

Free Slave: Artist Statement, Thesis, and Working Novel

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Dedications

This story and thesis is dedicated to my wife, Natalene Johnson, and daughter Hadassah Johnson. Both of these lovely ladies bared with me as I labored into long nights to present a palpable story and thesis, and I could not have completed the work without their love and support.

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Free Slave: Artist Statement

Inspiration

It is bold for a white man to try to put himself in the place of a Black slave and to wrestle with the long-lasting impact that institution has had. Bolder still is to write a narrative, assuming the voice of a former slave and to suggest that a normal white male could even begin to do it justice. When I started this project, I did not consider how bold of a statement I was making. I simply had an idea, and I began to work on it. The idea came to me as I was reading *12 Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup. I was captured by the strength and intelligence of the narrator; his ability to overcome adversity and use his intelligence to better his position in given situations enthralled me.

As such, I took a look at other narratives that likewise captured my imagination. I re-read Fredrick Douglas' *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglas, an American Slave*, and Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*. I then took a look at Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In all of these narratives, I recognized certain trends that I admired: strength, dignity despite circumstances, intelligence, humility, and courage were all bound together in the lives of these slaves, and a character was fashioned based on these strengths.

In this way, Nathaniel Beattie was born. He was born of a white father and a black mother, and by a fluke of Georgia law, became a slave after his father is brutally beaten for his abolitionist ways. Nathaniel is young, but highly intelligent, humble, and determined to be a preacher like his father. He must overcome great obstacles to reach his goal, being that he is a slave, and Georgia law forbids slaves from becoming preachers except under the tight scrutiny of a white preacher, and even then, they were only allowed to have a congregation of ten. Not only this, but Nathaniel also has to face the bias that rests in himself. He must face questions such as what does it even mean to be a pastor of souls? Does it mean he has to get up on a pulpit on Sundays and be seen of men as a preacher, a great orator? He also has to face the realities of slavery and wrestle with scripture he had never wrestled with before in the safety of his home with his father. Scriptures about obedience to one's master, especially the cruel masters. Nathaniel will have to come face-to-face with unmerciful cruelty and in the end still find a way to declare, "halleluiah, for there is a God in heaven!"

Drive

There are two forces behind my work that interplay with each other. Although there are a host of other characters whose lives have somehow become interwoven with my own, there are two characters that dominate the greatest amount of my energy. One of the two I already introduced you to, Nathaniel Beattie. Nathaniel started as a mixture of voices from narratives I had read, slavery spirituals, and poems from American slaves. But as I worked with him, he began to take on a kind of life of his own. A voice began to pour out of me, an intelligent voice of a man looking back on a time of his life with a sad mixture of sorrow and love. It eventually came to a point where I knew Nathaniel's story needed to be told, even though it lives

exclusively in me. I have begun to realize this born free slave has a story to tell, and this story is fully relevant to today's society.

The other voice is harsh, but with a certain dignity. His name is Manasseh Grizzard, and he is a man that has had to fight hard for everything he has. He did not inherit his wealth; he has had to fight and sacrifice to build his tobacco plantation to the booming success it is. He considers himself to be completely independent, growing all his own food and raising his own cattle. This is done using slave labor, which he slowly acquired over time. His life has been tragic, losing both his wife and his daughter to smallpox while he was fighting in the Mexican American war. Bitterness has consumed him, and he conducts his life and business out of that cold bitterness.

Despite all his tenacity, Manasseh has never learned how to read. To keep track of his business he hires a man from town to come in and keep track of his books. This costs him more than he would like, and the man does not read for him other important objects in the house, such as the newspaper. When he finds out Nathaniel can read there begins to be a new dynamic between the two. Manasseh needs Nathaniel but believes he must continue to display dominance. This is the driving tension for the entire story.

Background

I have been doing a great deal of thinking about power, and what actually gives people power in a given situation. There is a certain power structure that lends itself to one having great authority or power over another. The greater the disparity between the two, the greater the tension. This, of course, is an obvious statement; but what I hope to garner and manipulate is how that structure can be manipulated.

The master-slave dynamic is not often manipulated. Power rests with the master, and the slave is subject to the whims of the master. Yet, there are ways to toy with this dynamic. Solomon Northup seemed to. He had culture, class, and education. He was noble in his presence and his attitude. Yet he fell subordinate to a cruel master, Edwin Epps. Although Epps had firm control over most of what was going on based solely on his position, Northup was able to exert a certain amount of liability due strictly to the fact he was educated, intelligent, and cultured. He was even able to make somewhat of a name for himself by use of his superior fiddle playing.

I wanted to take this antithesis to the next level. I wanted to push the boundaries of what people think power is and show power in a new way. By making Manasseh illiterate, and Nathaniel not only literate but highly capable, I have brought a strong conflict and tension between the two. There are other areas where this kind of dynamic plays out, such as with Zara Cook, Master Grizzard's slave cook. Although he is the master of the home, she often treats him and talks to him as though she were his equal, and he allows it. She has maintained a certain level of authority and dignity because she was a great comfort to him after his wife and daughter passed away. She offers him a tenderness that he will receive from no one else. Although their relationship is not sexual, it was at one time.

This brings me back to the background of this writing. It is set during a time when the tension of this country was at its zenith, the Civil War. America began to hit its grim fate when eleven states seceded from the union to form the confederacy. Then, in April of 1861, the confederacy would draw first blood by taking Ft. Sumter off the coast of South Carolina. It is my desire to fully capture and capitalize on this tension. The story starts just before the Civil War but continues through it. The climax of the story takes place during General Sherman's famous march to the sea.

In my mind, this is the ultimate conflict of ideals. Not just the Civil War itself, but the march to the sea shows the same kind of tension Nathaniel and Manasseh maintain. It also brings the reality of the cost of conflict if there is no repentance. The story lives in this kind of brutal tension, and it remains a theme throughout the story.

Process

Research has been my chief concern for this project. Not only have I had to research the big events, but I have also had to research everyday life in Georgia during the Civil War. I had to know what the day-to-day looked like and felt like. I also had to research how to grow tobacco, or, more appropriately, how they grew tobacco in the deep south. I continue to research slaves' lives on plantations, but I also have to figure out how a plantation maintained its order of operations.

It is my desire to write a slave narrative that feels like a real slave narrative. I desire every element to be as authentic as possible, while at the same time leaving room for the unbelievable. While the bulk of this work is done through a strong voice leading readers into a suspension of belief, not everything can be accomplished with this alone. For example: if I were to write General Sherman ordered every slave owner murdered, and had Manasseh killed in this way, it would not be true to history, it would lose credibility, and would disrupt a substantial number of readers to be able to sustain disbelief. Conversely, if General Sherman's troops stole all the resources from off of Manasseh's land and burned everything to the ground, shooting an enraged Manasseh who came after them with a pistol, this would be a believable turn of events.

Suspension of belief does give me a certain amount of wiggle room to play with. In chapter 2, Nathaniel's father takes a whipping because he taught his son, who is black, how to

read. The law in Georgia is that slaves were not allowed to read, but there is no mention I could find that extended this law to those Black people who were free. Neither is there any word of the teacher getting flogged, only the slave; the teacher was to receive a heavy fine and may face jail time. With that being said, I thought it reasonable to believe that a father would take the stripes for his son and lose his son in the process since he was a poor pastor who could not pay the heavy fine with which he was penalized.

So, there is this dance that I move in. I play with the suspension of belief, but I do not rely on it as my chief means. I do not desire for the voice of Nathaniel to carry the burden of hiding historical inaccuracies. Being this is a first-person narrative, the voice of Nathaniel is of the chief importance, and his believability is my primary concern. I do not wish for his voice to get muddled up in inaccuracy and then become viewed as an unfaithful narrator. To this end, research has become my primary means of bringing authenticity to my work.

At the same time, there has been a great deal of time spent on capturing the voice of Nathaniel. To accomplish this, I wrote letters in his name to different characters in the book and conducted a kind of interview with him. I learned this technique from the Gotham Writers Workshop book I bought several years ago. I conducted an interview with all my main characters, but Nathaniel was the most complete, followed by Manasseh. I asked him questions about his life, his fears, his hopes, and his dreams, and I answered those questions in his voice as much as I could.

The letters were also imperative to the process because they helped me distinguish between his spoken voice, and his written voice, which is necessarily different. Nathaniel is the only character I used the letter technique, and I believe this has helped me capture the essence of who Nathaniel is, and how he thinks.

As far as planning goes, I have written a few different outlines. The most recent outline favors a dramatic and high-impact approach to the story. When I took the screenwriting class through Liberty University, I learned that a strong story, one that keeps people reading, is measured in beats. Every chapter worth telling has a major event, something happens to the protagonist that drives the plot forward. While I have had this understanding before, thinking of the story in “beats” has changed the way I approach my planning.

My most recent plot outline is broken down into “beats” for each chapter. Each chapter also contains a “normal” life, with each chapter breaking the character into a new norm in some way, an inciting incident, a climax, and a new norm the protagonist must adjust to. I have also dug deeper into my characters, especially Nathaniel’s and Manasseh’s, in that I determined a driving desire for each character, a lie the character believes, and a real need that the character has.

I believe these elements have helped me to create a story that is fast-paced and keeps readers drawn to the life and narration of Nathaniel Beattie.

Vision

Literary fiction is a genre of books that seems as translucent and far-reaching as anyone who attempts to define it in any solid way. Some say its focus is on the craft of writing, or on the characters. In general, it is believed that literary fiction is not focused on the plot; but even this is not necessarily the case. Many solid literary fiction novels have a strong and driving plot, consider *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.

So, to say that this work is literary fiction means to say that I have worked to avoid tropes that would cause my work to be easily placed in any other specific genre. I do not want this

novel to fall neatly into historical fiction, although there are elements in it that might align the finished work with this genre. I believe what sets this novel apart is its deliberate attempt to sound old. In the same way an artist may purposefully antique paper using coffee and heat, or a contemporary composer might emulate Beethoven, I have deliberately chosen a mode and style for my writing that is outdated.

This looks like a careful selection of vocabulary, words that are no longer in use but were common in the days of slavery. This also looks like avoiding contractions in the narrative, except for dialogue. It also looks like the heavy use of vernacular, which was extremely popular in both slave literature, and literature popular in the day by authors as notable as Mark Twain. This can create an overall difficulty in readability I have come to regard as essential in the emulation of the style. For this reason, *Free Slave* falls more into the category of literary fiction than it does historical fiction.

I am concerned the story will not find its way to print because I am not sure if a publicist is willing to take their chances on a novel people may find outdated. Not to mention that the nature of the text is highly controversial. At the same time, I have decided to remain faithful to the style and to the genre of slave literature, and I can only pray God's will for the story after that. I have ideas to further explore and push the boundaries of the racial divide, but I do not know if anything will ever come of these ideas. Right now, they are merely seeds.

Conclusion

As stated before, this is a bold project for a white man to take on. I believe I am qualified for this venture because the topic of slavery touches on many themes that go beyond the skin. Suffering, strength, weakness, religion, coming of age, violence, mercy, and forgiveness are all

universal themes that exhibit themselves throughout this work. While the specific topic is a bold choice, I have not gone into the project without solid research.

Further, it is time for a white man to reach out in empathy. Literature has always been a way for people to experience the life of others. I can never really be a Black slave living in the antebellum south, but I can apply the universal themes associated with that period and use empathy to imagine what life would have been like. In this way, the first-person narrative is imperative to keeping me engaged in the work, and not tempting me to disassociate me from the more difficult subjects of the topic through a third-person story.

Free Slave Critical Paper

There is a captivating force that thrives within the slave narrative, a poetic David versus Goliath that grips the imagination. Within are true stories of brave men and women who overcame great odds to obtain freedom, garner success, or build empires. Indeed, it is hard to read of Solomon Northup's *12 Years a Slave* without comparing him to Ulysses of *Odessey*. Likewise, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Linda Brent has a sense of the Greek tragedy of Orpheus and Eurydice who went to Hades to rescue his love, only to lose her by looking back to see if she was following him. To recapture the strength of such narratives, it is imperative to go into the philosophies of the day, the lives of everyday people, and discover the narratives themselves and pull out a clear voice that expresses the fullness of the tragedy and strength of the slave narrative.

While it may be ambitious for a white man to write about the plight of slavery, it is not entirely unheard of. Authors such as Harriet Baker Stowe, Mark Twain, and Harper Lee also took on this challenge, although they wrote from the perspective of an outsider looking in. It can be argued that *Puddin' Head* by Mark Twain was written from a slave's perspective, but the slaves are still white, even though they have black blood. This is, of course, the satire in Twain's story. With that being stated, there is one novel that enjoyed a small amount of success in 2016 that envisioned slavery as a continuing institution by Ben Winters called "[REDACTED]." Winters dares to explore Black America through the eyes of a modern-day Black slave in an alternate reality.

Despite the relative success of Winter's novel, it is not his style that *Free Slave* emulates. This is simply mentioned to illustrate how a slave narrative, of any type, might be successful if written by a white man. What is important to note, however, is the fact that Winter's work is

firmly grounded, and wrestles with reading issues important to modern society. In an interview, Winter discusses at great length about his deliberate process to connect his world with the modern-day world. He wanted people to see the systemic racism he believes currently exists in America and makes the attempt to make people uncomfortable with the current.

Other neo-slave narratives have the same goal in mind, that is, to connect current world events and racism to the past. For example, in Toni Morrison's ██████████ we are introduced to a type of slave narrative mixed with a kind of horror. The ghost of Sethe lingers in her house and causes havoc on those who would dare enter the house. According to Morrison (8), this is to create a personal connection with slavery. It is one thing to write any kind of slave narrative, it is another to write the slave narrative in such a way as to make it relevant to today.

Although it was important to stick closely to the narrative form of the original slave narratives, there are some modern methods deployed in "Free Slave," just as there are in most neo-slave literature. The first, and most obvious, is the use of heavy dialogue to help move the plot and build characters. Morrison, for example, uses dialogue heavily in the first chapter to help form the characters of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D. She establishes a relationship between the three characters and builds a rapport with the reader as well. Morrison also does an excellent job in this sense of establishing voice. Each character has a distinct manner of speaking and specific ways in which they interact with other characters. For example, while Sethe is affectionate toward Paul D, Denver is first apprehensive, and then a little flirtatious. This allowed for depth and breadth of character to be exposed between the main characters. Through this development, tension is first built between Paul D and Denver, then relieved and replaced by the ghost of Beloved, the focus of the novel. The constant building and release of tensions between the characters is a shrewd device used to constantly build the overall tension of the book. The

romantic tension between Paul D and Sethe is relieved in the first chapter, leading to disappointment, but also leaves way for the tension of *Beloved* to continue its build.

There are original slave narratives that use dialogue to not only build character, but also propel the narrative of the story forward. Solomon Northup's *12 Years a Slave* utilized dialogue to bring the reader into specific moments of his life. In the same way, *Free Slave* is written with discerning dialogue in order to capture the very heart of different characters and push the narrative in and out of the tensions useful to the story. This dialogue carries the tension of the story. Inside of this tension rests the actual ideas and arguments that circulated during the time of slavery.

In capturing the modes, methods, and rhetoric of the day, it became important to study some of the actual arguments used during the period of slavery. The discussions and debates about the personhood of the negro, even the word negro itself, took on a life of its own and determined the ways in which people discussed and viewed the topic of slavery. Without understanding the minds and attitudes of the people who lived during that time, it would be impossible to recreate an authentic narrative. For this, an examination of David Hume, James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, and Johann von Herder was used to reveal some of the common arguments for and against slavery. Although these voices are white, these philosophers succinctly argued both sides of the issue and reveals the bias of the surrounding population.

David Hume probably produced the most widely known case for slavery in 1748 in his publication "Of National Characters." In it, he argues that different races have alternating moral characteristics and these traits were genetic and could not be changed with training. In this publication, he says of the negro specifically, and briefly, that he is apt to believe the negro is

inferior to all other races. He believes this to the point he compares the negro accomplishments to that of a parrot who learns a new trick and is worth no further consideration.

James Beattie, in a responsive essay called “An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of the Truth,” boldly declares Hume to be wrong. He concedes different civilizations are at different levels, but also asserts two truths. The first is that while some other civilizations are behind Europe in some areas, they are more advanced in others. In the same vein, Beattie asserts that many negro slaves have achieved great ingenuity and even artistic endeavors despite their enslaved condition. Second, if there are areas where Europe may be more advanced, to simply declare that they never could be is as preposterous as declaring that “a baby can never grow into a man” (Beattie 4).

In 1764, notable philosopher Immanuel Kant also made his argument in agreement with David Hume. In brief, Kant asserted the negro has never produced anything that could be considered beautiful (inspiring happiness) or sublime (inspiring awe) in his publication “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime.” The entire argument is a rhetorical disaster for two major reasons. For the first, it offers a subjective value opinion as proof of one race's inferiority. Second, it uses circular reasoning by declaring Black men to be naturally stupid and the proof of this is the fact that they have Black skin. Still, many people clung to this kind of argument to continue justifying slavery as an institution.

In response to Kant, Johann von Herder wrote “Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind” in 1784. In it, von Herder rejects the idea of classifying human beings by use of skin color. On the contrary, von Herder turns the ideals of ethnocentrism on its head and boldly declares that the Black man has as much right to call whites barbarians, brutes, and devils. Von Herder asserts that, because they live in a place where plants grow large, and so do the animals,

it is the white man who is the inferior man. This kind of argumentation was not common, but it did criticize the beliefs that one race was truly superior to another. He goes as far as to assert the physical differences, which were widely talked about to further assert slavery, to prove his point that the Black man is superior in his home country of Africa.

Other neo-slave narratives could also be looked at. For example, "Flight to Canada" by Ishmael Reed was written in 1976. Like "Beloved" and many other neo-slave narratives it is as much a social commentary on modern racial issues as it is a critical look at slavery. Although it is also written in first person and seeks to emulate slave narratives of the antebellum era, it is also a satire and is focused on pointing out social issues of the 1970s while using slavery as the vehicle for said commentary.

It is important to note that even though *Free Slave* is written unavoidably through a modern lens, there have been great pains taken to keep a nineteenth century feel and word texture. There has been significant effort exerted to keep the voices and issues strictly centered on the 19th century. Instead, the focus of the *Free Slave* is universal concepts and themes that draw humanity together, rather than tear it apart.

However, it would be impossible, and unwise, to completely throw out modern writing styles. For one, it is desirous to connect the readership to the events of the story in a modern way as a means of reflecting on the events of the past while simultaneously reflecting on their own life. This is the effect and beauty of the neo-slave narrative; not only is it designed to cause critical thinking of the past, but it is also meant to cause critical thinking of the present and the future as well. If done correctly, the neo-slave narrative should challenge the reader to take a closer look at the society that they live in and wonder about issues that are larger than themselves. This can make reading a neo-slave narrative difficult to read because it causes the

reader to reflect on their own biases, opinions, and their perceptions about the world they live in. Going beyond this, dealing with universal struggles adds a layer of depth and discomfort that aids in pulling readers together. The goal of *Free Slave* is not merely to express the evils of racism, but to express the evils of othering people in general, that is to say, we put label people and put them in a kind of non-human box and explore the depths of depravity in the human condition.

These philosophies were a small dialogue in the 1700s, and included private letters between Thomas Jefferson, who decried slavery but never abolished it nor set his slaves free, and Benjamin Banneker. But these private conversations would draw national attention when in 1830 David Walker would publicly proclaim the evils of slavery in his “Appeal in Four Articles.” Also, instead of appealing to white men, he appealed to the negro slave. To get his message out, his writing was smuggled throughout the south and encouraged the slave to rise and take their freedom. To combat this, his writings were outlawed in the south, a bounty was put on his head, and many states enacted laws that forbade the teaching of literacy to slaves. In his articles, he directly challenged the idea that slavery was mutually beneficial as the south proclaimed. He puts forth that slaves are treated worse in the Americas than any other people or slaves before. The opening and closing point of his first article is Black men are indeed men and have the right to be treated as such. He concludes in the first article that the white man is a barbarian, and his actions are worse now that they are Christians than they were when they were heathens.

However, probably the most prolific and respected voice during this time period regarding the topic of slavery was that of Fredrick Douglass. In his famous address at Corinthian Hall in Rochester New York on July 3, 1852, a speech he was invited to give for the commemoration of the Declaration of Independence, he boldly declared that the celebration of

the fourth of July belonged to the white man, while the slave mourns because they do not share in the freedoms that the white man enjoys. There is an elegance in his writing and his speaking that is emulated in *Free Slave*. Nathaniel Beattie is deliberately fashioned after Frederick Douglass and Solomon Northup. While his work is strictly formal, he also asserts a kind of humility. He admits his fears and trepidations, confronts his shortcomings, and at the same time, confidently declares his wisdom and humanity.

Douglas's writing is strictly formal, he withholds the use of contractions, and he is meticulous in his delivery. What is striking is even though he frequently declares his manner of speech to be simple and his writing is likewise simple, his use of literary devices, especially imagery and allusion, is incredibly complex. In his 4th of July speech in 1852, he compares the American Independence Day with the Exodus of Moses (Douglass 1). He then goes on and makes an allegory of the American Revolution, declaring that the tyranny under it would make a wise man go mad, and compared those who still favored slavery to the Tories during the American Revolution (Douglass 3). Even though he is easy to understand, this is not due to a lack of complexity. Rather, it is due more to a careful rendering of voice; Douglass seems to intrinsically understand when to deploy key rhetorical and literary devices in his writing. In his speech, "What to the Slave is the fourth of July," Douglass calls to memory the Declaration of Independence, the Bible, and carefully hints at folklore and legends. This is not an exclusive trait to Douglass alone, many of the slave narratives deployed similar complex messages in a simple, understandable manner perhaps born out of the vernacular tradition of the black American slave. This simplicity and vernacular tradition brought humanity to the narratives, it caused people to look at the slave up close rather than the institution of slavery as a vague concept or philosophy.

It is important to not only capture the misery, but the hopes, fears, dreams, desires, and even the fleeting moments of joy captured by love or celebration. Before exploring the shape and form of the actual slave narratives, in order to gain a full grasp of the humanity of black people during the time of slavery, a close look at their vernacular tradition is imperative, especially the religious life of the slave.

Black American spirituals depicted the life of the slave during a time when openly talking or singing about their plight was considered an act of rebellion. In fact, many slaveholders expected their slaves to always be content, if not jovial. In this way, the spirituals took on several duties. While it did encourage slaves in the faith of Jesus Christ, it also held a double meaning. For example, Douglas said of the classic hymn, *I'll Fly Away* that it was as much about the coming redemption as it was an encouragement for slaves to run away. Other spirituals followed the same pattern such as *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, and *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel*. Some were blatant in their call for freedom, such as *Steal Away to Jesus* which deliberately declares the intent of the slave to run away. Some songs even got banned on certain plantations because they seemed blatant in their call to end slavery. Such is the case with *Go Down Moses* which repeats the refrain "Let my people go" in lines 4, 6, 8, 12, 14,16, 18, 20, 22, 24, and 28.

The vernacular tradition spread far and wide and touched on many areas of the slaves' lives. They sang hymns to God, they sang songs of work, they made rhymes decrying their wretched state and spoke of freedom. The research of this period is difficult, however, as many of these stories are lost to time since most slaves were illiterate. Those that could read and write often hid this talent from their masters. This makes dating the stories, or calculating an exact author, impossible. But one thing that can be looked to are the stories of Uncle Remus. Although these stories were not printed until 1880, they provide a clear look into the vernacular tradition of

storytelling by the negro slave. The stories are anthropomorphic with focused attention on Br'er Fox and Br'er Rabbit. In these stories, Br'er Fox is constantly trying to capture Br'er Rabbit, and Br'er Rabbit is constantly outsmarting Br'er Fox. There are other characters but the focus of most of the stories is Br'er Fox and Br'er Rabbit. These stories gave hope to the slave, but more than that they showed how an enemy can be outsmarted and the slave could find ways to flee their captives, or at least get some extra resources through the use of wit. All of this shows the cunning and genius of the African American that is highlighted by the craft of storytelling, innuendo, satire, rhyme, and rhythm.

All of this brings a focus on the slave narrative itself, particularly the antebellum slave narratives, and to some extent the postbellum slave narratives, on which "Free Slave" is crafted on. While a deep study of African American literature during this time frame was relevant, it is the slave narrative itself that carries the greatest amount of weight. For years, the slave narrative decried the inhumanity of slavery, and it was used as a voice and tool to propel the cause of emancipation. It can be said that the slave narrative is the reason for the Mason-Dixon Line, and the reason for both northerners and southerners rushing to settle western territories. The slave narrative put fire to the northern response to slavery and dispelled the southern myth of the "happy slave" even more than the works of David Walker.

Taken as a whole, slave narratives are claimed to be remarkably simple and straightforward. A closer examination, however, reveals a depth of understanding which could only be described as a concrete understanding of the human condition. In general, slave narratives tend to be complex in their simplicity, beautiful and delicate in their craft, humble in their approach, but confident in their style. The slave narrative tends to be written very formally, as mentioned above, but at the same time with a personal and familiar voice. Oftentimes, the

narrator breaks from the narrative and addresses the readers directly. They will philosophize on the evils of slavery, or the conditions of the poor south, or their wrestling with the nature of God and man.

This familiar voice ties the reader directly to the narrative, and perhaps more importantly, to the narrator. Instead of being just a formal report of the wrong of slavery, the tone almost becomes like that of a loved one telling an intimate story to a sympathetic ear. At the same time, the narratives can sometimes be dry, almost emotionally detached. This is sometimes common in a memoir where a great travesty had been committed. In *The Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*, written by Fredrick Douglass, he describes in dispassionate terms how he was separated from his mother at an early age and never knew his father. In the first few paragraphs, we learn Douglass only saw his mother a handful of times in his life and his mother would travel to see him by foot late at night, and still be back on the field before morning. He describes how she died when he was seven, and that he never got to see her when she was sick and was not allowed to go to her funeral. All of this he writes early in the narrative without a single personal remark on its injustice or insufferable emotions that were undoubtedly present at the time. Instead, he lets the injustice of the situation stand for itself.

Douglass wastes no time describing the true horrors of slavery; in the first chapter, he discusses the whipping of his aunt whom his master favored for eliciting purposes. When she displeased him, he stripped her down and whipped her until “the warm red blood came dripping to the floor” (Douglass 259). The whole scene is vividly portrayed using strong imagery, and it is a case where Douglass (258) addresses the reader directly, declaring that he can never forget the incident. The pattern of Douglass’ narrative is somber; at the same time, it is also passionate.

When he is discussing the slave spiritual songs, he uses vivid and passionate terms and once again addresses his audience directly to speak of how the music still afflicts his soul to this day.

Like most other slave narratives, Douglas follows a four-part pattern: conditions of birth, how he became a slave, the atrocities committed under slavery, and how he attained his freedom. Solomon Northup follows a similar pattern, but his story differs to some degree. Unlike Douglas, Northup was born a free man and lived in New York. He was married and had a family. In his narrative, *12 Years a Slave*, Northup describes how he was kidnapped from his home after being promised a lucrative job playing his fiddle for a traveling carnival. The story of Northup is worth considering for *Free Slave* because there is a shared pattern between Solomon and Nathaniel in that they were both born free and became slaves.

Northup uses a similar style of intelligent writing as Douglas. The somber tone and formal style written in both narratives are immediately apparent. However, there is a raw tone from Northup that is mostly absent in the narrative of Douglas. Solomon makes skillful use of imagery and dialogue throughout his narrative, and he deliberately slows the pace to vividly describe specific scenes of his struggle. He is meticulous to describe the subtle nuances of how he gathered cotton, sawed logs, built cabins, and crafted his tools. He does not take for granted that the reader will simply understand any of his endeavors but does an exceptional job of describing everything he is doing.

This is not to say his narrative is not simple. Rather, in the simplicity of his narrative, he is sure to paint vivid pictures. Unlike Douglas, Northup does not often address the reader directly. When he does, it is either to affirm the truth of his story, or to commit to the reader's attention the fate of one of his fellow sojourners, his protectors, or his provocateurs. While he addresses the reader less directly, the story is well told and even familiar in the sense that the

vivid description of his experience brings the reader into the world of the slave. *12 Years a Slave* has a way of invading the thoughts of the reader and making the reader feel the burden of slavery being put on them, and the injustice of the institution of slavery as a whole.

However, both slave narratives are from the perspective of field slaves. Nathaniel is a man who is slight of build, and more importantly, because of his ability to read and write, and because his master lacks these talents, a narrative that observes the events of the homestead is in order. For this, Linda Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is worthy of a closer look. Women had a different take on slavery than men, especially women of the homestead. Brent describes how she endured the passions of a vicious owner who sought to rule over her very body and mistreated her whenever she did not acquiesce to his demands.

Again, Brent's narrative follows the same familiar pattern: conditions of her birth, how she became a slave, the atrocities committed under slavery, and how she found her freedom. What makes Brent's narrative stand apart is its heavy use of dialogue and focus on relationships. We are introduced to Brent through the relationship she had with her mother, her brother, her grandmother, and her master. She does not spend as much time discussing her daily chores or duties, and nor does she make long speeches about the evils of slavery. Rather, she focuses primarily on relationships and the damage to those relationships that the very condition of slavery causes. There are a few exceptions to this in her narrative, such as when the whites searched the cabins of the slaves. Brent explained how the slave owners used the poor among the whites to commit the greatest atrocities and provides the only narrative that talks about the damage being done to poor whites along with the slaves, even if the poor whites were ignorant of the fact.

This focus on human relations carries through the narrative, and Brent writes her narrative with a certain kind of empathy for those around her. Save for Dr. Flint, who is her primary tormentor, most other characters are depicted with a degree of humanity and grace. Not to say that she does not condemn slavery in all its forms. Rather, she decries the evils of it by showing its destructive influence on the lives of all it touches, both white and black.

Finally, it needs to be addressed that *Free Slave* is not written in an antebellum way, but rather in a postbellum way. That is to say, it seeks the narrator, Nathaniel Beattie, and causes him to look backward at the institution of slavery after slavery had already been abolished. This means the narrative of Nathaniel Beattie will not be written for the purpose of convincing whites to stand up and fight against the evil institution but had to have a different motive. For this, an examination of Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* becomes a notable example to pursue.

Washington's purpose for writing his narrative seems to have a specific focus. The actual slave narrative portion of his book is only present in the first chapter. Many of the hardships of slavery are alluded to, such as Washington not knowing his birth father, or being raised in horrible conditions, and the beatings of slaves outside of his direct knowledge. However, nothing is directly depicted. He focuses most of his attention on his strong hunger for knowledge, especially after the slaves were set free after the Civil War. Much effort was put into how he learned to read, how he gained an upper-level education, and how he started the Tuskegee Institute. The fact is, the narrative reads as if it were from a man who is pleading a cause, the negro man and woman are capable of everything the white man or woman can do, and he will show them how.

Washington is careful to avoid any sense of victimhood in his narrative, instead, he focuses on how he overcame the adversities. His narrative is driven to encourage white men to

assist the Tuskegee Institute, and to willingly and joyfully employ colored men who are likewise hardworking and able. He also uses his story to encourage colored men and women to be willing to work. This time, instead of working under the lash, he wants them to work for themselves. He demonstrates the value of his hard work and his learning of crafts. He even discusses how food tastes better when he worked for it.

Like other narratives, Washington's narrative is formal. He avoids contractions and dialogue. He explains his last name, and he describes his conditions throughout his life. He does not mince words. There is not much in the way of imagery throughout his narrative. The power of Washington's narrative is in his rhetoric. When he worked hard unloading a cargo ship in exchange for food, he explains it was the best breakfast he had ever eaten, although he does not describe what the food was. This plants the idea that if you work hard, the food you eat will be richer and more satisfying. While working in a coal mine he overhears two white men discussing a school in Virginia where colored men who were poor could work for an education instead of paying the tuition fees directly. Instead of describing the filthy conditions of the mine or taking time to draw the reader into the mine through imagery, Washington prefers to emphasize the idea of hard work, and working for one's education.

While it is as simple as other narratives, the rhetoric is the factor that captures the reader's attention in *Up from Slavery*. It leaves the impression of overcoming great odds through hard work and dedication, and the reader is left believing they can accomplish any number of great deeds. This power is something *Free Slave* tries to tap into through the use of addressing the reader directly, while at the same time, refusing to turn a blind eye to the atrocities of slavery.

There is a great deal that goes into the voice of Nathaniel. Perhaps the most important voices, however, are the voices of scripture and the Nicaean, anti-Nicaean, and post-Nicaean

church fathers. Nathaniel's message is one of hope, forgiveness, and mercy. His narrative is about acknowledging the pains of slavery, but at the same time encouraging the forgiveness of sins. He is well studied in both the scriptures and the works of the early fathers of the faith, especially Augustine of Hippo and Polycarp. In all, Nathaniel is a carefully crafted voice of pastoral love, great intelligence, and a painful past he is working towards overcoming.

Recapturing the voice of a generation that has been so long passed from this one is not an easy task; it required a careful look at the history, philosophies, and voices of that time. In doing so, many modern biases had to be let go, and there had to be an embrace of an older way of thinking. If the idea is to truly immerse the reader into a different time and place then that new time and place must be fully embraced. By looking at the debates and discussions surrounding the topic and issue of slavery, a full grasp of rhetoric was obtained. By looking at the neo-slave narratives, an understanding of the methods used to connect to a modern audience could be examined. Finally, a close read of the actual slave narratives of that day allowed for the capturing of a voice and a style unique to that day and time and is rightly called the first American genre. In a time when there is growing racial tension, it becomes even more important to connect with the origin of the wounds that have been so badly healed. In so doing, the personhood of all involved may one day be seen.

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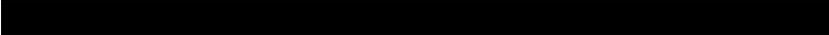
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Narrative of a Free Slave:

Leeland Johnson

Preface

Dear Reader,

When I was first approached by various men to write my story, I was initially reluctant. I did not believe that my story adds much to the overall discussion. For one, the horrors of slavery are, by now, well known around the world. Also, although my experience could be described as brutal, they were relatively short-lived since I was born a free man and only spent around four years inside that grueling institution. Besides all this, I have never been certain that my story would advance the placement of the colored man in society, especially with the war being over and black suffrage having been won. On top of all this, my experience with slavery is now thirty-one years past me, and I worry that my ability to write this memoir is lacking.

However, there has been the advancement over the past few years of laws that cause the colored man to be fully separated from the white man. These laws started almost immediately after the Civil War, but with the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy vs Ferguson*, they have become fully supported by the US government, and I fear that they will have a lasting impact. I am already beginning to see disturbing trends here in my home state of Georgia. They say it is to be separate, but equal. But I must ask, who will be in charge of ensuring any kind of equality?

So, dear reader, whoever you may be; black, white, poor, rich, male, or female, I put forth this humble story. I promise to render as faithful a telling as my memory allows. While I cannot promise a perfect rendition of my time in slavery, I have found that certain events remain etched in my mind and I can relive them in every pertinent detail. In reality, this has been the greatest part of my hesitancy. I am not simply writing a story for you or me, dear reader; I am reliving it. Every crack of the whip and accompanying scream echoes forever in my ears. Every scar across my back I still feel. Sometimes I awake in the night screaming.

I relive this for you, not for pity's sake, nor to bring up old wounds that the country, I believe, is trying to move past during this time of reconstruction, but as the philosophical battle continues to be waged I wish to remind you, dear reader, of the humanity behind every Negro that you pass on the street. I want to show you their intellect and their skill. I want you to see the Negro as equal to the White. What this story is, presented with the highest level of the writing craft that I am able to perform, is my best argument for the biblical ideals that God created man in His own image. Nowhere in the Bible is the color of Adams's skin determined, so one must conclude that we are all from the same man.

Lastly, my friends, less the tragedies that rest in my story be repeated, we must live amongst each other in a blended community. If segregation continues, we will become further isolated. Here is what I can promise you from Scripture, and as you read my account, I hope you often remember this one verse, as my father, Lloyd Beattie, used to often quote:

“For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (Galatians 3:28)

To the white folk reading this verse, I say please remember that we are likewise created in God’s image and image-bearers of Christ just as you are. To the Negro, I call you to forgive. Not just forgiveness of slavery, but all other racially related crimes committed by the white man, even those that may occur in the future. I realize the burden this might seem to be, and I will pray.

Yours Truly,

Nathaniel “Joe” Beattie

Chapter 1

Genesis of Pain

“Pastor Lloyd Beattie is dead.”

These hollow words were spoken by the good Dr. Anthony Benezette as I was standing in a small wooden cabin awaiting my fate. These words continue to echo in my soul, playing on my imagination that elusive “what if?” game we often play after tragedy strikes us. My feet failed me, and I sunk to my knees on the wooden floor of the cold cabin, my stovepipe boots tightly folded around my shins. My arms ceased their routine functions and hung like dead fish at my sides. I could not cry at that moment. I was too numb. I was too dumb. I was too taken aback. Pastor Lloyd Beattie was more than a Pastor to me. He was the man who named me “Nathaniel” and from whom I inherited my slight frame and my blue-gray eyes. He was the reason my skin was only a milky brown color instead of stark black like my mother. He was the white man who dared to marry a black woman in Pennsylvania, a scandal in the north, and a sin in the south. While this taboo earned him a contemptuous eye from the residents just twenty-six miles west of Savannah, Georgia, it is for the offense of teaching me to read and write that he would be sorely striped by the “law-abiding” sheriff, Abner Hull.

Even before the incident, my father’s health was deteriorating for the grief he felt over the loss of my mother, Eve Beattie, to smallpox just three years ago, when I was but a boy of sixteen. It is from her that I inherited the shadow of my complexion, my stark black and rolling hair, and I reckon my fiery spirit, although my father was born of great zeal as well. I can still recall a great many nights my parents pouring over sacred Scripture and passionately preaching at each other and declaring words of victory over our mission. My mother’s excitement often spilled over into song.

My parents felt led of the Lord to leave their home in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and come to Georgia to set the captives free. My father would say that, while the slaves were indeed captives, the slave owners were equally held captive to their sin. He did not desire to simply set the black man free, but to free the South of the very sin of slavery, thus setting the South truly free. I often wondered why the great God of Heaven and Earth, the one who could see all things and know all things, could possibly believe that my father could preach to the stiff necks of the south without his faithful wife; but I digress. Some things are too big for me, and all I can do is weep.

It was an honest mistake on my part, speaking now of the aforementioned event of my father's death, and had I kept my tongue bit he may still be with me. Oh, but see how great a blaze such a tiny member makes, when the tongue lashes the fallout of events will blaze a forest to ash or burn down the church of one honest man of God who only sought to set the captives free. I should not have spoken to the honorable Pastor Bernard Graham, but speak I did, and boldly too. Being born free, the lesson that I was not esteemed equal did not occur to me.

He was visiting my father's small church one fine Sunday in the spring. My father had been preaching there for almost seven years by this point and there was no surprise in my father's message. My father, who was supported by many churches in the north for his missionary work of preaching abolition to the southern residents, had preached consistently on the value and equality of humans and the damnation of slavery.

Pastor Graham took offense to my father's message more than once and openly debated him. It was on a particular Sunday, after services, that Pastor Graham confronted my father.

I remember one particular Sunday where he entered through the front doors, flinging both doors of the small church open grandly, as was his custom. On this Sunday, my father had three

attendees, I was sitting in the front, which I do when the congregants are scarce, the good Dr. Benzette, and Gabe, who was sitting towards the back trying to shake off his previous night's battle with whiskey, which he sorely lost and found himself sleeping in my father's church. Sometimes more people came to services, but mostly as a novelty because my father's message was unique, and they found him entertaining. On this day, Pastor Graham had his usual entourage of character, from the kindly Betty Summers in a colorful, oversized hat, who simply wants the slaves to stay in bondage because, "It's what's best for them dear."

To the wild eyes of old William Harrison who still maintained, "By gum I tell you, slaves do not even have a soul. They are little better than an expensive horse."

"Pastor Beattie!" said Graham, as he made his way around the single row of pews situated in the middle of the small church, behind him walked his congregation and they took seats in the pews behind myself and Dr. Benzette. Feeling the eyes of Pastor Graham's acolytes burning a hole in the back of my head, I silently slipped from the vantage point of my father in the front and swiftly made my way to stand against the wall. My father never was concerned with this inhospitable interruption, for it was during these little debates that my father reached the largest crowds.

"Pastor Graham." My father smiled. "How nice it is to see you and your congregants this morning. I do not see your wife; I trust she is well?"

"My wife is tending to grandchildren today. I have come to your meeting today, sir, to yet again plead with you to give up this ungodly cause of yours." Pastor Graham rested his hands on the side collars of his fitted frock coat. My father looked down on the old man with pity, the way one might look upon a beggar who has given up all hope of self-sufficiency, then he

carefully made his way down from his pulpit to stand before the tall, gray man, reciting Scripture as he did so.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

“Yes,” said Pastor Graham, “you do cite that scripture often enough that the town has it by memory whether they attend your services or not. So much so that the women of this town might begin to wonder if they should take up the manly duty of voting. Ideas are dangerous when backed by scripture ripped from context.”

My father smiled again at the old man, seeming to regard the man for just a moment. “My dear Mr. Graham, the context of Paul’s words *are* clear enough-”

At this point Pastor Graham held up a hand, stopping my father mid-sentence, “We have been down this road, Mr. Beattie, and I have no mind to go down it again at this point. Rather, I have somewhat a fresh perspective for you.” My father cocked his balding head as he put his hands behind his back and silently waited for Graham to finish. “The negro is perfectly suited for slavery. They have a weak culture, they lack any true intelligence, and they would be totally lost in the world if the white man had not come in and rescued them from their sore fate.”

My father stopped for a moment, considered the old man, then looked over the congregation. After several moments, when my father was sure every ear was waiting for his response, he began to sing. His voice carried over a shocked congregation and reverberated over rafters, his voice almost chilling the spine as he sang with a passion that equaled the depth of sorrow often heard by the negro slaves on the plantation.

“Go down, Moses,

Way down in Egyptland

Tell old Pharaoh

To let my people go.

When Israel was in Egyptland

Let my people go

Oppressed so hard they could not stand

Let my people go.”

“How dare you sing that song, sir. Do you intend to start a slave revolt right here in town?”

“Whatever do you mean?” My father’s smile was broader now. “The song is about Moses asking Pharaoh to let his people go.”

“The song has a double meaning, and you know it! It is declaring freedom for the negros!”

“Why, good sir, are you saying that these uncultured and unintelligent people are creative enough to write poetry with inferred meaning?”

At this point, Graham stammered, and he looked to the faces of his congregation to bolster himself. When he looked back at my father his stare was icy cold.

“Even Augustine of Hippo declared slavery to be a natural cause of the fall!”

I am not sure why this caused me such ire. I have listened in on many Beattie-Graham debates and always held my opinion steady. But not this time. Perhaps because I had read too much Augustine to keep my tongue in check, as Augustine of Hippo was a favorite of mine, or maybe because my pride prompted me to show just how much a black man could know. Truth be told, I desired his esteem, as I desired the esteem of any educated man. It was good to be well noticed

by my father, but I wanted the world to look upon me and see me as a well-educated, and well-spoken, man of God. So, I returned his words.

“Pardon me sir, but while Augustine certainly did see slavery as a consequence of the fall, he declared it to be unnatural. As Christians, should we not shed ourselves of this fleshly desire to dominate one another?”

Pastor Graham looked upon me as though he had never seen me before, and chances are he had not. While I was always at the church with my father, the aged pastor never had any reason to regard me before.

Suddenly, he laughed at me. “And what do you know of Augustine? Perhaps listening to your master.”

Before my father could speak, I blurted out, “Pardon me sir, but I have read most of his works, and much else from the Nicene fathers and beyond.”

There was a silent stare between my father and Pastor Graham. The look on my father’s face was pleading silently. After several moments of a silent conversation between them, Pastor Graham left without a word, and his congregation slowly followed after him leaving the church with a heavy silence that I had never known before.

That night, Sheriff Abner Hull and ten of his men came for my father, and he took both of us into custody with nary a word from my father. However, I was not silent, but protested the treatment and demanded what the offense was until a heavy thud landed on the backside of my head, lurching me forward and I could feel myself losing consciousness. This was the first time I

had experienced any kind of violence, neither my father nor my mother ever had need to strike me.

I awoke on a wooden floor with a scant amount of sunlight filtering through a small window above my head. I could bring no thoughts to bear and reflexively touched the sore spot on the back of my head as I sat up, I almost expected to find my head to be softer in that spot, as though my skull may have been somewhat tenderized despite there being sharp pain in my head where I touched it and was relieved to find solid mass. My warm hand offered a small amount of comfort to the dull pain that continued to invade my skull. The headache seemed to cover the fullness of my skull and to this day my vision seems to blur, and my thoughts never seemed as clear as they were before.

There was nothing in the small wooden house I was in, no bed, no table, nothing but a wooden floor. I found the door through the dim light and pushed against it, then I pulled. I vainly pushed and pulled, screaming out for my father, for my mother, for my God, for Jesus, for anyone that would listen.

“That don’ do ya no good.”

It was only at that moment that I realized I was not in the room alone.

Chapter 2

Sorrow Upon Sorrow

I am still amazed that I did not notice the tall, wiry man who was watching me for some time with an amused smile. Startled by his sudden intrusion on my pleas for mercy to a God that I was for the first time starting to be uncertain of, I whirled to him and stared at him wide-eyed and blushing. I could not have been prepared for the vision that filled my eyes if I had been given a direct prophecy from the Lord beforehand.

The man who stood before me was taller than any man I had ever known before, and even his hunched stature could not hide this fact. His clothes had been stripped from him, and dark raised scars intermingled with fresh red marks, covering his grotesquely thin yet toned body like wine had been spilled over rocky ground. He was not bleeding at this point, but I could still see the redness of the new markings even in the dim light of the small, empty cabin. He looked down at me with a broad smile, standing almost too close than I was comfortable with. He seemed as amused by my presence as I was startled by his.

“Is not nobody out there that care ‘bout n****s in the pen,” he said. His voice had a nasal quality but was deep despite the fact. Much of his body was caked in mud and grime, especially around his open wounds, but despite this, he had nearly perfect teeth.

Turning from him suddenly, I slid my black coat off and handed it to him, which he quickly accepted and said, “What poor, dead cracker did you rip these clothes off from?”

“I didn’t. These are my clothes.”

Although I could not bring myself to look on his sad frame any longer, I could feel his eyes boring into me as he waited for some kind of explanation. Instead, I let the uncomfortable

silence linger. I was not altogether ignorant of his plight; I knew instantly he was a slave, and that this poor wretch was being punished for some crime his master felt justified in treating him as one might treat an unruly mule.

“So, why they throw a house n***** in here? What you do? Get cozy with da missus?”

“I’m not a slave.” My voice was hard to find. My thoughts escaped through the back of my head were the lingering dull pain still invaded my skull like a slow tide, capturing my ability to articulate the way I normally would. Instead, I turned the tables and convinced him to talk.

“What happened to you that got you thrown in here?” The phrasing of the question was carefully placed, meant to be as unassuming as possible; even though I had already guessed he was a runaway. What I did not anticipate was the man’s ability to tell a story.

“Well, I tell ya, my masta, Masta Steeples, is a cruel and hard man. He don’ like me hanging ‘bout the garden. But that has always been my best strength, and where I can catch glimpses of my lovely Betsy. I tell ya, the’ ain’t been no creature black and lovely as my Betsy. But, although we been married now a year, I ain’t never got to, uh, enjoy de pleasures of marriage. Masta moved her into the house and declared she be his. Any time I go close to her he chase me away with da whip. One day, I get close enough to my Betsy to see her distended belly, and I knew what had happened. All she could do was stare at me with sad eyes. See, da masta is a portly man who smelled of whisky. I hadda witness the wrath of the missus upon my wife because of her jealousy.

That moment was all I could take. I told her we had ta go. So, we ran. We had no ideas. We just left at that moment. We looked ‘round us and saw no man and we took our chances in the rich forests. We didn’t get far. We avoided da roads, but we was not gone long ‘fore we heard the hounds in da distance. They ain’t ever been hounds as astute as Masta Steeples, but we kept running anyway. We should had gone to da river, we should had anticipated the dogs and built a raft to take to da Savannah river. We should had thought of many things, but we hadn’t. So, when they catch us, they strip us both and stripe us right there in da woods. They take her to, I don’t know where. As fo’ me, I been here two days waiting my fate.”

Staring into his melancholy eyes, all I could muster was “I’m sorry.”

“Don’ be sorry for me, yet. They ain’t done wit they dis’pline yet.”

He told me his name is Jabez Steeples, his master gave all his slaves his last name to make it easy for them to track should they escape. He further informed me that his fate for running away would be brutal. They had already whipped him, but the law also prescribed that he could lose a foot, be bound, or any number of other such punishments as the court saw fit. At this point, I introduced myself to him and told him my story.

“So, you is a readin’ n*****.” He looked me up and down, then hung his head and shook, “I fear fo’ ya.”

It was at that moment that I heard a voice at the door, “Nathaniel!” The voice was a harsh whisper, but I recognized it right away. It was the voice that would sing deep hymns and dared to travel with my emboldened father and mother when we left our home state of Pennsylvania and would read to me as my father drove the small, covered wagon south. The support we received for this move was overwhelming, but I digress. The voice was none other than that of Dr. Anthony Benezette, faithful friend and companion of my father from the beginning.

I ran to the door, “Anthony! They took us Anthony, Pa, and me. They took us and locked me in here.”

Jabez slipped up behind me quietly and I could hear his heavy breathing and uneasy shuffling.

“I know Nathaniel, I know. I’ve been with your father. It’s downright criminal what they are doing.”

“Please Anthony, let me out of here.”

“I would if I could son. The sheriff has you watched pretty close. It’s only by God’s good grace that I have been allowed to talk to you now, but we are not alone.” There was a moment of silence, a building tension, as if the good doctor wanted to say something even more but could not.

After a space I finally asked him, “why am I in here? and where is pa?”

“We have offended these townspeople greatly and committed a great crime in their eyes.”

“What crime?”

“Literacy.”

“Literacy,” I stammered. My mind raced as I tried to figure the exact crime. “But Anthony, I’m a free man. How can I be charged with literacy?”

Behind me, Jabez rested a hand on my shoulder that I barely felt at the time. “That don’ matta’ none to dem white folk. All they wanna do is keep every negro a slave an’ own us. If they can find a way to keep you down, they will.”

My head spun in several directions at once as I searched for some kind of understanding as if I were trying to read my father’s Greek New Testament.

On the other side of the wall I heard Dr. Benezette breath out heavily, “I’m afraid your companion is right in this case. The legitimacy of your father’s marriage to your mother is being questioned. The sheriff claims that he did a thorough investigation of both church, and parish and could find no documentation of marriage, nor could he find free papers for your mother. I, myself, also took to the search, I knew where your father kept such things, but they were gone.”

“Stolen?” In my mind’s eye I could see the small wooden box with the oversized lock tucked away under a loose floorboard under my father’s bed.

“They must have been. I was there when your father obtained the free papers from the Harrisburg Pennsylvania court. His room looked ransacked, the bed was moved, and the floorboard that had your father’s lockbox was dislodged. The entire box was gone.”

“Who would do that?”

There was a long pause, a careful deliberation for a careful answer, “I cannot say, false accusations carry a stiff penalty in this town.”

His suspicion was the same as mine, Sheriff Abner Hull. He did not have to say it, and he did not have to. Perhaps the reader thinks it bold of me to share names, and perhaps I agree. But there was a grave injustice done to my father, and myself, at the hands of this man. No one else would have been free to search the house, and no one else who could read would have taken

notice. But the court will never hold him responsible, so let his name be written here. May the good Lord forgive me if my heart is untrue.

Dr. Benezette continued, “they had the trial quickly. I informed them that I could get legal documentation, I would need to travel north. The sheriff informed the judge that I might try to forge papers, so the judge ruled that any evidence must be brought forth immediately. Without evidence, the judge committed sentencing. Your father was sentenced to a fine he could not pay, and you were sentenced to a flogging.”

My heart dragged me to the ground, I was too heavy for words. After a long pause he said, “there’s more.”

What more could there be? “No,” I said, “let the day perish from whence I was born already. I can’t take anymore.”

The doctor cleared his throat. His voice was broken, and half choked, “I am very sorry Nathaniel. I would spare you this pain if I had any power to do so. But I have to tell you the full weight of the matter because it is the only way I could prepare your heart in prayer.”

Somewhere in the recess of my mind I could still feel Jabez’s warm hand on my shoulder from behind as I waited in the silence for Dr. Benezette to continue.

“You are counted as property Nathaniel and since your father has not the means to pay the debt of his crime you are to be sold at auction.”

“They can’t do this to me! I was born free in Pennsylvania!”

I wanted to scream this. I was desperate to scream this. My mind was screaming the injustice to the very principalities that were sealing my fate. However, my breath was trapped within me. Like James the Greater, I had no words upon my coming death. Instead, my voice stayed in my chest, beating against my heart intensely. Vocally, all I could manage was a desperate, raspy whisper choked in tears, “my God, my God. Why hast thou forsaken me?”

Dr. Benezette continued, “I need you to know, Nathaniel, that this is not the end. I will fight for you. I will stay to attend to your father until he will be allowed passage back to the North where will obtain the papers necessary to secure your freedom. Pray, and do keep hope alive in you.”

With that, we said our farewells with the promise that he would return as often as he is able.

“Tell my father that I am hopeful in the Lord.” It was not entirely true, but I wanted my father to know as much peace as possible. Besides, what more could it mean to be well in the Lord than that one is simply hopeful of His goodness. I was as well in the Lord as the desperate father who cried out, “Lord I believe, help thou, my unbelief.”

After Dr. Benezette departed I became conscience of the hand on my shoulder, and I grasped hold of it as if it were my mother, come back from smallpox to comfort her son. But no, though the hand shared her complexion, it was greatly larger and rougher. I turned to see Jabez quietly looking down to me, his large eyes brimming.

“Is sad enough,” he said, “that negros such as me must be slaves. Is even sadda when a free negro becomes a slave.”

At the exact moment I fell prostate to the ground. The well of water that had been pinned up since I was taken broke forth, and my face flooded with the wrath of God.

“Oh God!” I cried. “Lord, how are they increased that trouble me and rise against me. Many would have me believe that there is no hope for me. But thou, O Lord! Thou are a shield for me, and the lifter of my head. Jesus, you are my defense, and I will not be afraid though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”

Suddenly, the cabin door swung open, slamming against the cabin wall. The silhouette of a burly man filled the doorway holding a small club in one hand and a bucket in the other. Dusks darkness obscured any real physical features and he seemed to be more phantom than man. He put a bucket on the ground and some brown water splashed to the ground. He then tossed two pieces of bread on the dirt floor of the cabin. “That’s enough noise outta this here holding pen, hear me? Ya aint got nothin’ to be whinin’ ‘bout. Your n***** families is out doin’ all the work.” With no more words he closed the door with a slam, and I could hear the clinking and snapping of locks being put back in place outside the door. “Damn lazy n*****s.”

Jabez got close to my ear and whispered, “Good Lord. I aint no fancy speakea, but you had made me as I am. We is all your cre’tion. I aint known yo’ defense yet, but I still believes in ya. Protect us, o God. Protect my wife Betsy and protect my new brotha Nathaniel.”

“Lord, yoke me with this new brother as David was yoked to Jonathan.” To this day I don’t know what made me pray this prayer. But for many reasons I am in his debt. Even in this moment, not knowing me, he saw fit to comfort me. He had his own misery, but he still saw fit to comfort me. There is a faith in this that is true beyond the words of Augustine. It is a faith that is demonstrated, and this man became a Barnabus to me.

We stayed in quiet prayer that night. When I began to get too excited Jabez would gently soothe me and wisely tell me not to arouse the master of the cell. So our prayers were in fierce whispers, only loud enough that we could hear it. At some point, we dusted off the stale bread that was thrown into us and ate our meager rations. The bread had an earthy flavor which indicated that it had molded, but it was too dark to see where the actual mold was. We also drank some of our water out of cupped hands, and I spit the dirt out that lodged between my teeth. Jabez didn’t seem to notice.

I don’t know what time I fell asleep praying, nor can I pinpoint the time of day which I awoke from sleep off the dirty floor. The ground was almost soft beneath me - almost. It was still hard enough that my arm was asleep when I woke, having been firmly pressed under me. The morning sun highlighted small dust particles like small fireflies tightly packed, giving the illusion of slightly transparent walls between each crack of the shabby cabin. My limbs felt stiff as I began to stir. Jabez slept near me, curled on the ground using my frock coat as a blanket. Outside, I began to hear a frightful commotion. It sounded as if Jesus were walking down the Via Dolorosa again, and the crowd was yelling “crucify him!” But this was not what they were saying. Rather, it was a confusing cacophony of voices crying out to whip him.

Rising, I swiftly moved to the cabin walls and tried to peek between the logs futilely.

Jabez came behind me, “look up.” There was a small gap between the roof and the wall. Not large enough to squeeze out of, but just large enough to poke my face out and to see outside.

The roof of this cabin was not high up, but it was still above my head, and just barely above Jabez's head as well.

Without a word, Jabez made a cup with his hands and indicated I should stand on them while he hoisted me up a bit so I could peer out. My coat was pulled on and it hid most of his shame. The logs of the cabin were not well sanded or even scraped much, and the bark stuck to my cotton shirt and ripped it some. But I was lifted to the hole and was able to see the commotion to some degree.

Not far from where this cabin stood was the sheriff's station, and in front of the sheriff's office a crowd had begun to gather in silence. In the middle of the crowd, I could make out two large poles buried into the ground. Those poles were permanent fixtures that I knew well and had always done my best to avoid.

Standing next to the pole was the slightly stooped figure of Pastor Bernard Graham, resting his hands on the collars of his fitted frock coat, and his trim white beard dancing lightly in Georgia's spring breeze. Not far from him was William Harrison, his eyes still looking wild, and almost seemed jubilant about what was about to happen. Beside him, the kindly old Betty Summers, her hat as large and even more ridiculous, than the day I confessed that I could read to Pastor Graham. She did not smile, but looked solemn, as if she were getting ready to lay out discipline for one of her unruly children.

Very soon, Sheriff Hull came out of his office, and I immediately recognized my father's bald head turned downward, reflecting the golden sun off massive sweat beads and I thought of the pictures of saints I had seen in the stained glass of some churches. As they led him to the pole to bind him, I saw two of the sheriff's men turn towards the cabin I was in and made their way towards it.

I told Jabez to let me down, and he did just in time for the two men to unlock a chain from the door. I did not recognize the two men in beat-up hats and ragged clothing piled through the door. They looked us both over for a moment.

"Get to the back you!" shouted the taller, and younger-looking of the two, pointing to me.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

The two men pulled out what appeared to be short clubs of some sort and began to advance on me. Jabez stepped up.

“Oh please, kind mastas. He’s new. I go with ya, leave the young man be.” To this plea, the shorter of the two knocked Jabez over the head with his club, collapsing him to the ground. I retreated to the back of the cabin swiftly.

“We’ll be dealin’ with you soon enough n****,” said the taller of the two, pointing his club at me.

As Jabez struggled to his feet, the two grabbed him, hoisted him up, and dragged him out of the cabin. I thought for a moment to follow them out, but I hesitated, and the door was shut before I could move. I could hear the locks being put back into place. If I had known what was to come of all this, I would have bolted for the door. *No, that is not true.* I like to think sometimes that I would, and perhaps have spared myself some of the sufferings that waited for me. But then I realize two things. First, they would have beat me before I took more than two steps, the effort would have been fruitless. Second, Paul says that all things work together for the good of those who love God. Even my suffering had a purpose, and I hope you can take this to heart, whoever you may be dear reader.

Alone in the cabin, the restless dust slowly settled after the scuffle and I focused my ears outside the cabin, pushing with my whole conscience. An eerie stillness settled outside, then I heard the first crack like high-pitched thunder, followed by a cry of pain from a voice I knew. It was the voice that taught me about David and Saul, and Abraham and Isaac, and Paul and Peter. My father, whose voice which was never used to cause pain or harm, now cried out in a shrill way that I could never have imagined before.

More volleys, followed by a cry, and then a cheer from the crowd around him. As the ungodly choir continued its sadistic song my mind wandered to all the people my father had helped in his time since he came here to Eden, Georgia. I thought back to the goodly old Betty Summers who liked to eat my mother’s peaches and cream as comfort after her grandchild died suddenly in the night. I thought of the strong William Harrison, who my father chopped wood for after he broke his leg. Even the Pastor, Bernard Graham, who bit at my father angrily for my father’s abolitionist ways, was altogether grateful when my father prayed with him all night as

his wife suffered yellow fever. Sorrowfully, I do not recall him returning the same love to my father as my mother lay dying of smallpox. Neither can I understand why my righteous God would allow the tender soul of my mother to pass on, bereaving both father and son, while sparing the other.

Looking back to this time, I find that there are still many things I must continue to forgive. I cry out for their forgiveness, walk away feeling refreshed and cleansed, and then find the same bitterness even now. But I know the Lord sets the captives free, and I will continue to walk in forgiveness, even if my heart cries against the injustice.

After a time, the whip stopped, and I could picture them dragging my father back into the jail. From there the crowd seemed to move closer to the jail. My heart stood still in my chest, I simply knew they were coming after me next. I heard the crowd gathering. But the door never opened. Instead, I heard the voice of Jabez:

“Oh, please good masta’s. Please. Don’ do this. I’s been a good worker. I jus’ lost some of my sense is all masta’s.” I ran to the splits between the wood, but could not see much beyond the glaring sun and the shadows of men turned devils.

“Hold him down now Max.” It was the voice of sheriff Abner Hull, gruff and monotone, completely detached from what he was about to do.

“Damn, but he is a wiry n*****,” the voice was almost a laugh.

“Listen, you ignorant bastard, you keep squirming like this and you will lose more than your foot. We are likely to miss and remove everything from the knee.” Sheriff Hull’s voice was not calm and reassuring, instead, it was still flat. Knowing the sheriff as I do, I can say confidently that his concern was more about how much damage he wanted to conduct on property, and less about the harm he would do to a living man.

“Please masta’. This don’ have to happen this way,” I could hear the tears in Jabez’s voice as he pleaded and sobbed. However, they must have got him settled down because the next thing I heard was a loud thud, like one might hear if they were chopping wood if they placed a towel over the log first. After that, the most horrendous scream I had ever heard that seemed to echo over the entire town. It cut off the casual conversations of the onlookers, and reverberated

somewhere around me, penetrating me, joined me in such a way that it will never leave my memory.

Then there was nothing but silence.

After a moment, Sheriff Hull cleared his throat. "Take him to the jail. Get Doctor Benezette to look at him, he seems to like these animals."

With that, the crowd dispersed, and I was alone to contemplate what just happened. The silence was thick, I could almost push against it. I know now God was with me, God is always with me. But in that moment, I was truly alone.

The next day, Doctor Benezette came to see me. The guards let him in and he walked in with a solemn expression. His typically pressed and clean clothes were wrinkled and dirty. Three days of grey stubble spotted his full cheeks. Sad lines crusted around his usually jovial grey eyes. As soon as he saw me, fresh tears brimmed his eyes, he took hold of me and embraced me, "I am so sorry Nathaniel. I am just so, so sorry.

His customary brown frock coat was gone, as was his tie and waistcoat. His once pristine white shirt had become light brown and had large spots of dried blood covered him. Three days of salt and pepper stubble growth sanded his typically smooth face. All I could do was stare at him as he cleared his throat and stood straight.

"I'm very sorry, Nathaniel, but Pastor Lloyd Beattie is dead."

Then this is where the story began. This is where the floor fell away from me and I fell to the ground, limp. We have now come full circle, and yet the story was only beginning. My misery had only just begun to crest the tops of the valley of the shadow of death. And yet there is now a small part of me that is grateful to God for the hearts He would put me into contact with,

the souls who God was sending me to. But at that moment, I could not find a voice to be thankful in all circumstances.

Dr. Benezette further informed me that my father died during the whipping. He had taken my whipping hoping to save me the pain. He also wanted to take a whipping to pay for the penalty of teaching me to read, but the court had already decided to sell me off. Oh, that I would have taken the whip, I would have to soon enough anyway. I had never been angry at my father before, but I felt it swell up inside me in that moment, and I felt that anger, mixed with grief, stuck in the top of my chest and the back of my throat. I was ashamed of these feelings, I still am. God forgive me.

“You should know,” he went on, his voice was cracked and slow, “Your roommate will live, although he’ll never be the same. They took half of his foot, from his arch to his toes. I was able to control the bleeding. When he woke up all he could do was cry. But he will live.”

It was the only good news that I could hope to get. “Where is he now?”

“He is recovering inside the jail. I told them it is imperative he stays in a clean spot. The jail is as clean as they are willing to provide for a runaway slave. I will continue to monitor his condition, but I expect him to make a full recovery.”

A small wave of relief came over me. Jonathan was safe, at least for now. It wasn’t much, but I clung to that small token of mercy.

“What’s going to happen to him?”

The good doctor looked at me as an anomaly for a moment, then his eyes brimmed once again as he shook his head.

“I wish I could say. His owner does not want him back, and no one is going to want to purchase a runaway, especially one that is handicapped,” he shook his head slowly as he closed his fist in his hand. “My God, Nathaniel, I am a man of medicine, I cannot understand the brutality these men show to other men.”

All I could do was stare at him. I was as lost as he was, struggling to understand how or why God would allow my father to die, or a wife to be stolen.

But again, there was much I could not understand then, and even still struggle to understand. I suppose the writing of this memoir is as much for me as it is for you, maybe even more so.

Dr. Benezette broke the awkward silence after several moments. “I am going back North” he said, “but I am not abandoning you. A severe offense has taken place here, and I will correct it. I am simply powerless to do anything from here. I am going back to Harrisburg to obtain records of your parent’s matrimony and your free birth. I will bring the whole damned Union army back with me, if I have to.” He looked into my pleading eyes, “I will correct this injustice; you have my word.”

What could I say? I fell to my knees and wept. He came to me and embraced me. I do not know how long we sat together, this lack of knowing time will become a perpetual state for me. When he got up to leave his eyes were still brimmed, and his cheeks were wet. He gave me a solemn look.

Dr. Benezette never said anything he didn't mean, and he was more determined than any man I had ever met in my life. I clung to that hope with everything I had in me and doubted at the same time that I would ever see him again.

Chapter 3

Living Like Job

The next day, as a rooster crowed in some distant corner of some distant field, I was met with the gruff awakening by two men. One was tall and thin with lean muscles and a bearded face; the second was shorter but very husky and clean-shaven, a perfect juxtaposition of the first. I stirred at once as they entered having been awakened from a very light sleep on the dusty ground when the almost warm air of the cabin rushed out and was replaced by cooler air just outside the door. The taller of the two spoke to me, the other just grinned at me as if he were hiding some great secret that he found terribly amusing.

“Get up n****.” His voice was pitched like an older boy even though he looked to be older. “Eat yo breakfast, then come outside.” With that, he placed a bowl of cornmeal on the dirty ground.

“May I have a spoon?” It was as simple a request as any might give. But I had not yet been fully trained as a slave. When I asked him the question, I stared him straight in his deep brown eyes, as brown and downtrodden as any negro that he felt obliged to beat into submission. My eyes did not cast downward, and I had the look of one who was equal. I would soon learn the true gap that existed between him and me.

“Oh, I am truly sorry n*****, I did not mean to offend you. Let me rectify the situation.”

With that, he picked up the corn meal and dumped it out on the ground. “Eat it like the dog you are you worthless. Then come outside as you was told.”

With that, the two men left the cabin, leaving the door wide open. I could see the shadows of the men standing outside the door. At this point I was hungry, but I was not hungry enough to dig the yellow mush off the earth with my bare hands and shovel it into my mouth like some kind of animal. Instead, I fell to my knees and cried out, “dear Lord, you are my only defense. Please, dear God, let this evil pass from me, let this cup not come upon me for I cannot drink it.”

“Hurry up in there, ya ain’t got all damn day!” It was not the sweet voice from Heaven that I was hoping for. I stayed on my knees, prayerfully waiting on Jesus to deliver me, to wipe away all my tears, and restore me. “If I gotta come in there after ya, so help me God you will regret it!”

I couldn’t move. I heard more threats and swearing pouring from that vile mouth, but I remained where I was, my heart searching desperately for comfort. I tried to remember just one verse at that moment, but for the longest time all scripture eluded me, and all I could think of was my miserable plight. It was not long when I heard the shuffling of feet inside the door. I did not look up, but I stayed on my knees, begging the Lord desperately to intervene.

“You are not off to a good start n*****.” With that, two men grabbed me and hauled me to my feet and escorted me outside the cabin. The sun was not yet fully up and cast a grey hue on the world around me, or at least it seemed to. I was roughly thrown to the ground and told to strip. I could not move, but I rolled onto my knees and stared at the man. In that moment, the two

men before me seemed larger than life. I was at least a head shorter than them as it was, but their aggressive posture surprised me, I had never been sorely treated in my life. The closest to it was when I used my mama's clean sheets to make a fort in the yard before we moved to Georgia. But even that was meted out fairly, and the whooping I received I knew was well deserved. Still, the overwhelming fear I felt in that moment was similar to the moment I stood before my mother and father and had to take the discipline they meted out.

I am bearing my soul here, dear reader, knowing full well what some white men have said about the colored man, about being cowardly and not able to stand on one's own. I explain this, not to give credence to the claim, but rather to connect with you on a human level. I was but a young man of eighteen years when this period in my life began, and I would be but twenty-two before the nightmare came to an end.

I sat frozen as the two men suddenly ripped my now dirty and tear-stained shirt off of my back. What happened next is even now hard to speak of directly. I watched as the shorter man pulled a whip from the outside cabin wall and slowly made his way behind me, silently grinning. A wild excitement seemed to take him, and I heard the dull thump as the whip uncoiled and the top hit the ground.

The skinny man stood before me, "this is your first lesson then n*****. When we give you a command, you immediately obey." With that, he nodded to his counterpart, "just one lash, for now, Fred." With that, I heard the same sickening crack that stole my father from me just the day before. Before I heard the sound, I felt the leather both punch and bite into the thin flesh of my back, and I felt the warm trickle of blood slowly ooze. However, when I cried out it was not for the pain I felt at that moment. Rather, it was for the pain of my father who took the lash for

me in vain. It was for the loss of my budding manhood, the loss of my dignity, the loss of my humanity to that of a beast.

“Now stand!” He ordered.

Slowly, I rose to my feet.

The skinny man continued, “every slave must be a hard worker. As it stands, you are a puny and worthless little n*****. But it is my aim to change that. You mayn’t never be large, but I will make you a hard worker. Your job is simple boy, you do whatever I say swiftly, and without complaint. Do you understand so far?”

I nodded to him, I could feel tears beginning to sting my eyes. He looked at me with a downward sneer behind his thick, brown beard. “This tiny pain you think you are feeling now boy, this is only the beginning. You ain’t never been whipped before, that’s clear from the looks of your back. Neither have you ever been beaten. This is a shame, an unbroken n***** is useless. But I promise you this, boy, you will be broken by the time I’m done with you. And you will be a noble prize to the state.”

With that, he nodded to Fred again, and there was another crack, again I felt the punching bite and the trickle of blood, and I cried out again, this time for my own pain as much as for my loss as before. “Why?” I cried.

“To remind you that you have no power here.”

“But, I’m obeying you.”

“Again,” he said to Fred, and there was another crack, another punch, another sting, and another cry. “Don’t you eve’ talk back to me. You may say two phrases only, yes masta, and no masta. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Again,” the skinny man said. This time I arched my back as the punch landed and I cried out, the pain seemed to become more intense with each lash, “yes, what boy?”

“Yes, master,” I stammered.

“Better,” he said. “What is your name, boy?”

“Nathaniel.”

A nod from the skinny man sent the cowhide into my flesh again and I cried out, “Why?”

“Blast that name. Your name is not Nathaniel. Your name is “Joe.” What is your name?”

“My father called me Nathaniel,” I whimpered. Another nod, another cry of pain.

“What is your name?”

“You say my name is Joe”

Another nod, another drop of blood. “Please,” I begged behind tears, “why must I give up my given name?” Again, just a nod and I felt my flesh flee from the tip of the lash.

“What is your name?”

“Please,” I begged behind streaming tears, “please. It’s all I have left.”

Again a nod, and my back began to scream. I heard I second crack immediately after, I winced, but no strike came. I heard Fred chuckle behind me, “he ain’t as smart as other n*****s is he?”

“Hell, you teach a n***** to read and suddenly he thinks he has some kind of rights. You ain’t nothing special son, and you don’t get to keep none of your past life.” Again he nodded to Fred, and I saw the crimson begin to stain the dirt beneath my feet. “Your name, boy.”

“Joe,” it was barely above a hoarse whisper, and I felt my strength leave with it and my head hang down. I did not see the nod this time, but I felt its effect, and I felt my body convulse away from the lash which only seemed to make the biting sting more.

“Louder,” he demanded, “like you mean it.”

“Joe,” a little louder, but I did not look up. I could not focus as the ground seemed to be spinning and I felt the warm sensation of nausea develop in my mouth. I knew not if it was from dehydration, or lack of blood. Again, the blow struck my back. At no point did the pain of the blow seem to ebb, only increase as my flesh became rawer with each blow.

“Louder.”

“Joe,” I cried as the whip struck me another time.

“For the rest of your life, if anyone asks you your name, you are going to say what?”

“Joe,” I said, but I did not believe it. My thoughts were to the front that as soon as I am outside the presence of this maniac I would return to my original name. Again, another crack

echoed in the town, mixed with the scream of one poor colored man who was starting to become a stranger to me.

“Joe what?”

My mind was spinning. I thought, at the moment he wanted me to say my last name. “Joe Beattie.”

Again the whip cracked and I fell to the ground on my knees “why?” I cried again.

“You have no last name! Joe what?”

Then I realized what he was after. “Joe, master.”

Finally, there was no crack of the whip. “Good job, Joe.” There was pleasantness in his tone, like a schoolmaster talking to a child who finally understood the concept of long division. “You have earned a short rest,” and with that, he fastened shackles on my wrists and ankles which were fastened to a chain, fastened to the cabin exterior wall. I stayed kneeling in the dust in front of the cabin as a bucket of water was placed in front of me and my tormentors went laughing somewhere behind me.

I stayed kneeling for some time, hoping that a cool wind might blow over the wounds on my back to cool the lasting burn and penetrating fissures. Every move sent nauseating waves of pain through my body as the markings stretched and taunted, twisted, and split. Carefully I pulled the water to me and drank deeply from the bucket dipping my face in. I thought momentarily of Gideon’s men and how I lapped like a dog. At that moment I believed God

certainly had more faith in me than I had in myself; I doubted very seriously that I would have been recruited into that faithful army. I felt as though I were more beast than man.

By this time, the early spring sun began to heat my back, causing the lashes to heat. The cool breeze was my only momentary relief from the brutal treatment, and this would not be my last abuse before all would be said and done.

I do not know how long it was before the men returned. Judging from the appearance and movement of my shadow, I reasoned it was about an hour. I had spent the time weeping the 23rd Psalm,

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

As I was praying this, the one called Fred spoke, “look at this n***** Howard, is he pious or just pathetic.” With that he roared with laughter, amused at his own alliteration.”

“The n***** has a name now, Fred, start using it so’s he gets used to it.”

Men and brethren, I testify to you that there are indeed two spirits in me. A preacher might call these two spirits the Spirit of God, and the flesh. I do not doubt this eternal wrestle, but I refer now to two separate flesh natures in me. My father, Lloyd Beattie, was a gentle creature in his life. Everything he touched was in a calm humility that could ease the tension

from the mightiest foes. His prayers were like that of Moses, slow of speech and tongue. His love for mankind drew people to him and felt safe as he pointed them to Christ.

My mother, Eve Beattie, was altogether a different kind of soul. She was indeed kind as my father was, and there was no kindness that she would not withhold from a stranger or neighbor. I have seen her give the family's last dollar to buy a beggar and his family food. That being said, there was a fire that burned in her soul, and the wrath of God could pour from her with an intensity that even kept Reverend Graham from becoming too bold. This side of my mother tended to show up the most whenever she prayed for "her" people, the negro people. She supported my father with humility of spirit certainly. But in the privacy of our home, my mother would pray and preach the psalms to God saying "how long, o Lord, righteous and true, will you deny the salvation of your people!"

I believe it is this same fiery spirit that caused me to confront Reverend Graham on his erroneous assumption that Augustine of Hippo supported slavery. The lie fell on my ears and started a fire down in my spirit. So, shackled with my hands in front of me, I rose up to my shaking feet and declared with a firm voice "I had a name before you whipped me. It was Nathaniel, Nathaniel Beattie. The son of the late Eve and Lloyd Beattie. You call me Joe."

"To answer your question there Fred, the boy seems piously pathetic. He seems to be born with a sense of pride. Don' worry though. I have trained many n*****s in my day, this one'll break just the same."

More whippings ensued after this. More degradation. Howard would only call me Joe, and would only respond to me if I referred to myself as Joe. My meals consisted of cold cornmeal. I had to earn my right to eat out of a bowl again by referring to myself as Joe. When

they brought me lunch that day they dumped it on the ground again because they asked me my name, I told them, “you call me Joe.” For this, they dumped the food on the ground again.

Though I could feel and hear my stomach begging for food, I refused to eat it out of the dirt. The same thing happened that night after they dragged me into the cabin, having been whipped off and on all day. Water was placed inside the cabin. My throat was sore, and my body was numb. When I managed to crawl to it I saw a dusty boot of Howard.

“What’s your name, boy?”

With the raspiness of a dying man I replied, “you call me Joe.” For this, he tipped the bucket over with his foot and left me bare and wet lying half-naked on the dirt floor of the cabin. My stripes lay bare and open, exposed to the rapidly chilling night air. I was thankful for this as it seemed to ease the pain a little on my back. I drank the tiny remains of water that rested in the bottom of the bucket and prayed. Hunger and pain kept me from sleeping, so I recited scripture and prayed. With my finger, I wrote out Psalms 91:1, “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”

I could not be certain, but it seems to me that I could smell the smoke of some massive fire in the distance. I cannot explain completely why, but it felt like my soul was ablaze with the fire that burned in an unknown location, even if I believed that the smell was only in my imagination.

Although sleep seemed far from me, there must have been a semblance of it as I was suddenly startled awake in the early morning by voices outside the cabin door.

“For Christ’s sake, Howard, I hope you didn’t kill the boy. I went through great pains to secure him, and the state needs him.” I recognized the voice to be that of Sheriff Abner Hull.

“I ain't ever killed a slave sheriff. I know what I’m doin’. Been doin’ it for a long time and I ain't never lost a slave.”

“I don’t doubt your ability to train these animals. But consider, would you take a racehorse and immediately attach him to a plow?”

“I will not let the boy die sheriff. I have been training the negros for some time, I know what to look for in them before their body gives out. They ain't like a white boy, you can push them a lot harder.”

“You know his father was white.”

“I gathered that from his skin tone, but his negro blood still makes him endurant.”

“Tell me, Howard, do you have \$700 on you right now?”

After a pause. “I thought not. That boy is going to pay off a debt to Manasseh, he is worth \$700 to the city of Eden and so if’n he dies you will pay every cent. Are we understood?”

“You’re crystal, sheriff.”

“Good, now let me see him.”

With that, the cabin door was opened and the stocky frame of Sheriff Hull filled the doorway. Behind him stood the lanky Howard. In the hands of Sheriff Hull was a plate with fried

eggs, grits, and thick slices of bacon. I felt my mouth salivating from the smell of it and my body yearned hungrily for it after yesterday's lack of food.

“Eat hardy Joe,” Sheriff Hull said with a broad smile, “today we got some work for you to do.” With that, he put the plate of food on the ground, and Howard put the bucket of water next to it.

“Eat fast,” said Howard as they both left the cabin. Again, they left the door open. Again, I could see their shadows outside the door, along with that of a third man that I assumed belonged to Fred.

There was no utensil with the meal, but I bit my tongue this time. Instead, I poured some water on my hands from the bucket and washed as well as I could. I blessed the Lord for my meal and swallowed a bit of pride as I thanked Him for my trials even as I begged him that this cup would pass by me. I meditated on Paul and Peter the Apostles and their martyrdom. I also thought of Polycarp, and finally, Job. The food landed in my stomach like heavy lead, and some of it felt like it got stuck in my chest. Despite this, it was a welcome relief. As I finished my food, I prayed, “Lord, I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice. Though you slay me, yet will I trust you.”

With that prayer, I stood, still shaking from the abuse of the day before, and the terror that faced me on the new day. I stood in the strength of the Lord, in the strength of my mother, and in the humility of my father.

Chapter 4

Humble Seminary

Despite feeling shaky, the breakfast had given me a new sense of self. There was a renewed strength in me, and I thanked my Lord, Jesus Christ, for renewing me. Even as my back burned, and my legs felt as though they were barely beneath me, I boldly stepped outside the cabin door to face my Assyrian captors.

As I was greeted by spring's blazing sun I winced but stepped out anyway. As soon as I did, I heard Howard say, "what is your name?"

Despite being strengthened by the meal, much of my former zeal oozed out of my back with my blood and body fluid. The thought of that lash on my back again honestly horrified me, as it would anyone who has heard that awful crack and felt its teeth digging into their soft flesh.

"My name is Joe," I answered plainly but loudly.

Howard beamed proudly at the sheriff, "you see that sheriff. Ain't never been a slave I could not break, and this one only took a single day. Plus he can stand. I would say that in just a few weeks of training you will have yo'self a fully bonified n*****."

The sheriff looked me up and down for a moment, "turn around Joe."

I did as he commanded me and turned to face the inside of the cabin.

"I don't like the way those welts are looking. You better get them cleaned before they start to fester. I once knew a man who cut his hand on some rope trying to catch a runaway horse. He died a week later from infection."

“What about his training?” That was Roy, I recognized his oddly husky voice. There was a disappointment in his voice.

“You’ll have to find another way to train him, at least until these heal.”

“Sheriff Hull...” Roy began, but Howard intervened.”

“Don’t you worry Sheriff, your investment will be safe, and trained at the same time.”

“Do not harm another hair on his head until he heals. I will send my horse doctor out to him to check on him daily.”

“You betcha, sheriff. Joe here will be well cared for, right, Fred.”

“Absolutely sheriff, we won't let you lose no money on him. We has our ways to train that will leave no more marks.”

With that, Sheriff Abner Hull left, and I was alone again with the sharks, Howard and Fred.

“Turn around, Joe,” said Howard., and as I did so Howard shackled my neck with a collar which was again attached to a long chain. The collar was large on my neck, holding my head in an upright position and preventing me from looking down.

“You have no permission to talk today, Joe. No matter what is said, no matter what you hear or see, you will keep that trap of yours shut. You may not be verbal, not even to pray. I don’ want to hear no scripture, no backtalk, no nothin’. Understood?” Howard's face was so close to mine that I could smell last night's whiskey on his breath.

“Yes, sir.”

I received a firm backhand from Howard, causing my body to lurch to the side. Tears streamed my eyes when I righted myself. “What part of no words do you not understand?”

I stared at him as my eyes continued to blur. I tried to blink the tears away, but fresh tears were waiting in line behind the old tears. I stared at him silently, and he backhanded my other side, “didn’t I just ask you a question, boy?”

Again I corrected myself. I felt a burning heat grow with each beat in my chest. If I had the spirit of Elijah I would have consumed him in fire through my raging eyes. I bit my cheeks hard in a deep frown, but I answered him not a word.

“Good job Joe,” Howard said with a satisfied smile, again taking on the tone of a satisfied schoolmaster. “Now you just stay that way until we come back to the cabin and I tell you it is time to talk again.” With that, he turned his back and, taking my chain, led me away from the cabin and into town. Fred took position behind me. The pace was brisk, and it was hard for me to keep up. But if I slowed at all I was yanked abruptly by the chain or kicked in the rear.

As we walked through town, Howard was quick to salute the passers-by while also indicating to me and saying, “What do you think of Joe, the sheriff’s new n*****?”

Some replied that I looked scrawny, others said I looked small but strong. One guy said he would like to purchase me for cotton picking, adding that my size might make me fast on the pass. Another man asked if I were an artesian, to which Howard responded I was not, but that I was highly intelligent. A few asked if I would be for sale, to which Howard referred them to the sheriff. All of the people who he talked to I knew, but they looked on me as if I were a stranger.

No, worse than a stranger. I was like a new horse being paraded around town for the people to admire.

The saddest encounter was that of old Mrs. Betty Summers, wearing the same kind of oversized hat that she wore while watching my father get flogged.

“Well good mornin’ Howard,” her voice took on its natural southern drawl and she sounded like the town's favorite grandma. “Is this a new slave you are training?” Last harvest, my father sent me to Mrs. Summers's house to help her in her garden because her husband had passed away. She was as kind to me as if I were a grandson. We joked about the green beans and squash. I told her of John Calvin's “TULIP” and she seemed amused as I told her my beliefs on predestination versus choice. She served me lemonade and pecan pie after the work was done. In all, it seemed like she enjoyed my company. We did not discuss abolition, for I knew where she stood and did not want to make the conversation awkward, but we connected on a deeply human level. Of all the people in town, I felt sure that she would have recognized me. But instead, to her, I was just another negro not fit for anything beyond manual labor.

“Yes ma’am. Sheriff Hull acquired him just two days ago.”

“He’s kinda small, ain’t he?”

“Small but strong ma’am, also smart. He takes to training like a thoroughbred.”

Well, he kind of looks mulatto to me.” She paused and looked at me for a moment. I felt certain for a moment she recognized me. But, the moment passed and she looked back to Howard, “you have always been a good trainer Howard, I am certain as the setting sun that you will make worth more than many that look just like him.”

“Why thank you kindly, Mrs. Summers.”

“Your welcome Howard. I shall be on my way now. The sun will be full blaze any time now and I should water my garden before it gets too hot.”

“Oh dear Mrs. Summers, how will you manage?”

“Well, I’ll tell you. That abolitionist had a church slave whom he sent to help me last year after my Richard died. He was a sweet man, but a bit of a hypocrite if you ask me. I mean really, what kind of an abolitionist owns a slave,” she paused and looked at me again, almost as if she might recognize me. But then she shook her head, “ah, but what am I saying. It ain’t proper to be speaking ill of the dead. I’ll let the good Lord separate all that mess out. For now, I pray the good Lord brings that sweet Mr. Beattie into his presence, even if he was a tad misguided.”

“Yes ma’am. You have a good day now.”

As she left she opened her sun umbrella. She looked back one last time as if she might recognize me. I begged in my heart that she did. But she just turned back around and walked away. If she did recognize me, even just for a little bit, I would never know it.

Fred’s voice suddenly invaded my ear as he leaned close to me. Day-old stubble stabbed my cheek like tiny nails. “You see that? Ain’t nobody going to remember you. Ain’t nobody that really know you. You ain’t nothing more to them than just a nasty, ignorant n*****.”

From there the parade continued. The streets, though I knew them and could tell you where every side street ran, seemed suddenly unfamiliar and foreign to me. Before long I cast my

eyes to the ground and only watched my long shadow. I discerned it was coming on 10' based on our direction of travel and the cast of my shadow. The conversations continued around me, and the compliments to Howard for training yet another slave continued to ring in my ears. It was surreal. These were voices that I knew. Many of them I had spoken to. Yet none of them recognized me. Or if they did, they kept it to themselves. I was nothing to them, and I never was.

There were some on the walk that asked of the slave that the abolitionist used to keep, to which Howard tactfully told them that he had no idea of that one's fate, but was certain that the city and state would know how to delve out the pastor's possessions.

After some time we stopped and Howard commanded me to look up.

Slowly, my eyes were filled with the sight of the remains that were as horrifying to me as that of witnessing my father after he was lashed, or my mother as the fever slowly withered her body. The bones of my father's church seemed to still be smoldering and the air was heavy with the acidic soot and my nostrils burned. At the back of the church stood tall the remains of my father's pulpit, it's back erect and strong as if it stood in the fire alone with Jesus as Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego. The walls were almost completely gone, and there remained almost nothing inside.

I cried out as I fell to my knees, "my God, my God!"

This received a harsh reprimand from Howard as he turned on me and backhanded me, knocking me to the ground. "I told you to stay silent! I didn't have to bring you here at all." As I corrected myself, staying on my knees, he backhanded me again, "that n***** lover abolitionist got exactly what he deserved. He comes here with his slave whore and a mixed child and stirs up

trouble trying to change our way of life.” Again he backhanded me, this time on the other cheek. “Ain’t nobody in this town cares for you, or even knows you well enough to even notice who you are. Hell, you are even wearing nice pants and stovetop boots still and it didn’t raise the least bit of suspicion. Fact is son, everyone here has always seen you as nothing more than another negro slave.”

With that, he half-dragged me to the wasted church by the chain around my neck and yanked me through where the double doors used to stand. There was almost no floor left inside, and the pews were almost all gone, save scraps in a few places. Among the scraps were burned pieces of timber that at one time belonged to the roof and steeple. My vision blurred as I groped at the once smooth floor, only to have pieces of blacked floor crumble at my touch, and I watched as the ash slowly flitted down to the foundation beneath.

“When the fire started, the fire brigade only responded in a manner as to keep the flames from jumping to any neighboring structures,” Howard further explained. I did not have to look at him to see his smirk, his voice was thick with the enjoyment of the situation, and my misery. “Every soul knew that this fire was the righteous indignation of God, and no one interfered with it. The fact that there are any remains to speak of is only due to the fire burning itself out.”

With that, he beckoned Fred over, who seemed reluctant to step into the structure. Fred handed Howard chains and shackles, then held me down as Howard went to work shackling my hands to my feet. Howard took some ash from the church and rubbed it on my back to treat it for any kind of infection that might have been growing in my lacerations. The two of them then lifted me onto the remains of a bench and used the chains to strap me to it across my chest,

abdomen, thighs, and shins. “You are not to leave this spot, Joe. And I will remind you again, no talking.” He then poured water into my mouth, leaving me choking and coughing.

With that, they both left me staring at the open sky through the broken ribs of the church as the ashen splinters of the bench remains pressed mercilessly into my back as the spring sun continued to rise above me. As I lay there watching the sun slowly moving across the sky and then the moon slowly rising behind it, I remembered my father's sermons and songs. We were a small congregation, but we were alive with purpose. Even Gabe, who was drunk or hungover every time he was at the church, sang with the spirit of ten men. Sadly, he never gave up his alcohol, but he did repeat my father's message in the pub and throughout the street. He probably could have made a mighty evangelist if he could put away his whiskey long enough.

It was rare that my father ever had a larger congregation, but when he did, it was to challenge his beliefs about the free negro. This was an annoyance to my mother, she hated to see the way my father was disrespected. However, my father always made the most of this time, and I was never as proud to be his son as I was in those moments. Most of these moments occurred when the Reverend Bernard Graham would bring his congregation over to our small church, boldly named “Freedom in Christ Abolitionist Church.” Often, Pastor Graham would try to bring an argument to my father after one in his wealthy congregation caught wind of one of his arguments and wanted to justify his keeping of the slaves. Pastor Graham was always ready to reassure them and would attempt to throw my father off balance.

I was young when the first of these confrontations took place, when I was around twelve years of age. It was my father's second week and we had bought a small church building that use to be a Quaker church. They sold the church to my father for almost nothing because they greatly

supported what he wanted to do. Sadly, the congregation moved to Atlanta. My father had only been preaching for a few weeks when the first of these encounters took place. I was shocked to see so many people show up suddenly, and I believed at that moment that God was moving on the hearts of the people of Eden.

Unfortunately, I do not recall what his actual message was that day. But I do remember the exchange between him and Pastor Graham, which commenced at the end of my father's benediction and closing prayer.

"You have made quite the big stir in our little town, Mr. Beattie." Even at this moment, Pastor Graham looked old to me. I admit that it may be that I was simply so much younger than he was. However, his hair was already greying, and his eyes carried small crow's feet. "I wanted to commend your courage, but at the same time, I hope you have a teachable spirit."

My father considered the man from his pulpit, leaning against it. They had met in town before where they discussed gardening and the joys and perils of starting a new church, so introductions were not necessary. "It's good to see you again Pastor Graham, what is it you desire to teach me?"

"The important role that slavery has in scripture, my dear Pastor Beattie. As I am sure you are aware, the Bible does not one time condemn slavery. On the contrary, there are times when the Old Testament commands it, and the New Testament commands that slaves obey their master."

My father regarded the old man, and slowly nodded as if he were taking it all in. He looked at Pastor Graham with a smile, “so, you would have slavery as a Biblical institute, is that what I am to understand?”

Pastor Graham rested his hands on his fitted frock coat and smiled, “if the Bible commands it then who am I, as a steward of God's Word, to deny it.”

“Things are very different from those ancient times...”

“But the Bible's words are forever!” declared Pastor Graham victoriously. This elicited some in his congregation to applaud and congratulate the man. But my father remained undaunted.

“Why, Pastor Graham, herein is a wonderful thing that you say. I was worried at first, but it seems you may be an abolitionist after all.” Pastor Graham stared at my father in absolute confusion.

“What do you mean?”

As my father responded he slowly made his way down from the elevated pulpit. “Manumission, my dear friend. Deuteronomy 15:12 says that a slave ought to be released after six years of servitude. That is the law that God ordained. So, if you would desire to follow the Biblical prescription for slavery and advocate every slave that has been under the lash for six years or more is set free, then I will gladly fight that fight with you.”

“Things are very different from those ancient times reverend,” Pastor Graham managed to say.

“Indeed they were, reverend,” my father returned, “in those days, and in the days of Rome, many men voluntarily went into slavery as a means of survival. They served a stint of time and were either set free, as with the Jews or could buy their freedom, as with the Romans. In either case, slavery in those days was a very different kind of institution.”

“Well,” said Reverend Graham, “I see we are at an impasse for now. I will be praying for God’s enlightenment on your life, Pastor Beattie.”

“As I, you, Pastor Graham.” Pastor Graham and his congregation began to leave, but not without hearing my mother singing to them from the side of the church. She stood, her graciousness flowing like her long yellow dress in the breeze from her lips. Her voice bathed the room as the song surrounded every person in the church as the sunlight does a flower, warming and piercing their souls.

“Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel,

Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?

Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?

And why not every man?”

Many in his congregation stopped to listen to her sing, compelled by her powerful and smooth voice. When the verse started, my father and Dr. Benezette joined her, creating such a sound that the walls of the church cried.

“ He delivered Daniel from the lion's den.

Jonah from the belly of the whale.

And the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace,

And why not every man?"

As I lay on the pew, unable to move and watching the sky begin to darken, I broke the rules and sang that song again. Somewhere in the distance, I heard a man singing with me. His tune was bad, and his voice was badly slurred, but I knew right away who it was, and it was the most beautiful voice I had heard for two days. After finishing the last chorus I said, "is that you, Gabe?"

"Is me, Gabe. I can't see you though. Where's is the church?"

"It's gone. They burned it down."

I heard a man stumbling through the debris, falling, swearing, and then climbing again. They were making their way from the front.

"Tha's right. Now I has nowhere to sleep. So's I's goona sleep in a burnt pew."

"I don't suppose you can release me from these chains."

"Jesus!" he declared, by now I could smell the liquor on him, "Jesus, these chain'ses are too strong for me. Sets the captives free, Lord Jesus." With that, I heard him fall on a pew, heard the pew break, and then heard deep snoring. So that was that. I was on my own again. There was a small amount of comfort in having Gabe nearby, even if he was of no real use in his current condition.

It would be impossible to know the exact hour that Howard and Fred returned for me that night. Given that the moon was almost directly overhead I estimated that it was not too far past midnight. They saw Gabe before they got to me and laughed the poor man to scorn, that is it would have been to scorn if he were conscious.

”What should we do with the town drunk?” laughed Fred.

“Leave him be,” said Howard amused, “we came for Joe, let Gabe sort his self out.”

I saw Howard's face suddenly hover above mine. “For now, your speaking ban is lifted, Joe. You may answer direct questions with a yes masta or a no masta. Do you understand?”

“Yes, master,” was all I could respond as my tears washed the sides of my cheek.

With that, the chains were released from me and I was commanded to stand back up. Howard turned me around and inspected my back. “The ash did wonders for your back Joe. Definitely not as inflamed as it was before. Are you grateful?”

“Yes, master.”

They released the chains from my legs but kept the cufflinks and collar on me as they guided me out. Once outside the church, they gave me a large chunk of bacon and water in a cup. I ate it as we traveled back to the cabin, this was somewhat tricky as I was ordered to carry my chains and leggings as well. When we got back to the cabin, I was locked inside without a word.

“Did you enjoy your day off, Joe?”

Yes, master.”

“We got us a big day tomorrow Joe, get yo’self some rest now, ya hear?”

“Yes, master.”

With that, he shuffled off. I love Gabe. I would not see him again until sometime after the Civil War. He would leave the south not long after running into me and somehow made his way to Ohio and would eventually join the Union Army to fight slavery. But at that exact moment, I hated him a little, and I hated his enslavement to alcohol intensely.

Chapter 5

Zeal Without Wisdom

The next day came and went, and several days followed. To be honest, I began to lose track of the days, for each one was exactly alike. I would be woken up just before dawn and be given a bowl of basic cornmeal in a bowl. I was never given a utensil to eat with. I was then taken outside and instructed to perform the most meaningless labors. One day I was to dig a six-foot hole that was big enough for me to lie down in. I was then brought out of the hole and scolded for putting a hole in the ground and instructed to refill the hole before going back to bed. Other tasks included chopping large amounts of firewood, cleaning chamber pots, scrubbing the cabin, scrubbing the jail, and assisting Mrs. Summers with daily chores around her house; this time, however, I did not receive the kind blessings nor pie. Instead, she prepared a pie to be delivered to Mr. Howard, which he delighted in eating in front of me with Fred, lecturing me on my proper place as a Negro.

Under direct order of the sheriff, the whip was to be used sparingly on me for the time being. This was not because he cared for me as a person; rather, a slave with too many whip marks decreased the value of a slave. Sheriff Hull had plans for me, and those plans required me to be at the peak of price. The fact that I was a young man at the peak of my physical condition was a good start. But he also recognized that my slight frame might hinder him from receiving a full price, and so it had to appear that I was rarely in need of correction.

This does not mean that I escaped corporal punishment, however. Indeed, Howard and Fred were well-practiced in many devices of correction, and none of them required that a mark be left on me. One such method had me chained to the ground while being blindfolded, my arms

strapped to my side so that I could not raise my hands to my face. My legs were stretched out in front of me and pressed together. From here, Fred sat on my chest and held my head in his hands. A piece of cheesecloth was then draped over my face while Howard slowly poured water over my nose and mouth.

At first, I felt nothing. However, within seconds I could feel the water entering and access to fresh oxygen being denied me. The chains made sure I stayed still during the process, though I reflexively strained against them; Fred kept my head facing upward, though I desperately tried to thrash and turn away.

After a short amount of time, the water would stop, the cheesecloth removed, and Fred would allow me to turn my head as I coughed out water and caught my breath. After a few moments, and they were certain that I would maintain the breath of life, they would repeat the process. Such was the punishment if my work fell short of what Howard considered perfection, tiny flaws that Howard and Fred actively sought out. Many times I thought that they were going to kill me by this means, but they always knew when to release me and set me free to recover. At the moment I considered this a mixed blessing. In those days, I often prayed for death, but death refused my offers.

Another favorite of Howard and Fred was to lock me in a tiny box that they left out in the sun for several minutes to hours at a time. The box was formed to my size if I were to sit squatted. It was not big enough for me to sit all the way, just enough for me to almost sit. I then had my head pushed down as the lid was applied. Once in the box, the lid was secured by a heavy lock. There was no room to move, and I was forced to remain in this posture for hours at a time, sometimes even a full day. My muscles screamed at me, but I dared not call out for I knew

that the punishment would be worse if I did. To add to this discomfort, my own breath caused the box to heat up like an oven and my sweat would cause me to itch, but because I could not move, I would simply have to live with the itch. In those moments, I learned to take myself to long hours of prayer, giving God the glory that I might suffer with Him. I would also pray the Psalms, such as Psalm 80, “how long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked? Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy.” This, of course, was done silently, as in secret.

When released from the box, standing was an issue. I found multiple muscles would be cramped. Fred would yank me out of the box and throw me to the ground while Howard chastised me for being lazy, and would deride me for a long moment asking if I was done being a “lazy n*****.”

“Yes, master,” would be my only reply.

After this, he would have me tell him all the ways in which I was being lazy, he called it his confession. He would get angry when I would confess to my laziness, and he would get angry if I denied my laziness. He would berate me for long periods. After this, he might put me back in the box for a time, or he would have Fred through me in the cabin. This would be my chastisement if I did not move quickly enough to complete a task he assigned.

In the evenings, the sheriff's horse caretaker, a burly man covered in coarse black hair named Mr. Townsend, would come to assess my wounds and make sure I was being treated well. My whippings were turning into scars. He would say nary a word to me except to command me to strip. He then proceeded to look over every section of my body, exposing every protected area with his probing fingers. He spent careful time around my scars and sometimes

applied a foul-smelling ointment, presumably iodine and bromine, to the old whippings, or the few fresh stripes on the few occasions Howard thought it necessary to resort to those measures. When he was satisfied with his work he simply walked off, saying nothing to me, but I could hear him give explicit instructions to Howard.

“Keep him out of the dirt until those fresh wounds heal,” or “make sure you give him raw eggs and vegetables to eat in the morning.” He usually said I could continue in full labor, I do not recall him ever saying I needed a day of rest, except the Sunday sabbath which was prescribed by law in Georgia to all slaves. I was not permitted to go to church at first. But after a time, perhaps three weeks, but again my memory of the exact timing is fuzzy after so long a time, and I was commanded to stand outside of Pastor Bernard Graham’s Southern Baptist Church. Nothing struck me in his preaching, but they regularly sang a particular hymn that was new to me at the time but is quite popular now: “Nearer, My God, To Thee.” I fell in love with this song and sang it when I knew my handlers were not listening. I still sing it, along with the spirituals my family sang, to my children and in congregations.

This continued for some months, well into the summer, but before harvest season. One night, after a particularly grueling day, I heard the sheriff talking to the men and his hoarse caretaker. He wanted to take me to my next owner.

“You mean he’s already sold?” I heard Howard say. “I thought you was takin’ him to auction?”

“I never said I was taking him to the auction. I said he was worth a good deal of money and that I needed his value to stay intact.”

“What gives, Abner? I thought there was to be a profit for me in all this?”

“You’ll get your money, just ya settle down about that. The boy is to be used to pay off a debt. I don’t have confidence I can raise the needed sums on the auction block, but if I handed him off to the debtor then the debt is repaid in full.”

“Then how you gonna pay me, sheriff?”

“Let’s go talk in my office about that.”

With that, I heard them shuffle away. At that moment, I did not know whether to lament or rejoice. While William and Fred were terrible, I had no assurance that whoever I was being shuffled off to would treat me any better. In fact, there was a good chance that they would be worse. While William subjected me to a great deal of psychological torment, his hand was restrained due to Sheriff Hull’s insistence that my value not be decreased. I will have no such guarantee with my next master.

So, believing myself to be alone, I lifted my voice to sing:

“There let the way appear

Steps unto heaven

All that Thou sendest me

In mercy given.

Still, all my song shall be

Nearer, my God, to Thee.

Nearer, my God, to Thee

Nearer to Thee.”

I was so caught up in the song that I did not at first hear the lock being levied from the door. So, when the door swung open to reveal Fred standing there I jumped and instinctively retreated to the back of the cabin. But as I stared at him, wide-eyed, he did not move to accost me. Instead, he wiped tears from his eyes and said, “please don’t stop on my account.”

Standing paralyzed, I opened my mouth to sing. But as I stared at his husky frame I could not make the words come out. There was a choking sensation in the back of my throat and I found myself struggling to breathe. The more he stared at me, the worse it got. I was like a hunted rabbit, or a deer when it knew it was about to die. Panic gripped me, and I had no place to run. It was the first time that I viewed myself as different from the white man. The difference between us was, for the first time, palpable. I could feel that I had no right to view him as my equal because we were not equal. He had authority, dominion, and power. He could do whatever he wanted to me, and I could do nothing to him. He was protected from me by the law, and by law, I was merely property. For the first time, I felt unworthy to sing in the presence of a white man. Knowing in my mind that we are all equal at the cross was not enough to overcome the devastating impact months of torture had on me.

After a long moment, Fred sighed heavily and then sat on the ground and began to cry. Staring at him, I sat down where I was. I thought of bolting for the open door, but common sense, or more likely fear, kept me sitting still and watching the man's bulking mass heave. After

a long moment, he looked up at me. After taking a heaving breath, Fred finally spoke again, his voice cracking and soft, “it ain’t right what they done to ya. It ain’t right what I done to ya.”

Then, after taking another heaving breath, “my pa taught me that slaves ain’t got no souls. Like the animals, when they pass, they simply pass. But that was before...” he trailed off and looked away. “I’ma set ya free, Nathaniel.”

“The hell you think you doin’ Fred!” Howard had returned.

“I’ma setin’ this negro free. He was born free, the law say he still is free.”

“The law is Sheriff Abner Hull in this town. The law say he ain’t free, that he is confiscated property to pay a fine. And what you care about that anyhow? He ain’t nothin’ but another n*****.”

“Never you mind what he is to me, I’ma settin’ him free and that ends it!”

“You ain’t doin’ nothin’ of the sort, Fred. I employ you, not you me, and that there n***** belongs to the sheriff.”

He started to move towards Howard but stopped suddenly. I could not see Howard from where I was, but I was too frightened to move at that moment. I kept commanding my body to move, but it simply refused to obey.

“That’s a good boy, Fred. Now shut the door and put the lock back on it.”

Fred did as he was told.

“Now, we been partners for a good long time, so I ain’t goin’ to take you to the sheriff for abolition. But I can’t trust you no more neither. So, you are leavin’ town. Tonight. You may

gather your gear, but if I see you here in the mornin' all bets are off and I'm turnin' you in. Understood?"

There was a brief silence, "good boy. Well, don't just stand there, get!"

There were some hurried steps, and then Fred was gone. I heard Howard's voice again, "I'm sorry for all that confusion Joe. Rest assured, your fate is to live like the rest of your race should be livin'. Ain't nobody goin' to set you free, ain't nobody who has power goin' to care. You were obtained at no cost to the city of Eden, and Eden is goin' to give you at no cost to a new masta to pay off a debt. Say, I guess that means you really are free, free of charge." He laughed at his own cruel joke, "ah Joe. I'm goin' to miss trainin' ya. I consider ya to be one of my greatest success stories. Oh well, sleep tight tonight, this will be your last night in this cabin."

With that, I heard him walk off, leaving me pinching my fingers and rubbing my arms, trying to regain feeling. For a very brief moment, I had hope. I was about to be set free, and then it was ripped from me. But then what? What was the chance I could travel North through five states without being captured? Or even if I could, I have no experience surviving in the wilderness, what are the odds I could even survive trying to travel North. In the end, God was defending me. Some ways truly seem wise unto a man, especially when desire is involved. But the end thereof leads to death. Or, in Fred's case, zeal without wisdom is dangerous.

I have never found out what happened to Fred after that day. I heard rumors to the effect that he defected North when the war broke out and died in some battle. I did learn that his mother was well known as a singer in the churches. She told him, and others, that only a creature with a soul could sing. She passed away not long before my captivity, *Nearer My God to Thee* was sung at her funeral.

Chapter 6

Humilities New Home

The next morning, I was woken at sunrise. Mr. Townsend came into the cabin with a bucket of water and a scrub brush. Howard stood behind him with a whip in his hands as a reminder to me to obey. I was ordered to strip again, and Mr. Townsend ordered me to bathe using the water in the bucket. The water felt as though it had come straight from the river, and my skin became goose flesh. As I labored on my front side, Mr. Townsend took the scrub brush and roughly worked on my backside. My stripes were now sensitive scars, and I winced some as he went to work. After I was bathed head to toe, they walked off with my clothes. I was ordered to stand in the middle of the room without moving until they returned. The cold water was left on my body as I drip-dried in the middle of the cabin, goose flesh grew as I lightly shivered.

About an hour later they returned with new clothes for me to wear. My stovepipe boots were replaced with a much simpler leather shoe without a buckle and felt somewhat loose on my feet. My trousers were replaced with wool pants, more basic than what I wore before, and my shirt was replaced by itchy, unrefined linen that felt like I was wearing a hemp rope for a shirt. From there, I was given a hat made from hemp whose brim was floppy, and a waistcoat that was inferior to the one I gave to Jabez the day they whipped him. But it seemed to serve its purpose.

“Come outside, Joe,” said Howard, and he confidently turned his back to me and walked out of the cabin. I will confess that, for the briefest moment, I thought of the harm I could inflict

on Howard with his back turned to me, and then possibly escape. But, the moment was fleeting and the moment passed before I could act on any screaming instinct to protect myself from the fate to come. Instead, I shuffled out the door, Mr. Townsend followed behind me. My wrists were bound, and my neck was recollared immediately as I walked out of the cabin.

“Ah, good morning, Joe!” Sheriff Abner Hull was standing next to a carriage with a team of two horses. “Today is an important day for you. You excited?”

“Yes, master,” was all I said to him.

Sheriff Hull walked over to me and carefully inspected me. There were no recent signs of abuse, at least, nonvisible. He looked me in the eyes and studied my face intently. I moved not an inch and avoided direct eye contact as I was taunted. Scratching his beard he walked over to Howard, “has he been fed?”

“No, you wanted to leave as early as possible, so we bathed him instead.”

“Is there food for him? I don’t want to drag a passed-out slave to Manasseh Grizzard.”

“Nothing is prepared, but I can get him some peaches or something.”

“Peaches would be perfect! After all, today is a special day for our Joe, a big day. We ought to give him some celebration food, ain’t that right Joe?”

“Yes, master,” I said without pitch or emotion.

Howard nodded, and then was off in the direction of Mrs. Howard’s house. In the meantime, I was left standing where I was. Sheriff Hull walked around me and pulled a cigar from his breast pocket. I heard him strike a match against the cabin and the smell of sulfur filled

the air, followed by the smell of burning tobacco. When the sheriff came around he had the cigar in his mouth.

“I hope my cigar doesn’t offend you, Joe. But you better get used to the smell of tobacco.”

With that, he offered it to me. I shook my head to refuse, but he said, “it’s not a request.”

So I took in a bit of the tobacco smoke, being careful not to inhale it, but coughed desperately anyway as my eyes watered and the sheriff laughed.

“Mr. Townsend, get the carriage ready.”

“Right away sheriff,” and Townsend was off to the carriage checking the horses and their straps. He also carefully inspected the wheels, and he fed the horses a bit of carrot. While he was busy, Howard was returning with two peaches in his hands. Sheriff Hull walked me over to the carriage by the chain around my neck, and Mr. Townsend quickly hurried to open the carriage door. As the sheriff guided me to the carriage, Howard ran up to him, “if ya don’ mind, Sheriff, I would like to say goodbye to Joe.”

“Knock yourself out, Howard,” with that, the sheriff handed the chain over to Howard and he climbed into the back of the carriage.

“Well, Joe, I s’pose this is where we part ways. Think you’ll miss me, Joe?”

“No, master.”

Howard laughed boldly and loud, “That’s what I’m gonna miss about ya, Joe. Even after all your trainin’, you have no trouble bein’ candid. But let me give you some last bit of trainin’.”

He dropped a peach on the ground and slowly crushed it under his foot. “Now pick it up and eat it.”

I bent down as I was told and lifted the pulp of the peach and stared at it.

“I said eat it, eat it now or Lord help you.”

“Is there a problem out there, Howard,” there was a sharp warning in the sheriff’s voice.

“Not at all sheriff, I was just givin’ Joe his peach and some last-minute advice.”

“Well hurry it up, I want to be back from Manasseh’s before supper.”

I dropped the gritty pulp from my hands and stared at it, then I slowly lifted my eyes to Howard.

“Son of a... a’right, you listen very carefully. Never forget that you are only a n*****. Despite what you may think of me, what I have taught you will keep you alive out there and keep you from gettin’ whipped. I have considered you my greatest accomplishment, and you will do well to remember everything that I taught ya. Lest you forget, there will always be a driver who acts and thinks just like me. Make sure you please that one.” With that, he pressed the peach into my hand so hard that some of the juice let out.

“I will pray for you, master.”

“Time to go, Joe,” he said as he turned from me and guided me to the carriage with the chain. Once in, I sat opposite the sheriff, and the sheriff attached his end of the chain to a hook behind his head. Mr. Townsend closed the door, and I saw him bolt it as well. The windows were

all open to air, and I jostled some with the carriage as the heavy man climbed into the driver's box.

As Mr. Townsend whistled at his pair of horses and cracked the driver's whip at them I flinched reflexively. There was a sudden kinship with the animals that I had never felt before, and I found myself lightly weeping. As the carriage moved away from the cabin that had served as a kind of home for me for the last few months, I heard Howard calling after us,

“Enjoy your new home and master, Joe. I’m sure, Master Manassah will be bright as a new pin when he sees ya.”

Eden Georgia is a very beautiful area, and Eden is a very appropriate name for Georgia in general. The land is green with tall trees and shrubs. Its mild winters create a long growing season which allows for almost anything to thrive in both spring and fall. Large oak trees, covered in low-hanging moss, dominate the area. In all, if it had not been for my current predicament, the trip from Eden to Grizzard Escape, the plantation I was being transported to, I would have considered the travel a rather pleasant one.

Sheriff Hull said little to me, except to ask me if I was excited about seeing my new home, or talking to me about how beautiful the land was where I was going. We followed the river most of the way out and, after a couple of hours, the land become clear. The ride became hot and muggy by this point as the sun beat upon the small, black carriage. There were a great number of people in the fields, white men like spectators on horseback, and black men and

women toiled on the ground. They were singing, but I could not make out the words, and it created a mournful wail that chilled my spine, and yet comforted me at the same time.

Slaves.

The plants that they were among were no more than two inches in height, and it appeared that they were pulling them out of wheelbarrows and planting them into the ground. The men on horseback looked over at us but did not move to intercept us as we made our way to the large home rising in the center of the fields.

It rose in my view, white as a Roman pillar, and as large as Camelot. It was two stories high with a balcony and a wraparound porch. I stared, eyes wide open and mouth agape, as we rode past the large house, and wrapped around it to the backside. As we rode past the house, I noticed that the door was boarded up.

On the backside of the house was a smaller house, single-story and made of brick and timber. It also had a porch. The house was not unpleasant, but compared to the previous house it was quite plain. The carriage came to a stop, and I felt the cab jostle as Mr. Townsend descended and came around to unhook the door for the sheriff. When the door was opened, the sheriff got out and greeted a black lady dressed in a plain black dress and carrying a broom. She was thin and carried herself with poise and dignity.

“Masta’s in the main barn.” That was all she said, then she went back into the house. The sheriff climbed back into the carriage and Mr. Townsend closed and relatched the door. Looking at me, he said the first cross thing I had heard him say all day, “sit up straight, you look like a monkey. Be better than that house wench.”

“Yes, master,” I said plainly, and sat up more erect.

“Not a drop of southern hospitality exists in black blood. No kind word for the sheriff, no nothin’. She should be happy she ain’t living in Africa with the rest of her heathen lot.” He continued to murmur to himself about her as we continued down the road to the barn.

The barn was at least as big as the first house, also standing two stories. There were two large doors, both were open, and a man in plain clothes seemed to be working on one of the doors as he swore. An older black man who was thick with a full beard ran up to the carriage as it was brought to a halt. As he opened the door, the sheriff stepped out, turning to me he said, “wait here a minute, Joe.”

The older man looked at me for a moment, a sad frown crossed his face as he closed the door.

“Manasseh Grizzard, I would like to have a word with you,” Sheriff Abner Hollard as he walked up to the other man.

Manasseh stood, he was at least a head taller than the sheriff, and twice as broad. He wore plain clothes and had a full head of salty hair with a full beard that matched. His eyes narrowed at the sheriff and a conversation ensued that I could not hear. After a few moments, the large Manasseh scratched his beard, then held out his hand, indicating to the sheriff to lead the way back to the carriage. Manassah walked with an obvious limp and leaned heavily on a cane in his right hand. When they got to the carriage, the slave excused himself and disappeared into the barn. The sheriff opened the carriage door, unhooked the chain, and tugged on it a little, indicating to me that I needed to come out.

When the large Manasseh saw me, he grew visibly red and he turned on Sheriff Abner, “the hell are you tryin' a pull, Abner. This n***** ain't worth what it would cost me to house him.”

“Now, don't you get your dander up, Mr. Grizzard. This boy may not look like much, but Joe here has got many advantages.”

“Advantages? He ain't no bigger than a minnow in a fishing pond. First, you give me a n***** that is lame, and apparently a runaway. Now you give me one that will likely die his first day out in the fields. This is supposed to be how you repay me? Or are you trying to simply swamp my estate with leeches so that my tobacco plantation simply goes under?”

“Now, don't you go getting ugly. There is something special about Joe here that I ain't told ya yet, something that you might actually find of value.”

Manasseh said nothing, instead, he crossed his arms and stared the sheriff in the eyes, bearing down on him as he waited for an answer from the sheriff. Finally, “well, I ain't got all day, you gonna tell me, or no?”

Sheriff Hull considered him for a moment, and then smiled, “how much you pay the Carlisle boy to go over your books and read you the paper each day?”

Manasseh stepped up to him, his hands dropping into fists, “that ain't none of your business.”

The sheriff stayed calm, “well, whatever it is, Joe, here is worth at least that much.”

“That means,” Manasseh looked at me sharply, and then back at the sheriff, “isn’t that illegal?”

“The deed was already done by a third party who paid the price for their misconduct, a preacher who wanted him to read the Bible. He lost his property, and a great deal more also. The crime has been paid for, but there is no reason for you to not enjoy the fruits of that labor.”

Manasseh looked over at me with a scowl. Without warning, he reached his large hands and felt my bicep, engulfing almost my entire arm with his excessively large hand. Looking back at the sheriff, “\$500.”

“That ain’t how this is going to work. If you take this slave, then I am going to consider the debt paid in full.”

The big man considered, crossing his arms and resting his hand under his nose.

“You ain’t going to find another opportunity like this, Manassah. Not anywhere between here and the Mason Dixon line anyway.”

Manassah nodded his head slowly. “A’right Abner. I guess we’re square.” With that, they shook hands, and in moments the sheriff had the collar and chains off of me and was in the driver’s box next to Mr. Twonsend and the carriage pulled away, leaving me alone with the excessively large Manassah peering down at me as if he were trying to consider what to do with me now.

“I don’t need another house slave,” he began slowly, “but I also want you close by, so I can’t put you in the field neither.” He looked away from me, and back towards the barn, “Abraham!”

The older man came back out in a rush and hurried over to Manassah, “Yes masta’ Grizzard.”

“Get...” pausing, he looked at me, “Joe?” I nodded, feeling both weak and nauseous not knowing my fate. As I stood there, the voices between Manassah and Abraham began to fade in the distance as they discussed my usefulness. My eyes slowly began to dim, would brighten, and then dim again.

I heard some brief cursing, but I couldn’t tell from who, as my vision suddenly fled from me and I felt myself falling backward.

Chapter 7

The Cost of a Free Slave

When I came to myself, I was laying on hay in the shade of the barn, my shirt open, and I was soaking wet. Manasseh had a bucket of water that he had used to splash me down, and Abraham was peering over me, fanning me.

“Dear God, boy, don’t you dare die on me already. Let me at least get my money’s worth out of ya first.” His speech was still slow and methodical. Every word was carefully placed, and his baritone resonated through my chest.

Abraham helped me to my feet, and I stood, wobbling, as I awaited my fate.

“Well, boy, what can you do?” I stared blankly at him. The question seemed so large at the time, and I felt unworthy to try to answer it. Instead, all I could do was stare at him.

“Can’t ya talk?”

“Yes, master.”

“Well, then answer the question!” his voice was elevating, and he took a step forward. Abraham turned to him.

“Please, Masta Grizzard. Gib de boy a moment. He ain’t been woke up yet. Let me try an’ talk wid him.”

Manasseh pointed to me, “figure out what he can do, then get him branded, then come talk to me.” With that, he stormed off towards the smaller of the two houses. Abraham let me sit back down on the hay and then kneeled beside me.

“Where you from, young man?” He had a very gentle nature about him, and his eyes exhibited the same gentleness I saw in my father. I trusted him instantly. He was a taller man, almost as tall as Manasseh, and almost as thick.

“Eden” I told him, “My father was a preacher there.”

His eyes grew wider as the light of understanding crossed over him. He looked down the road where the sheriff went, then he looked at the smaller house that Manasseh had gone to, then he looked down at me.

“I’m Abraham, Masta’ Grizzard jus’ calls me “Stable Buck.” He ain’t fond of gettin’ too close ta his slaves, so he call us by our work.” Removing his hat and scratching his head he

continued, “I know you ain’t neve’ been a slave befo’,” bending down close he whispered at me, “and it don’ matter now. When de masta say speak, ya speak. When de masta say move, ya move. I know you ain’t got much trade, but I can keep ya busy workin’ wid me. Would dat be okay wid ya?”

I nodded, the feeling in my body and my heart had seemed to fade away into some distant memory. Even my thoughts seemed far from me as I desperately tried to grasp hold of anything familiar in my mind.

“Okay, den I need ya ta trust me. We hab ta do some t’ings dat are not nice. It will be good for ya ta trust me in dis. Da masta’ will see any fight in ya as being defiant, and will use de lash on ya. Can ya be brave fo’ me?” Again, I simply nodded my head, my mind swimming with the horrors I had already faced and filled with wonder over what horrors still lay before me.

From this point, I was taken out to the tobacco fields. There, a young man with a whip and a head of wispy white hair was standing watch over a field of slaves.

“Good afternoon, Stable Buck! What brings ya out to the fields?”

“Masta’ Grizzard gots a new slave needs set up, Masta’ Amnon.” A large, toothy smile spread across Amnon’s face as he looked over at me.

Without many words, we followed him to a barn at the opposite end of the field. Inside, a fire was burning, and I watched Amnon as he pulled an iron brander from the wall and rested it in the fire. There were other men present, mostly slaves who were sorting through piles of tobacco. There are two ways to harvest tobacco, by harvesting and drying the whole stock at

once, or only harvesting the largest leaves. Manasseh preferred to only harvest the best leaves as they grew to maturity, and even these were tightly scrutinized.

It can be funny, the things one remembers about a moment. I remember the smell of cut tobacco as the sun heats up its oil. I remember the sounds of a man counting and hearing the scratching of a pencil. I vaguely remember Amnon kindly asking me to remove my coat and shirt, and Abraham sitting me down and holding me still. These last two being remembered after I was told of the incidents.

More importantly, I remember the vision of a beautiful lady with skin like mahogany and large eyes that seemed to envelop me. For a moment, our eyes locked and we simply stared at each other, and it was all I remember seeing before I smelled hot iron, searing flesh, and my world going dark for the second time that day.

When I came to, I was sitting outside the barn leaning against the wall; there was a burning pain on my chest that seemed to radiate to my bones. Looking down, I discovered a burn about the size of a mans hand on my left breast. It was in the shape of a tobacco leaf with the initials MG in the middle of it. On the darkest of nights, I can still feel the heat coming off of it, and its memories scorch areas of my thoughts that I have tried to move past. Forgiveness is a process. It was white and blistering. I then realized that Abraham was beside me.

“You be careful wit’ dim blisters. I know it seem itchy, but don’ pop ‘em.” With that he sat next to me as I gathered my wits about me. I wanted to ask who the girl was in the barn, but I could not gather my wits to talk. I found solace and comfort in remaining still and waiting on the Lord to show me all things.

The rest of this first day was a kind of blur. I was taken to a horse stall that was made out with a small mat and a blanket. This would be my home for the next five years. The smell of hoarse would surround me while flies and mosquitoes buzzed my ears. Eventually I would build an actual bedframe with the help of Abraham, but for the first several months all I had was a sack of hay to sleep on with a course blanket.

I was taken to the house and Abraham told Manasseh that he would train me to help in the stables.

“Alright then, I think that will work. Look at me, boy.” I gazed up at his hulking frame as his eyes bared down on me. “I need you here every morning at first light with a fire going in the stove and fireplace. Anything that Stable Buck has you do is on top of the duties that I have for you. You will be responsible for both, understood?”

“Yes, Master Grizzard.”

Taking a step back, he examined me again. “Na, you’ll be just fine for the purpose I have for you. It don’t take much strength to read and write.” He continued to look at me for an awkward moment, “You don’t talk much, do ya?”

“Talking gets me into trouble.”

“And when ya do talk, ya don’t sound much like a n***** either. In fact....” He trailed off and examined me for a moment longer. “Never mind, I don’t want to know nothin’ about you. I don’t want to know where you is from, who your pappy was, who your mammy was, nothin’. I just want you in here at dawn, ready to obey me.”

“Yes, Master Grizzard.”

“And from now on, your last name is Secretary. I may call you Joe, or I may call you Secretary, you will respond promptly to either.”

“Yes, Master Grizzard.”

With that, he looked away, “Esther!” The thin lady of the house came back in, her broom was no longer in her hand. She gave Abraham a gentle look before turning to Manasseh and stood before him with her hands behind her back saying nothing.

“I need you to feed this young man from whatever scraps you can put together. After that, make sure he has all his needs met. The first part of his day will be here in the house, I expect him to look like a gentleman.”

Esther nodded at Manasseh as she smoothed her black dress and looked at me with a kind smile. She led me by the hand to a small kitchen where the pungent smell of onion and garlic seemed to seep out of the very walls.

“You will eat from the masta’s table,” she said to me, “he already done tol’ me that you was a special slave.” She smiled again a comforting smile as she went to a cooked bird on the counter and cut some meat and a crust of bread. Next to that, she added some greens and included a small slice of peach pie.

After eating like an animal these many months, I found an instant fondness for Esther’s recipes. The fowl was savory with crispy skin, while the bread was soft and delicate. The pie was sweet and had a hint of cinnamon. This was my first meal as Manasseh’s slave. I would not

always get to eat from his table, but the food that Esther cooked often made me forget the bacon and cornmeal rations I had to eat between times.

After my meal, Esther took my measurements and gave me a set of work clothes for when I was working in the stables. She said she would have an extra suit made for me, but to take good care of the suit I arrived in.

That night was a fitful night. As I listened to the horses around me sleeping I stared at the stable roof, at the hayloft above me. It was a hot night, and neither breeze nor starlight seeped through the cracks of the boards. I do not recall sleeping much that night, but I do recall Abraham calling my name before the sun had risen and lighted a lamp

Chapter 8

Earning My Daily Bread

Compared to many of my contemporaries, some might say that my time in slavery was not labor-intensive. When I met with Manasseh the following day, it was explained to me exactly the capacity of my service to him.

When I entered the small house, the silhouette of the big house seemed to loom in the distance. Abraham helped me start a fire after stealing a quick kiss from Esther. After a short embrace, and a reluctant parting, Abraham showed me where the stove was and how it was to be prepared. Manasseh had a certain way he liked things done, and would periodically check the ashes to see if the fire had been stoked in accordance with his expectations. He had determined a

method of lighting the stove so that it created enough heat to cook with, but would use a minimal amount of wood.

There had been one time that I did not build the stove in the manner which was shown to me by Abraham. It was late into the first year of my captivity when the sun yielded some of its strength to shorter days. I did not hear of the matter until I had retired from my chores for the evening. Late into the night, I heard the stable door slam.

“Secretary! Secretary! You get your worthless behind in front of me this instant!”

Manasseh was not a man who would let a matter settle, but he handled all of his affairs promptly and in the height of his passion. He was, no doubt, encouraged further by his bourbon.

My mind thought to pretend I did not hear him. That, if I were asleep, I would not have to endure whatever punishment he had in his mind. As I heard him approach my stall, all the while calling out profanities and swearing by the Lord I knew that my plan was only going to make things worse. Hastily, I rose out of bed, the air was chilly against my bare skin and I put on my work clothes. Just as I slid my shirt on the door to my space was flung open. Our eyes met for just a moment before Manasseh grabbed hold of me and threw me into the middle of the stable. Shortly, he was upon me with his full weight, kicking, stomping, and beating me as he relayed to me my offense.

“How dare you use so much damned wood! As if my resources were yours to abuse!”

With that, he grabbed the rawhide and told me to remove my shirt.

“Please, Master Grizzard. I’ve learned my lesson. I will be more mindful of the wood.”

Manasseh regarded me for a moment, but only a moment. His wrath was not yet satiated, and

mercy did not become him at this moment. For the briefest of moments, I saw the light of gentleness cross his face, and in the very next moment, it was replaced again with hardness as he commanded me to strip my shirt off.

He laid the whip to my back, opening up old scars and creating new ones. I determined in my heart not to cry out, and I was able to maintain this resolve for the first few lashes. But eventually, my cries echoed into the night with the crack of the whip. When he was finished, he replaced the whip and ordered me to leave my shirt off and to go into the house.

Once inside I saw Abraham, Esther, and the angel who by this point I learned was called Tamar. She was the daughter of Esther and had obtained favor from Manasseh along with her mother.

“You owe this family a great debt of gratitude. It is for their pleas that I have shown you mercy this night.” Then, as Esther and Tamar tended to my wounds, he had Abraham build the wood in the fire without lighting it. I remember distinctly the softness of Tamar’s hands and falling into her gentleness. Manasseh instructed me to watch carefully how Abraham accomplished the task because he would not be so lenient with me if it happened again.

I was certain to obey his voice in this endeavor, and never again was I beat for building the stove improperly.

The lighting of the stove was the least of my duties. As it turned out, Manasseh was illiterate. Before I was brought to him, he was paying a blonde young man an astounding \$10 a month to do the work that I was now going to do. As he ate his breakfast, I read to him the newspaper. I would read the headlines, and then the articles of only the one he said to read more

of. Of particular interest were the weather and this idea of westward expansion. Manasseh use to keep close tabs on which territories would be made free, and which ones would be made slave.

After this, I carefully went over the books with him. He use to keep careful track of how much tobacco he was harvesting, how much he needed to plant, when crops needed to be rotated, the price of tobacco in Savannah and Atlanta, etc. He was meticulous with his book, and it was a discipline I was accustomed to.

In my father's church, I was taught to keep track of the books, donations received from the North, and any possible tithes which always came from Dr. Benezette. I also kept track of expenses and kept an ordered affair of church affairs. Of course, keeping track of expenses for a small church is a far cry from keeping track of the books for a large plantation. There was a bit of a learning curve, but it was a challenge I was able to overcome in short order.

With that being said, heaven forbid there was ever a net loss instead of a net prophet. This would cause Manasseh to go into a kind of fit where he started looking through his house deciding what he could sell or cut from his life to make up the difference. He also would often fly into a rage and blame me for not keeping the books correctly, or not informing him earlier of signs that there may be a problem. Most of the time, the problems were not indicative of any error on anybody's part; sometimes the market for tobacco was simply in flux and this problem was corrected quickly. Other times there was a loss of harvest due to blight, drought, or bugs. In either case, Manasseh's plantation continued strong, and his tobacco was well known throughout Georgia.

As part of keeping the books, it was also my responsibility to go out to each of the storage barns for the purpose of keeping track of input and output. I was to keep track of how

much tobacco was brought into the barns, how much tobacco went out, to who it was sold to, and what the purchase price was. I often looked forward to this part of the day because it allowed me to get to know Tamar.

Tamar was one of the few slaves he did not call by title. At first, I thought it was simply because her role was not clearly defined. She worked in the house in the morning, in the barns in the afternoon, and finished her day in the fields. But there also seemed an affection for her, a favor that he showed her. This affection was extended to Esther as well, but in a different kind of way.

Every afternoon, Esther and I would walk out to the tobacco barn together and chat. Her voice was smooth and had the quality of an opera singer. The first time we walked together, I could feel my heart in my throat. I did not know where to put my hands, and I felt as though I were dragging my feet and stumbling over them. I struggled to find words to talk to her. Thankfully, Tamar that broke the silence.”

“Papa say you knows how ta read and ta write.”

“Yes ma’am. My father, Lloyd Beattie, taught me how to read scripture and taught me many things besides.”

“Your Papy know how ta read an’ write too?”

“Both my parents did.”

As we walked, she looked at me with wide eyes and her mouth was half-open. “Where are your papa and mama now?”

I stopped in the path as I fought back the sudden memory of my mother being laid to rest, and my father's remains being driven out by a wagon as I stared from the log cabin I was held in after they had whipped him. The tears stung my eyes as I tried to find the words to say that they were dead. Before I could, Tamar stepped close to me and embraced me with her thin arms. She held me close as I fought to regain my composure.

She kept a supportive arm around me as we continued the walk, both of us knowing that the consequences would be great if we were too delayed. As we did, she sang, "Swing low, sweet chariot/ Commin' for to carry me home. / Swing low, sweet chariot, / Common' for to carry me home."

Her voice swept over me in the way that my mother's use to with a richness that penetrated my very soul. As we walked, I found my voice to sing with her, "If you get there before I do, / Coming for to carry me home,/ Tell all my friends I'm coming too,/ Coming for to carry me home."

I regained my composure by the time we reached the drying barn. This was not the same barn where I was branded; rather, it was the tobacco leaves' first stop after being harvested and hung to dry on long cords. As I mentioned, Manasseh had a high standard for his tobacco and preferred to harvest the leaves instead of the full plant. He also only accepted the finest leaves to be cultivated. Tamar had become somewhat of an expert on what Manasseh expected in his tobacco leaves, and he trusted her to inspect the plants. Often, he inspected the plants as well, but rarely did he find a fault because Tamar already pulled the plants that were of low quality. Because Manasseh made use of tobacco's perennial nature, he kept the plant in the ground for around three years. This brought on the added issue of soil exhaust and would cause the tobacco

to rot after an extended period of time. When this happened, Manasseh would have the crop pulled after salvaging what he could. He would then use manure, and other waste material to replenish the soil. Part of the tracking of the harvest was to keep track of the location as well so that the soil could be properly tracked and replenished as necessary. There was always large stretches of land that was either in rest, or producing beans as a result of this rotation. Bean plans were tracked separately, but not sold. Instead, beans were used to feed the slaves.

While Manasseh made use of overseers, he preferred to employ slaves in the role of keeping the product on the move. These drivers were often looked at with scorn among their fellow slaves, considered traitors much like the tax collectors of Rome. In this way, the house slave and the driver had a kinship. The driver who ran the drying barn was a kindly man in his forties. He was thin and tall with a large bald spot on the crown of his head.

“Hi, Roy. Any new crop yet?” Tamar asked as we approached.

“Nothin’ yet sista. I think they scared to harvest today on account you droppin’ so many leaves yesterday.” His voice was cracked and a bit high-pitched, yet still had a friendly quality to it.

Tamar’s eyes softened and she walked up to Roy, resting her hand on his arm, “no one got in no trouble, did they?”

“Not by me sista, but you know how dem overseers be, ‘specially that Amnon King.”

Tamar bit her lower lip and looked away, then started walking through the leaves of the barn, carefully inspecting them as she wiped tears from her eyes. With that, Roy looked at me.

“You be a strangely dressed negro.”

I was dressed in the suit Sheriff Abner had bought me. They were not cut to fit as the suit I wore when living with my father and hung on me somewhat loosely. “I’m Nath...I mean, I’m Joe.” I extended my hand to him.

“What’s the last name Joe, what do de masta call ya?”

“Secretary,” I said.

“Well, I’ll be. I ain’t never heard dat one. How far ya think ya goona get dressed like dat?”

“Excuse me?”

He drew up close to me and spoke very quietly, “listen. Avoid de main road, it ain’t nothin but trouble. You can cut through de trees, but you have to change first. Keep de outfit wit’ ya though, it be handy in de North. Keep de book you hab too, maybe dey teaches ya how ta read up there.” His eyes were full of starry wonder.

“Roy,” Tamar said as she came around the corner, “he’s replacin’ the Wilcox kid.”

Roy stood straight and looked me over, “Nebermind what I said, young masta. Is de heat, makes me a bit drunk ya know. Why, I don’ let no slave escape, no siree...”

“Roy,” Tamar said again, “calm down, He ain’t gonna snitch on ya. He’s a new guy, just purchased yesterday. Give’m a break.”

With that, he looked me over again. I looked at my book and found the place where the crop intake from the field to the drying barn was kept. This was only for my notes, everything would be re-written into a ledger that was specific to this purpose after my rounds.

“How many new leaves were brought in last night?” I asked

“I don’t know, you has to count dem fo’ yo’self.” He watched me smiling as I went to work counting the multitude of leaves that were hanging. It was a tedious job, and the barn was huge. The leaves were spread across long string, and each leaf was huge, at least twenty inches in length, and at least a foot broad. The process took me a great deal of time the first time because I had to count every leaf. After the first day, I would simply ask Roy where the new leaves were hanging and count the additions, minus the ones that Tamar removed. His smile broadened when he saw me write in the journal. He asked if he could see what I had written, which I showed him.

“Dat, dat is de most beautiful thing I think I seen in a long time,” with that he looked over at Tamar, “‘cept you of course sista.”

With that, we were off to the storage barn for packaging which was just about a hundred yards away. This is where my job became more involved. This barn usually had a great deal more activity surrounding it as this was where tobacco was brought from the drying barn to be packaged and shipped to town. Depending on the time of year, there could be days when almost every slave on the plantation was busy around the storage barn.

Upon arrival to the storage barn, I immediately recognized the wispy hair and blue eyes of Amnon. He leered at Tamar as we entered the barn as he scratched his chin and made his way

over to us. On this particular day, the barn was extremely busy. Although Manasseh harvested year-round, the summer months always produced the highest yield.

“What brings ya to this barn peach?”

Tamar took a reflexive step back, placing me between her and Amnon.

“Masta Amnon, please don’ whip de slaves when I pull leaves. Is not a sign of laziness, but a sign the plants need rotati’n.”

“I suppose I could be nicer to them n*****, that is, if I have the proper incentive.” He tried to push me out of the way to get to her, but I did not move from my place. He gave me the familiar look, the look of surprise that I exist at all. He had barely seen me before, and now he was forced to actually see me. It was the same look Pastor Graham had given me just before this whole mess got started.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” There was wild ice in his eyes, almost more beast than man. He had a bestial desire, and I was standing between him and his desire.

“You already know me, Master Amnon. I am the one you branded yesterday. I was sent...”

“I don’t give two damns why you was sent. I was havin’ a conversation that don’t involve you. Get out of my way before I tan the n***** out of you.”

“Master Grizzard’s business always comes first, Master Amnon. If you desire to tan me for that I will be certain to let Master Grizzard know why his numbers are late.”

“Ya jus’ got here yesterday, and you think you that special? I’m about to show ya how special ya is.”

Tamar spoke up, “He replacin’ the Wilcox kid.” Her voice shook like a leaf blown, but she stood taller as she spoke.

“Toby? You think you can do Toby’s job?”

I said nothing as he took a step back, tongue pressing against his cheek as he eyed me up and down. “I asked you a question, boy. What makes you think you can do Toby’s job?”

“What makes you think I can’t, master?”

“For one, you’s a n*****, and for two, you’s a n*****. Toby’s job requires readin’, writin’, and math.”

“I am capable of all these tasks, master.”

“You’s a damn liar! You may think that this ruse will go well with ya, gets ya a better stay an all, but this play you got goin’ on will bite you in the ass, and I will be right there to laugh at ya when Master Grizzard beats the tar baby right out of ya.” With that, he snatched my notebook out of my hands and opened it up. After readin the last pages, he shut it dramatically and shoved it back in my hand. “Well,” he said, “get about your business than, and leave me to mine.” He looked past me to Tamar.

“Actually, master, I need your assistance.”

“What, a smart n***** like yourself, what do you need me for?”

“Master Grizzard said you were to show me around the barn and teach me how to keep track of everything coming in and going out.”

Amnon gave a final look at Tamar, “we’ll finish this another time my little black berry.” Tamar sighed as Amnon showed me around the barn. I took my time writing down the destinations of different harvests and the amount yielded and took very careful marks to make sure my figures were correct while making sure Tamar was completed with her tasks before I was. When prompted to hurry up, I made allowed my skin color to be the excuse for how slowly I was writing. As far as he was concerned, I was nothing more than an ignorant n*****, and although it hurt my ego to allow him to think this, it also allowed me to get Tamar out of the barn without any more of his attention.

After taking stock of the harvest I conversed with Tamar about which fields were ready for a rest, and which fields should be ready to grow tobacco again. I marked this in my book, and I would discuss these with Manasseh at the end of my rounds. I was also to keep track of his slaves, and make an account of their overall health and attitude. This last part would become very crucial as my time on MGT (Manasseh Grizzard Tobacco).

When we got back to the small house, I was directed to a desk in the living room which housed the books I needed to complete my job. Each note had to be accounted for in a separate book. There was a book for keeping track of the field rotations, for keeping track of tobacco harvested, for tracking the amount of tobacco sold, and for keeping track of slave numbers, names, and approximate ages. When I first inherited the books, it only included their last names, or rather, the last name that Manasseh gave them based on their duties, along with a first initial. For example, I was J. Secretary. As I got to know the names of the slaves, I would change the

system around and write their full names on the ledger. Everyone deserves the dignity of a name, and Manasseh had no way of knowing any different.

As the beasts were brought back in from the field, I was to meet Abraham at the stable and assist in the removing of harnesses, padding down their coats, feeding, and grooming the animals. Because Abraham had been doing this alone, some of the maintenance required had been neglected; now that he had a companion, much of the neglected chores were now attended to. In my first month, all the horses were re-shoed. It was also my responsibility to keep track of how much hay was used to feed the animals, and to make sure enough hay was in the hay barn. Manasseh grew his own hay, and like his tobacco, it was grown year-round. Unlike tobacco, hay fields did not need to rest as often.

This was my day-to-day for the next four years. However, my average day was not like my experience in slavery. I was entering into this monstrous institution at a time when the whole ideal was about to change.

Chapter 9

Reunion



Headline: “The first flag of independence raised in the South, by the citizens of Savannah, Ga. November 8th, 1860 / drawn by Henry Cleenewerck, Savannah, Ga.; lithographed by R.H. Howell, Savannah, Ga”

Freedom. Perhaps no word carries as much passion in the human spirit as that one word. It is ironic that the slave holders of the South were so adamant about the ideal of freedom, but felt no tinge of responsibility, no remorse of the hypocrite, while shouting “Don’t tread on me!”

Those days, months before the actual Civil War broke out, the tension was palpable. When Abraham Lincoln was elected president, Manasseh was visibly troubled. That same day of reading about it we went over all of his books and determined the cost if he had to set his slaves free or pay them a livable wage.

“It would be doable,” I told him, with the books splayed open on the work desk. It was at this time that I started concocting a scheme in my head. Not a scheme to take down his plantation, nor was it really to convince Manasseh to set all the captives free. But it was an idea to bring back a measure of dignity, and even a certain degree of liberty to the masses under Manasseh’s hands. He was nursing a brandy as he sat in his high-back chair across the room.

“At what cost?”

“Well, you would either have to lose some of the field hands...”

“That is not a realistic solution, they can barely keep up with production as it is.” Leaning forward and scratching the salty stubble on his cheek he asked, “what else ya got?”

“The other option is to remove the overseers.”

“That ain’t no option at all!” he cried out. “Them slaves ain’t goona do no work unless they have a heavy hand!”

“May I speak, Master Grizzard.”

He waved his hand at me, his indication to go ahead. “It seems likely that a well-treated servant, who is granted a measure of dignity, will serve his master better than a slave who is treated like one of the barn animals.”

He looked at me squarely for a moment, “I don’ see how that will work, Secretary. Those field slaves ain’t like you, or Maid, or Stable Buck. You seen’em. They require the constant sound of the whip’s crack, or they will settle in the shade of a tobacco leaf and stop working.”

“What if...”

“That is enough!” He slammed his cane on the ground and stood, towering over me, “You begin to forget your place, boy. We ain’t equals in this house. Now I gave you a say, an’ the matter ain’t up for further discussion.” With that, he took three large steps to the liquor bar and poured a large glass of brandy.

“Forgive me, Master. What do you propose we do?”

“For tonight, drink. We will cross the Lincoln bridge if we have to. As of right now, there is no law setting anybody free, and he can’t work outside the law. The constitution still stands.”

Then that was the end of the matter. He told me to destroy my figures and to put the books away. I threw a dummy page in the fire but tucked the figures away in the back of the book. After he watched it burn, he retired to his room, and I was ordered to complete my other duties.

When this news came in November, which was handsomely illustrated with Southern men celebrating in Savannah the first free flag to be flown, Manasseh was surprisingly not pleased.

“Fools,” he yelled out, “damn fools. What do they think they are going to accomplish by secession?” He looked over at me as I read the article to him, but I gave him no answer. In truth,

I was scared, and I prayed to God that this would amount to nothing more than noise. I believed that freedom was coming when I read about Abraham Lincoln, and I prayed for a peaceful resolution. But the men of the South, at least the men of Savannah at this time, would none of it. Perhaps they saw the writing on the wall, the dwindling of new states becoming slave states, and free states outnumbering congress to the point of federal action. I dare not speak any of this to Manasseh.

Suddenly, Manasseh stood up and ripped the paper from my hand, focusing on the article's portrait, even ripping it out. "When I fought in the Mexican war to liberate Texas, good men died for the honor of being called American. Now, these assheds want to undo all of that!"

With that, he turned to me. "You been doin' a great deal of staring at me this morning. What you got on your mind Secretary?"

"I have got nothing to say, Master. I was not yet born when the Mexican war was fought."

Manasseh dismissed me with a wave of his hand, "The tobacco has been slowing down, we are coming to the end of the heavy growing season. I need you to spend less time on rounds and spend some time helping the gardeners. I trust you can handle that small amount of labor?"

"Yes, Master Grizzard."

So, for that day, and then all but once a week following, my duties after reading the paper to Manasseh was to work in the garden. The garden was his pet name for the 100 acres used to grow food for the house and to feed his slaves. While the bean yield was sustaining to some extent, it was not enough by itself to feed the fifty slaves, plus the overseers, and himself for the

entire year. The garden was planted on the east side of the house and thrived because of the even measure of sun it received in the morning and was somewhat protected as the sun set.

After quickly changing into my work clothes, I ran out to the garden. There was one overseer in the garden, a broad man with dark hair whose name was Will. This was my first time actually at the garden, although I had been to the storage barn for the garden daily. As I approached, Will called out to me, “boy. Hey, boy. What’s the big idea common out here so late in the day?”

He was on a horse, and he rode over to me as I ran to the field. By now, the corn had been harvested and the stocks would be pulled shortly. On this day, the small group of slaves was harvesting sweet potatoes.

“Master Grizzard has sent me to the garden to help with the harvest.”

He eyed me carefully, “why ain’t you been here all day?”

“I was attending to my other duties, Master. My morning duties for Master Grizzard always come first before I may be dismissed to do other chores.”

He scrunched his heavy brow and leaned down to my, his left hand gently touched the whip. “Listen carefully, boy. If you goona work out here, with me, then you goona be n time, which means at dawn. We understood.”

“Yes, master. I will tell Master Grizzard that he will have to receive his paper and report earlier in the day.”

He shot back up, “what’s your name, boy?”

For a moment, I considered giving the man my real name, declaring boldly and proudly that my name is Nathaniel. But as I contemplated the issue I remembered the whippings, the near drownings, and the box. My heart beat harder in my chest, to the point I could hear it, and true terror gripped me so that I blurted, "Joe."

"Joe what?"

"Joe Secretary."

He took his hand from the whip and sat straight in his saddle, "you're that damned special n*****. My good friend got canned because of you." He looked around, then leaned close to me, "as far as I'm concerned, you ain't nothin' special. How don' carte how smart Mr. Grizzard thinks you are, to me you ain't nothin' more than another n*****. You will get no special treatment from me, get into the potato field. You'll have to dig by hand today, tomorrow you best bring a shovel."

"Yes, master."

As I began to depart from him he rode his horse around and blocked my path. "Take your hat off."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"I said take your damned hat off."

I slid my hat from my head and held it in my hand. "That is how you will face me from now on. You will respect me as your superior in all ways. If you forget to do so again, I will whip you until the earth under your feet cries out for mercy. Are we understood?"

“Yes, master.” Then, as I was starting to walk away again, he rode around and stopped me once more.

“Boy, you don’ ever leave ‘till I tell you to.”

Removing my hat, I looked up at him, “yes, master.” Then I simply stood and waited. He smiled a small smile.

“A’right, Joe, you may go.”

“Yes, master,” I said, and I slid away from him and went into the potato field.

As I entered the field of sweet potatoes, the tangled vines wrapping around my feet, a tall, lanky figure stood out at the other end of the field. Forgetting myself, I ran to that figure as my eyes drank in the first bit of familiarity and the second most beautiful thing I saw since coming to Manasseh’s Tobacco.

“Jabez!” I cried out as I came up to him, it was all I could do not to give him a great hug. A smile spread over his mouth and was caught off guard again by his perfectly white teeth.

“We talk soon, Masta Nathaniel. Don’ rise the anger of Masta’ Thunda Clap.” He turned and got back to digging up sweet potatoes as big as his palms. It was good to hear my name, my real name. It was the refreshing my soul needed, and I could feel the stinging tears of joy brimming at the edge of my windows. I dug up potatoes on the other side of him, and listened to him sing,

“I know moonrise, I know star-rise,

Lay dis body down.

I walk in de moonlight, I walk in de starlight,

Lay dis body down.

I'll walk in de graveyard, I'll walk through the graveyard,

To lay dis body down.

I'll lie in de graveyard and stretch out my arms;

Lay dis body down.

I go to de judgment in de evenin' of de day,

And my soul and your soul will meet in de day

When I lay dis body down.”

As he sang, I sang an accompaniment, and I could hear the voices of three others as well. We were working the field together, our backs aching over the low stoop for digging the roots, and we were joined in spirit as we worked. From time to time, I heard the whip crack, and other times I felt it across my own back, Master Williams encouragement to work faster, but even in this, we continued to sing as we worked. My hands were covered in the dirt, and small drops of blood would mingle with the dirt creating dark mud; still, we sang. Sometimes, Jabez led, sometimes others, and sometimes me, but always we sang.