to race barefoot through the hollow night of what remained of his youth. He'd dash first to visit his animal friends, sprinting like mad to lose the scent from Miss Martha's lady things that clung to him like the wet stubborn clay to his papa's thin soled boots. To run was to breath and live for this ten year old and he could not run fast nor far enough to get away from his demons. At the fence, he climbed to the top rail and with wondrous balance walked around the corral. He still remembered a rainy night many years ago when he had found a friend in a misplaced and shivering pony. The wind had started to blow slightly and he paid more attention to his footing on the rail. On other nights he had walked the fence around the whole corral twice before falling and tonight he was determined to make a new record for himself, wind or no wind, as he was feeling particularly sure footed. The many varied species of animals had grown accustomed to his nightly display and scarcely raised a hoof to acknowledge him tonight. The half moon darted in and out of clouds that held no rain as though it played night games of its own. A startled smile sprang across Willy's face as his foot slipped and then recovered. He winked at the moon. It

was nice to have company. He grabbed a deep breath back from the foggy night air and stepped over a post. The sow stirred slightly in her muck below and the horses suddenly nudged the gate almost nervously. Willy drew his eyes into a squint just before he toppled off the rail and landed with a squish in the mud next to the giant pig. She squealed, not altogether pleased to share her mud bath, and then seemed to settle some when Willy didn't move. He heard an angry voice and slowly opened his eyes until two white and frightened ovals appeared in the mud. Only feet away, the slave driver James wrestled with a stubborn ewe whilst Willy quivered in the steaming muck. The big ol' sow grunted some and nuzzled the ten year old in his tender side, certainly pushed at having to share her mud hole, but she didn't give away Willy's position to the slave driver and soon settled down on her knees a few inches away. Willy peered through the ground haze and tried to understand just what his eyes were seeing. The driver was fumbling with his britches and cussing up a thunder storm as he pulled back on the rope looped around the sheep's shaggy neck.

The animal bayed frantically into the stark night as her hind legs were heaved over the low railing of a broken fence, rendering her

stationary. Slave driver James began panting and groaning so, that Willy knew he just had to get a closer look somehow. He pulled himself quietly through the sludge, his heart racing like a cotton gin at the end of a long harvest day. Soon Willy spied the reflection of the evening quarter moon on the white mounds of the slave driver's back side as they pushed and pushed his lanky body into the matted wool of that poor sheep. Fascinated with this display, Willy had pulled himself clean out of the mud and had slithered within ten feet of the driver. His child's eyes suddenly doubled in size as he realized that Driver Jim was forcing his *man-part* into the end hole of that shocked lamb. A brown liquor bottle danced atop the loose rail before falling to a flat sheering stone and shattering with a *pop* amid the ruckus. Willy had giggled in the back of his throat but jumped when the bottle fell and his snicker got knocked clean out of his mouth. His lungs collapsed as the slave driver lifted his head seeming to sniff the air. Willy squinted, hoping to conceal the whites of his eyes as his soft brown body lay still as a parlor rug on the shadowed ground. The slave driver wiped his mouth and loosened his grip on the animal. The sheep scrambled off the fence and darted into the darkness of the pen.

Willy cringed as the driver turned his nakedness toward him, his manhood as hard as an oak limb and his frame as tall as the barn door. "Why you little nigga-" he raised his voice with every word until his mouth snapped shut and his body lurched toward Ben's boy. Willy rolled under the fence and struggled to his knees and then his feet before whipping like a thunder wind into the stillness of the fog-strangled night. The Driver hopped 'o'er the fence, gathering his pants back around his waist and disappeared into the brush after him. Willy scrambled over fallen limbs and through thickets that sliced at his arms and legs like razor blades. His heart pumped with the speed and rage of mule-tail blood, fed to him in the milk of his own mother. He darted through the undergrowth possessed not only by a hooved spirit familiar with this timberland maze but also with a vivid imagination of what would surely come to pass if ever he were caught by the mad and evil slave driver.

His bare feet slapped the mud puddles they couldn't jump and dodged the rocks that wouldn't move, before his ten year old body lost the balance of his twelve year old legs and went sliding and tumbling face first onto a pebbled shoal of the Flint River.

Stunned, he tried to right himself just as the driver's hand suddenly

shackled his ankle and jerked him back to the ground. The wind tumbled out of his chest to settle amid the shiny stones, alternately washed by the ebb and flow of the Flint's whim.

Willy's head was forced down into pebbles that gave way like the marbles he'd watched Massa's son play with, on the big porch, the driver's hand as big as Willy's skull. His mouth sputtered in the shallow water as his overalls were tugged from his shoulders and ripped low about his legs. He smelled the driver's whiskey breath that pushed into the chilly night from two angry nostrils and a clenched mouth. He felt the driver's chapped hand exploring roughly between his cramping legs until he found the spot where food comes out when the body's done with it. Willy gasped just as an arm of the river tossed another wave over the glossy shoal. It felt as though the slave driver had reached his hand up into Willy's stomach as he coughed and spit until he realized that both of the driver's hands were pressing his face and arms into the rocky beach. The driver's weight crushed the tiny boy with a thrust that drained the blood from Willy's head. "Bah like a sheep, nigga. Ba-a-a-h," he hollered into Willy's ear. Willy's focus came and

went as the driver pounded his muddy, chestnut body into what would surely become its watery grave. "Baaah," he repeated over and over again between fits of angry laughter. "Ba-a-a-h."

Somewhere across the Flint, a dog barked in the distance jarring Willy back into consciousness and throwing the driver off guard.

Willy scrambled beneath him until his backside was free of the driver's manhood and he splashed his way into an upright, though temporary position, hobbling along the water's edge as the driver's hand rushed to manipulate the bounty of an evening's rage from between his legs. He groaned ferociously in the dampness as his hand issued forth the cream of a thousand churnings. Willy stumbled deeper into the confusing woods. His nighttime playground had betrayed him and he had lost all innocence. These woods, this Georgia and his life would be forever altered. He could still hear the slave driver wailing into the fog but he pressed on even though his stomach ached dull and true well below his boyish and naked waist. His eyes, the sweet color of a pale southern rue simmering in a copper kettle, were open river-wide and dry as rocks in a fire pit, as they pierced a frantic trail through

a lush undergrowth of fear, thorns and desperate uncertainty. His heart felt as though it had been rammed clean into his throat and the sound it pounded there tricked Willy into believing the slave driver's deliberate feet thumped o'er the mossy ground just behind his clumsy own, which kept him running headlong into the wicked blackness of night for more than two hours. When the oaks gave way to hefty-trunked cypress and the moss began to splash beneath his bleeding feet, Willy collapsed in a muddy, bloody, chestnut heap. It was some time later, in a pained and unconsciousness state of shock, that he crawled between the stately trunks of a mismatched oak and cypress tree to find shelter in an oddly situated hillside cave.

The sun was surely 'shamed to rise over the Bradston Plantation the following morning and would have likely preferred to float behind the darkest of late summer clouds, but it shown a glorious August morn and Beau was anxious to rub the sleepiness from his moss green eyes to greet the day. He had been awakened by the rapping of Headman Ben's gigantic hand on the plantation house

door. In the excitement, Beau pulled a foot straight through the worn fabric of pajamas already two years too small and scrambled to the top of the stairs to discover what was so urgent about Big Ben's tone on such a perfect summer day.

"Massa Bradston, weez missing two boys in the slave camps this morning. My *Willy* and The ol' Widow Clark's boy done disappeared from their beds during the night just passed. They be fine boys Massa Bradston, the same age and size, and I just knows that you didn't come and sell them off in the night, did ye?" Ben's forehead rose into wrinkles deep 'nough to plant cotton. Beau put a hand to his mouth. A'course he'd seen Ben's boy before. He even regular talked to Reina about him on account of their birthdays being on the same day in October. -Boys his own age didn't just disappear, did they?

"Ben I assure you I didn't do no sneakin' off in the middle of the night to sell your boy, nor Widow Clark's boy neither." Beau's father explained softly. "Now I am certain these two boys you speak of are off playing on this fine morning, no doubt in mischief as boys that age usually are, but they'll be just fine. As soon as

they get hungry, they'll be home. You mark Massa's words, Ben. Mark my words."

"Thank you Massa. You probably be right as rain." Ben offered a slight smile and turned to leave, knowing all along that his wife and the Widow Clark weren't about to settle for that explanation though he half believed it himself. Beau's father waved him off the porch and returned to his breakfast in the side parlor. Beau's pajama top was already off and thrown into a pile next to his bed by the time Headman Ben reached the trail running along the east side of the great lawn. He glanced out his bedroom window every few seconds as he changed into clothes appropriate for the day. If there were boys missing, and it seemed there were, Beau's mission was clear. He bounded down the long oak staircase nearly hollering into the parlor as he descended the steps two at a time.

"I'm off explorin' today, papa!"

"Now, Beau, you listen to me-" his mother began to plead until she heard the front door slam behind her little ten year old terror. He was his father's son and there was no use trying to alter the course of his momentum. She shook her head in useless defiance.

Beau practiced his speed racing, which usually included forgetting to breath, forgetting he was human and ultimately forgetting his balance, but he was working on it and he caught up with Headman Ben in no time at all. "Headman Ben!" his lungs gasped as he grabbed the old black man's arm for support.

"Why, Li'l Massa Bradston, -what's your hurry this morning?" Ben asked rubbing a red gingham hanky to his broad nose.

Beau sized up the frame and contenance of the respected man and looked him square in the eyes, cleared his throat and said, "Mister Wuliku, I understand your boy is missing this morning and I would like to help you find him."

Ben cocked his head. "They'z making you a proper gentleman, isn't they?"

"Yes sir," Beau answered, wishing to keep the old man to the point as time was wasting.

"I 'magine your papa is right when he says the boys are probably just being boys. So never you mind about these matters. The good Lord'll bring the boys home when He's good and ready."

"Yes sir." His mission dashed, Beau kicked a small stone all the way to the barn before picking it up for the day's pocket collection.

A sunning frog found himself terribly exposed in the middle of the boy's path and a frog leg short when it came to out jumping eager hands. Beau stroked his moist head and watched the field crew make their way across the meadow in route to the harvest in progress. The frog seemed as needful for attention as Beau was, and croaked softly in his gentle hands. From the side door to the big house, Beau spied his uncle still dressing as he jogged to join the slaves. Beau was already learning to avoid this strange relation and crouched behind a rotund milk cow as he passed buttoning his shirt. Beau teetered on growing legs that didn't sustain any one position longer than ten seconds on a clock before having a to stretch and as he fell sideways to release a cramp, his frog and fist squished in the thick mud outside the animal pen. Between the back leg and utters of this spotted beast, he watched his uncle look toward the barn and smile for no particular reason. Beau and the cow didn't move and after his uncle had disappeared and Beau extracted his hand from the mud, neither did the nearly forgotten frog. Beau jumped to his feet and raced the creature to the Flint

River's edge where he splashed off the mud and watched disappointingly as the lifeless, yellow belly frog floated away on top of a sluggish current dusted heavily with dogwood pollen.

Beau hated his uncle. He seemed to ruin everything good.

The tips of the long, wide blade grass arched over the slouching bank to be tugged by a tepid river that always had other places it should be wandering. That's the way Beau felt in his world, tucked safely away inside a fifty foot circumference about the front porch, while the brown marsh crickets begged his exploration, just beyond the boundary trees. He skipped a series of flat rocks across the rivulet until it looked as though a lace table cloth had been cut from a dusty, pale fabric to glide o'er a table of rich mahogany graining. The ten year old boy sneezed three times in an instant and thought longingly ahead for the cleansing autumn rains his father seemed to dread out loud at most every meal, until his cotton was dry and packed away in the oversized barn.

Through a portal in the pollen blanket scarcely inching its way through the glen, his itchy eyes stared without blinking, as they did nearly three dozen times each day with attention designed by

laziness over matter and with boredom over thought. His mother had already spent a frustrating summer trying hopelessly to engage his conscience and had more than oft' accused the boy of sleeping with his eyes wide open. So be it unknown to any in his encircled dominion, -that it was in this cold and green-blue state, that he conjured peace from the madness and escape from his captors. His eyes watered and he blinked his heavily lashed eyes into focus.

There, in the pollen window, as the breeze stopped blowing and the birds held their beaks, the swollen face and then the body of a black boy floated to the slimy surface, his eyes and mouth wide open. Beau scrambled backward up the sandy bank unable to coax any air into his lungs for several moments. His lips mouthed the words *Ben's son* but no sound was made. The black boy's body, nearly ashen white already, began to move with the river. His upturned shoulder sliced through the mossy green surface like the fin of a shark Beau had seen in picture books. He had never seen a dead person before; plenty of dead farm animals and a few animal skeletons in the woods, to be sure. But this was somebody he knew, maybe not well, but he had seen him alive which was very much different from the way he was seeing him now. He kept

his eyes on the boy as he floated toward the bend where the river turns back toward the main house. When Beau's brother had died of Scarlet Fever at the age of twelve, Beau was too young to understand life let alone the reality that it eventually ends. He was bundled off to the McPartlin Plantation twelve miles away with his older sister Josephine, one starless, foggy night. He remembered the eery full moon that tried to cut through the mist and oak canopy, -the moon his sister had said was the eye of God seeing everything. Rachel had not yet been born who would later provide the only source of stability in Beau's life. Josephine went a bit crazy for several months and actually never returned to the image of the sister Beau thought he had remembered before his brother's death. What Beau would never discover had nothing to do with his brother but rather with the personification of everything bad that had ever occurred on the Bradston Plantation; - his uncle James, who had raped Josephine and vowed to slit her throat if ever she spoke of the incident that night as her own brother perished in a violent sweat in the adjoining room. Truly it was that which the eye of God must have seen that evening, that disturbed her so profoundly for so very long.

Beau moved to position himself further down the river bank where he could keep watch on the boy's drifting body. Somehow Beau understood that the river conspired to remove all evidence from the Bradston Plantation and that there was likely someone who wanted it that way. He didn't scream for help nor did he make any attempt to intervene. He was peacefully mesmerized with staring at the body as it turned over and over in the slow current. He could tell that the boy wasn't wearing any clothes as his rump would bob up every once and a while like an old hen's brown egg boiling on a stove fire. After a moment, he raced further downstream to where small rocks formed a narrow beach. He waited while his heart thumped uncomfortably in his throat. And he watched as Ben's unlucky son tumbled down the Flint River toward him. At some point in the next ten seconds, Beau's brain dispatched the ten year old into the knee deep waters that had transported centuries of sediment into the lowlands, to retrieve a body his own size, that the lowlands could simply not have. This boy belonged to Headman Ben's family and it was part of the Bradston Plantation. It would be staying here. He reached out to steer the body to shore and was startled by the touch of his skin.

As he pulled the body onto the rocks he remembered his fifth birthday and the smile on this boy's face as he rode the birthday pony intended for Beau. He remembered Reina telling him some years later that her son's birthday was on the same day as his and he had always felt good that at least he had been able to ride the pony that day. Beau was profoundly sad for Ben's family and suddenly very sad for himself. He had often thought about wanting to play games with Ben's son as he was the only boy on the plantation his age. He had even thought they would one day laugh and splash in the Flint together on some unbearably hot summer day, though this was not what he had in mind. Yet each time he mentioned these thoughts to his mother or father, to Reina or Headman Ben, he was discouraged to the point of forbiddance.

And he had heard it all: - *Bradston's don't mix with the coloreds* and - *it's not good for your role development to - our boy wouldn't know how to behave around you white folks* and - *it just wouldn't be proper-none for the both of you to carry on liken you was friends .* - *Libel to upset the balance of things , -that's what it do .* The way Beau saw it now, this colored boy could have probably used another set of eyes looking out for him, even if they were blue or

green. He didn't understand grown-up reasoning much. -Mostly because it never seemed to hold up to what Beau already knew or was about to figure out anyway. He was at that age when he just rolled his eyes a whole lot or stared off into space. He took a deep breath and closed the eyes of his friend who probably had as much use for seeing grown-up things clearly right now as he did. Beau put his fist to the boy's chin and gently pressed it toward his nose until his mouth closed. A good part of the Flint River drained from his puffy lips. Beau had never been this close to Reina's boy before and he was momentarily content just to see what this playmate of his could have looked like. For the first thing, he didn't see how they were all that different. Beau was nearly as dark as the boy after spending all summer in the Georgia sun.

They both had two eyes and a nose, two ears, a mouth, two nipples, belly buttons that stuck out... -okay, well they were a little different down there. Beau checked himself to be sure and conceded that he wasn't nearly as big as Ben's son in the region where his uncle liked to play. He wondered why that was. His uncle James had told him several times that he was growing nicely there and his uncle checked regularly too. Beau looked closer and

saw the blood around some ragged skin and several leeches. This boy's ball sack had been hacked off! Beau jumped back and grabbed himself in sympathy pain. Instantly he wondered if the boy could have hit a stick or a sharp rock in the river? -Or worse, did somebody do this to him? Beau walked away ten steps then back the same ten steps in sudden anger, not sure what to make of any of this. What had this boy been through in order for them to come together at this place? He took a quick breath and closed his eyes feeling as though he were going to throw up if he didn't hold entirely still. He lurched toward some bushes and threw up anyway. Tears threatened to spring from his head surely forced out by the confusion that swelled there, but he stood his ground and refused to cry. Ten year old boys didn't cry on this plantation. On this plantation, ten year old boys were no different from five year old's or two year old's. If there was one rule to be obeyed and five others to fudge on every now and then, it was that boys do not cry. And he didn't neither.

Beau decided that it wasn't doing him nor the colored boy any good to just wait, so he left the river's edge to tell Headman Ben

that he alone had discovered his boy; -or rather, his boy's body, as someone with a knife and an angry heart had cut the *boy* right out of it. With that thought, Beau's gate turned into one of his fast runs, at which he was getting better all the time.

Right as rain, Ben thought to himself. Right as rain? It hadn't rained in Georgia in seven weeks. Those boys weren't yonder playing anymore than the cotton that grew in a straight row between his legs, was going to pick itself. He stretched his aching and sun blistered back into an upright position and squinted into the midday sun. He had twenty-five men, forty women and twenty-eight children out in this heat today, but he should have had 30 chillen of picking age, -thirty. The slave driver James took notice of Ben's break and walked down the row to challenge his pace.

"You missing a boy today, ain't ya, Ben?"

"That's right," Ben bent back over and continued to pick the yellow-white balls from the sun crumbling vines.

"And where do you s'pose he is?" James asked with a crooked grin, grabbing at his manhood to stop an itch.

"Can't find 'em, Driver Jim." Ben paused for a moment wiping the sweat from his brow. A drop fell to his broad foot and vanished instantly in the hot dust that had collected there.

"Tis odd the boy not showing up in the field, knowing, like he does, what happens to nigger slaves that don't show for the day's work." James stated, acting somewhat surprised.

"Yessir." Ben continued picking cotton to avert the eyes of the Driver.

"I see. Well in that case, Headman Ben, I think it only appropriate that you speed up these niggers to make up for that missing boy. He was one quick nigger, that boy was. You tell 'em to work faster, Ben."

Ben cupped his chapped hands around his mouth and hollered in every direction at once with that magical voice of his that sounded like somebody yellin' into an empty rain barrel. Satisfied with his reprimand though troubled by this new information, James walked

back to the trunk of his shade tree next to the fields and continued his whittling. That boy had been very quick, he thought out loud, recalling the chase that had followed his escape last evening. For nearly an hour, James had followed the direction of every twig break and bird cry this side of the Flint. It was only after he'd nearly given up and headed for the big house, that James spotted the young slave taking a piss just beyond the slave quarters. It was then, that he surprised him from behind, slapped his giant hand over his mouth and dragged him kicking into the woods to the bank of the Flint River. The boy was whimpering by the time they entered the water but James knew this black lamb had to be silenced. He had seen and felt too much to remain a boy. He forced his head under the surface and held it there for four or five minutes, long after there had been any struggle. And then, as he had done for more years than he could remember, with every game or livestock kill, he took out his hunting knife and savagely claimed his prize. James had a special place in the forest where he would stash these new editions to his growing collection, perhaps later that very afternoon. He raised his head from his whittling diversion to see his favorite nephew bounding through the cotton

fields. It had been a delight to watch that child grow and James could hardly contain his impatience waiting for him to become a man. The slave driver had been imprisoned on this plantation for nearly fifteen years without contact to the outside world and if it came to it, he would grow a mate from infancy who could return his affections and satisfy his monstrous cravings. Then he would feel human again.

Beau, scarcely winded from his flight across the plantation, tugged at Ben's tired, but muscular arm. "Headman Ben. You have to come with me right away." Ben hesitated, looking over at the slave driver who had started to get up. "Uncle James!" the ten year old yelled. "Father needs to see Headman Ben immediately. I've been sent to get him." He turned back around to the aging black man and looked him in the eyes. "It's your boy, Ben. Come with me." As they left the field, Beau looked over his shoulder to make sure his uncle didn't follow them. The driver looked nervous but he was already trying to recover the field momentum, that had come to a near standstill with Beau's arrival. The Widow Clark would have left her skin behind to pick cotton and done without it

the rest of her days if only she could have gotten out of that field to look for her boy. The waiting was agony and she feared the sun would turn her mad before it set.

Willy's eyes opened reluctantly, stuck together by a mask of mucous, river algae, cave dirt and sweat. It had been a nearly impassable night of fevers and shaking and pain that a ten year old could never have imagined, but at least for the moment, he had succeeded in erasing the details from his consciousness. He sat up suddenly to see where the devil he was and gasped in pain from the weight on his bottom. Oh, his bottom; -he remembered after all.

And he hadn't died as he surely thought he would. He decided to stand to relieve the pressure on his backside and realized his nakedness and walked to the wall to pee. It hurt. He could see the sun of a new day pouring into the entrance of his hideaway and wondered what panic he had caused by not being in his bed or in the field today. His mama had been begging the Master to allow her boy to work with her in the big house. He knew that his disappearance would jeopardize things. Older slaves got whipped

if they missed a day in the field. Then Willy figured that iff'n' the slave driver laid his eyes on the likes of Willy, he'd kill 'em for running away. Hell, Willy spit on the dirt floor of the cave, he was good as dead. He knew in that instant that he couldn't go back. He'd wait for night to come and he'd go. He didn't know where, but he'd go.

Along the wall he spotted a long shelf that had been carved in the hardened clay and on this shelf were several eggs of different sizes. Some were very large. He picked one up and examined it. It was shriveled and caved in on one side. It wasn't like any eggs Willy had ever seen before and he couldn't imagine what had been born from them. Some were smaller and looked like dried plums that had been sitting in the sun a whole summer long. He quickly lost interest beyond the fact that someone else had been here before him. He walked to the edge of the cave and to the long circle of light that pushed its way inside like a parlor rug in the big house. He hadn't actually realized how badly he smelled until he got his lungs full of fresh air and could make a comparison. He saw the dried blood on his legs where it had mixed with his own

end and he saw the river. Willy wasn't much for looking bad under any condition and he walked cautiously out from between the trees into the day. Through a bog of mud he trudged, watching his footprints disappear behind him. The mud felt cool and safe but he had his eyes on the river. He waded in until the water lapped at his chest and he began washing himself. He felt instantly better though he kept a constant watch on the trees and the trail for any movement there. Willy knew the river and he knew how to swim across it when he had to. And he knew how to hide under the grassy banks when he sensed danger like he did last night. His mama had always told him he had the ghosts of many ancestors trapped inside him showing him the way. Willy knew to believe it. Now, he had no choice but to trust it.

The air was thick with the scent of freedom. Willy had escaped the arms of the Slave Driver and tonight, he would escape again. But he needed food and he needed clothes. He was hungry. He crawled from the cool river and into the warm mud bog where the wet earth swallowed his body as efficiently as it had removed his footprints. Willy allowed the mud to find every crevice of his ten

year old body and the mud excited him. The part that made him a boy, became hard and anxious and as he pressed it deeper into the inviting clay, he remembered the slave driver. Willy began to mimic his anger and the animal like ways he had used his man parts on him and the sheep outside the barn. His head stretched into the sunshine as his black bottom and legs drove deeper and deeper into the soft river bank. Willy was alive with feelings he had never felt before, feelings the slave driver had taught him, and he pounded his body into the earth until it felt as though it would break into a hundred pieces if he didn't stop but he couldn't stop. His eyes rolled back into his craning head as the earth sucked the boy out of his heaving body leaving behind the shell of a man. He spasmed in short breaths trying to inflate his new lungs. He was alive.

A branch snapped and sounded like thunder. Willy didn't move. His eyes strained to cut through the timber, to see the animal or man who could make such a noise but saw nothing. Slowly he brought handfuls of mud to his face to cover his forehead and cheeks and chin. He had discovered the clothes that would get him

through the day and into the night. Still, he scarcely moved.

There! At the entrance to the cave, barely six leaps away, he spotted the Slave Driver as he ducked his head to go inside. Willy slowly lowered his head until his chin and mouth disappeared in the muck. His eyes closed to mere slits until the whites had vanished and he stared like a frog in the midday sun. In a minute, the driver emerged and hurried back down the trail without any interest in the river, in the mud, in the sun, the frogs, the trees.

Willy listened as sticks and rocks signaled the driver's retreat back into the woods. The sun had started to dry the mud on his backside, but he didn't dare move, not even when his skin started to itch beneath the baking mud. The woods had now betrayed him twice but he was mastering the art of staying still.

For nearly a half hour longer he laid there in that bog until he feared it would harden solid and trap him. He pried his body from the wet clay and stood, fascinated by his transformation. He walked a few yards to the trees and posed before a thicket of slender trunks, sure he could confuse Nature, by the way he looked like a trunk himself. He laughed, feeling very much like a boy

again, and sat on a large rock where he carelessly but helplessly fell asleep in the strong, yellow sun.

After pointing Headman Ben in the direction of his son's body, Beau doubled back to watch his uncle from the trees next to the cotton fields. Even for a ten year old, he knew his uncle pretty well and could usually tell when something disturbed him. He hadn't seen him for more than five minutes when he had gone to the fields to get Ben earlier, but he had a strange feeling that his uncle just might have something to do with the disappearance of those boys. Beau was beginning to gather the pieces.

Remembering that last night he had refused his uncle's advances for the first time, causing his uncle to leave the house in a rage, Beau deducted that with the discovery of the boy with his privates cut, all of this madness could possibly be his own fault or, at least now, had become his responsibility. He followed his uncle north along the Flint, keeping a safe distance between them. It was odd enough that the Slave Driver left the slaves unattended in the fields, especially in Headman Ben's absence, but his uncle was

running through the woods like a frightened swamp deer and it was everything Beau could do to keep up. Fortunately, Beau knew the river trails well and the river even better. After an hour he realized the trail was about to end at the river's edge and his uncle would be forced to return back or he could cross the river to pick up the trail on the other side. Across the river wasn't Bradston property and Beau had only explored there once before. The river would be easy crossing this late in the summer, he reckoned, but hid himself in some bushes just off the trail about 200 yards short, just in case his uncle doubled back without warning. He didn't have to wait long either before his uncle strolled by whistling a common field tune as though he had been out for his Sunday walk. Beau sat still as a rock for several minutes before he was satisfied that the forest had become quiet and safe enough for him to resume his investigation. He noticed that the heel from his right boot had fallen off, which would cause him to walk funny, but he didn't delay and headed down the trail to the point where it disappeared into muddy shallows fed by the passing river. His greenish-blue eyes braved the brightly glistening water to search for the second body which Beau sensed was around there somewhere. He waded

in until the water passed his knees and he combed the banks on either side finding nothing. He was perspiring and the water, ever so slightly cooler than the day was hot, felt wonderful. Beau eased back dipping his whole body in, clothes and all, until the Flint gurgled past his lifted chin while the rest of Georgia baked beneath the sun. In an instant he could have forgotten the day and the time and the reason why he had come to this particular stretch in the river, had the reason not hauled open and sneezed less than eight feet away! The Little Bradston jumped from fright sending a splash of river into all directions including his eyes. He heard a yell and rubbed his eyes in time to see an old log stand itself up on the rock next to him before running into the trees. Beau scrambled out of the water holding onto his britches. He spotted the log as it darted from tree to rock and he took chase. It was a marvelous discovery and whether this log was a wild boy or a stray Indian, Beau was determined to catch it as it dashed in large circles about the end of the trail. The missing heel on his right boot made him faster than he had ever been before and he found he was gaining on his prize until suddenly, it vanished! Beau slipped to a stop in the river mud where the chase had began and shot looks in every

direction. His heart thumped madly and a smile crept onto his determined face. He was looking for a wild boy or an Indian. He needed to be looking for a log. He blinked his eyes and searched again, very carefully. There, to his left was the only tree in the forest with shoulders raising up and down as his muddy chest filled and expelled rapidly. Beau slowly turned to face him, avoiding any sudden movement, as though he could calm the creature.

Willy had only known such fear once before in his life and even that experience was scarcely twelve hours old. Still, short on direction in these matters and out of breath, he wouldn't move until Master's boy moved. He was terribly anxious to discover the character of this white boy as he had long watched him from a cautious distance and realized early that he didn't seem to have the hate of his father in his eyes. But he knew how quickly the eyes of the white folk could change to rage. He swiped his dry lips with a pink tongue and tasted the mud there and recalled in that instant that he was still naked save for the mud. Embarrassed, his hands flinched to cover his boy things causing Master's boy to jump suddenly, just before he gave away his first smile of the

confrontation.

Beau thought he recognized the eyes of Ben's family under all that river mud but he couldn't be sure anymore. He thought he had been sure that he'd pulled Ben's son from the Flint earlier that morning and his heart raced as he recalled Ben telling his father on the porch, that two boys were missing, not one. It seemed silly to just be standing there staring at each other and when the other boy moved his hands to cover himself, it seemed even funnier still.

Beau took a slight step toward him hoping to confirm his identity.

Willy took a solitary step backward reminding himself that his instinct to investigate would need to respect his instinct to flee, if cornered. He could see the Bradston boy shaking behind an inquisitive smile and he relaxed slightly allowing his lungs to breathe again. In ten years he had never stood face to face with this boy that had been born on the same day. He wanted so desperately to talk, -to ask the questions he'd long daydreamed of asking. He wanted to run again, to chase and be chased until the sun slipped down the other side of Georgia and it would be time to go home for supper. Willy knew in his heart that this is what boys were

supposed to do even though he had nothing whatsoever in his lifetime to base that on. Instead, he was hungry and his bottom-side ached and these were things that a ten year old shouldn't have to worry about.

Ultimately Beau spoke, with a voice unsure of his years. "Do you know who I am?" He asked.

Willy shook his head yes. Beau took one step closer. Willy stepped back.

"Do I know who you are?" he squinted raising his forehead into deep rust curls.

Willy shook his head yes and stepped back again, for good measure. He found himself pressed against the trees leading into the cave.

"I would never think to hurt you," Beau struggled for reassurance.

Willy had been hurt by absolutely everyone all his life and wondered how anybody could even make such a promise. He stepped back again.

Then from out of the trees and from behind the sun came a voice so horrifying, so bass and defiled, that it flushed the blood from Willy's head and he collapsed backward into the mouth of the cave. Beau shot a lightning glance toward the trail coming out of the trees and spied his yellow-toothed uncle half-smiling as he did only when he knew he was about to play dirty with his nephew. "I caught you, didn't I," he grumbled waving the heel from Beau's boot. "You followed me out here didn't you?" He approached grabbing Beau by the front of his shirt. Beau could tell that he was nervous and angry and he stuttered when he answered.

"No. I-I- I just went walkin'. That's all."

"You're lying to your uncle!" James raised the boy from his feet and stood him on a large, river-smoothed rock. Their eyes were on the same level. The rancid smell of bourbon rolled from his dripping tongue and Beau turned his head away. "You've been snooping, haven't you?" You followed me to the cave, am I right?" His uncle raised his voice and shook his hand holding the boy's clothes. Beau glanced over to the trees to make sure his friend had gotten away. From this new vantage he could see the entrance to

the cave his uncle spoke of and trembled. "I am right!" his uncle deducted by the look on his face and the direction in which it stared. "Well, let's go in together and see what we can find-!" His uncle yanked him from the boulder and began to drag him toward the cave.

"Wait!" Beau screamed, before he had ever thought about what to say next. "That's not why I came out here." His uncle relaxed his grip on the collar and Beau proceeded to smooth out the material as his explanation developed. "I followed you, yes. I, I was afraid you were mad at me for not letting you play last night. I didn't want you to be angry." Beau bit his bottom lip for fear the truth would leap out of his throat like vomit from a thousand fevers. His uncle stopped and turned around very slowly. His teeth grew to the size of Indian corn in the Fall as his free hand sailed from no where to cradle Beau's crotch with a firm and approving squeeze.

"Is that so?" the whiskey-soaked relation whined in a gentler register. "Well, that changes things doesn't it, young man?"

"Yessir," Beau cringed.

"Then I'd be honored to show you my cave." His uncle gestured broadly toward the concealed entrance beyond the guarding trees and Beau took a step back.

"Uncle James," he gasped. "I don't think I would like going inside a cave," he panicked. "Let's do our business out here next to the river."

His uncle picked him up in laughter and carried him toward the cave. "Don't be a girl, Beauregard. I know what you have between those legs of yours." He fondled roughly. It took every muscle and pore in Beau's nervous body to resist his will to fight but he knew he needed to distract his uncle by providing him pleasures if Ben's son was to make it out of the cave alive. Beau laughed loudly as he forced himself to play out a struggle in his uncle's strong arms. He wanted his frightened friend to hear their approach from where he surely trembled inside the cave.

Willy inched his way into the deepest recess of the hole until he was crouched down in standing water. The sound of the driver's voice dispatched him in a rage that could kill with bare hands, but he waited, taking quick sips of air between heart beats. He could

see the daylight streaming in angled lines through the entrance. He pondered but could scarce remember the night he had passed there, in and out of fevers and delirium. Voices grew closer and he could hear the boy, strangely laughing. His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he saw, all too clearly as the driver laid Master's boy on the cave floor and lowered his age ten overalls. Willy withdrew another foot and found the water deeper and cooler as it penetrated the muddy sheath that had been his second skin, -his second chance. Would he be blessed with a third?

"It's been several weeks and I know that you are bigger than the last time we played," his uncle fiddled with his under pants and Beau was embarrassed that Ben's son would know this, see this. It never occurred to him that Ben's son had watched he and his uncle in their games before, on a rainy night from the muddy Bradston porch, nor that Willy understood better than most, the helplessness of the vile situation. "Ah, yes. Much bigger as I had suspected," his uncle praised as Beau lowered his under-drawers and flung them to the back of the cave where he hoped his friend could make use of them in his nakedness. The driver chuckled in a low voice

at his nephew's apparent willingness after so many years of frustrating resistance, and buried his head between the boy's white legs, sniffing voraciously. He tugged at his own pants to free the monster there. "Why isn't your little man strong?" he prodded with clumsy fingers.

"Dunno," Beau responded clearing his throat. He turned his head and prepared his mental escape as he had always done, removing himself from the predicament with thoughts of butterflies and bullfrogs awaiting his capture. He squinted into the blackness at the back of the cave and thought he saw the white of his shorts slowly disappear. Then, his uncle did something he had never done and put his mouth over his little man. Beau gasped from the sensation and began to squirm. His uncle held him down while his mouth explored the wonders of a ten year old. In no time, Beau was *strong* down there, the way his uncle liked him. He tried frantically not to think about his uncle's yellow teeth or stinky whiskey breath, but it was impossible.

"How does that feel, Beauregard?" his uncle asked wiping his grinning mouth with the back of his hand.

"O-kay, I guess." Beau wasn't sure how he felt. He thought perhaps he would throw-up and feel better, but he didn't. His uncle straddled him below the waist and kneeled tall above him. His hand was now touching his own business and rubbing it back and forth.

"I 'magine you heard about that missing nigger boy this morning," his other hand moved the tender skin of his nephew's boyhood up and down.

"I found him, you know." Beau volunteered.

"So I heard. So I heard." His uncle paused a moment. "Did you notice anything strange about the body, -in this area?" he pinched Beau between the legs.

"No sir." Beau fidgeted beneath the weight of his uncle knowing that if he knew to ask about that, he knew a lot more. His mood began to change and Beau grew increasingly nervous.

"But now that the boy is found, everything will get back to the way it was, huh?"

"I reckon it will." His uncle sent a finger between Beau's legs

and pushed around a bit. "I reckon it will," he repeated as his nephew winced.

Willy grabbed the boy's underwear and slipped back even further into the water until his eyes and nose were just above the surface like a gator on Lower Line Creek. What body was they talking about? He had to think hard for a moment to make sure they wasn't talking about him and that he was still alive and not dreaming all of this. But why hadn't Master's boy told the driver about him hiding there? Why wasn't his folks tearing up the woods to find him? He figured that if they found a body and things would get back to normal like the Bradston boy said, then none of the rest of this mattered, and he could go back home. He allowed his head to gently slip under the water. When he opened his eyes there he could see light coming from somewhere. He stretched his leg toward it and thought there might be a passage into the river if he could just hold his breath long enough. He let his head float back into the cave where he quietly rubbed his eyes and drew a series of deep breaths into pulsing lungs. He listened to

the driver's voice and managed patience to reserve revenge for another day. He worried about the Master's boy even though he couldn't help him now and it seemed as though that ten year old was in more control than he had been. It was possible that Willy would never understand the sacrifice this white boy was making for him and while this weighed heavy on his conscience, it would have to wait for another day.

"Now put your mouth on it, boy. -Just like I did to you." The driver held his nephew's head at an angle most uncomfortable from where he sat upon his tiny chest. Willy watched the boy shake his head. "Put your mouth on it!" He yelled, forcing his man into the boy's astonished face. Willy shut his eyes and filled his lungs praying there would be a passage from this madness for both of them. He allowed his body to sink into the hole and with eyes wide open, he felt his way through the narrow opening that seemed for sometime to be getting smaller. In the blink of his eyes he knew he could panic. The underwear in his left hand caught a rock and Willy tugged to free it, unwilling to let go. With another blink, he couldn't turn back. Yet another blink and the passage spilled

into the open river where he paddled to the life-giving surface. He would be spared again.

"Thank you, Jesus," he managed to gasp before hitting his head with the dullest thud against a grand river rock in the middle of the only rapids on the entire length of river. His face flopped back into the water as the current sped his tumbling body to a sand bar on the far side. It wasn't for another minute, when the river bottom began to rise beneath him, that he awoke on his knees, choking and coughing. He instantly checked his hand and the under britches were still there. He pulled them onto his legs and raced through the forest toward home.

"That's more like it," the uncle grunted.

Four

The next five years were remarkable and sleepy in a Georgia sort of way. While the cotton surplus of earlier years headed for disaster with the leeching and erosion of the sterile red clay, William John Bradston the Second, turned to distilling brandy from the peach, apple and cherry orchards planted nearly twenty years before, between the Flint River and Line Creek behind the plantation house. Cotton still managed to come in at 520,000 bales for Georgia that year, in 1858, despite the dead soil that now plagued three-quarters of the state. And as more and more of the neighboring plantation owners approached desolation, the more and more appealing the taste of Bradston Brandies became to them. But even the liquor didn't numb the losses for farmer McPartlin, who had shared the West Bradston Plantation border of Line Creek for thirty years. They say Uncle James, of all people,

found him hanging by his Irish neck, just the other day, from a Live Oak Tree in front of the old McPartlin House. Beau often wondered what else his sick uncle had discovered hanging on the fair-headed man. The two had seemed peculiarly close after his wife and children had left him to move back to Savannah and as his drunken uncle was not as obliged to take service from his nephew as he had been during the younger years, Beau reasoned he was getting on with someone somewhere else, -which was fine by him.

The junior Bradston had grown amazingly fast following that incident in the cave five years before and while time may have stood still on that central Georgia plantation, Beau Bradston had not. Nearly six of the king's feet tall on his fifteenth birthday, Beau was becoming a fine looking man. His red hair had burned in the field sun to a roasted auburn while his eyes had wrestled blue for green over the years to now cast purposefully somewhere between. In deep thought, he often set his jaw at an angle not square with his mouth and the grin that resulted there, bore his popularity with the frequently visiting lady friends of his mother

and sisters. His broad shoulders and back had been crafted by hard work in the fields where he had chosen to spend his daylight hours toiling in the relentless sun where he could watch the sweat-glistening muscles and the determination of Headman Ben's mysterious but headstrong seed, Willy. For reasons, Beau had not been able to understand nor reconcile, the friendship that seemed inevitable five years earlier, had not transpired. Their lives surely conspired to keep them apart. Reina had pulled her son from the big house to work in the fields with his father, almost overnight.

Any of Beau's early attempts to catch the slave boy alone were dashed by Headman Ben or his own father who had become more adamant about the necessary division between the white and black, free and slave classes. Beau did not care for the brandy monsters that had invaded his life. But brandy was money and cotton, of late, wasn't. The cotton weevil had claimed an early harvest at the Bradston plantation and brandy was the only hope to make things better, or at least make them seem like they was. At night, working late hours in the cellar of the house for the biggest monster of them all, the young Bradston carried cask after cask of fruit alcohol from cellar to wagon, improving his arms and

widening his chest which seemed to be of significant interest to his tutor, whom he secretly longed to impress. In the absence of his mother and father who had never taken a dotting interest in his development and the shadow of his uncle who had suddenly stopped, Beau struggled to catch somebody's attention. Big things were happening and they were missing it.

Twenty-two year old Magnus Telfair, had been dispatched from Augusta in the Spring of 1856 following a return from very successful studies in New England, to provide lesson instruction to the blessed Bradston children. While his avocational preference would have been to be a school master in comfortable and respected Augusta, he lacked the age and maturity expected of such positions, and had been advised to gain experience as well as discipline, in the interior of the state. He immediately found the plantation master to be a drunkard, his daughters to be frightfully above their upbringing, and Martha a little too involved in her adventure and romance novels to exercise a hand in family matters, but Magnus also discovered that he did favor the boy who seemed to go much out of his way to please the family tutor. In the

beginning, he had done well to fight his affection and interest in the red-headed child but as the boy grew and responded to his lessons with an almost passionate voracity, Magnus had become increasingly disturbed by his feelings. Unfortunately, these feelings often discovered manifest in odd and awkward compliments he would pay about the boy's physical development, which Magnus regretted but could not prevent. It was his reward at the end of every six, well behaved weeks, that he be allowed to return to Augusta for a weekend with his subversive and somewhat controversial school friends, Lee and Issac, more affectionately known, at least on every sixth weekend, as Lady Everlee Chartreuse and The Dresser. With a wink and a seven hour wagon ride back and forth, Magnus was certain that he could continue to distinguish between his two very different worlds.

The Reverend Doctor Charles Colcock Jones, had made a mighty powerful name for himself throughout the whole of the South and if ever there was a sign of the wondrous miracles from God, it was his visit to the Bradston Plantation in the Spring of 1854. Folks everywhere called him the *Apostle to the Blacks* and

while he mostly made the plantation lords nervous, he had a way of calmin' the coloreds that nobody could explain. When the Reverend Jones pulled into Fayetteville County, Headman Ben's boy hadn't spoken for six months except'n his sleep and Reina was convinced sure as fire that the devil done won her boy over.

'Course Ben figured it was on account of the murder of Widow Clark's boy that his own son would hold silence all those months and he learned to respect the grief his boy seemed to be carrying.

He and Reina would listen in on him when he was sleeping to learn the answers to the riddle that was their boy. When he spoke it was like he was having a conversation with a good friend of his, like the Widow Clark's boy, but in his sleep, Willy called this friend of his *Li'l Massa*. In the morning when Reina would ask her child who the *Li'l Massa* was, he'd stare at her with those pumpkin colored eyes and say nothing. Every day, for six months before the Reverend Jones arrived, the Second Timamalo Wuliku, said nothing.

On the rainiest night in March, Headman Ben and his wife, with one of their hands on each of the boy's shoulders, walked him to

the barn where the Reverend Jones had called a meeting with the slaves. They were looking for answers but would settle for a blessing. It would be the first time in Ben's memory that the slaves had been allowed to meet together in one place. Master Bradston didn't much like it when the Negroes got together, so he prohibited it. It must have been another sign of Reverend Jones' amazing grace that he done talked the plantation owner out of the use of his barn for the evening. Ben had a feeling it would be a good night for a few miracles. He patted his boy's head as he introduced him to the Reverend Dr. Charles Colcock Jones. The Reverend done put the hand of Jesus on the boy's head and said, tell me your name boy. Willy spoke his name and his mama rocked back. "Sweet Jesus!" she shouted and the rafters shook with thunder. A few of the women folk passed out cold on the barn floor and the Reverend looked upward, his hand still gripping Willy's head.

"In the name of Jesus, I cast the demons out of this boy's body that he may live and glorify you, Lord!" Again, thunder shook the barn and spooked the animals outside. The Reverend told everyone to gather 'round for his message and to hear the Word of

God. After he spoke and the singing got going, he pulled Willy aside and asked him what had been troubling him all those months.

Willy announced to the Reverend Doctor Charles Colcock Jones, that he had seen the face of God on the head of Widow Clark's dead boy before they buried him by the river, and that the sight of it had seized his voice box. He went on to explain to the preacher that he believed the face of that violated ten year old body should have been his own, but when he looked into the open box and it wasn't, he figured that it must've been a miracle if not the very face of God, Himself. The Spirit of the Lord done washed clean through that boy and he kept right on talking just like he'd been saving all those words for just that moment. The good Reverend took advantage of the first breath Willy had taken in several sentences to compare him to Jacob. "In Genesis, Chapter 32, Verse 30: it says, - *'for I have seen God face to face...'*" But before he could finish the scripture, Willy finished it for him.

" *'-And my life is preserved,'*" he delivered, folding his hands and bowing his head.

It seemed safe to any observer in the church that the Reverend

Doctor Charles Colcock Jones looked rightly astonished.

"You know the Bible, boy?" he asked in high notes not of a farming man. With an outstretched arm he drew Headman Ben and Reina closer to him. Together they encircled the troubled boy.

"No sir." Willy continued to look down.

"Look at me boy. Just then you finished a scripture I had started." The preacher looked to the parents. "Are you reading him the Bible at home?"

Headman Ben grew flush. "No sir," he admitted in shame and the Reverend could tell he spoke the mysterious truth.

"How else is there to explain this then?" The Holy Man crouched down to Willy's level looking him straight in the eyes with a hand to steady the boy's chin. "Unless the boy is studying on his own...like it says in the Book of Proverbs, Chapter 9, Verse 17: *"Stolen waters are sweet and..."*

"- And, bread eaten in secret is pleasant ," Willy added. Reina steadied herself on her husband's shoulder and the Reverend burst into spontaneous clapping.

"How delightful to have a scholar among us on this rainy night," the visitor had commented in a loud voice to draw the crowds near.

And while Willie was delighted to have the burden of silence lifted from him, he was peacefully disturbed by the new manifestation that had taken its place, which he could no more explain than could the visiting man of God.

In the months that followed Reverend Colcock Jones' revival, Willy received a lot of attention from the other slave families who mostly wanted blessings or cures for what ailed them. It was never as though Willy knew what he was doing and aside from finishing the passages that somebody else would start, Willy never remembered the scripture numbers and he couldn't recite a full passage by himself, even if it was one he'd already done. After a while, when folks discovered they could get no more from the boy, the attention he was given began to decrease. People don't hold interest in a miracle they can't understand if it doesn't give them something back and after a year or so, Willy was returned to his silence. In the years that followed, the Reverend Doctor Charles Colcock Jones visited the Bradston-Fayetteville Plantation two

more times, each visit a little more concerned that his prodigy well was running dry. Anymore, the scriptures weren't something Willy thought about or had the call to practice daily. At the age of fifteen, all Willy could think about was freedom. And in his field meditation, he was just as everyone else; he had no use for a miracle unless it could get him something *he* truly wanted.

Matters had gotten worse for the slaves from where Willy saw things. The Driver, who could never know nor be forgiven the truth of that night five years ago, turned more into an animal every day. The breath jumped out of Willy's lungs each time they came within five feet of each other and had it not been for the year Willy spent delivering the Word of God, Willy's size would have overtaken his sense of good and there would have been one less mouth to feed and listen to, on that plantation. Every bit as tall as the driver was stupid, Willy knew that he might never be free of the state of Georgia but he would be free of Driver James. He had the hands that would see to that dream. And every time the driver called Willy by his nickname the *Nigger Prophet*, Willy would grin, mostly cause he could see the future; -the future of the slave

driver anyway.

He had never known how best to thank Massa's son for his sacrifice that day in the cave, what with him not speaking until the preacher arrived, but he knew just as sure as his teeth had been forced down into the earth by the weight of that devil driver, -one day he would know how to convey his gratitude and Massa's little man would know how to accept it. Until then, he could wait and he could prepare.

It was early Fall in cotton country when the brilliant yellows and rusts and reds and oranges of the air were usually offset by the white cotton clouds perched on withered stalks in the dried fields.

Every year for at least the past six, Master Bradston had promised to give the weary fields a rest and he had bargained again to the crop gods if only they would give him one more bountiful yield.

He had long reasoned that if he could just surplus half of a harvest in the barn to get through next season, he could be true to the gods and true to the earth, both of whom threatened to abandon him.

But this season, with the efficiency of the weevil, they did.

Bradston was forced to sell off slave after slave to survive. To finally ease the madness, he even trimmed several acres off the plantation in order to buy more brandy bottles, build more liquor crates, and hold any prayer for salvation for a profitable distilling harvest. And even though the liquor profits could have been even higher if only the distiller and his slave driving brother-in-law could limit their own consumption, Bradston knew that the following season, he would be forced by hardship to plant again, to distill again, -to drink again. Georgia dealt him few choices.

The white women of the plantation were buzzing like fat honey bees during hive building time. Josephine, the oldest Bradston child would be married on the plantation in two weeks. Her suitor was the portly and life-loving son of Georgia's territorial vice-governor, the Honorable Jonathan Wilkontny. Mark Wilkontny had been raised in politics and even pursued law at some fancy college in New England though he elected not to practice it professionally once he returned to the South. He was a fair hair shorter than Josephine which should have complicated their eventual union, but he was entitled to more money than Josephine's

father had ever seen and that had a way of improving his stature in the eyes of many. Beau couldn't determine if his sister was actually in love, but the couple laughed until well into most evenings which Beau took as the first of many signs.

Magnus, the tutor had been moved into Beau's bedroom so that Mark could spend the evenings at the Bradston-Fayetteville Plantation during the weeks preceding the big day. Beau liked Mark very much and was glad to have him as part of the family.

He was one of the few people that could make him laugh, and not just laugh, but holler in fits when the joke was particularly funny.

But what Beau respected most was that Mark didn't seem intimidated by his soon to become father-in-law, and of all his traits, Beau hoped most to learn from that one. Sharing his bedroom with Magnus wasn't going to be bad either, as far as he was concerned. It was sure to provide him round the clock attention, for which, he was adolescently desperate. The shock to both boys came, however, when Beau's single bed was replaced with a wider one.

"Your grandparents are coming from Augusta for the wedding

and they won't sleep in the same bed. It's only temporary," Martha explained to both of them after interrupting the day's lesson. The blood rushed from Mr. Telfair's face as she left the parlor. Beau looked up from his mathematics text with a grin.

"I don't snore, if that's what you're so worried about," the student offered.

"You do so," his younger sister, Rachel, argued.

"Quiet, quiet," the tutor warned. "Back to your lessons!"

Magnus rose from the table and walked to the side window. He couldn't help but wonder what the Lady Everlee Chartreuse would have to say about these arrangements, and that frightened him.

Reina had known a lot of pain in her forty-three years and carried most of it with her each of her days, so she found it terribly hard to be acting all happy around the Bradston's on account of this wedding. The slave woman was cursed with a heart too big to wish evil on anybody and while she had it better than most slaves on the plantation, she would have no part in her Master's

happiness, even if she did practically raise the bride by herself. -
No. Massa Bradston done sold her oldest boy, which she hadn't
seen since, and he put the devil in her husband's head to 'llo' half
of Line Creek to flow into their baby girls' lungs. And recent, she
done heard Ben talking to the driver about all Massa's hardship and
how Ben's own back wouldn't be supporting many more harvests
and Massa needin' a 'placement real soon. Ben feared Massa
would sell him further down the Flint iff' he saw a 'portunity.

No. She only had two babies now, and she was saving all her
blessings for them.

She often thought too much and today, doing the laundry on the
back stoop of the plantation house, was no different. Sometimes
her breathing got to be so aggravated that she could work herself
into a frightful dizzy spell. Sometimes Reina even lost her balance
and fell, but today, as she was sitting in the sun, rubbing the soapy
linens against the tin washboard, she realized there wouldn't be far
to fall no more. She'd already sunk down 'bout as far as she could
go without becoming a grub maggot for scraps.

It would be time for Rose to be takin' a husband soon. Iff' she

didn't come up with one on her own, Massa would surely be stepping right in to pick one for her. It wouldn't be like him to waste not one minute of her child-bearing years. He done never gave those fields of his a rest 'tween seasons and he wasn't about willin' to give the slave women a rest neither, even if it meant he had to put babies inside 'em hisself. She had been counting on her daughter's union with the Widow Clark's boy 'fore the accident. He wasn't near as smart as her Willy though he was three years older too, but she knew he would have treated Miss Rose right by God, which made her all the angrier that God took him. She worried too about her boy. When Willy was still working with her in the big house, she could keep him frail and unnoticeable but being in the fields for these past five years had made him tremendous strong and of good stock. Master would surely come calling 'round the time of Willy's next birthday. Slave boys were considered men at sixteen and slave men were expected to be makin' slave babies. Reina knew that her boy was made for bigger things somehow. And still she could do nothin' about nothin'.

It wasn't like Beau to fuss over getting to bathe but after dinner and his chores in the brandy cellars were finished, he took over the bathing room and it wasn't his scheduled night. For years, the girls had bathed on Saturdays, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays while Beau, his father and lately Magnus, shared the same barrel water on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Beau often bathed in the Flint when he found himself offensive after a day in the fields or a particularly damp night in the cellars, but this was a Wednesday and he had no business bathing in the house. His future brother-in-law, however, had the entire family engaged with another of his many long and hilarious stories in the side parlor, and Beau reluctantly stole away. Magnus had already gone to bed immediately following dinner with complaints of a headache and Beau was anxious to join him, though he didn't know the reasons why exactly. Beyond curiosity and a drive to win his tutor's round the clock praise and admiration, Beau had not considered the motives his uncle might have had in the same situation. Magnus had yet to excite Beau like that and yet there had been something, almost like strings, between them for over two years now. Beau appraised himself in the dressing mirror. It was very strange to be

bigger and taller and wider and longer, but most of all, it was strange just being older. He made a playful face and bounded off to his bedroom.

Magnus had decided it would be best to feign unconsciousness and pretended to be sleeping soundly when he heard the door to the bedroom creak slowly open. He feared his shaking might reveal his nervousness but he quickly settled into long, relaxing breaths as he felt the covers pull back and the fifteen year old climb into bed next to him. For five minutes neither of them stirred, flinched nor scarcely breathed. Then Magnus suddenly and unintentionally crunched down on a peppermint candy he had been sucking to freshen his breath; -surely another sign of his chronic impatience.

"Are you awake, Magnus?" the student asked.

"No," the tutor answered.

Beau nudged a leg across the imaginary boundary that separated them, connecting with the long flannel of his tutor's sleeping gown.

"You are awake and you're going to absolutely roast in that night shirt of yours. You should really sleep in your underpants like I

do. It's better for your system."

"My system is just fine but I most sincerely thank you for your concern. Now, good night!" With a smile concealed by darkness, Magnus turned his body on it's side away from his bedmate.

"I'm telling you," Beau insisted, "it's August in Georgia, there's another body heating the bed tonight...you're going to be too hot!"

With that argument stated, Beau bounced across the bed to straddle his tutor to wrestle him out of his bedclothes. Tiny fragments of peppermint candy hit the wooden floor as all the air Magnus had held tightly within his aching lungs, expelled under the pressure of that six foot distraction of his. He tried to wiggle his body from the jaws of a vice but found the boy's touch igniting. He made concerted effort to keep from laughing out loud as he struggled to overcome the attacker.

"This is most inappropriate," he was finally able to utter in a reprimanding whisper with his face inches from that of his pupil.

His eyes widened in mock defiance as they gazed betrayingly into the desperate eyes of a redheaded boy innocently cast in moonlight but bathed in the heady scents of a full grown man.

In a move more revealing of his boyhood, Beau reached between the legs of his tutor and grasped the pole that hardened there.

"Something doesn't think this is so inappropriate," he countered with a grin as big as the tension throbbing between them. Once Beau's cheeks caved into two irresistible dimples and he tightened his grip, the tutor closed his eyes with reluctant abandon allowing their heads to collide in the first kiss to mark the boy's coming of age.

Beau hadn't kissed anything beyond his mother's powdered cheek and he didn't really know what prompted his need to kiss his tutor now, but his whole soul seemed drawn toward the mouth that had spoken and taught, smiled and frowned, praised and cautioned him for the past year and a half. He knew at that moment that he had always been drawn to it and now that it seemed the quickest route to his tutor's heart, he employed his tongue to get even further. The tutor moaned with pleasure and as it had always been Beau's will to please him, he found encouragement to probe further and harder still.

Magnus managed to free his hands from the sheets that detained

him to firmly immobilize Beau's head. He pushed it away from his mouth to speak but words weren't available. His eyes darted from Beau's eyes to his mouth and motionless tongue a half dozen times before his arms cooperated, returning his mouth to Beau's.

Beau adjusted his position to bring his midsection to press on top of his teacher's flannel mound. Again, the air forced it's way past the tutor's lips this time to expel in his student's mouth. Beau silenced his conflicting protestations with redirected lips and push after push with his sturdy hips. The sensation ricocheted through the fifteen year old's body like a musket ball fired into a rock ravine. He was sweating awkwardly in the moonlight and his breathing was almost as if he had some diabolical pneumonia and every breath needed to be coaxed from deep within his chest. He knew his heart must have swelled like everything else on his body, putting undue pressure on his lungs and his brain. He had never felt like this before, not with his uncle, not by himself. He fought the sensation to scream into the darkness that was his bedroom, even though it was the most natural response his body could expect to make under such magnificent circumstances. He was keenly

aware of the pulse of his heart as it scampered through every vein in his body and pounded a savage cadence inside his ears, as he also monitored every place on his skin that touched, rubbed or slid along the matured contours of the flannel wrapped and panting package that shared his bed and mirrored his desires. He had gone to bed, a child. He would greet the new day, a man.

Fumbling for the flat buttons of his sleeping gown, Magnus rolled the boy onto his back and sat himself upright atop the fifteen year old's midsection. He could feel the exuberance that flexed there beneath his spreading cheeks and while he longed to take the boy as he had taken other men in Augusta or Savannah, he realized that he could scarce afford the consequences of being discovered an aggressor in this situation lest he be destroyed forever by scandalous public judgement. But did he dare accommodate this child in kind? Could they love unencountered and unsuspected by the other five inhabitants within the very house of his employer this night? Was it wise he trust this emblazoned youth with the secret maintenance of such a blasphemous union? He pulled his sleeping gown over his head and his sudden nakedness betrayed

his better sense and nullified his need to question anything again.

The boy's hands went swimming over his sufficiently hairy chest and stomach as the tutor of children arched his back to encourage wanton exploration. He noticed the child's breathing seemed almost uneasy, staggered. He lifted his weight slightly, though it was already pounds less than the child's own. His student's hands wrapped about his slender waist and pulled the trunk of his body toward his rusted orange head, which was propped clumsily against the headboard and a few pillows. At first, the tutor failed to notice, for he had never expected that his 'twixt leg appendage would find its way inside the mouth of such a young and unpracticed student, but there, beneath him, exhibiting remarkable dexterity and imagination, the Bradston boy took significant measure time and time again. The tutor caught himself thrusting, almost aggressively, into the freckled face of his eager protege and jumped back in horror, landing on the boy's privates. Beau cringed in a flash of pain and in that reflex of shock, bounced his teacher back onto his chest, where he took him carelessly deep into his mouth and made his mark with two rows of deliberate but gentle teeth. Magnus trapped his breath which would have surely become

a yell, then lowered his body to claim his catch. Beau had kicked off his under garments and Magnus was delighted to press against his nakedness. And in this moment he stretched to reach his pupil's ear. "Where did you learn to do these things you do?" he almost demanded to know.

Beau whispered back biting Magnus on the ear. "Do you think you are the only teacher in Georgia?" Magnus could see his teeth smiling in the dim moonlight beneath him. They kissed again and the tutor felt suddenly protective and uncomfortably challenged by Beau's prior involvements. In an instant it became clear that he would have to take Beau where he had not been with anyone before. He knew he had his trust. It was but a short matter of time before he would be able to claim his heart and his devotion as well. The tutors kisses began to leave Beau's lips and venture down his chin and on to his neck. Magnus circled the Adam's Apple with his tongue and moved toward the boy's budding torso. He encountered hair already thriving between the two fields of muscle and around large nipples each the size of a Union dollar piece. He licked down the boy's left side and crossed to his navel, which

protruded slightly. The sweet, pungent smell of his groin begged a hasty descent but the tutor dallied a spell, building anticipation while testing what little was left of his meager restraint. He wondered what he was doing with this child, -this boy pretending to be a man. His Wesleyan upbringing had not sufficiently prepared him to refute all carnal temptation and while he had spent months imagining the unspeakable, this manifestation of it bewildered him beyond clear thinking and any hope for immediate repentance. He lunged for the boy's groin rubbing his faintly whiskered face through the promising crop of harvest orange hair that bristled there. High on his cheekbone the fifteen year old's proudest physical achievement in recent years, bobbed like a metronome during a split-time waltz. Magnus dodged his head a couple of times before pinning it to Beau's waist in an open mouthed kiss. Beau arched his back almost convulsively and the object of the tutor's desire rammed past his teeth toward his gullet. He contained his cough with a tightened and full mouth but the student could not have anticipated the pleasure he would know in these moments and groaned most audibly. In an instant, the two held every muscle and paused their lungs awaiting the

reprimanding footsteps that would surely attend to the troublesome noises from within their bedroom. There was silence and all the house seemed encased in slumber.

Another minute passed and Beau began to thrust himself gently into the throat of his instructor's mouth. Surely his own eyes had rolled clean into the back of his head and he must have been the nearest he ever would get to dying because his whole body tingled like Heaven. It was very clear to him amid the helpless euphoria, that his dirty old uncle had been doing something all wrong for this to feel so very different and right. Beau craned his head to watch the magic as Magnus moved his head up and down, up and down. Beau could see his teacher's hand as it worked on his own extension and imagined that it would be possible to give him the same treatment at the same time. In a playful jolt, Beau swung his long legs and twisted at the waist to get within tongue's reach of his prize. A softer hum vibrated around Beau's barrel as he set to work on the tutor. He reveled in the conflict between enjoyment and providing pleasure and felt that the two collided with a breath stealing somersault somewhere in the middle of his stomach. He

reached up with both arms from underneath the tutor and must have squeezed the life right out of him because Magnus popped upright taking business into his own hand and shook wildly as the whitest, hottest gravy Beau had ever seen, landed in spoonfuls about his stomach and chest. The tutor shuttered for a moment over him, breathing irregularly, before collapsing into a lifeless heap on his side. Beau just stared at the scattered spewing on his body that looked like fine powdered sugar frosting in the moonlight. He took two fingers and dragged them across a decorated nipple, bringing them back to his mouth where he kissed the tutor's offering as the two tumbled soundly into sleep.

Five

The wedding was never intended to be the event of this half of

the century, but as more and more of Mark Wilkontny's wealthy relatives committed to making the journey by train to Atlanta and then by carriage to Fayette County, the more William John Bradston II felt he had to put on airs. The cotton was coming in better than expected, prices paid for it were higher than predicted and brandy, well the brandy flowed thick as the Flint River year round, 'cept in the winter months when the canning reserves eventually run low as the temperatures and folks start screaming for cold remedies and belly warmers. But it was still mid fall in Georgia; a beautiful time for a floral wedding with magnolia blossoms as big as a man's hand, dogwood sprigs, hyacinth clusters and late blooming lily flutes all twisted and tied and bundled and hung in wonderfully sweeping live oak garlands that seemed to stretch for anything that would hold still or take a nail. Josephine had been a walking blush of emotion for days while the slaves and family spun dervishes about her preparing for the big day. Her husband to be played yard games, practical jokes and rode horses from sun up to sun down, nearly collapsing from exhaustion at every evening's meal. A quarter hour nap after supper and he had miraculously regained enough stamina to take him off' well past

midnight, usually drinking fire brandy and chewing the fat with his father in law on the front porch. To Beau who clearly idolized him, Mark seemed the most generous person he had ever known, always giving so much of himself to everyone around him, which was probably why folks were always around him. Mark could look into your eyes and make you believe you were the only other person in Georgia worth talking to. Beau had to respect that. And while the marriage to his sister would assure years of brotherly companionship between them, Beau could not help but resent the fact that Mark was too good for his sister and that she would make him suffer dearly for the privilege of her shrewd hand.

On the eve before the wedding, Mark moved his things into the boy's room on account of a tremendous influx of Savannah and Augusta relatives that suddenly transfigured this remote plantation into a center of considerable census. While engaging his tutor every night for several weeks had been fantastic sport, Beau welcomed the diversionary intrusion, though Magnus acted remarkably put out. Mark had suggested that he sleep on the floor as he was the imposer. Beau loudly insisted the groom-to-be

should have the bed as it was likely the last good night of sleep he could hope for. Magnus made repeated declaration that he would be just fine on the fainting couch in the parlor downstairs, which seemed appropriately dramatic to Beau who couldn't help but roll his eyes at the martyr's decree. In the end, the three drew hay straws and the Bradston heir was relegated to the floor of his own bedroom. Mark and Magnus shared the bed. With his arm casually flopped over the edge of the bed, the tutor insisted on attempting to arouse his pupil laying beneath him on the floor but Beau batted his hand away, even though the attempts were beginning to work. For no other reason than to listen to him finally sleep after giving so much of his day away to others, Beau had wished to share his bed with Mark. It was certain that Magnus didn't care about sharing the bed with the groom half as much as he cared that Beau wouldn't. Beau didn't know what to make of this behavior exactly. It made sense to leave the bedroom for a late night walk among the wedding fixings, to gather some thoughts. He would not be alone. On the front porch, where the couple was to be married, he encountered his sister praying to God to bless their union. Beau knelt down beside her and offered a short prayer

that God would give Mark patience. He kissed his sister on the forehead and left her for the main lawn that was already busy assembling the dew for the big day.

Once Beau had passed the neatly positioned rows of fifty wooden folding chairs that he and Headman Ben had set up earlier that day, he broke into a fast run trying to hold his breath until he reached the edge of the grass, some 300 yards away. He didn't know why he was always playing these games but he felt it might someday be important to have controls and be aware of his limits.

As the air began to run out and his lungs started to tighten, Beau shut his eyes and pushed harder and ran faster. Thump! In an instant his face was pushed into the grass where it, alone, seemed to slow his body to a stop. He had no breath in his lungs to lose and therefore his first response was a series of spits and gasps, expelling grass from his mouth and filling his chest back up again.

Before he had a chance to focus into the night to determine what he had tripped over, it had jumped up and started to run away itself. Beau rubbed his cheek, now sore and stinging red. His heart had yet to recover from the shock of the encounter with the

ground when the human log that had been strewn in his path, stopped running away and started to run back toward him.

"I'm sorry, Massa Beau. 'You be all right now?"

"Willy?" Beau asked, starting to stand. The slave extended his hand to help but a light head convinced Beau to sit back down for another spell. "Willy, what are you doing out here in the middle of the night, laying around in the grass?"

"Uh, I need to get back now. Good night. Uh, and I'm sorry."
He turned to leave.

"Wait another minute. Sit here with me at least until I'm feeling better." Beau was desperate for his sympathies and an excuse to speak to him after all these years.

"Massa?" Willy asked as though he thought the Bradston boy might have hit his head a bit too hard to be requesting his company.

"And stop calling me that! I'm not your master." His head now throbbed with alternating sharp and dull pains.

Willy didn't move. "My papa say's you will be someday."

"Well Headman Ben is wrong then, isn't he? Say, I thought you couldn't speak or something, seeing as though you never thanked me for saving your black ass five years ago. Sit down, I said."

Willy crouched down on the backs of his lower legs. "It's a good thing I'm not your Master too. You don't listen very well. -It's okay to sit, "Beau spoke very slowly. " I'm not angry with you."

Willy leaned back on his arms until he could be considered sitting, but he wasn't about to look comfortable at it. Beau managed to shuffle his aching body toward him until they sat facing each other. "I didn't talk in the beginning. It wasn't 'cause I couldn't. It was cause I didn't want to, but I have thanked you every day 'o my life since then. You have to believe that. I look toward you in the fields or the barn or in the big house and my heart says it over and over again.

-Thank you," he said out loud.

Beau shrugged his shoulders discovering what was sure to become a good size bruise there. Willy reached his arm toward

him and with his longest finger, gently swiped a small trail of blood that issued from Beau's nose. He brought the finger back to examine it closely before announcing "it looks just like mine," with all the amazement in the land.

"Well, of course it does," Beau laughed, momentarily distracting Willy from his study. Willy tried to smile as he reached his hand behind his back and under the ragged cloth shirt to present a sample of his blood on the other hand. "Dear God! What has happened to you boy?" Beau sprang to his aid despite the soreness of his own body and examined the shirt that was blood soaked from behind. He carefully lifted the shirt away from the wounds to examine the slave's back. Beau gasped. It was clear by the lash marks that he had been whipped, and whipped recently. Beau took Willy by the face with two hands and asked "Who did this to you? My God, who did this?"

Willy's eyes got very large as though he were trying to suddenly hold back the tears that certainly belonged to pain like his. But he didn't cry. He'd spent half the night laying on the front lawn where the cool evening air had started the healing process that he had

known all too well by the looks of his back, bleeding in most places, still scarred in others. But he hadn't wept. Beau saw into those round, squash colored eyes and was mesmerized by the parallel life that dwelled there. Even though these two had been born but seven and three quarter hours apart and their skin touched now for the first time, between white hand and black cheek, the distance between them was not travelable by everyday men of either color, and still they managed to attach somehow in that moment, beneath the common stars and moon, each certain in knowing that the other cared to make the journey that led to this revelation in the grass. "Tell me who did this to you and I will make him an enemy of mine, too," Beau stated confidently with narrowed eyes. "You must say, Willy."

Willy had started to shake and Beau employed more muscle to steady his friend. "The Driver has whipped me before. They say he is your uncle but I think him an animal if not the devil!" Beau placed his hand over Willy's mouth and tried to calm him, to lower his voice. Willy licked his lips and talked softer. Two times before tonight, the driver dragged me and some slave girl from the

quarters out into the woods where he says for me to put my seed in the whore to make more slave babies, 'cause that's where slave babies come from. -From whores, he tells me. I tried but I be too scared, too nervous to put the seed in. So he ties me to a tree while he puts his own seed in my sisters, and then he raises the devil on my backside with his whip."

"I'll kill him. I should have killed him before but I'll be sure to kill him now. I'll kill him now!" Beau nearly yelled. This time Willy put his trembling hand on Li'l Massa's mouth.

"But the Driver didn't whip me this time," Willy tried to explain.

"No one would blame me either. Not my mother, not my sisters, certainly not you or your family. They will make me a saint if I succeed!"

"Now, you're the one not listening." Willy raised his bloody fingers to Beau's face, only a hands length from his own. He suddenly remembered the pony, the cave, the blue blanket all at once and looking this closely into eyes that blue, was nearly enough to cause him to pass out, but he held his focus. "This time

though, he brought someone with him to the woods. Again he commanded me to put my seed in the girl but just when I got started, the other man he pulled me off of her. See, he wanted to plant her 'nstead, and afterwards, the Driver told him he better whip me, cause he'd done never whipped a nigger before and the Driver, he felt it was 'portant he learned how."

"Was it that wretch McPartlin from the plantation across Line Creek?" Beau felt the sting rise in his face. "It was that bastard, wasn't it?" He demanded identification and he'd wield his revenge.

"No!" Willy nearly growled, his voice deepening with the night. "It was the one who takes your sister's hand in the morrow. He did this to me."

Beau had never felt more uneasy in his stomach than he did standing next to Mark on the front steps of the plantation house. Music was being played by a string quartet that the oldest living Bradston had brought in from Atlanta. The bride was expected to be coming down the grand staircase from the upper floor at any moment. Beau squinted defiantly. The sun was blinding hot for

ten-thirty in the morning, irritating the swollen eyes that had seen no sleep, of the man who was to stand up for the devil on his wedding day. Beau had not said so much as good morning to his brother in law whose honor had flown in the face of all things decent and good in Georgia, among which Beau had always only been able to enumerate two: honesty, which was rare, and a Georgia Fall which would never be diminished, compromised nor destroyed by humanity. Autumn was all that Beau had left to believe and delight in and thankfully, it would be upon him soon.

There was a pause in the minuet before the four hurled their bows into the bridal march. Beau gritted his teeth as he noticed white shoes and the ruffle of a certain dress at the top of the stairs inside the front doors. While he wished his fist could connect with the cheek and nose of the intended groom, he realized that a far more punitive option was descending before him. Blackened eyes would heal but his sister would be a scourge upon his heart as sure as the scars on Willy's back and it was for this reason only that he sought witness this day.

As Josephine and her father neared the porch, her maid of honor

and younger sister, and Beau, the groom's best though recently alienated man, turned inward to face the preacher and the doomed wedding couple. From this vantage, Beau could see the crowd, twenty five on either side of a center aisle. He could see Hannah Banks, the prize daughter of General and Mrs. Thelonus Banks, who had long admired the Bradston boy who lived eleven miles from her father's own plantation. He spotted Magnus sitting behind his mother, fanning himself in the undaunted blaze of the morning sun. Beau felt as though he were outgrowing his tutor and in all likelihood, would speak to his mother about it on his sixteenth birthday in another month. It was easily acknowledged that quite possibly the only thing he had learned in his studies since their bedroom discovery, aside from how protective and demanding his teacher could become, was that one should be cautionary with awareness as too much can spoil the finer delusion.

But it was beyond the rows of chairs, twenty-five on either side, that Beau's eyes should meet with the renegade slave they called Willy. Standing proud and proper a full head above his mother

Reina, the two were dressed in their serving whites and polished shoes so fine that it was easy to forget the scars that surely raised puss on his backside and hatred in his soul. Beau smiled into his direction hoping to provoke a return acknowledgement but Willy, looking frightened, looking angry and looking betrayed, simply looked away.

"The ring, Beauregard!" his sister Josephine had snapped, charging into his daydream like an Indian elephant synched in white lace and satin, her yellow and twisted tusks poking out from under a delicately crocheted veil. Startled, Beau fumbled for the ring deep in his trouser pocket and slapped it into Mark's outstretched right hand. In that instant, Beau saw the blisters and callouses of a mighty adversary and knew that this very hand had raised to change Beau's world and his guarded image of it forever. He feared at that moment that he might vomit profusely adding a calico flare to the elephant's wedding gown and the groom's consciousness but by bending his knees and taking a deep breath, he managed to retain the contents of his stomach and remain upright for the next fifteen minutes of the ceremony. When

finally, it was over and Satan had kissed his concubine on the trunk, Beau excused himself to find Willy.

The grand white house was suddenly awash in a sea of guests trying to escape the heat and the thick, wet air of the Georgia outdoors. Even the string quartet had squeezed their way into the side parlor and had begun to play from their repertoire with an enthusiastic tempo. Brandy swirled in wide bottomed glasses while the finest champagne available in the Port of Savannah bubbled to the crystal rims of heirloom fluted stems. The hickory vapors of roasting hogs and wild turkeys, from spits being hand turned behind the house, wafted through the crowded rooms to tempt those who had forgone breakfast in anticipation of the ceremonial feast. Slaves scurried everywhere, filling glasses, setting tables. Beau encountered a hundred obstacles in his search for one man and though his intended route was straight to the kitchen, it seemed the collective will of the people to thwart his mission.

"Toast, a toast!" the throng chanted, shoving a champagne glass into Beau's hand. He had not thought of his formal obligation

since speaking with Willy earlier that morning and while his prepared speech to toast the wedding couple had employed a necklace of attribute and witty rhyme, Beau desired nothing more than to fashion those lies into a noose that would make his sister both a bride and a widow on this most appropriate of days. The room grew quiet as Beau cleared his throat to lynch.

"How many of us in this room, -in this house, can say that we know each other? How many of us, I wonder, would be surprised to learn, that indeed we do not. Today, a stranger marries my sister, which makes him stranger even still." The crowd laughed and his sister shot him a flaming arrow with her eyes. Willy appeared just then in the doorway to the kitchen and Beau set free all manner of thought. He cleared his throat again, suddenly nervous. "These two before us today, will spend the rest of their lives together but they will only know what each lets the other know." Beau's words quickly eliminated all other ears in the room to climb inside and rattle around those belonging only to his brother in law. "I beseech thee, Stranger: Pray with me for honesty. Pray with me for justice. Pray with me for forgiveness."

The best man's eyes had watered for length of stare, but they dared not flow. The guests, undeniably impressed with the eloquence and depth of the fifteen year old's delivery, applauded both him and the couple as the bride pulled her shaken husband into another kiss. Beau blinked, then looked away toward the kitchen door, but he was gone.

"What is in you, child? You look as though you have seen the great white ghost of Revelations," Reina grabbed her son by the shoulders. "What be the matter with yo' eyes?"

"Mama, don't baby me now! I've got work needs getting done." Willy shook his shoulders loose and walked out on the back porch for some air that didn't smell up like magnolia water. His father was tendin' to the roasting of the meat and caught him off his guard.

"Whatchoo doing back here?" his daddy asked.

"Sure, weeze mighty thirsty over these coals but you be an inside nigger today, Willy," a friend of his father's joined the fun poking.

"Pay careful that none o' this ash get caught on that pretty shirt o'yours. Be a shame for you to look like us, now."

"Hold your mouth, Little John. Somethin's eating at my boy. He don't look good neither. -Turn this here spit for me awhile." Ben hopped on the porch and took his boy's face into his rough hands.

"What is it?" he asked with a firm grip.

"Don't feel good, that's all. Just needed some air." Willy tried to shake his head out of his father's hands.

"Oooh, boy's got him a fever I reckon." Ben hugged his boy.

The pressure on his backside made him nearly faint in his papa's arms, but his legs held him strong. Willy didn't know how exactly, but he didn't fall down. He pushed himself out of his father's weakened hold and bent down to get another wooden crate of brandy from the steps leading to the cellar. He couldn't help but think about the cave where it was cool and he could sleep until the slicing pain went away, like the time before. He was thinkin' about Li'l Massa's words too, as he went back into the kitchen, -about knowing someone but only knowing what they let you know. He opened another bottle of Brandy, wrapped it in a white cloth and

wondered if he would ever let him know more.

Grabbed from behind and wrestled into a closet beneath the grand stairs, Beau's search for Willy was tactically delayed by Magnus who proceeded to ravage him with kisses in the dark space. "Magnus!" His mouth engaged, "-Mughus!" he commanded with his tutor's tongue preventing the proper formation of the word.

"God, I missed you last eve. A dozen times I nearly turned into your brother-in-law from habit and I'm afraid I remained hard the evening long. Bit sore today from it, I must confess." The teacher whispered, excitedly desperate to have his affection returned.

"Magnus! Listen to me. I have many things on my mind today, among which, I must confess, you do not have priority. We can talk once we get to bed tonight but there are a hundred people on the other side of this wall, one of whom I must speak with immediately. Now, if you'll excuse me..." Beau didn't much care for acting the adult when he was clearly out-experienced, but things were changing between the tutor and the student and Beau

was every bit as confused as Magnus, though the latter apparently had much more at stake.

"Let me bid you off properly then," Magnus spoke with clenched teeth tugging at the buttons on Beau's trousers.

"Magnus, no!" It was too late and Beau's undeniable state of arousal bobbed like a surrender flag in the molding darkness beneath the stairs. In an instant, the tutor's mouth had encompassed it and Beau's head dropped backward on his shoulders, still amazed at how wonderful it could feel. The stairs creaked and popped above their heads and Beau jumped, struggling to force his cock back inside his britches. "Not now!" he reprimanded.

"Yes, now!" Magnus snapped at him digging his fingernails into the sides of Beau's legs. "Now and every time I want it, you will be mine," he commanded. Beau whimpered slightly as he felt sharp pains in both legs. "Let us not forget who is the tutor and who's meant to be taught!" His voice frothed like an animal, mad with disease. Beau had never been talked to in this manner, not by his father, not by his uncle and the tone offended him. A reflex as quick as lightning carried the message straight into the tutor's face.

Magnus slumped backward on a pile of old draperies and didn't stir. Beau finished tucking in his fancy shirt, rubbed his dispatching fist, and rejoined the wedding party. As he closed the squeaky miniature door behind him, he caught the eye of the finest looking black man he had ever seen on this plantation or any other, and he blushed instantly, hoping that his tutor would be sleeping some minutes longer and not emerge just yet from their inopportune tryst. He smiled at Willy who immediately turned away to serve liquor to the guests. Beau ran his fingers through thick auburn hair and adjusted himself roughly in his pants.

Perhaps Willy had known the tutor had been lurking inside the stairs which made Beau curse his father for building such a foolish trap, and his own ignorance for not using it to his advantage before now. He snared a glass of champagne from a passing tray and swallowed twice with a face; too sweet. Just then his father, who had likely been drinking since the night before, threw his bottle bearing arm around his heir and spoke boisterously into the side of his face. The smell was putrid but as Beau hadn't seen his father this jovial in half his lifetime, he consented to his better patience.

"Drink with me, son!" he slurred, passing a bottle of bourbon.

"We're rid of her!" He laughed and laughed. As the feeling could not have been more mutually shared between the two, and was further sweetened with the marital reckoning of her suitor, Beau took the bottle and carelessly chugged a half dozen swigs before bursting into laughter himself. When he finally regained composure he noticed Willy across the parlor, watching him again, and he began to excuse himself. "No. Wait, son. I want you to meet Mark's father, the Honorable Vice Governor of the Georgia Territory," he announced in the middle of a belch, grabbing the arm of the groom's elderly father. He chuckled out loud.

"Wilkontny, have you met my boy?"

The old man acknowledged that Mark had introduced them the previous evening at dinner. Beau thought to steal away but Mr. Wilkontny used his shoulder to steady himself as he spoke to the senior Bradston. "You know, Bradston" his scruffy, authoritative voice shook lamps on the parlor tables. "Mark had mentioned that you might be interested in letting your Headman go for a competitive price, seeing as your crops haven't been what they

once were." Beau's face registered horror at the thought of levying one more injustice on Willy's family.

"Mr. Wilkontny," Beau interrupted, "I can assure you that we would never consider letting our Ben go. He has been a member of this family for thirty years. He will die here and your son was mistaken."

Beau's father was at the same time impressed and distressed to have his son speaking for him, as it would one day, be his lot. He half chuckled as he sometimes did. "I think what my son is trying to say for all Bradston's is that Ben is a fixture here. Things would have to be pretty grim for us to consider cutting off our nose to spite our face, and that's what we would be doing, too."

Beau was relieved to have not been directly crossed by his father, especially on this topic, and politely excused himself to find Willy.

"Correct me, Sir Bradston, but I believe my son and I both know what our families married into, -and pardon me for being so bold, but the combined sum of our families worth divisible by two hardly comes close to your contribution after this year's dread

harvest. Face it, William, you've enjoyed better times." He patted his counterpart in this union on the shoulder and led him off to the side of the parlor. "I'm prepared to erase this year's harvest from your record books as a blessing on this marriage. I understand from my son that this year's losses, less what you were able to recover with your fine brandy operation," he raised his glass, "amount to \$27,000.00. Making your Ben the most expensive slave to ever wear a bid around his neck in the whole of the Southern Territory, I propose a transaction, one I'm sure you will recognize as fair and irrefutable. He certainly cannot still be worth that amount to you in the fields. I understand that in the heart it must appear a different matter entirely."

William Bradston stroked his chin. "I must say your offer rings of temptation, your honor, but I'm afraid our Headman is not for sale." Uncertainty choked his conviction. Willy shuffled behind them with his serving tray, clearing empty glasses left on every piece of furniture, the mantle and the bookshelves. The fresh wounds on his back thumped the beat of his own heart and with every stretch of that silver tray, he felt his skin strain to contain

everything that was meant to stay on the inside.

"Come now, William. Be a proud man. Not a stupid one," The vice-governor implored him. " I'm offering you twenty-seven thousand dollars! No man is worth that price, much less a nigger."

Willy swore his ears could hear that word across a sweltering cotton field on a windy day, he despised it so, and clear as the women chatting up the new bride, he heard it now. "You sleep on it then, Master Bradston. The Missus and I will leave Fayette Plantation with your fine headman at the reins in the morrow." He shook hands with the father of the bride and excused himself.

Willy felt as though his legs would snap, finally unable to support the strain of carrying all the secrets of this god forsaken plantation.

Certainly he lugged at least one for each of the stripes running crosswise on his broad and muscled back. He leaned against the tall shelf of books, some of which his mama had brought home to instruct him about the ways of creation. He looked to make sure that no white folks caught him resting and spied Beau who had suddenly turned back toward him. Willy stood up straight and prepared to move when he noticed the groom grab the master's son

by the arm.

"If you have words for me, I pray you, do not mix them. I believe we know each other far too well to play such games, Little Master Bradston." Mark's words were terse and well directed but more importantly, from where Beau stood, having never been spoken to in this manner by his brother-in-law, -they were laced unmistakably with the evidences of guilt.

"I've said what I had to say to ease my mind. My silence speaks to you now only to spare my heart. If you'll excuse me..." Beau wrestled his arm free from the groom's grasp and took a step away before he was spun back around with the force wielded by a slave beater. "You do not welcome the scene I am capable of creating for you at this moment. Unhand me!" the fifteen year old commanded with authority well beyond his years and a voice sufficiently deeper than his given range. "My grudge with you is not a wedge between us but a mountain, a river and a desert. Yesterday I would have braved these obstacles to be in your company, today I move them into place to keep me from it!" He

turned to check Willy's location and found him leaning into the bookcase. Brilliant red lines of blood ran in every direction through the defeated weave of his white cotton shirt. Beau's body twirled and his fist tightened as it gained both strength and conviction. His eyes darted ahead to fix on the chin of its target and his body followed through with a pop below the groom's jaw, that sent him backward onto the cake table. Appropriate southern gasps filled the air as parchment paper fans twitched into action over gaping mouths. In the commotion, Beau rushed to Willy's side and smuggled him upstairs to his bedroom.

"Don't speak. You must trust me right now even though it appears I am a mad man." Willy held his tongue as Beau instructed, having just witnessed his dealings with the groom. It had never been a conflict for Willy to trust the Master's boy. Trust had been established between them many years ago and Beau had only just done what Willy had fantasized doing for the past forty-eight hours. It was gifts such as these, that kept Beau Bradston in Willy's prayers and in Willy's dreams.

Beau hadn't remembered breathing for the past five minutes,

what with the second of his wedding encounters sleeping off unfortunate appointments with his fist, somewhere on the first floor beneath them in the big, white house. He would have never characterized himself as particularly violent, but he had never felt these feelings of desperate rage that others stoked inside him lately. This, with the kerosine of puberty flooding through his veins, made him combustible and wholly unstable. He positioned Willy next to his bed, and doubled back to lock the bedroom door. When he returned to Willy's side, he had shrunken to the edge of the bed where he sat for a moment's rest. Beau, swept by compassion, took Willy's face in his hands.

"I wish we could disappear to the cave," he said with eyes that held Willy tighter than hands or arms. "I wish I could take half your pain and carry this burden with you." He began to unbutton the slave's serving shirt that rose and fell with his broad chest. For a moment, Willy stopped the Master's hands with his own, using that fulcrum to bring himself to a standing position before him. With their faces level, Willy released his grip allowing the buttons to be liberated, his eyes locked madly with those of his captor. He knew

his heart would be visible through uncovered skin as it already bounced in his stare and found syncopation in his breathing. Every muscle in his body, including those lacerated on his back, flinched in instinctive anticipation. Beau's hands that had jerked with vengeance now hovered with genteel patience as he separated the back of the shirt from the raw flesh that hung in pieces there. He had never seen the hand print of man more vividly and with greater anguish than he did at that moment while the two halves of his heart ripped in memorial severance. Laughter and resumed celebration squeezed through the floorboards like smoke from a funeral fire. It would be the death of subjugation, if it were the end of anything, he swore through teeth that clenched, like a spring loaded bear trap, in disgust. The edge of his wounds were outlined in tooth-white puss over a startled background of broken sienna skin. Beau poured a generous amount of liquor into the serving shirt from the bottle Willy had set on the floor and dabbed lightly on the long and slicing wounds of Willy's backside.

He followed the lines and counted them in order to exact their numbered revenge and when he determined eleven lashes, he

brought the liquor and blood drenched shirt to his lips and kissed it, returning the cool promise to Willy's soul.

Beau asked Willy to wait in his room until he returned and then disappeared down the hall to the bathing room where he loaded his arms with cotton gauze bandaging reserved for family emergencies. He carefully wound the dressing around Willy's mid-waist and over his shoulders securing the ends in front of his chest so that the knots would be hidden between the two tables of his muscle. As he imagined the pain his friend endured he marveled at his resolve, while his tearless orange eyes followed Beau's every maneuver and recorded the slightest touch.

Willy had never felt stronger or more proud in the presence of a white man and he was entranced by these feelings and the man who made him feel this way. For a moment, their noses nearly touching, the warmth of their breath on each others lips, they stared inside the others eyes hoping to see the souls trapped just behind blue-gray and squash colored gates. Just as Beau pressed his mouth to the slave's, the handle of the bedroom door that had not been secured following Beau's supply run to the bathroom,

turned and popped open. There stood Magnus, holding his face that surely throbbed from the blow that his pupil had landed there.

He lowered his hand from an already blackened eye and his mouth gaped wide. His eyes registered dark brown betrayal as they narrowed their focus and an upper lip twitched with the squint of this latest discovery. He turned to leave, yanking the door shut behind him. Beau scrambled for a white shirt in his clothes closet and handed it to Willy, who suddenly was very confused by their brief exchange.

"Are you all right to go back down?" Beau asked quickly.

Willy shook his head, ambushed by his own ability to speak.

"You should probably lay down here for a while, until the pain gets easier to manage. I could tell your mother that I ordered you to rest upstairs, -in your condition," Beau offered in an attempt to salvage the advances they had just made before the interruption.

"No!" Willy protested. "You cannot tell my mama about my back. They will have enough to worry about when your father sells mine to the father of your sister's husband tomorrow."

"Where did you hear that?" Beau demanded to know.

"I heard your father talking. I understand that there is much money to be gained" Willy steadied himself with a hand on the elevated mattress behind him. He winced slightly, adjusting into his bandages that barely stretched enough to allow him to button the new shirt. He tucked the tails into his worn black pants and smoothed the puckered folds that formed about his waist.

"That won't happen, I give you my word as my father gave me his. Now, you rest." Beau raised a finger to Willy's lips and left the room to intercept the wrath of Magnus.

Downstairs, the party droned on. At once, Beau saw his mother, the bride, his father and Hannah Banks all begin to converge toward the base of the staircase where he had paused to look for Magnus. As it had become perfected habit to avoid the women in his life, Beau bit his lower lip and made straight for his father, which he rightly assumed would frighten away the other mocking birds already in flight.

"Boy, do you have business with Mark Wilkontny?" his father

barked in a high whisper shaking his pudgy pointing finger until they had reached each other and he could thump it with greater authority on his son's chest.

"Not at the moment, no sir." Beau answered taking advantage of his detainment to further scout the room. His father scowled his disapproval. Beau spotted Headman Ben and decided to take that issue up with his father as a counter measure. "Father, your intentions regarding Headman Ben...?"

"Should be of little concern to you," he finished the sentence and began to turn away, clearly wishing to avoid the matter.

"But father, surely if I'm to inherit this plantation one day, I will too inherit the slave lineage, which makes this my concern. If Ben's fold should be greatly agitated at this juncture, what hope would I have in subduing his next generation and what would prevent them from rising up against me in your absence. Has not the Bradston dominion exacted enough suppression for one century?" As he heard himself speak, he couldn't help but recognize the influence Magnus had been in his coming of age and how he must have appeared as an adult-speaking child in his

father's bewildered ears.

"Now listen here, young man," he stumbled on his words on account of the alcohol. "This plantation is not managed by committee and you had better worry about getting along with me for the next twenty years long before you ever begin to conjure up the notion of having this plantation for yourself. Nothing is given in this life," he preached.

"But everything is taken! That's the Bradston way, isn't it?" Beau turned to leave his father slobbering on his precious brandy. He instantly realized that he had not accomplished the humanitarian intervention he intended and stepped outside for some humid, thick air to toughen his resolve. Already it had been a most productive wedding day and it would likely take him well into the night before he could fix the havoc he'd wreaked. He reasoned that he might as well get started with the repairs by finding his tutor. A sonnet by Kipling, that had comprised the composition lesson the day before, encouraged Beau to check the river bank for his spurned mentor. He left the porch and walked between the folding chairs, no longer in neat rows, no longer

pressed in service by the witnesses of this travesty. Beau toppled a chair with his left hand and entered the trees just short of the slave encampment. He could hear the Flint this day as it meandered past the mess that would forever be his father's plantation. William John Bradston the Second, for one, knew he was meant for better things in this life. A possum scurried through the brush and leapt onto a tree in front of him, causing Beau to jump suddenly. He started to laugh at himself and the bundle his nerves had become when his uncle and the groom came crashing out of the bushes to block his approach on the trail. They each carried a mostly empty liquor bottle and didn't or couldn't stand completely upright. Still, Beau did not move from his spot on the path.

"Well, if it isn't the little man of the plantation," his uncle stammered after a moment of awkward silence, which seemed to be the signal for Beau's heart to quicken its pulse. His uncle took slow steps around him as though his nephew were a lesser species confronted by hungrier prey. Beau's eyes remained on his sister's new husband as his immediate retaliation seemed the most threatening. Then, in a move Beau had not anticipated in their

obvious state of inebriation, his uncle grabbed him from behind, immobilizing his arms so that he could not fairly fight back. Mark walked closer, slowly at first and then with several quick steps that carried the first blow to Beau's stomach. Beau doubled over as much as his uncle would allow and he expelled a cough and then spit, looking his attacker square in the eyes.

"How belittling this must be for you, Wilkontny; -to beat a fifteen year old under such restraints. Where's your challenge?" Beau asked between staggered breaths.

"My challenge comes in not killing you!" His fist flew again, this time to Beau's face. "An eye for an eye," he retorted stepping backward.

"Then a lashing for a lashing," Beau gritted his bloodied teeth and narrowed his eyes.

"Is that what all this is about, then?" The groom approached again while Beau retracted his right leg behind him looking as though he were trying to back away. One step closer and Beau's leg sailed from a cloud of dust utilizing every muscle in his body

to plant his foot with intentioned force between his brother-in-law's open stance. Mark launched forward but this time not to levy a punch but to cradle the source of the sharpest pain he had ever known. He fell to one knee and issued a groan.

Beau smiled through his own pain. "Have a pleasant wedding night. You can consider that my gift to the lucky bride." Mark started to rise to answer the fifteen's year old's mouth, but collapsed on the ground before him. Beau spit again, this time with aim. "Unhand me, uncle!" Beau threatened. "I'd hate to have to talk about your pastimes to others," he threatened. His uncle pushed him away and backed off.

"As much as I'd hate to spoil the arrangement you have with your live in tutor, I am certain." James offered an evil grin.

"And what do you think you know?" Beau wiped his mouth.

"Oh, he's a talker, that one. You'd be surprised what I know. Now, run along before Wilkontny gets good and mad." His uncle stooped to check on the fallen groom and Beau proceeded down the trail toward the river, checking the blood on his hand. *What a*

day , the fifteen year old pondered, kicking a pebble ahead of himself.

True to Kipling, Magnus had camped his moods on a large rock at the Flint's edge. He paused to watch him before making his presence known. Among those things that Beau tagged with confusion, his changing feelings for his tutor, like those that had been dashed by Mark, caused him tremendous consternation and he'd sooner be rid of both of them if Georgia presented its inhabitants with any choices, but he was stuck in the clay of his own indecision.

Magnus must have sensed he was being watched as he stirred uncomfortably in the shadowed sun. Beau completed his approach complete with twig snapping and feet scuffing, so as not to have to say anything that would further complicate the riff between them. Magnus identified the intruder and turned away.

"Have you come here to drown me? One last injustice to add to a broken jaw and a shattered heart. I didn't teach you to be this irreverent. You can just imagine my disappointment." When it seemed he might never finish, Beau interrupted.

"Magnus, I don't know what you thought you saw but I apologize for the way your head must be aching. I'm just a powderkeg today and I'm not sure even I know why. Please forgive me. I-"

"I do forgive you, silly. That's how love is, you see." The tutor opened his arms and motioned the student to the rock.

"I wasn't finished, Magnus. Please forgive me but I don't love you that way. I like the way you make me feel but I like riding horses and I like exploring in the woods and I like the currant jam my mother makes for Christmas, but none of these things control my life like you are trying to do. I like learning from you and I now know that I want to go to school in the Northeast like you did, and I know that I need you to help me get there. I never meant to hurt you with my hands and I don't mean to hurt you now with my words, but now that the wedding is over and Mark and the relatives will be leaving, I think it is best that you go back to your room and leave me to mine." Beau itched at his chin and looked away, afraid to see the tutor's response to these provisions.

"Leave you to your slave, you mean. And wouldn't that be

convenient?" he snapped back. "Oh, you have much to learn Beau Bradston and I can see this plantation has become far too distracting for you to concentrate on your studies. You won't get to your fancy Northeastern school if you forsake me now." He stood atop the rock. "You think long and hard about what you need and want in this life and you'll see that I am the only one who can get you there. Maybe then you'll think a second time about what I want and need!" He jumped from the rock and rushed past his student on the trail.

How was it that everyone in his life had something to bargain with? Beau must see to acquiring some leverage so that he could fight a fair exchange.

Hours later, as the sun disappeared behind the live oaks and after most of the relatives and guests had clambered into carriages for their respective trips home or to Atlanta to catch the train, Beau smuggled a bottle of apricot brandy from the cellar, across the yard of long shadows, to the slave quarters. He slipped the dark bottle between two planks in Headman Ben's hut, where, he had learned

from Reina, who organized a small cleaning army, that his Willy was sleeping off the day's strains. Crouched on the back of his legs, he whispered through the boards, "drink this for the pain and sleep true."

Beau bounded back through the trees without knowing if his message and gift were even received but he reasoned that he should be allowed to have one thing go right in his day so he didn't worry about it. When he returned to the house he saw two things that did manage to trouble him greatly: Magnus had cornered his mother on one end of the veranda and his father exchanged hands with Vice Governor Wilkontny on the other; two ominous signs that this day was not yet over. It made some sense to the fifteen year old that if he climbed upstairs and went to bed, he could choose matters closed for the day, so he did just that.

But the stubborn night labored on...

Willy stirred some in his sleep, dreaming of Massa's boy again, whilst he laid on his stomach letting the night air work it's swirling magic on his ruttled back. *Chase me in the rain*, the white boy-

man spoke in warming whispers. *And weep true* , he pleaded in a voice so clear that Willy felt his dream breath on his smiling cheek. And they chased each other in a storm, collapsing by each other's side when they tired and weeping openly when they felt happy or sad. Willy woke himself when the dream became too unbelievable, even for his imagination. Men don't really weep like that. He knew better. He shifted some and hit his head with a thump on a bottle that had mysteriously found its way into his bedding. He examined it and instantly feared being discovered with it by someone. Surely he hadn't brought this back from the big house. That would be stealing! *But how did it get there* , he wondered. He heard his mama and papa arguing on the other side of the thin wall and Headman Ben suddenly burst through one of the tattered curtains that separated the three rooms of their shack, allowing light and their argument to spill into Willy's daze. With a kerplunk! the bottle dove beneath the pillow.

"What do you have there, boy?" his papa demanded to know.

"Come on, bring it out here for all the world to see. Whatchoo hiding?"

"You won't believe me none, papa, but I don't know how this got here...less you hid it here for yourself," it suddenly occurred to him. Willy presented the bottle with the fancy sweet liquor the color of his own sleepy eyes, sloshing around inside.

Headman Ben examined it, pulled out the cork and sniffed it then threw back a swig or two, "just to test it," he had insisted.

"Casin' it be poison to kill the stealin' slave."

"Honest, papa. I didn't steal it. I didn't."

"And what be those marks on your back, son?" he asked in a horrified manner. His mama stepped from the shadow of the doorway to see for herself and gasped as Willy turned his back toward the lantern in his papa's outstretched hand. "Who done this to you? Who, boy?"

"Papa, it was the Driver who done it, but I deserved it. Honest, I did." Willy was sweating now and his face began to reflect the lantern's nervous light. His papa drank again from the bottle.

"Sweet Mother Mary!" his papa exclaimed in a voice that shook the shack.

"Hush, hush," Reina implored, laying her hands on her husbands shirtless shoulders. He knocked her away and Willy stood up.

"Ben!" she shouted. "You get a hold o' your anger. This isn't about me and it's not about Willy!"

"Be still, woman!" he commanded and she shrank further into the corner. "You won't see things the same afer tomorrow when you don't have no husband no more."

Willy shot a wide eyed stare at his mama who had promised she would say nothing to Ben about the offer the groom's father had made. Clearly this and the liquor already inside him was why his papa stood before him a crazed man now. "Massa's boy Beau gave me his word as his papa had given him his, that you would not be sold." Willy tried to pat at the sparks where his father's rage had already leapt into flames.

"What does that fool Beau know 'bout bizness matters?"
Headman Ben shrieked before taking another belt from the bottle.
"What does Massa's fool child know bout nothing? -Standing in the cotton fields, picking cotton like he was some common nigger...no smarts a'tall that boy." He tilted the bottle again and

Willy moved to take it from him but Ben stepped out of his reach.

"And he'll be yo Massa someday and he'll be the one whipping ya when ya don't work or when ya steal or tell a lie to protect yo family," Headman Ben rambled on so.

"You're wrong!" Willy objected, feeling the pain of his back where his muscles tightened to address his papa. "It's gonna be a new plantation when Li'l Massa grows up." Reina managed to coax her husband to sit down on a bench outside Willy's room.

She placed a blanket around his broad and burdened shoulders.

"You'll see," Willy promised through the curtain separating them as he sat holding his head in his hands. He pulled an age old blue cover up to his shoulders and remembered how he'd gotten that blanket already ten years ago when he slept one night on Massa's front porch. The nights were starting to get cooler. Sooner than not, that thin blue blanket wouldn't keep the cold out anymore than it protected Willy from his father's temper. Both seemed to find their way straight through to his bones. He could hear his mama and papa arguing outside so things must have become normal again. Willy fell asleep sitting up.

Beau lay awake staring at the ceiling. It wasn't like him of late to be sleeping alone and while he looked forward to the peace and quiet of solitary slumber after the day he had just had, he rubbed his aching hand and couldn't help but think of the two men who had occupied his bed the night before. He marveled at how much could actually change in one day. Then he thought of Willy, how their lips had brushed and how amazing it had felt to finally touch his skin. His body suddenly went cold and a shiver worked its way from his toes to his eyelids then back again in an instant until his body was warmed, if not glowing, in the August moonlight.

Indeed, touching Willy had been magic. He thought *touching Magnus and Mark that day had been magic too*, though in a different manner altogether. But his hand, the one that ached now with purpose and life, had forged a new beginning for William John Bradston the Second. His enemies had been marked and fallen in a single day and this new feeling of his, so overwhelming, so pure yet madly intoxicating, having taken over each of his senses, filling his head with the softest of goose down and his heart with the richest of wines, had to be love! How strange then, he

pondered, that this feeling should be for another man. Stranger still that this feeling should be reserved for a slave but mostly strange because it could not be helped, averted or explained. And this feeling would be his bed mate, to wrestle and squeeze, to press against and lean upon, to comfort and console, not until Willy Wuliku belonged to him, but until Beau belonged to Willy. A smile bigger than Georgia gave way to a sigh longer than the Flint River.

This much, Beau could feel. This much he understood.

Nobody could say how long they had been sleeping exactly. No one if asked could remember the content of their dreams. When the shouting started, there wasn't a soul on the plantation that would ever be able to claim their innocence again. When the shouting started, the trees, the birds, the river and creek, the barn animals, the slaves, the women, the men and the children, -dozens of children, memorized those cries to insure the shouting would never stop on the Bradston Fayette Plantation. And in fact, *it never has*.

First, Headman Ben, awash with drool and vomit of apricot, scrambled from the slave shacks wearing but a raggedy old pair of field pants. His feet, bare as the day he was born, now hardened by field clay and ignorance for over half of the century, scarcely seemed to touch the grass and rocks of this earth in a rage which was not. Jiggling lanterns sprang from every shadow and the shouting grew louder, more desperate. From his window on the second floor of the big house, and only for a moment, Beau observed the frenzy below before grabbing his shirt in a race for the stairs. He neared the landing and could hear guns being rattled from their cabinet. *Boom!* A warning shot was fired into the air from the Master's rifle on the front porch. Beau joined his father on the steps. *Boom!* Beau covered his ears but was too late.

Reina's screams were higher in pitch and sounded nearly like an animal from the deepest bog in the swamps. She chased her husband, stumbling and falling each time Ben changed directions.

Fog had moved in across the great lawn between the separate stands of Live Oak and the lanterns danced in the thin mist. Beau had started to delight in the eery spectacle when *boom!* His father fired again.

"Ben! You stop your legs this minute!" Master Bradston commanded. Ben half laughed and half screamed in his delirium, angling his way toward the Flint. Beau ran to keep up with his father who was joined by the slave driver, his uncle. Reina fell again. This time, Willy, in the borrowed white shirt, untied and unbuttoned, stopped to help her to her feet.

"Stop your papa! He's full o' the devil, he is!" She collapsed in a heaving mass between two gnarled roots of the same tree. Willy wiped the sweat from her forehead and raced after his father.

Other slaves between Ben and the river scattered to form a human barricade, -a net to snare their own. Beau, his father and James ambled toward the river in stretching strides while the house's other inhabitants gathered on the front porch.

"I won't leave this plantation alive!" Ben's shouting suddenly made sense before returning to gibberish that was half English and half Zulu or maybe Congo.

"Papa!" Willy yelled into the night helping Beau isolate Willy's ever changing location in the fog. Beau ran ahead of his father in the direction of Willy's voice as he began to fear what the slaves

must have certainly imagined; that Ben knew what he spoke of.

Slave women wailed in anguish along the river bank, all too familiar with the resolution of such matters. Reina's hands clawed at the grass until it came up in clumps in her two palms. She howled into the belly of creation. Her Headman was good as dead.

Beau felt that he should have been able to stop the scenario from playing itself out. He needed to be the hero that won the trust and admiration of a slave's son. He prayed to God as he sprinted through the foggy night, following shouts and screams to an almost certain end. *Boom!* Again, his father's gun issued its threatening report. Again, his father shouted in ultimatums. Again, Ben replied in the wet night "I won't be taken but by God!" They were now running south, Beau gathered by a sudden shift in sounds. He heard splashing and the words of Willy begging his father to put an end to the rage. It seemed that Beau reached Willy's side just as his father and James took up their position some eight feet away.

The lanterns quickly closed in and the moonlight conspired to light Ben's ill-chosen escape as he flailed in the current of the chilly Flint. *Boom!* The Master of the Plantation warned his

slave one final time.

"Ben!" he shouted with one hand cupped at his mouth. "You must see how foolish this is. We can see you plain as daytime. It's over Ben."

Beau reached out for Willy's arm, certain his father would only tolerate a peaceful surrender at this point. He squeezed his reassurance and Willy glanced at him still terrified. For the moment the shouting and the wailing all ceased. But the incessant splashing continued. Ben was not to surrender. In that instant, the senior Bradston raised his firearm and took aim, Willy broke from Beau's grasp and Beau took two leaps and dove at his father shouting one elongated and piercing "No-o-o-o!" They collided with a thud and the discharge tracked to the right. Beau had water in his ears where he and his father had landed close to the bank on a shallow shoal. His father struggled to regain the wind that had been knocked clean out of him and Beau rubbed the river from his eyes to see Willy paddling frantically toward his father who didn't know how to swim. Then like a sledge hammer coming down on an anvil, a deafening sound jumped from the calm that was

darkness as the double barrel rifle of Beau's uncle raised to nuzzle against his bracing shoulder. Beau opened his mouth to yell but only the river rushed out.

Boom! Boom! A nerve driven and crazed hunter reloaded but one barrel. *Boom!* And the splashing, for all it's commotion and all it's promise, abruptly stopped. Without seeing and without confirmation of the sudden and consuming silence, Beau let his head drop into the inch or two of water as though he had no supporting neck at all. *If one of those shots claimed Willy's heart* he thought under water, *the Flint can have me too.* There were no heroes in Georgia. Beau expelled his pain in bubbles against the pebbled floor, while his ears above the surface of the river strained to hear any echo of hope left in the land. His father grabbed the shirt at his neck and jerked him to his feet as the moon revealed the angriest blue eyes that Beau had ever seen. His father's teeth clenched in rage and his back hand flew from fifteen, nearly sixteen years of restraint to connect with the side of his child's face. Beau's neck popped slightly as his head swung on top of his shoulder throwing his balance back into the river that had claimed

more lives than he cared to recall. But this time, he didn't just lay there. He scrambled to all fours and then to his feet where he charged his father not only with the brunt of his nearly full grown body but he also deliberately charged him with the accountability for all things evil. It was this combined force that should have knocked the life right out of him where he stood but his father caught him in a hug that thwarted any intended injury and held him there where he soon exhausted the long day's struggle and broke into heaves. It would have been easy to add tears to the sobs and the spasms that originated somewhere deep inside his chest and had he thought for a moment how he could best alienate his father, he would have let them flow. But if he cried, if he dared to weep in this lifetime, it would be for the keeper of his heart and not for his lousy father. It was foolish for Beau to think his father's embrace held truth or even understanding and the moment the senior Bradston felt his son might be crying he pushed his hands against his chest and shoved him to the ground.

"You disgust me," he snarled, just as splashing was heard on the far side of the river. Beau raised on his elbows then sprang to his

feet as the lanterns scarcely illuminated the figure of Willy carrying his papa's body from the river. Willy started to run for the trees on the opposite bank as James fumbled for more lead in preparation for a careful aim. Beau knew he couldn't reach him in time to deflect the shot from where he was propped on the river bank so he threw his head back and howled into the moonlit night like a coyote "Wil-ly!"

At the sound of Beau's desperate voice, Willy stopped, his back flinched and to the river. He knew his chances were slim in the trees burdened by the weight of his lifeless papa and he wondered now if he should have ever left the dark swiftness of the current.

As he waited for the report of the driver's gun and the force of its load ripping into his backside, his lips began to move on their own.

"Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me." *Boom!* There was a shot but Willy felt nothing. "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me..."

Beau had scrambled to his feet and hurled the weight of his body into the knees of his uncle. *Boom!* "...and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord, forever and ever." Willy dropped to his knees

in the rich mud and though tears collected like a mighty ocean tide around his eyes, he let not one escape. His papa would not be further disgraced by this final act of weakness. His back stung with fierce pain now though Willy could not tell if it was because of the lashes he had received and the strain of carrying his papa or from the gun just fired, though he feared and accepted the latter.

He did not lay his father's body down but rather held it to his chest so that they might enter the gates of the Kingdom together.

Beau watched as Willy collapsed on the other shore and while it seemed they had already been engaged in this struggle for hours, scarcely minutes had scampered by. He rolled into the river until he felt the current nudge him and he began to swim. "Willy!" he cried between breaths and between strokes. It was difficult to gauge his position in the water but the river was too deep and too swift for him to right himself so he tried to look behind him. It was then that he saw his uncle raise his firearm and point it not toward the far river bank but to the middle of the Flint River.

Boom! Willy tensed his muscles as though he would be able to stop the musket ball from ripping through his cinnamon flesh and

he prayed words that were not his own. Beau's head vanished under the surface of the orange running water that carried the stolen clay from a dozen plantations. Willy opened first one sunset colored eye and then the other, surprised to find he still could. He heard Massa Bradston cursing the devil on the other side of the water but did not turn his head to look.

The Slave Driver had not seen the steam engine that barrelled toward him from behind but when the owner crashed into his deranged brother-in-law, you might have almost expected twisted metal and sparks. Bradston's arms swung like the parts of a whirling cotton gin until they were covered in the blood of his wife's idiot brother who lay even more senseless than normal on the stained grass.

Beau had managed to dodge fate by submerging when he had, as the firearm's discharge zipped into the river past his left ear, or so he imagined hearing as he felt his way past rocks and fallen limbs.

Beau didn't have time to labor on the notion that his own uncle had tried to kill him. All that was important in all the universe was that he make it to Willy's side before his lungs gave up his final

breath and before his eyes recording his last memory. All the water in the Flint's reserves couldn't hope to come between them now. He reached the reeds short of the far bank and raised his head just enough to realize his uncle had been incapacitated. He bounded from the water like a cannon ball and scrambled up the muddy bank where that ol' river swayed to the right. He looked back as he scurried toward the kneeling Willy in time to see his father fire his rifle into the air. *Boom!* Beau stumbled in some brush, startled by the report.

Massa Bradston hollered across the river lined with lanterns held by other slaves and guests arriving from the plantation house.

"Boy, you stand up and get your black ass back across this river! You know I won't think twice about shooting you and I don't miss," he threatened with a hand cupped at his mouth.

Beau shouted back at his father so enraged that spittle flew from his angry mouth. "Fire that rifle one more time and it had better be aimed at me because I will kill you myself!" He stopped only long enough to see his father lower the firearm slightly, from the embarrassment of having been threatened by his own offspring in

front of the slaves and especially his new in-laws. Mark Wilkontny arrived at Bradston's side with his own father trailing not far behind and assumed the muzzle loader of his fallen partner in plunder. Further yon on the grass, Martha had discovered Reina in hysterics and moved to comfort her in her apparent and assumed loss as black veiled clouds came together like giant draperies to conceal the moon's judgmental eye. Somehow the slaves with lanterns along the river bank came to realize that the younger Bradston had managed to get the situation under control and by whispering down the line that nearly stretched thirty chain lengths to the slave quarters, one by one, the lanterns were extinguished, plunging the night along that wicked river into further and more reverent blackness than on any night before. Massa Bradston yelled for the slaves to relight their lanterns but none paid him no never mind as they turned with heavy heads to walk back to their huts and shacks. And in that blackness, Beau reached Willy's heaving side and threw his arms about him as his own knees, protruding through a worn pair of dungarees he'd snatched in haste, sank in the cool Georgia mud. He cocked his head some to hear the whispers on Willy's quivering lips as he clenched back tears

enough for both of them.

Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. II Samuel, Chapter 1, Verse 23. - For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. II Corinthians 4, Verse 11. -So that my soul chooseth strangling, and death rather than my life. I loathe it; I would not live always: let me alone; for my days are vanity. Job, Chapter 7, Verse 15 and 16. -And David sware moreover, and said, Thy father certainly knoweth that I have found grace in thine eyes; and he saith, Let not Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved: but truly as the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, there is but a step between me and death. I Samuel 20, Verse 3. -Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me. Ruth I, Verse 17.

As Beau listened, slightly nuzzling Willy's cheek with his own from behind, he stretched to support the cumbersome weight of Headman Ben, without putting undue pressure on Willy's

splintered back that trembled inside the hollow trunk made by his chest and arms. After taking a shallow breath, scarcely enough to sustain a newt, Willy continued his praying and it started to rain, small droplets at first, but then drops the size of tears. Yes, the size of tears. All at once Beau realized he didn't have to hold his emotion back, so he blinked and two of the largest tears in Georgia dropped from his cheeks, as innocent and natural as rain from the eyes of God, surely ashamed of his creation this night.

Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his! Numbers 23, Verse 10 and Chapter 17, Verse 13 -Whosoever cometh any thing near unto the tabernacle of the Lord shall die: shall we be consumed with dying?

Willy's words frightened Beau, who knew no more where they came from than Willy did. He squeezed his eyes very tightly just as his chest let lose a sob that shook the three of them. Willy pulled away to turn his face and his fallen father toward Beau who shifted to share the burden. Using his raised knee as a table, Willy freed one of his hands and dispatched it to Beau's tracked cheek.

He captured a droplet there and brought it back to his mouth tasting salt. "We are not meant to cry, you and I," he said. They stood with the body between them, then walked without saying another word along the far side of the river until they could see the slave quarters at the foot of the other bank. There they entered the trouser deep water and were met half way by the male slaves of the plantation. In this life taking stream they lifted Headman Ben's body high above their heads and with Massa's boy, no longer oddly among them and on Willy's right side, they took that husband home to his prostrate and widowed wife.

We are not meant to cry, you and I.

Six

As though the sun might plum refuse to rise until things were neat and tidy again around the Bradston-Fayette Plantation, everyone resumed their normal stride as though nothing, -well, next to it, had happened at all. Beau was one of the first out of bed, having never really spent much time in it once things had finally settled down a bit. He had spent most of the night, -early morning really, staring out his lace curtained bedroom window toward the slave quarters and the Flint River where the moon occasionally elbowed its way between rain clouds to admire itself in the winding waterway. But now that the live oaks and the three story barn were preparing to toss their shadows like a welcome mat on the great lawn, Beau smelled bacon and he smelled coffee, two unmistakable scents of the morning he would forever associate with Reina no matter what became of everyone else. He could hear the barnyard animals snorting and whinnying just like they did this time every morning when Headman Ben did the feeding and tending. He made his bed, pulling the white terry spread all the way to the top like his mama liked to see it done and he stuffed his pillow in the matching terry bag that closed with a draw string

on one end. He dipped a comb in the water pitcher that sat in the center of a chipped ceramic basin next to the bedroom door and coaxed his thick red hair into place. Like everyone on the plantation, he imagined, he didn't know quite what to expect from the day but he was pretty sure that a day like the one before could only happen once every fifteen years. He took a lasting breath of relief and bounded down the staircase. He didn't know better.

First matter of business was to follow his nose to the source of bacon nudging out the evidential odors of spilled brandy and spent tobacco. Beau had long made habit of swiping the first strips of thick bacon that he gnawed like jerky on the back porch basking in the new day's sun as it filtered through millions of live oak leaves and the vines of Babylon willows along the river's edge. Reina never used crossed words with that boy and usually stepped aside with a *uh-huh* that vibrated her version of *good morning* from behind closed lips. This day was not different in that respect though the rest of her body shook from the events that had overtaken it but a few hours ago. Beau squeezed her shoulders from behind and turned her stricken resolve to face him.

"This sickens me," he said barely parting his teeth. "If it were possible, I would bare half your pain. If it were possible, and it would have provided your family peace and freedom, I would have gladly fallen in Ben's place." At that moment his eyes blurred with the makings of tears and he opened them wider to enlarge the blue-green lakes that surely threatened to overflow into separate and irretrievable streams. Reina could see for herself with those same ironstone eyes she'd given her son, that these words were true and that perhaps he could be trusted to share a bit of her anguish. She patted his cheek with the palm of her bacon greased hand, promptly wiping her mark from his blushing skin.

"Where's Willy? His voice cracked from man to boy then back to man again, revealing just one of the countless struggles he waged.

Reina bit her lip, took a breath to gather her feelings and answered "he's doing his papa's chores." Beau rushed out the back door toward the barn. "But he ain't talkin'," she hollered after him as she looked down to the fresh purple burn on her hand where she had been bare holding the fire-red handle of the bacon skillet.

Holding that handle had given her pain she could control herself which helped her respect the pain she couldn't while it kept her standing, strong and altogether in the Bradston boy's eyes. Them Bradston's weren't about to see Miss Reina crumble now. She plunged her hand into the wooden fire bucket and closed her eyes real tight.

Willy didn't look up from where he was feeding the chickens, even when Beau moved his own legs and feet to stand beneath the scattering grains. "Willy?" he asked repeatedly until he resigned himself to monologue. "There are no words I can give you that will change what happened last night."

He kicked his shoe into a clod of dirt that scattered into a hundred pieces sending the chickens into a frenzy. Still, there was no response from Willy. "There is nothing I can do or say that will bring your papa back. I am angry with my family and I think it would be alright for you to be angry with them too. Just don't be angry at me. Hate them, -not me Willy." Beau felt the nagging squeeze of stale tears that seemed as though they would persist until he bid them release, but he remembered the last words Willy had said to him with his papa's body lying dead between them, and he held his tears inside his eyes, for no other good reason than that.

"Since we were small," he explained, "I thought it should be my place in this life to protect you. When we were five and you were cold on the porch of my father's house, I gave you my blanket.

When we were ten and my uncle nearly killed you, I gave him my body to punish instead. When I learned that my sister's husband had beat you, I declared enemies of my own family. And last night, when firearms were pointed at your back, I would have willed the world to save your father and given my soul to destroy mine, -if I could..." Beau wiped his nose..."but I could not" he admitted, nearly prostrate with grief. Willy moved to the cows and lifted a large armful of straw over the wooden railing fence into their bin. Beau followed closely behind not willing to give up his life's charge. His arms encircled an equal measurement of straw for the horses which he tossed into the next stall, forcing Willy to walk around him to reach the two pigs that had survived the summer's heat. Both men reached for the corn scoop though Beau's hand landed atop Willy's. He slowly, but forcefully raised his hand with the scoop to his chest where it was secured by his free hand. Upon that spot of trampled manure and the dried blood of a recent slaughter, the two young men stood motionless except

for their hearts, steam pushing fear from four nostrils in the silhouette of their tortured lives framed for the moment in the doorway of that crooked barn. Like the sun's labored ascent into the morning sky, Willy raised his head and troubled eyes to look into Beau's.

"How can I show you that I would do anything for you?" Beau asked in a whisper that Willy read on his lips. The lashes from Willy's eyes formed a fringed shadow of darkness on the highest point of his cheeks and Beau struggled for the words that would raise the veil between them forever. "What I feel inside here for you," he thumped their hands and the corn scoop on his chest, "is more than I would feel for a brother. It's more than anything I hold for my family. It's what I imagine should be saved for maybe one person in someone's entire life. That's what I feel inside for you, Willy. Do you understand that?" Beau raised Willy's fist to his lips and kissed his skin just once but with purpose. He watched as Willy's eyes grew shiny as though they were puddles reflecting the sun's orange brilliance and he held his breath. How must all this seem to him, Beau wondered, amid his bewildered and

overwhelmed state of chaos. He watched his eyes for the slightest clue and as Willy's tears mounted and he blinked them back, Beau whispered "Come now. We are not meant to cry, you and I."

Willy looked away from Beau at that moment as a tear tumbled off the eyelashes of his right eye and fell to a parched though concealed cheek. Beau yanked Willy into an embrace to spare him the shame of crying before him and he held him there. Willy did not resist, nor -save for the tear that escaped, did he cry further.

He didn't understand how he could feel everything and nothing at precisely the same time. He felt Beau's hands squeezing into the ripped skin on his back and though it pained him greatly, he squeezed back, desperate to let him know that if he were capable of feeling anything at the moment, he would feel the same way somehow. And as much as the situation called for him to speak he found that still, he couldn't and as much as Willy needed to feel, he did not.

As Beau tightened his grip around Willy's back, he felt him flinch slightly and remembered his wounds in that instant. His arms released and he took a step backward in apologetic astonishment

but Willy stepped forward without letting go and in fact, held Beau even tighter. Carefully Beau looped his arms back around Willy and nuzzled his neck with his chin and nose. The sheep stirred some but that entire leaning barn could have fallen down and the two likely wouldn't have noticed.

Beau kissed his dusty neck and promised that things would change for them now. He told him how all papas died eventually and that sons were meant to take over the best they could. He said that when his father died he was going to let all the slaves move into the plantation house and he and Willy would live in the cave, after they fixed it up of course. He wanted to feel Willy shake with laughter. He wanted to reach down inside this man that he held to pull the sadness and confusion right out of him. He needed to know that one man could feel this way about another and that the other man could feel the same way back. When he truly thought about it, he wanted that miserable barn to fall over and land square on his uncle and father but alas, these were too many things to arrange in a single day, so they just hugged for the longest time. And the part about those two not noticing should the

barn fall down was true. Those sheep stirred for a reason and the reason was simple: they didn't much care for Beau's uncle James.

Being the Master of a sizeable plantation never really had its good days, though some were better than others and some were just plain bad. Master Bradston knew the kind of day he could expect before his eyes ever opened and he clenched them tightly hoping he could hold the sun off a few minutes longer. Martha had not been an overwhelming source of encouragement when she stated, just before leaving the bedroom, "You have a lot to answer for today, John Bradston." He knew that. Any hope for financial salvation went under in that blasted river and unless he were willing to part with Ben's only boy, he needed to do some quick explaining to the Honorable Vice Governor. He figured he'd let Martha handle the consoling of Reina as consoling was predominantly women's work anyway. But the matter of disciplining his son would fall to him. He shook with the embarrassment he carried like a new appendage having had his own offspring publicly oppose him and intervene in slave matters

on their behalf. Somehow Bradston knew the regretful events of the previous evening could only be made worse by two things, -a disobedient son and the realization that this son had probably been right. None of this sat well with him. None of it. He struggled into the day's clothes and had walked outside on the balcony when he was intercepted by the children's tutor.

"Mr. Bradston, I wondered if I could have a word with you," Magnus asked in a voice deeper and more authoritative than normal. "It's about your son," he added when he thought he might be refused or postponed to another time.

"Make it brief, Mister Telfair. Evidently, I have many to answer to this day, according to God and my wife." He bent at the waist folding his hands in front of him with his elbows lending fulcrum on the railing. But his head did not turn to face the tutor and as the teacher was accustomed to this face to face confrontation as an indication of captured attention, he persisted in engaging him.

"I have grave concerns about Beau's demonstrative behavior of late." He waited for a response.

"On that matter, Mister Telfair, I must say we agree." He had glanced toward the river when everything suddenly came back to him forcing him to promptly look away with a shudder.

Magnus paused a moment for emphasis. "I am of course referring to his unnatural and socially reckless association with the slave they call *Willy*." He watched as Master Bradston's face suddenly turned toward him. "Why just yesterday, I discovered the two of them in your son's room in the middle of an embrace and it had appeared in that instant that the two might have been kissing at the lips, though I cannot be sure." Magnus seemed at once to forget his deep register voice amid the high details of sordid drama he played out like Judas at the Last Supper and soon his speech was more clearly reminiscent of his Augusta acquaintance, -the Lady Everlee Chartreuse. He watched as Master Bradston's face boiled in rage and he moved closer to deliver the boy's fate. "I have given it considerable thought and I would like to request that Beau accompany me to Augusta for the winter's lessons where he might be free of distraction and the less than desirable influences he has encountered here. I would

personally see to his formal education in a respected school that would more adequately prepare young Bradston for opportunities of higher learning. As for your youngest daughter, Missus Bradston has already expressed a desire to instruct her in the ways of cooking and sewing so that she might better serve a future son-in-law." Magnus knew he was planting seeds of Machiavellian proportion and he moved closer to more adequately water and nourish his evil garden. "In addition, I'm afraid my asthma is complicated by all this interior humidity and my doctor feels I might achieve a stronger constitution by returning to the coast at once. In the boy's best interest..."

"I'll give it my thoughts," Bradston snarled as he excused himself from the landing.

Magnus rubbed his hands and returned to the guest room to drink tea in bed.

William John Bradston II was unhinged by the time he reached the front porch after finding his son's room empty. His brother-in-law James was returning from one of two outhouses reserved for the family and the Master barked "Have you seen Beau?"

"Not since last night but if you're going to give him a whipping, I'll help you find him," he offered enthusiastically. "If it wasn't for his damn nigger lovin' I could have had me two of 'em last night."

James usually said or did one thing too much.

"What do you mean when you say his *nigger lovin*?" The Senior Bradston asked, leaving the porch to hunt down his son.

James galloped a few strides to catch up to his gait that seemed to aim straight for the barn and thought about how his nephew didn't come around for favors anymore. "Yes sir, well you've seen him in the fields working like an everyday slave and always as close as he can get to that boy of Headman Ben's, too. I have long suspected he might be going bad," the idiot relation formulated this thought for the first time as the wrath on the face of his sister's husband deepened to maroon. They neared the barn and the sheep became disturbed.

Beau's hands returned to Willy's shattered face to steady him. "I will do better at protecting you," he promised before pressing his lips against Willy's mouth.

"William John!" Massa Bradston yelled in a voice as loud and startling as thunder from an angry god. "Let-the-slave-go," his voice trembled as it paused between each deliberate word. The boys jumped in each others arms and a shake came over Willy that Beau could not stop no matter how tightly he squeezed. At that moment, James yanked Willy away and pushed him to the hay-strewn ground. Beau yelled as his body flew through the air to check his uncle's assault on Willy but James turned in anticipation and sent his fist into his nephew's gut. Beau dropped to one knee, his breath bouncing onto the ground before him. He gasped once and then a second time. The next words were his father's.

"Get up!" he commanded, spitting disgust from his pierced mouth. "Get up!" he shouted again when Beau seemed slow to react. Beau accepted his defeat in that moment and rose to his feet to face his father as his uncle lashed Willy's wrists to the corral fence. He watched the red face of his father contort and twitch and finally look away when the appropriate words failed him. James picked up the slack.

"Permission to whip the slave, William?" he asked nearly giving

away a smile just at the corner of his mouth. Beau turned to intervene if need be and Willy's tender back spasmed all at once. Master Bradston caught his son's arm and squeezed it so tightly that the freckles there, normally the color of rust on a rain barrel, disappeared into the whiteness of his skin.

"Not just yet, James. Whether you whip the nigga or not will be for young William here to decide. -He thinks he's the man of this plantation. Perhaps it's time he did a man's work and made a man's decisions." Beau jerked his arm back and worked the feeling back into it with his right hand. He heard the wind rustle through leaves down by the river and he prayed, which he didn't do often enough to go expectin' a blessing or a miracle today. His father began to walk a circle around him. "Now I suppose some might look at the events of late and wonder where they had gone wrong as a father. Yesterday you attacked your sister's husband in a house full of guests. I learned just this morning that you also hit your tutor during a disagreement and last night, you lunged at me and knocked your uncle to the ground, nearly letting two slaves escape. Your behavior so confused the situation that now, one of those

slaves, -a fine headman, is dead."

The anger within Beau mounted to flood his eyes with rage, which incensed his father even more. The back of senior Bradston's hand sailed to smash into Beau's cheek and jaw. His head flopped to his shoulder but snapped right back into place should there be more retribution for him to endure.

"Not one tear, dammit! Be a man and take this, I'm warning you!" His father spit through clenched teeth as he spoke. "Now I come here and I see this," he motioned to Willy then back to his son with his head suddenly lowered in revolt. Thunder rolled like a sky locomotive; from far away it tumbled toward them leaving the blackest, sootiest plume of judgement, Beau or Willy had ever seen, across a veiled sky. "I see this," his father repeated, then paused. "...and I am sickened! This-," he referred to their arrangement, "goes against Nature, against the establishment of Georgia and against the laws of this plantation." Again, the sky rumbled.

Beau looked up to the darkened heavens, in case God were getting closer somehow, and prayed again, -this time for lightning. "Yes,

most fathers would wonder why, but I, -I have hope and plans for you even now." He stopped his feet after the third time around his son to stand before him. "I have decided that you will accompany your tutor to Augusta where you will spend the winter in studies there, far from the distractions and pressures of this plantation. If I learn of your progress, I will consider bringing you back in time to tend to the orchards come Spring. You leave tomorrow!" he spoke forcefully but inches from his son's head, eyes looking straight into eyes.

Beau's heart made a thud as it dropped into the pan at the bottom of his stomach and his wounded resolve could not control the gasp that hissed from defeated lungs, upon hearing this announcement.

Perhaps like Headman Ben, he too would make the assessment that he would be better accounted dead than forcibly removed from the one he loved, or felt he loved. Beau raised his head to look in Willy's direction but instead saw the arresting brown toothed grin of his Satan uncle. In that dark moment, it indeed seemed the easiest possible course to expose his filthy uncle for what he was and what he had done to him all those years of his childhood, as if

that might be explanation enough to satisfy his father's need to blame something. That ploy might just save his hide, but it would only further jeopardize Willy's, so he held his tongue still.

Besides, if it came down to it, he might have to sacrifice Magnus to remain on the plantation and his credibility could be weakened by using the same *bad influence* story twice, regardless of the conviction behind it. He reminded himself that he wouldn't do Willy any good in Augusta. -He hadn't done him a lot of good here, the way Willy was about to see things.

"And then there's the bigger problem of Ben's boy here." The Massa walked toward Willy who kept his quivering chin low, trying desperately not to shake above the neck, but he was scared, - possibly more afraid than he could ever recall. He clenched his teeth on his lower lip until the taste of blood spread through his mouth. Without a father to intervene on his behalf and the Massa's own son possibly in more trouble than he was, Willy couldn't help but sense doom descending like all of creation about him. A sudden pop of thunder sent him out of his skin; -now if he could only stay there, he thought, as the Driver repeatedly jerked the

ratted whip through his cupped hand. "For thirty-eight years," the Massa spoke, "I've had me slaves on this plantation. And for thirty-eight years, these slaves have understood, every one of them, that I am good and treat them fair as I can. For two generations now, my slaves have understood that nothin' better in this life can be gained by running away from the Fayette-Bradston Plantation 'cause this is the best it gets for a nigger in Georgia. And alas, for thirty-eight years, I have whipped every last brown grub of God who tried to get away in spite of me. Last night I saw you and your papa trying to escape across the river and into the woods on the far side, but I don't have the mind to whip you just yet. Your papa worked real hard for me all these years and you seem to be ready to fill in those footsteps, but you need to be given a lesson now if you're going to turn out right by him. My boy needs a lesson mighty bad too, and that's why he's going to be the one doing the whippin'. If ever he 'spects to be Master himself someday, this will sure be useful and if you ever plan to be a Headman of the slaves, I 'magine you'll learn a thing or two here too. I'll set the lashes to number five as this is your first attempt to escape and my son's first experience at whippin'."

Willy's backside tightened and then relaxed as he thought about his whippin' coming from somebody he cared about. It shouldn't have made any difference but it did. His mind thought to argue the charges as he hadn't intended to escape a'tall, but when the guns started popping all he could do was try to get his papa to the trees where he could talk some sense and sobriety into him. He knew he had about as much chance saving his papa as he did convincing the Massa that he wasn't no runaway. 'Sides, Willy thought he might want to become headman of the slaves one day and the way Massa put it, this whipping was part of the process, so what could he do 'bout it anyways?

Beau's freckled face revealed a smile that was hardly an expression of happiness, recognition or joy. It was a genuinely mature reaction of disbelief toward the adults in his life who rather behaved like vengeful children. He would have no part in their experimentation and told them so. "I truly cannot believe that you would suggest such nonsense." He turned to face his father head-on. "If ever I inherit your miserable swamp, you can be assured of two things: I will earn the respect of my workers without a whip

and I will not be called anybody's *Master*. I am your son through no fault or choice of my own, but if you want a monster to succeed you, then look to James here or your new son-in-law. They come from stock like yours more than I ever will." He knew his speech called for a hasty exodus but he also knew that any hope Willy had for protection rested solely in his presence, so he stood his ground of manure and clay.

"That tutor of your's has certainly turned you into quite a fancy talker. Perhaps Augusta can turn you into a real man." His father grumbled while his uncle burst out with a short laugh. Beau ground his teeth and squinted one eye at him with more disdain than a shrew has for a water moccasin. "Hand him the whip, Jim," his father barked.

James held out the ratted leather strap and Willy closed his eyes. For a minute, Beau did not move, his father was still, even James resembled more of a statue than a mental case. Willy trembled, wondering how much more his splintered back could take; the wounds from his previous whipping had not yet closed together. At last, Beau took the whip from his uncle's hand and examined it

closely turning it over and over, threading it through his hand. *If only Willy's punishment could have included a gun*, Beau thought quietly to himself, he could have turned it on his father and uncle and been done with it. Somehow he knew a whip in an inexperienced hand wouldn't have amounted to a very impressive defense. "I won't do this," he looked up at his father, extending his arm. "First, Ben's son wasn't trying to escape. He was trying to get his father out of harm's way," *-which is more than I would ever do for the likes of you*, he knew to shut his mouth even though his tongue was still moving. "And second, Willy is my friend and all that his mother has left. I would sooner carry him to Atlanta and back before my hand would send this whip across his backside."

He hoped his father would find challenge in his words and devise an alternative punishment for him rather than take out all the aggressions of the South on Willy. His father stirred, disturbed by such abhorrent compassion between a slave owner's son and a slave. His face turned red with rage. He jerked the whip from his boy's hands.

"Either you will give this slave five lashes with this whip or I

will have James give him ten. You want to save this nigger? Take the whip!" He extended it abruptly speaking through clenched teeth. Beau took it from his father's shaking hands. The Master walked to Willy and ripped the thin shirt straight from his back so fast that Willy scarcely felt a tug. But he was already sinking numb in anticipation of the frayed strap of leather that would slice a jagged trench to his soul. He dared not look at Beau now and run the chance of lessening his resolve. He needed Beau to deliver the penalty. It would serve neither of them if Beau were to cave in to principles. Five lashes from a hero surely won over ten lashes from his darkest foe. Willy tried to control his wobbly legs.

Master Bradston took one look at Willy's back and demanded an explanation. "Where is that blood coming from?" He took the rag of a torn shirt, still in his hand and dabbed the backside of his young slave. Beau looked at Willy's back which flowed spontaneously with fresh blood like a Spring bubbling up from mossy rocks. Beau stepped closer and heard Willy begin to pray-mumble, like he had the night before and like he had done for weeks after James had plundered him at the age of ten. His

wounds, already three days old from the incident with Wilkontny, had opened to reveal the travesty there. "Who did this to you?" the Master shouted into Willy's ear. "What were these whippings for?" Spittle flew from Bradston's angry mouth.

Willy continued to pray as the blood still trickled in zig-zags down his open back. "James! Did you do this to him?" Bradston hollered.

"No sir!" James yelped like a Basset Hound, afraid of revealing the incident in the woods.

He shot a glance at his nephew to see if he would be betrayed.

Again, the Master of the plantation yelled directly into Willy's ear, with words he shouted slowly and distinctly. "Where-did-these-marks-come-from?"

Willy was heard to utter more loudly than before, " *...from the precious blood of the lamb.* "

Beau stepped forward as his father raised his hand to strike Willy, most likely across the back of the head. "I gave them to him, -this morning!" Beau nearly choked on his lie. He looked to

his uncle who breathed again with relief. "I gave them to Ben's son this morning for trying to escape from the Bradston-Fayette Plantation last night. I knew they would be coming from somewhere and since I had interfered with the manner in which you and Uncle had preferred to handle matters with your rifles, I thought the lashings should come from me.

I am not proud of this but it is done." He lowered his head dramatically, holding out the whip.

His father's mouth gaped open and Willy's praying subsided. "Go home, Willy. Rest today and we will put this behind us," he said in a voice so calming, one would have thought that Willy was his prized son. "James, put this away!" He tossed the coiled whip into his brother-in-law's stomach. "I want it secured this time," he warned. James trotted off despondently toward the plantation house. The senior Bradston turned to walk past his triumphant son. "You are such a rotten liar," he said in passing barely parting his teeth.

Seven

Augusta, Georgia. It wasn't at all how he'd imagined and it ultimately didn't turn out to be as terrible as he had thought it was going to be in the beginning of his consignment there. Of course, Beau should have realized that rarely was anything quite as it first appeared. There seemed to be no one in all the South who had nearly as much experience with that disappointment as he had. This was 1860 already, the beginning of his second year in exile.

His childhood had dried up like the morning fog on the Savannah River around noon time, and he was on his way to becoming a man if he could only forget how to keep from looking back.

Magnus would have liked to have taken the credit for the erasure

of all plantation life memory and the emergence of refinement in the young man, but Beau had already developed a grand capacity for grieving just under the surface where he held on to everything. His heart had felt like an anvil wedged between his ribs those first weeks in Augusta and it seemed scarcely all he could do to transport his depression and the anvil from one chair to another where he would sit for hours, looking out another window during yet another rainstorm. He didn't speak to Magnus for three days, slept upright in one of his many chairs until his posture, a favorite stickler on his tutor's list of immediate and necessary improvements, gave in to the floor or the fainting couch in the parlour of the flat above the mercantile next to the foundry only recently converted to munitions storage. Beau had watched steam race out the windows there on the third floor and from pipes sticking out the brick sided walls to fill the street with a haze that was indistinguishable from the fog and he knew somehow that the building wasn't what it seemed either.

Eventually, loneliness and the late fall rainy nights that sent an endless draft scooting across the narrow plank floors, likewise sent

Beau to warmer corners of the abode and a reconciliation, although most certainly temporary, with the abductor, his tutor. Magnus had tried to hold him that night but a solitary grunt had persuaded him to settle for the lesser victory of adjacency. In time, Beau had begun to nudge his tutor, under the auspices of sleep and soon all out engaged him as before, usually stirring into a dramatized wakened state about the time Magnus manipulated the expulsion of white tar from between Beau's still growing groin. Beau usually feigned some display of disgust as Magnus lay with a smile that knew better, at his heaving side.

Within the week, Augusta had provided Beau his first environment with human contact outside the realm of his family and their slave holdings. And though Magnus was a hurricane of confusion trying to be father, mother, suitor-in-waiting and tutor, all in one, Beau was well taken care of and receiving the education of his life, for the most part, in the classroom of one Lady Everlee Chartreuse who had taken the young Bradston on as her personal salvation project. *We cannot afford to dally when it comes to reversing those tragic years of interior isolation* , she had carefully

articulated the second time they had spoken. A week earlier, his first words, (because he was a *he*) had been undone by the fluster brought on with Beau's handshake and the innocent sparkle in his green and blue eyes. And rather than saying *it is a pleasure to meet you*, he had tripped all over the words and stated *meet to pleasure you*, and the two of them had a grand laugh at that one.

In the months that followed, Magnus became madly jealous at the closeness between Beau and Lady Everlee which was also a source of endless and cruel amusement between the two oddly matched friends. *Lee*, as he was called during the daylight by his employer, the only baker in Augusta, was only two years older than Beau, compared to Magnus who was an even four. It was only natural that Beau would find more in common with Lee and aside from the fact that Lee mostly pretended to be a girl, Beau grew to cherish this companionship. While it never entered Beau's head to ever dress like a girl, he was fascinated by Lee's almost nightly transformation before suppertime, which Magnus, Beau, Lady Everlee and The Dresser, always took together in the house Lee's widowed mother left him when she died a year ago, herself.

Anyone who had spent anytime around Lee could tell you that the

over sized house was secondary to those blessed closets bulging with generations of fine Southern fashion. That was his inheritance, that was his mother's legacy. And with those closets, came The Dresser, a poor orphaned boy whose body too quickly developed into a man's before his tiny brain had a chance to grow with it. Magnus had once told Beau that The Dresser was twenty-nine years old and had dressed Lee's mother for the last fourteen years of her life; didn't know how to do anything else. Lee and The Dresser were practically brothers since the time Lee was six years old. Just before her last breath, she had made her son promise to take care of The Dresser because he couldn't well take care of himself and there wasn't any of his own family to take over. Lee had promised, not so much because The Dresser couldn't take care of himself but because, somewhere, deep inside the goodness that was his own soul, Lee recognized that he simply could not cynch a bustle alone. The arrangement between the two was christened whereupon seeing his mother in her box with the lid removed, wearing her favorite lavender lace procession hoop with matching brocade cape, that Lee was able to communicate, with one raised eyebrow and the slightest lift of a smile, that wish or no

wish, that dress would not be buried. The Dresser wrestled it off her later that same evening and had it pressed and hanging in the heir apparent's closet by dawn. Magnus reports that they could both be seen walking double-time back from the cemetery on the hill outside of town. Rumors flying like angry crows behind the raised black gloves on that particular sunny afternoon had it that the orphaned Dresser wasn't an orphan at all but the bastard son of Lee's choleric aunt, his mother's sister and the product of his own father's anxiously strayed seed. The aunt had died from what ailed her long before Lee came along and Lee's father refused to turn the child over to strangers. Lee's mother went understandably crazed with rage at hearing the explanation from her suddenly not-so-devout husband and exclaimed that the house would not be big enough for her, the bastard and his guilt, but the leading hand prevailed and The Dresser came to live with and be raised by them.

If The Dresser had a name, she never used it. Once, while she was beginning to dress she caught him, all of five years, watching her through a crack in the door. She screamed pulling him inside by the collar and dragging him into her ample closet. *See these*, she slapped her naked breasts. *Your mother had these and nice*

ones too. And this, she grabbed the boy's tiny head and forced it between her legs nearly suffocating him, is where you should have come from , before she broke into horrendous sobs falling to the floor before him. He stood there, not shaking, not afraid, and began to rub her head, smoothing down her hair and trying to calm her. When she started to shiver in her nakedness, he reached for her clothes and began dressing her, somehow understanding that he could put her back together again.

Still, she never used his name and when her own child came some years later, he was introduced as *Dresser* . Lee had called him *Dress* his whole life and it wasn't until after his mother died, that the name was elevated to an official and well deserved title though it was quite possible The Dresser never understood why.

He was a grown man when Beau met him, his real name, if he ever had one, had gone to three different graves and if he knew the secrets he carried, he couldn't share them with anyone. He laughed when others around him laughed, often at his expense, and he was silent when he worked whether it was dressing Lady Everlee Chartreuse or preparing the evening supper where she made her

nightly appearance from atop the rug lined stairs. As Lee and Beau grew closer, she even confided that The Dresser made a remarkable lover, though he didn't talk then either, *work* as it must have been, Beau had reasoned.

It wasn't that Lee couldn't be made to be beautiful because when she was Lady Everlee, she was powdered, curled and radiant, but as a man, Beau found him awkward, skinny, and desperately unhappy and the thought of pressing his body into all those miserable bones made little hairs raise on his freckled arms. But he liked holding her in those big dresses while she taught him to dance around the parlour or before he and Magnus would leave at night for the flat above the mercantile. It was grace and affection he hadn't known with his mother, or his father, -with anyone when he thought hard about it, except for Willy.

The never-changing Bradston/Fayette Plantation had changed and was changing still. Willy, a new father resulting from that forced incident in the woods, could see it with his eyes closed. He tasted it, almost like blood in the back of his mouth. He felt it

when he hugged his mama to get her to stop shaking when she had gotten lonely for her dead Headman. He smelled it in the rain as it splashed in the sour clay about his bare feet. But more than any of these, he heard change, soft at first, a rumble just beyond the trees of Massa Bradston's property line, but getting louder. Getting closer. He was having dreams that gave him fevers too, dreams about rivers swelling wider than a plantation is long with Beau on one shore and him yelling without making any noise on the other. He didn't know how far away the tutor had taken Beau but he knew it was beyond the trees of that property line and he knew that Beau was changing there, too.

The girl in the forest hadn't insisted she marry him when the baby boy was born with Willy's unmistakable orange eyes. He wouldn't have thought he was even inside her long enough to make no baby but there it was staring back at him. She had accepted that it wasn't love that grew inside her and she had told him one day in the cotton field that iffin it was a nigger baby and not a monster put in there by the young white massa, she would keep the secret if he didn't think he could learn to love her. They both knew better that

if the families discovered the truth, a marriage would be forced on them too, and they had already been cut out of one decision. It was such that Julia was almost two years younger than Willy and a mother at the age of sixteen. Willy had not known her well before the baby came along though the two were becoming good friends, but in the end despite his sense of obligation, it was true, Willy could not learn to love her and she did not hold him accountable.

The boy, which Julia had named after her new friend and called *Little Will*, was a strong baby and as it grew and as Willy took a father's, though not a husband's, interest in the boy, he became more and more like him. Julia often warned Willy about being too rough on the baby and Willy would answer back saying he was just getting it ready for a world that was going to be rough on him. He thought it best to remove some of the uglier surprises in life. Reina badgered him at least once a week and usually after he returned from Julia's family quarters about cutting in on some other buck's territory. *Unless yous the one planted that bastard*, she'd preach, *ain't no bizness o' yours, no bizness a'tall*. Willy reckoned she knew from the day Lil Will came into this world called Georgia,

who the planter was, but she didn't let on. His father would have 'proached matters quite differently and Willy imagined it would have been with the back of his hand. He missed his father and was relieved to have him put down at the same time. His back would not have held many more seasons in the fields even if Massa had decided to keep him on at Fayette. In God's way, Willy figured his papa was spared a few of the uglier surprises too.

And he missed Beau watching out for him, eventhough he was big enough now to watch out for himself. That made Willy chuckle when he thought about it. He had always been big enough to take care of himself though it seemed to give Massa's boy something to do with his spare time. Now, he just missed him. He didn't understand the feelings that seemed to live just inside his chest, but knew that he held them there for Beau. He was sure Massa's boy would come home for Christmas the year before eventhough he'd only left the plantation two months earlier but Willy remembered his disappointment when Massa's wife, Martha had told him that *William John* would not be coming home for the holidays. He understood that when slaves get sold to Massa's far

away, they don't never come back, but it seemed to Willy that the white man, who could go anyplace that pleased him, should want to come home every now and then. And everytime Willy thought this way, he had to wonder if maybe the Lil' Massa just didn't want to come back. That hurt those feelings living just inside his chest, more than his disappearance from the plantation. It was one thing to think Beau was sold further down the river without any say, it was quite another thing to think he ran away. Nobody in Willy's life could explain this to him in words or feelings he could understand. He talked to his mama about Massa's family but she was very particular when it came to questions about *that boy*. He sometimes mentioned a rumor or piece of news he had overheard concerning Beau in Augusta to Julia and while she wanted to understand Willy's interest, she mostly wanted him to love her, so acted as though she understood when it was plain for Willy to see that she didn't. Lil Will was the only one on the plantation who seemed to care what Willy was talkin about, so Willy talked to him most all the time. Early evenings after suppertime, with both of their bellies bulging, and before the sun tucked itself in for the night amongst the mighty sour berry bushes and leaning willow

trees beyond Line Creek, was the best time for this sort of papa to son talks as far as Willy was concerned.

"Somedays I couldn't tell you, Lil' Will, if I was going to come through this storm or not. There is days, -there *are* days," he corrected himself for the edification of his child, "when my heart is so empty. When I miss Massa's boy even more than the day before or the memory of your grandpa thrashing like a gator in this river.

Then I see you or get to hold you and I feel the storm almost breaking. *Almost*," Willy stressed. "No matter how many times I hold you or find myself laughing at something somebody told me or a good memory that comes back, I'm still a slave. I know my place. And I am angry, -all the time. That's a terrible way to live your life. My papa had promised me change in my lifetime. He said I'd see the day when slaves were no more. He didn't get to see it in his life and the older I get, I think it's best to start passing that dream on down to you. I know things gots to change one day cause really they can get no worse, but I'm afraid I'm out of patience, through with putting up with the white ways and taking the white whippings. If it weren't for you Lil' Will, I might just

plain be through with living if the good Lord gave me a choice.

But the Lord don't see it that way, I reckon. Accordin' to the Lord, I'm supposed to be forgiving the Slave Driver for the beatings he gives me, Massa for the work he expects from me, Beau for leaving me...that's a lot of forgiving for one slave to manage by hiself...by *himself*. Himself," Willy repeated slowly, determined to practice the language the way he heard the white folks speak it and the way his mama had helped him every time he asked. "If Massa's boy ever comes home, we'll show him what he's missing and how we be getting along just fine without him. If Massa's boy ever comes home," Willy whispered the words again as a tear jumped from his pumpkin colored eye to splash on the dry cheek of his boy. He squeezed his eyes together real tight then looked up into the purple twilight sky. "If Beau ever comes back," he took a deep breath, "he sure won't catch the two of us weeping after him," He proclaimed, biting down on his lip. Lil' Will threw a pebble into the water and laughed, jumping up and down, already searching for his next stone. Willy had to laugh with his boy, mostly because his boy was too young to have forgotten how.

Round about the first part of October, Beau received a letter from his mother as he had each of the thirteen months he had been away from the Bradston/Fayette Plantation. But this letter was different from the twelve others somehow and he read it over and over again.

7, October 1860, Sunday Afternoon

My dearest Beau,

It startles and confuses me to think that a year has managed to creep past us with not so much as a note or visit from you. I realize you must be bitter toward your father and possibly toward me as well for not being able to stand up to the man. My head tells my heart that I have to understand this, though I do not.

Fortunately we have received regular correspondence regarding your development and studies from Mr. Telfair, who assures us that he was correct in suggesting your relocation to Augusta. For some reason that is supposed to be sufficient to still my worries but I am a mother, after all, and usually need to see or hear things for myself. It seems lately that I am not able to get beyond the realization that I gave birth to two sons without somehow feeling I

have lost both of them. Please forgive us for being parents and insisting this one last time on what we thought would be best for you before we sent you into the world to make that decision for yourself. You will be a father one day and then you will understand the necessity of your father's actions, but you will never be a mother and for this I pray you will be spared the heartache that only I can know. Like an olde friend, she looks back at me from the mirror on my dressing room table. She is watching me now.

You will understand if I repeat myself from letter to letter as things seldom change here. It becomes a renewed challenge to find excuses to write you beyond a mother's longing for her son and I hope you will not find my letters an unpleasant intrusion in your new life. The cotton failed us and did not come in this year. Like me, I am afraid, the ground is exhausted and simply not capable of holding a seed any longer. In my situation I must say I am relieved to be finally rendered unfertile but the soil could be the disaster your father has predicted would befall him, his entire life. As you can well imagine, failed cotton means a new emphasis

on the fruit orchards, and as you also know your father, I do not have to tell you that this emphasis falls more to consumption than production. I worry so, but I am a wife after all, and while it seems too horrible at times to believe, I see and hear the affects of his efforts to escape this life of troubles, around the clock. I do so miss having a man around the plantation. With my brother acting as your father's best bottle mate, I am afraid we Southern ladies (and I speak of your blossoming younger sister) are helpless and vulnerable. It is my every hope that I have inspired some higher duty for you to return home with haste to safeguard our fragile welfare. For your consideration, we would like you to know that we will be feeling most defenseless three weeks hence this coming Friday as fifty to eighty people converge at the plantation house to celebrate...YOUR SEVENTEENTH BIRTHDAY! I have made arrangements with Mr. Telfair to release you from studies the Thursday prior so that you and he may travel at your leisure. The party is scheduled to commence at Noon on Friday the 26th and I hope you will be willing to put aside your personal anger or resentment long enough to visit your mother. The party, you see, is not for you, but for a mother who is in desperate straits to see her

son. Please do not disappoint us as we have surely disappointed you oh these seventeen years.

-Your Loving Mother

Martha believed that should do the trick as she fashioned an envelope to put it in. A year had been too long to have gone without seeing her boy. She didn't blame her son for the resentment he must surely hold for his father as she clenched a piece of that too, especially when he was drinking which was more often than not, but a mother should see her son every now and then if she could, despite the wedge it would drive between she and the boy's father. She lit the candle for a drop or two of sealing wax and bundled this letter together with the monthly letter she had written the day before for her other son, Beauregard. William Bradston would have liked to think his wife crazy for writing letters every month to her dead boy but he delivered them all the same. For twenty some odd years now, he had promised his wife to take letters to a cemetery she couldn't bring herself to visit, and there he placed them in a box under a rock next to the headstone that listed the dates of Beauregard's birth and death, exemplifying

the tragically short interval that had happened to occur in between.

And in this box that had been regularly enlarged to the proportions of a small crate were stuffed some three hundred letters chronicling a plantation that never changed and a variety of excuses to write here and there, beyond a mother's longing for her son.

This day, of all days preceding it, Martha's inebriated husband chose to make issue of her ritual and today, of all days preceding it, as he quickly learned, was not the wisest day to challenge his wife.

"Woman, it's been over thirty years of this nonsense. For two and a half decades I have buried these letters with the bones of our son, but I tell you now, I have delivered my last letter. If you want him to keep getting this drivel, you are going to have to claw at the cold, cold ground yourself! I have more important uses for my time." For the briefest of moments, Bradston may have thought he had succeeded with his latest ultimatum, though he couldn't see his wife's eyes from where he stood gazing out the window.

And in his stupor she clutched the shoulder of his shirt and spun him around to look into her white face and devil-red eyes and she

said "Writing letters to my sons, dead and missing, provides me the only happiness I know on this God-forsaken expanse of clay you call a plantation. If you take this away from me, you might as well put me into your cold, cold ground because our marriage is just one more of those meaningless things in life that has gone on for three and a half decades too many!"

Of course, Bradston's hand flew because that's what men did in those days when words, crops, women, sons, civility and sobriety had failed them.

Martha faltered some, reaching for the arm of the chair to steady herself, but she refused to fall. She slowly straightened her back, hands naturally attending to her hair, and managed to look her husband in his own bloodshot eyes and said "if you will excuse me," before she turned to leave the side parlor.

"And this other letter," he persisted, waving the envelope in the air. "If this one is inviting William John home for his birthday, I hope you have already taken care of the conditions we discussed," he steadily raised his voice to accompany her into the kitchen.

She plopped into a chair at the small table directly across from the cooking hearth, her stinging face cradled in her magnolia petal hands. At least he would not follow her in here, she thought, preparing to take consolation from Reina who would try not to let on as though she'd heard the full exchange.

"Miss Martha, have yourself a sip of this fresh lemonade here," Reina spoke tenderly while really having no more feelings for the Massa's wife than she had for the dirt clod at the bottom of the back porch stairs, but pretending just the same.

"Thank you, Reina." Miss Martha always managed decency which called for respect between women if not between their races.

"Why don't you take a load off your feet and talk with me a spell," she suggested, revealing the trace of a slight smile between her gradually opening fingers. Reina did as she was told, suggestion or otherwise. "It is sure mighty warm for October, I say."

"Plenty warm," Reina agreed, fully prepared for the worst, which is all the Bradston's had ever given her any reason to expect from them anyway. And bad news from Massa's wife done always followed some passing comment about the weather which was

truly the only thing they could ever hope to have in common.

Reina thought back to that night just over a year ago when she was screaming face down in the grass after hearing those shots down by the river. Miss Martha came up to her then, kneeled down beside her and said *oh my, this ground is cold tonight.*

"There is going to be a party," Miss Martha announced full of resignation. Reina clasped her hands to her bosom wondering if she was finally going to kill her husband, but alas- "You know that our two boys have a birthday approaching." Miss Martha had disappointed her again and all Reina could do was nod her head.

"Well, we have asked Beau to come home for that weekend so we can celebrate together, as a family, with our friends. Of course, this is going to be so much work for you and what with it being Willy's birthday too..." she paused. Reina thought of Willy, not because they would have to work on his special day but because he seemed so fond of Massa's boy for reasons she would never understand. It would do that troubled heart of his good to see his friend. Massa's wife continued. "...Master William and I would like you to talk to Willy, on our behalf of course, and explain that

we will be sending him to the old McPartlin Plantation to help the new owner with his cotton harvest. Now, this is only temporary measures Reina, before you go off fretting that we're going to be selling your boy." Reina raised her ashen, bony hand to her mouth.

"Reina, you know better than most that this has been a terrible year for us. Loaning Willy to our neighbors who have harvests to get in is the only way we can keep him. Certainly you can see that he is the only hope we have for a Headman next season. Do not think we fail to recognize this." Martha stroked the side of her face that still stung from her husband's blow. She didn't know where she was going with all these promises that kept coming into her head. She had never been much good at playing the strong arm of her husband's law, not with her children, not with the help. At that moment she despised her husband and her life that had been consumed and confined by this plantation for over thirty years.

Her mother, God rest her murdered soul, had always said she could have done worse than William John Bradston which Martha had always taken to mean she could have certainly done much better too. It was days like these that conspired to prove her mother wrong. She looked at Reina's drawn and worried face and

decided that this condition needed a woman's touch. "And when Willy has finished harvest at Mr. Ashton's plantation, you can celebrate his birthday here, -in the kitchen of the big house."

Martha smiled though it hurt the side of her face. Of all the conditions she was expected to pass down and uphold, she particularly liked this last invention of her own the most.

Reina did not know what to say. She was too old to pretend she was not fooled by their white lies no matter how many layers of promise they came wrapped up in. For the time being she would just have to believe they were not planning to sell her boy remembering from her tortured past how quickly all that could change. "I will let Willy know, Miss Martha," she managed, having to clear her throat in the middle.

"You know, Reina, it probably would be best if you did not mention to Willy that Beau was coming home. Everybody has enough on their minds with this failed harvest to be fretting about something else, don't you think?" Martha stood, her deed complete.

"Yes'um," Reina bowed her head and nervously stirred the

lemonade.

Now, Master Stephen Ashton was a young English man, and new to plantation living and even though he purchased the old McPartlin place for the most criminal of prices since the Yazoo Land swindle, he did not know what to rightly do with it. Not wholly convinced that all the indians had been removed from the interior of Georgia, his newly betrothed wife had chosen to spend the first year in England with her parents until her passage and safety could be more greatly guaranteed. But he was a determined man after all, willing to go it alone if it meant forging a new life.

His dependence on the small family of slaves that had been part of the asking price and who had taken care of the McPartlin's before she left with the children and he offered himself, was such that he knew he would have to provide for them first if he was to expect any cooperation in return. It likely does not need to be mentioned here that this was hardly the way successful plantation holders had made a filthy tradition of slavery all these many years and it would be but a matter of time before his neighbors, the land or hardship

changed his ignorant ways. So, even with a crop in the fields so very near to picking time, he set as his first priority the reconstruction of the slave quarters to not only more comfortably accommodate the resident slave family he had purchased but the working slaves he intended to borrow from his less fortunate neighbors. And when the day quickly came for him to fetch Willy from the Bradston's, six miles away, he met him with a shake of his hand and a good long look in the eyes. Willy reckoned he'd only be gone two or three weeks and figured that Li'l Will couldn't grow that much in such a short time. And when the Slave Driver James came running after the horse and wagon as Master Ashton and Willy pulled away from the Bradston barn, asking if he could make use of a Driver to keep his slaves in line during the cotton harvest, Master Ashton grinned and said "I've got Willy here, to do that. Thank you, though." Willy couldn't help but smile and made sure that damned Driver saw him smilin' too, as they rolled over the road toward Line Creek.

At first, Beau did not know what to make of his mama's letter

inviting him home for his birthday. Christmas had come and gone without an invite, then Easter. Rachel was nearly twelve by now and he feared he didn't know her anymore. And Willy. The only reason he had read every word of her letters was for some mention of his life long friend. In thirteen letters, three hundred and seventy-eight days, there had been none and this letter was to have been no different. But with an invite home, Beau thought quietly to himself while Magnus read a book on the other side of the room, he could finally see Willy for himself. It didn't seem right to ask Magnus to take him home in all these months mostly because it had not occurred to him to even consider going back until they had asked him to. In the first months, his temper was so hot that his father would have had to beg him to return, but time had a way of chiseling back the hard steel edges of resentment. Time and his memories of Willy. If he could have managed even one of the thousand escapes he had daydreamed over and over in his mind, to the cave of discovery where he could touch, yet even embrace his friend once more, Beau would have done anything. He would have walked the distance in his bare feet or slipped away in the night hanging on the under-carriage of a railway car, if he had thought it

would have made any difference in their situation. And just as he prepared to overcome his indifference toward his tutor now as it was clear he would need the accompaniment of Magnus who had access to the carriage and two horses, he realized that in the months ahead, his coming of age would afford him such privileges and responsibilities without the necessity of this go-between. It seemed to Beau that Magnus was already becoming quite aware of the dwindling control he would have over the young Bradston's life after he turned seventeen. Still, Beau's father had made it known that he was not expected back at the plantation until after his eighteenth birthday and if Magnus were to have things his way, Beau would enroll in a fine southern school well within his reach and never go back to the Bradston Plantation at all. Beau rather had his sights on New England if it came down to this. The Lady Everlee Chartreuse had already promised to get him on at the mercantile after his birthday and even help him with the extra expenses in order to get him as far away from the south as she could afford for a decent education. The Lady Everlee despised the very south her character so effectively emulated but she was tied here, by her mother's money and by her grandfather's money

before that. She could never leave but through the hopes and aspirations of another. She was very fond of Beau and seemed to know his heart better than others, certainly better than her own friend, Magnus, but that was only because Magnus tried so darn hard and took such matters too seriously. Lady Everlee, who lay claim to having all of Creation figured out, realized from the start that young Beau's heart, surely beat for another and all of the manipulations of a schooled tutor weren't about to change that.

She had tried to dissuade Magnus from his designs but knew there was no changing that either. So she held court; listening first to one then the other rant about this or pine for that while attending to the developmental challenges of the Dresser. She was a mother really. That is where her training and destiny converged; -to heal the afflicted. She was doing God's work, charged with raising the outcast orphans of this wretched land they called the gentile south.

She had collected herself a family, as naturally as bees gather pollen or live oaks cultivate Spanish moss. Lady Everlee considered herself fortunate while she observed countless others around her who had not found their lots in life quite so effortlessly.

Sure, hers was a double life what with the hours *he* put in at the

Bakery before *she* became the Lady Everlee Chartreuse around suppertime, but she considered that another blessing as well. Most folks she knew were put on this earth to live one life while she managed to cheat Creation out of two.

"I am upstairs," he hollered down to his dinner guest freshly arrived. "I could use a hand with these buttons, too," she whined a bit more lady-like.. Beau took the steps of the grand staircase two at a time. It was only recently that he had been invited up to the *transformation chamber* , as the Lady Everlee liked to refer to her closets. Usually, he had waited downstairs with Magnus while the Dresser made her presentable and the suspense was allowed to build to dramatic southern proportions. She never wore the same dress twice unless it was requested, just like her consummate mother. But more and more, this was becoming their time and Beau treasured it like he idolized her. Clear as he could tell, The Lady Everlee had been judged plenty in her life which was precisely why she took great measure to insure she made no judgement concerning anybody else.

"Hello, Lee!" Beau burst into the dressing room. The Lady

cleared her throat indicating she was further along in the transformation. "-I mean *Ever* lee," Beau corrected himself with a bowed head.

"What are you so excited about? I haven't seen this much life in you since you got here."

"That's because I received word from my mother that I can come home. I can leave Augusta," he exclaimed to her obvious dismay "-but only for the weekend" he added quickly to spare her feelings. "It's my seventeenth birthday coming up. There's going to be a party."

"Won't that be fetching," the Lady snarled, having already voiced her disapproval of any father who shirks his responsibility by sending a child away to be raised by somebody else.

"I know," Beau acknowledged his self betrayal, "but I'll get to see Willy," he longed for her approval, lending his hands to the back buttons she couldn't reach.

"And what does Magnus have to say about all this?"

"He grunted but he'll take me. What choice does he have? My

parents own him more than they own Willy, which is the biggest reason I could never totally trust him." Beau watched her paint her face as intently as though he were watching a glass blower or a portrait artist. And brush by brush and blow by blow of talc powder, Lee retreated into hiding for the night. "Say, what would you think if we really threw my parents off my scent and I brought a girl home,

-someone I pretended to have an interest in?" Lady Everlee's eyes grew gigantic in the oval mirror on her dressing table. "Seriously! They would think that sending me away had worked and they wouldn't pay me any attention as I snuck off to see Willy. I would be asked home more regularly if it turned out that I was normal after all. You would get out of Augusta every once in a while..."

"Me? Where did that idea come from?" she shrieked. "I am most certainly not dressing up in my finest brocade to visit some backwater drunkards in the middle of Georgia! Inbreds like them find out what Lady Everlee is packing under her corsette and I would not have to worry about tucking it ever again. No thank you." Just then, Magnus arrived downstairs. She tossed him a

verbal detour. "Magnus, we're upstairs but be a gentleman and check on the Dresser in the kitchen for me. He has taken on a very challenging course menu for this evening." Magnus stopped on the third step of the grand staircase, turned and clomped down the steps most dejectedly. She looked at Beau who gave her the most imploring of looks. "Absolutely not!" she announced emphatically to end the discussion. "Beau Bradston, I am warning you to stop looking at me that way or I shall ask you to leave my room at once."

"Where is your sense for adventure?" he crouched down between she and the mirror.

"In the closet, where it belongs!" She pushed him out of her way.

"I am a fine looking man, Everlee. I don't imagine you will get another offer like this the whole year." He smiled so wide you would have thought a photographer was nearby.

"That does it! OUT!" she stammered, throwing her hair brush at him as he scrambled into the hallway.

Dinner was a tense affair what with Beau all smiles, Magnus upset because he had failed to make him this happy after a year of trying, Everlee still reeling from the arrangement proposed earlier and the Dresser, well, -the Dresser just plain confused as usual.

Beau tried to think of the one thing that would win Everlee over to his side. Getting Magnus to take him home was only a piece of the problem. His father would still pull everything in his dominion to keep his son and the slave separate unless Beau managed to convince them he was more interested in something, or rather, someone else. And then there would still be the matter of keeping Magnus out of their reunion as he was surely not willing to retire his role as the living stake driven between them. There was frankly no one more suited than Everlee for this assignment. The trick would be convincing her of that.

"Did Beau tell you, his parents have invited him home to the plantation for his birthday?" Magnus began the round of discussion that three out of four of them had certainly anticipated if not dreaded for the preceding fifteen minutes of awkward silence,

save a compliment or two paid to the Dresser for a meal well-executed.

"Yes, I understand you will be taking him there," Lady Everlee contributed.

"And bringing him back," Magnus clarified, wishing to eliminate any cause for extended optimism on his pupil's part. "I mean to say, I will be escorting him both ways during this brief break from his studies." Magnus finally took the bite that had been wagging on the end of his fork for over a minute.

"You know," it was time for Beau's move, "Everlee has offered to get me on at the Mercantile in the mornings after my birthday so that I can start earning money for school." Everlee kicked at his leg under the table but he dodged her pointed toes.

"I am Beau's guardian, appointed by Mr. and Mrs. Bradston and I will decide how he spends his mornings, Everlee." Magnus laid the fork down and prepared to do battle.

"Allow me the announcement that after my birthday in a short matter of days, I will be old enough to assume my own

guardianship and then *I* will decide how I spend my mornings, afternoons and nights." Beau felt his cheeks turning red.

"It would seem to me," Everlee addressed Magnus, "that the boy does not need a guardian as much as he could use a friend he could trust."

"And just what would you know about friendship these days, Everlee?" Magnus asked most directly. "What with spending all your time filling Beau's head with conspiracies of revolution against his teacher and the abandonment of his studies to earn a living, of all common pursuits." He threw his napkin on the table and prepared to leave while Everlee deliberately chewed her mouthful before responding.

"For your information, Master Telfair, Beau comes to me for advice and companionship when he cannot get these things from you. I listen. You don't. I have concerns about the boy. You have concerns about Magnus. There is a difference between us my friend and yes, dear, I am still your friend," she spoke clearly, then dabbed a napkin to her colored mouth. "-like it or not."

Magnus was visibly flustered. "It surprises me that Beau did not come straight to you and ask you to take him home for his birthday, you are so close."

"Do not be surprised then when I tell you he did ask me, not to take him, but to go with you. This is not a contest, Magnus. Beau is not some prize that two friends should be fighting over."

"Are you going then, to the plantation, that is?" Magnus needed to have confirmation of this last betrayal and he could walk away from her house forever. Without it, there would always be a chance he could eventually forgive her meddling and he was just too hurt at that moment to consider this option.

"If it is that important to Beau that I be there, yes," she answered without looking directly at Beau.

The dining room was silent but for the pounding of victory inside Beau's chest. It was his turn to be a friend and not allow the two of them to destroy each other. He knew that Everlee was right when she said they should not have been fighting over him, but he also knew that Magnus needed to hear some of those things, even

though he may not have wanted to.

"Can I say something?" he asked almost shyly. "Going home after all this time is very important to me. I suppose it is selfish of me to want you both there but you will have to trust me that I know my father better than either of you and if I say it takes the three of us to stand up to him, I know what I am talking about. I will need your support as my friends, otherwise I might as well go home to stay." Beau looked at each of them, lowered his head and said "Now, if you'll excuse me, I am going to help the Dresser with the dishes." Beau hit the Dresser in the shoulder who jumped to his feet and began clearing the table.

The Lady Everlee and Magnus did reconcile that evening while the dishes were being washed and all seemed to be going according to Beau's plan until three weeks later when Magnus pulled the carriage in front of Everlee's house and she appeared on the front porch fully made and dressed-up to travel. As Beau scurried to load her many travel cases onto the back of the carriage and as she blew kisses to the Dresser waving from an upstairs

window, Magnus held his tongue, or rather *shock* held it for him.

It had not been discussed that Lee would be traveling and appearing as Lady Everlee for the first time in public and while Beau should have been the nervous one, Magnus was outside himself with anger. Once Beau helped the Lady Everlee onto the front of the wagon and just as she had positioned herself in the middle of the spring loaded bench, Magnus jumped off and set out walking down the street like the boiler of a steam engine.

"You didn't tell him?" the Lady Everlee shouted before she realized she was already in public for the very first time. She pulled the wide brim of her hat down to cover her face until a more appropriate distance would yield nothing but strangers on the trail.

"You didn't tell him?" she repeated in a forceful whisper without moving her lips much. Beau shrugged his shoulders and took off after him.

It had been an exhausting two weeks for Willy, who respected Master Ashton so, that his need to please him seemed tireless. And this admiration, despite Willy's reluctance to believe it true,

appeared to be mutual. Having been installed as Master Ashton's Headman, working the family of twelve slaves from his property and a total of thirteen others from neighboring plantations, Willy had his hands as full as the shoes of his father when it came to directing the long days work. After only three days in the field, Master Ashton had taken him aside and offered his Headman a proper bed in the plantation house but Willy declined, being sure to explain that he appreciated the offer but had to sleep among his workers if he expected to have their respect and cooperation.

Master Ashton was rightly impressed by that. Rightly impressed indeed.

On the day before Willy's birthday, it had been particularly hot for the end of October and the harvest was but half completed. As Master Ashton was paying for his borrowed labor by the day, the price was beginning to concern him. But he had to get that cotton in. It would be a good year for those who could grow it and get it to market. Master Ashton rolled up his sleeves and worked in the row next to Willy. After some time passed, Willy remembered a trick he'd seen his papa use once when Massa Bradston was in a

good mood. He conferred with Massa Ashton and then gathered the slaves around to make the announcement.

"I know this is the hottest day yet but Massa Ashton says iffing we make the road up yonder by sundown, he will give us his best hog for Sunday's supper." -It was an easy life for the Headman that worked for Massa Ashton mostly 'cause his slaves did not hate him or want him dead. Willy's papa would have lived a great many years longer working for this man. And by sundown, with Massa Ashton sweating harder than anybody else, they made the road and even crossed to the other side in the light of a full moon that lit up those tufts of cotton like stars in the night sky.

It was on the walk back to the slave quarters from the fields that Massa Ashton said the strangest thing to Willy and while white men didn't usually carry any surprises, Massa Ashton had plenty.

"What makes you happy in this life, Willy?" Massa Ashton's scratched and bleeding hand squeezed Willy's shoulder at the neck.

"Sir?" Willy liked to hear him say things twice, on account of his accent.

"You know. -Happiness," he rephrased it. "What gives you reason to be happy?"

Willy smiled uneasily. "Not much. What do you expect me to say? I am a slave. My life is not my own." Willy looked down at his shoes and kicked at a rock. "I have my son and I have my memories, I suppose."

"Memories of a time when you were happy?" the Englishman prodded.

Willy thought of Beau. "Yes," he answered. Ashton watched as a different smile took over Willy's eyes.

"I see," his temporary Master announced. "I see," he repeated, stroking his chin, as though he too liked the sound of his accent being spoken twice. They arrived at the spot where Willy would turn toward the improved slave quarters and Master Ashton would continue home.

"Before I forget, Willy. I will be traveling to the Bradston's tomorrow morning for the day. Seems their son has come home for a birthday celebration of sorts. May I take any news to your

Mother?"

Willy's head shot up to see and hear that announcement again. "What was that?" he asked, a whole new smile ready to light up his face like an amber flaring back into open flame.

Master Ashton waited for that smile to show just behind Willy's eyes. "May I take news to your mother? The Bradston boy is coming home for a birthday celebration." Willy tried to avert his face but Ashton had already recognized the grin. "One of your memories?" he questioned his Headman. Willy could only nod, looking back down at his feet, which, as usual, were stuck in the wrong place. "Let me ask you something, Willy. Seeing as tomorrow happens to be your birthday too-" Willy acted surprised that he knew. "Miss Reina was kind enough to tell me before we left two weeks ago. Now, if you had one wish for your birthday, what would you wish for?"

Willy had given up on wishing years ago. Sometimes the only reason he still prayed was during times of unspeakable suffering, when he could not control it. But he did not have to think about his answer to Massa Ashton's question. He only had to think about

whether or not to trust him.

"Well? Come out with it. I don't have all night...well, actually I do," he corrected himself with a chuckle that grabbed Willy's soul and convinced him it was safe to speak the truth.

"It is hard for me to explain this but I was born on the same day as Massa Bradston's son and we grew up together. I have not seen him in a year and I don't know why but I have been very lonely. My wish would be to see him while he is home. I did not know he was coming." Willy bit his lower lip as a year's worth of feelings threatened to leap from his eyes.

Stephen Ashton understood loneliness even if he didn't readily understand the bond between the two boys. He scarcely knew the wife he was missing in England and had never felt more isolated in his life. He looked a short while at the moon and then at Willy who had made the most of his silence to regret ever having confided anything. "You don't even wish for your own freedom?" he asked, trying to comprehend what he had just heard.

"Why does it matter what I wish for anyway?" Willy looked up

at the night as a star flung itself from one horizon to the other, causing him to gasp. Ashton had seen the same star.

"Because wishes come true sometimes, that's why." He turned toward the house leaving Willy alone with his thoughts. "Good night, *Timamalo* ," he tossed his voice like a ball over his shoulder.

Willy's proper name sang through the thickets and oaks as clearly as the day it had been given him. Master Ashton had asked him his real name one day and he told him, never thinking he would care one minute to remember it.

Willy stood awhile and watched the sky for more falling stars and debated whether or not to run to the cave. It was at least eight miles to the Bradston House and another two beyond. He wondered what Beau had been told. Had they told him which plantation he had been sent to? Of course not! Willy realized at that moment that Massa Bradston had probably dispatched him on purpose, just like he had sent Beau away a year ago, to keep them separate. *Wishes come true sometimes* , Willy thought outloud. Maybe in Master Ashton's world.

Beau jumped from the wagon and offered Lady Everlee a hand down. A martyred Magnus, tended to the horses. Rachel appeared on the front porch and began screaming her brother's name as she raced toward him. Soon the entire household had assembled to greet the travelers.

